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# Cultural Intelligence

## IS SUCH A CAPACITY CREDIBLE?

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Are claims to describe and measure cultural intelligence credible? Three major objections are discussed: (a) Cultures are said to be entirely relative in their values, so holding one culture to be more intelligent than another is discriminatory; (b) cultural studies are said to be a form of postmodernism, whereas to have one central definition of culture is modernist—an imposition of our own dominant beliefs; and (c) attempts to categorize cultures are said to be crude stereotypes lacking subject. The answer to the first objection is the synergy hypothesis: Values are relative, but they are more or less synergistic. The answer to the second objection is the complementary hypothesis: Cultures are different, even polar opposites, yet they converge in a fuller description. The answer to the third objection is the latency hypothesis, for which every value is given face value and its latent shadow lies behind it.

**Keywords:** complementarity; cross-cultural competence; cultural intelligence; learning; mirror image; pattern; reconciliation; synergy

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Recently, there have been claims to describe cultural intelligence, cross-cultural competence, and transnational corporations. Are such claims credible? The purpose of this article is to consider some of the critiques of this concept and ask whether such an ability can really be said to exist. Given the trouble that globalism is getting itself into and the accusation that this refers to the spread of mostly American values across the globe, is cultural intelligence another cloak for superpower hegemony?

We will briefly examine three of the most common objections to cultural intelligence as a concept and ask whether its advocates (including us) can answer these critiques. The objections heard most commonly are as follows:

1. Cultures are entirely relative in their values. No better way of understanding culture as an issue, or other cultures, can possibly exist. These merely are. Our answer to this is the synergy hypotheses.

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2. Cultural studies are a form of postmodernism and are, as such, a backward step. We need to return to scientific objectivity and verifiable propositions. Our answer to this is the complementarity hypothesis.
3. All attempts to categorize cultures are crude stereotypes inferred from the most superficial features of those cultures, which miss entirely deeper and more subtle meanings. Our answer to this is the latency hypothesis.

We intend to examine and contest these arguments to show why the case for cultural intelligence survives. It is a very important and potentially world-saving concept. If we cannot quickly learn to respect and appreciate each other, we will almost certainly repeat the 20th century's legacy of genocide and holocaust.

### SYNERGY HYPOTHESIS

Cultures are entirely relative in their values. No better way of understanding culture as an issue, or other cultures, can possibly exist. These merely are. Our answer to this is the synergy hypotheses.

It was Franz Boas (1949), the great anthropologist, who railed against the then-dominant theories of cultural superiority of the West by arguing that all cultures were irredeemably relative to the conditions confronting their members. It was the task of anthropology to understand, not judge.

The values of any living culture had helped it survive in the environment where it found itself. Borrowing from evolutionary theory, it has become common to ask how well these cultural values fit the environment so that the culture survives. These survival values are passed down the generations. There are therefore as many sets of different cultural values as there are environments across the globe. These are not good or bad, high or low, civilized or primitive. They are to be judged, if at all, by their evolutionary fit.

Rather like the Galapagos Islands visited by Darwin where strange animals were found and not present elsewhere, strange cultures may inhabit remote corners of the world.

No wonder then that the United States found that individualism contributed to the survival of members of its culture. Immigrants who cross a vast ocean are likely to have this trait already. When they find themselves in a rich and fertile country never farmed before, with abundant timber and wild game easily slaughtered by firearms, each could disappear into the mountains for months on end and survive, as could a single farming family on a prairie given free land under the Homestead Act. Never was there an environment friendlier to individualists with fantastic opportunities for private gain.

Compare this to the conditions faced by the Chinese for centuries. You cannot grow rice without the help of a whole village. You are either a welcome member of a community or you die. Population survival is a group struggle.

It makes no sense at all to say that individualism is better than communitarianism or that the Chinese should mimic Americans, and it makes no sense the other way around. Each country did what it had to do to survive and is now shaped by those circumstances.

Cultural relativism is now the politically correct doctrine for most anthropologists. It is seen as an antidote to racism and prejudice and a way of teaching respect for all people. We regard it as infinitely preferable to claims of cultural superiority, but still flawed, especially for those in management studies where cultures yield very different levels of performance, which we cannot afford to ignore.

In our view, cultures are *both* relative to environmental circumstances *and* capable of converging on patterns common to all cultures and hence of universal validity. Although it is true that China required more communitarianism to survive historically, and America required more individualism, it is *not* true that China is without individualism. How, then, could you explain its entrepreneurship? Nor is it true that America is without social and community spirit. It has now cohered as a nation for nearly a century and a half.

The fact is that both nations have both values, even if the relative proportions vary according to the circumstances of their environments. But now comes what is for us the most important point: Every culture more or less reconciles its own contrasting values. In other words, preponderantly communitarian cultures succeed to the extent that they nurture the individuality of their members, whereas preponderantly individualist cultures may vindicate their individuality by contributing in a major way to their community and society.

In all probability, some bias remains. Americans are perhaps too individualistic, whereas the Chinese are too shaped by their communities. What we are claiming is that cultural intelligence, or transcultural competence, is a measure of the extent to which contrasting values are synergized. We call this the synergy hypothesis.

This idea originated with Ruth Benedict's classic book *Patterns of Culture* (1934) in which she compared several American Indian tribes, most of which were on the verge of cultural disintegration from having been herded in reservations wherein their traditional life as hunter-gatherers was impossible. Benedict soon discovered that two tribes were culturally buoyant, whereas the rest were wretched. Yet try as she might, not a single independent variable discriminated happiness from misery.

She was obliged to come up with a whole new way of thinking. All tribes accepted that their members were to some extent selfish, and all praised and hoped to reward unselfish conduct. In this rhetoric, they were very similar. The real difference lay not *in* these contrasting values but *between* them. In the relatively happy tribes, unselfish conduct was swiftly reciprocated so that the individual's self was rewarded. In the relatively wretched tribes, unselfish behavior was exploited and advantage was taken of the person. What discriminated between heaven and hell was the synergy or working together of selfish and unselfish conduct. In unhappy tribes, these values conflicted.

Not only were selfish and unselfish conduct at odds, but so were ideal and real conduct, and values (what people want) and norms (what is normal). It is such synergy and dysynergy that pattern cultures. These findings allow us to regard cultural values as relative, although retaining universal themes, and as situational, yet having general features. It also puts American business leadership in a totally new light. America leads the world not because individualism is superior to other creeds but because its own individualism is better attuned to its own and other's communitarianism.

### COMPLEMENTARITY HYPOTHESIS

Cultural studies are a form of postmodernism and, as such, are a backward step. We need to return to scientific objectivity and verifiable propositions. Our answer to this is the complementarity hypothesis.

Postmodernism has been attacking monolithic theories for the past 20 years or more, and concepts like cultural intelligence are likely to excite many daggers to be drawn. Christianity, Marxism, Freudianism, Newtonian physics—all have been attacked. Grand theory is out of style. The world now appears through multiple perspectives, all of which are deemed legitimate, if partial, points of view. The world is to be enjoyed through its diversity.

The Japanese, for example, have no word for objectivity in their language. They translate it *kyankatekki*, meaning "the guest's point of view." To be objective is to see things superficially and in outline, like a guest visiting a family for the first time. Subjectivity, or *shukantekki*, means "the host's point of view," and he, of course, knows that, say, his wife is angry with her daughter. His is the subtle and deep knowledge.

But if everything is just a point of view, can there be any true cultural intelligence? These critics seek a return to objective verification of facts. The moon is still a cratered object in the sky despite innumerable attitudes toward it. There is neither a man in the moon, nor is it made of cheese, nor does it drive men mad. False cultural beliefs must be cast aside to reach the truth.

In our view, objectivity is a Western cultural belief, originating in Calvin's doctrine of the objective word, a belief in the obvious truth of the Bible. It is quite a useful belief. It is more applicable to dead things than live people and to weapons than to human sympathies. To be personally detached from an object to understand it better is justifiable. To detach yourself from a sensate human being is to change that being and discover your own reflection! It is not justifiable.

What we have to do to human beings to understand them is to collect their mental models and show appreciation and respect for these. The more perspectives we collect, the better we can appreciate common ground as a form of intersubjective consensus. From this, an objectivity of sorts can emerge. What different cultures see is in part different and in part the same, depending as it does upon the angle of observation.

But our second important point is that viewpoints are complementary. They look upon a phenomenon from different sides and see different realities, yet these views converge in a fuller description.

In our view, differences between cultures are not random or arbitrary but complementary. Consider ways of printing and reading a book. Your eyes can scan left to right or right to left, as in Japan and traditional China. Your eyes can read laterally across the page or vertically down. We quite soon exhaust these possibilities for variation, and these are, of course, complementary, as is driving on the right side or left side of the road. In other words, cultures are mirror images of each other. Look in the mirror and you will see that some feature on the right-hand side of your face—a mole, perhaps, or an earring—has been transferred to the left of your reflection.

Now, if cultures are the mirror opposites of each other rather than arbitrarily different, then this vastly simplifies the task of understanding them and brings a coherent form of cultural intelligence much closer.

We believe our research has shown that cultural values are binary digits—that is, value contrasts on a dimension. This is also the approach of Edward T. Hall (1987), Geert Hofstede (1980), Bob de Wit and Ron Meyer (1999), and others. For example, individualism ↔ communitarianism is one dimension with two complementary ends. It can be seen from the individualist end or from the communitarian end, yet this is one coherent phenomenon, not two.

Among our other dimensions are universalism ↔ particularism, or all things rule bound ↔ all things relative and unique. Some cultures analyze into specifics; others synthesize into diffuse wholes. Some cultures are neutral and objective. Some are affective and aesthetic. Some cultures ascribe status to key persons; others insist that status must be achieved, and so on.

Although these values are complementary, the human race reacts with hostility and even violence to those who reverse their values. The communist menace in both the United States and Singapore has had a haunting quality. *Sinister* has the literal meaning of “left handed,” yet it also means “strange and suspicious.” The devil is said to be left handed, thereby reversing our own values in an attempt to subvert us! We nearly blew the world up in the days when U.S. individualism confronted Soviet communitarianism. These were the days of mutually assured destruction (MAD).

What we have discovered after 20 years or more of research using our seven dimensions model is that cultures tend to prefer one end of a dimension to the other, yet the less preferred end remains vital to attaining the more preferred end. For example, if you seek to create universal rules, you would be very wise to examine every particular exception. If, on the other hand, you seek to be exceptional, you had better know what the current standards are, or you cannot rise above these. If you wish to be an outstanding individualist, you would be wise to discover what your community wants and will pay for. If you want to be an outstanding communitarian then you had better start nurturing individual members and measure your success thereby.

Yes, cultural preferences are relative, but complementary perspectives illumine an underlying cultural intelligence.

### LATENCY HYPOTHESIS

All attempts to categorize cultures are crude stereotypes inferred from the most superficial features of these cultures, which miss entirely deeper and subtler realities. Our answer to this is the latency hypothesis.

This is a powerful critique, which we do not treat lightly. According to our critics, we do not need research to tell us that Americans are individualists and universalists because they proclaim this daily! What cross-cultural research does is tell us what we already know—that the Japanese are impassive and the French excitable. It is hardly useful to categorize cultures according to their surface presentations. If this is cultural intelligence, then we had better think again.

The problem is, of course, that stereotypes are true, at least in part. Countries like to present themselves in positive ways, and their dominant, preferred values become their chosen ways of doing this. Whoever saw a Hollywood film in which the chief protagonist turned out to be wrong and the group that found fault with him right? There are no such plots! Cultures stereotype themselves, often outrageously. We have to pay attention to these presentational strategies.

The view we take here is that cultures have dominant and latent values, which are complementary. Because individualistic people often get lonely and communitarian people have a frail sense of self, great efforts must be made, at a latent level, to share up the neglected values. If you scratch beneath the surface, you will discover the contrasting value eager for expression.

This helps to explain why a communitarian culture like that of the Chinese also has a strong entrepreneurial streak. It would explain why beneath America's dominant individualism is a church attendance 10 times higher than Western Europe, a tendency to patriotic fervor, and a nose for subversive plots and conspiracies, which permit Americans to close ranks against communists, aliens, fundamentalists, terror, and so forth.

What we find beneath the surface of a culture is a subculture, sometimes a subconscious that operates like a powerful underground stream. Americans are not supposed to admire ascribed status. They threw off kings many years ago, but they go wild over Princess Di and the Duchess of York. When Edward VII visited Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1907, 6,000 guests were invited; 12,000 turned up and the floor collapsed! Never did so many achievers yearn to consort with a king! The opposite value is always there buried beneath the surface value yet all the stronger for being hidden.

It follows that there is a little of, say, Japan in all Americans. The Japanese are well known for saying "yes" when they mean "no." They are saying, "Yes, please let this relationship continue." But any young man infatuated with his girl will do the same, even if she invites him to admire a dress he dislikes. He will say "yes" and not risk losing her. He will want her to save face. Hence, there are circumstances in which Japanese conduct is more appropriate but also circumstances when only a loud "no!" will save you. We grow more culturally intelligent as we study circumstances and cultural responses to these.

## SUMMARY

We have advanced three vital hypotheses on which, in our view, a concept of cultural intelligence must rest. The synergy hypotheses states that contrasting values are potentially synergistic and cultures will be happier and more productive where this is so. The complementarity hypothesis states that cultures are binary contrasts with two opposed ends, yet these are a single phenomenon with two contrasting aspects. Cultural intelligence requires that we respect both and the movements between these. The latency hypothesis states that one end of a values' dimension is typically presented at the surface of the culture but that the contrasting value is latent within that culture and



finds indirect forms of expression, sometimes fierce and disruptive, because it has long been denied expression. A culture will become intelligent by admitting its own latent values and permitting these to surface and qualify its dominant value. Between these three hypotheses meet the objections to cultural intelligence.

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