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May 31, 2019 Issue #34 Unpeeling the Misunderstood Onion of Culture

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Heaven is where the police are British, the cooks are French, the engineers are German and the lovers are Italian – and everything is organized by the Swiss.

Hell is where the cooks are British, the engineers are French, the police are Germans and the lovers are Swiss – and everything is organized by the Italians.

This excerpt was from the prologue of my Master's thesis for work and cultural psychology. *And it still works, I say!*

You may groan and still ask: *Why?*

Because the joke plays on our cultural associations - both on a national and job-type level.*

Cultural associations are built around what is generally familiar and/or propagated as norms for a group of people (or in thesis speak "a universal and for a society typical system of orientation"). (Obviously we are not talking about bacteria or interpretive paint blob definitions).

The most common thing that we talk about when discussing culture associations are national cultures, with a lot of publications from psychologists, Hofstede, Trompenaars, anthropologists, Barnardo, de Munck) or corporate cultures, like from Deal, Kennedy.

Culture is never a homogeneous and stable entity nor will a person always react in accordance the particular social norms of their "parent group". It simply means that shared culture arises out of how a group of people handle the **why** they are together as a group and as such face the conundrums, challenges, influences from the outside world and environment. Examples of these conundrums are understanding of time, cycle of life, power/status, an individual's role vs. collective, space and environment. The creation of shared a mental and social orientation does not happen overnight but rather is established over time to become social norms.

The social and mental norms effect what one sees, experiences, assumes to be normal and just. The thought-models and ways of being become ingrained and seem perceivably self-explanatory. It isn't until confronted by the option that there are different choices available for interpretation of a situation or nuance, that these fundamental beliefs are brought to the surface and - *perhaps* - put to a litmus test.

Yet often times, when discussing the topic of culture - be it national, corporate or a sub-group, the insight is left to be a surface or more superficial view around what you can see (e.g. wearing a headdress, using a microwave to make dinner, asking direct questions) aka. the "otherness" is offered up. It is fun, we all laugh at the quirky jokes and then move on with a feeling of 'huh, that was interesting but how does this help me' in being able to competently work together?

Sometimes there is a little more help, when the discussions dive into a bit deeper around the [values](#) (both the *aspirational/espoused* (*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*) actually *lived/enacted* (Ecole Polytechnique?) and the more solid social and cultural norms (aka [culture standards](#)). Though most discussions, assessments and recommendations remain at a more surface level.

If you really want to tap into the potential of diversity, inclusion and beauty of cross-*(functional, national, industry, generational (or whatever hyphen you want)* collaboration, bring the basic fundamental assumptions, underlying principles and paradigms to light and leverage them to uncover new solutions. How? Well, by using dilemma or challenges to broaden thinking and approaches. For example, take the current questions surrounding [AI](#) and the effects on the workforce with the statement: "Unqualified jobs perhaps are boring and repetitive, but can we deem them as [unnecessary](#)?" This can help drive a cultural [renovation](#) or perhaps even revolution.

How we resolve these dilemmas moving forward needs a deeper dive into assumptions and implications based on our cultures, experience, industries, and visions for the future. Which in my opinion, is the beauty of the world of work today - and the challenge ahead of us.

How shall I talk of the sea to the frog,

If it has never left his pond?

How shall I talk of the frost to the bird of the summer land,

If it has never left the land of its birth?

How shall I talk of life with the sage,

If he is prisoner of his doctrine?

- Chung Tsu, 4th Century BC (Zhou)

So let us unpeel this onion of culture together!



Peeling through the layers of culture

Culture Cross-Overs: Increase Awareness

Riding the waves of culture: Fons Trompenaars at TEDxAmsterdam

Onion originator, Fons Trompenaars, dives into how seizing diversity brings opportunities to organizations and the broader world.



In a separate [video](#), he dives into the 7 layers of his onion model and its relevance for management.

[www.youtube.com](#)

How Culture Drives Behaviours | Julien S. Bourrelle | TEDxTrondheim

Julien argues how we see the World through cultural glasses. By changing the glasses you can change the way you interpret the World. Julien is a Canadian living in Norway and uses his glasses to help bring about positive change.



[www.youtube.com](#)

Cross cultural communication | Pellegrino Riccardi | TEDxBergen

Pellegrino gives a lighthearted but easy to understand view on how cross cultural confrontation/comparing/confirming when met with curiosity brings about insights and means for moving forward.



[www.youtube.com](#)

Jacques Demorgon and Markus Molz Oscillation between Accommodation and Adaptation Model

(Ok - this is an add on to the online version for total die-hard culture nerds. It is a chapter on teaching intercultural concepts. Skip ahead to page 24 if you want to see one of my favourite models and explanations on cultural development.)

The premise is that cultural tensions between assimilation and accommodation exist, and there is a habit range that folks in the culture get used to, but that there is a constant and the necessary oscillation between these poles depending on the challenge and influence of the environment. "Culture is about defining appropriate decisions between two extremes in adaptation. A cultural orientation tells in an abstract way what for a group of people has been a successful behav- viour in the past. A range around that orientation, around what is perceived appropriate, is tolerated as "normal" deviations, as normal adaptations to the situations. Behaviour that is outside of that range is perceived as disturbing, wrong, not normal."

[pjp-eu.coe.int](#)

Recommendations on Culture Build

Culture Renovation: A Blueprint for Action - i4cp

One of my key professional missions is enabling cultures of [co-creation](#). i4cp does some great research on high performance organizations. The just published their research findings on culture renovation (*not transformation*) which were pretty much a mirror-reflection on the principles of the Co-Creator model. It is definitely worth a listen in and download.



[www.i4cp.com](#)

Integrating cultures after a merger: Addressing the unseen forces | McKinsey

Integrating cultures after a merger is critical to success and requires a comprehensive approach.



[www.mckinsey.com](#)

Council Post: Building a High-Performance Culture: Why Emotional Maturity Is Key

Real change cannot occur by leveling up on skills. Rather, in order to evolve, leaders need to change the way they think, and that cannot be done by mandate.



[www.forbes.com](#)

Keep Your Company's Toxic Culture from Infecting Your Team

Tips for staying positive and productive in a negative environment.



[hbr.org](#)

Question: What are the current culture questions facing you in your organization?

Enabling can-do attitude and collaborative approaches to solve broader needs is my calling card. On May 17th, together with [Anne-Cécile Graber](#) and [Mandy Chooi](#), we brought our calling-cards to play in the pilot [#future of work Co-Creator Night Live](#). It was a smashing success and we are moving forward. If you are curious and wish to know more, DM me and we will get something cooking!

Apropos cooking good things up, I am excited to be attending next week's #SOSUEE [sourcing summit](#) in Estonia. The hosts will be the incredible [Piet Luts](#) and [Hung Lee](#). There will be lots of great exchanges around the future of talent. I hope to see you there!

Wishing you all the best and looking forward to talking soon!

Liz

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