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Human Resource Development Review 2002 1: 145
DOI: 10.1177/1534484302012002

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The Concept of Culture in International and Comparative HRD Research: Methodological Problems and Possible Solutions

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International and comparative research is one of the fastest growing areas of scholarly inquiry in HRD. All international HRD studies, regardless of specific topics of investigation, sooner or later refer to culture. Therefore, the treatment of culture in international HRD research is a matter of central importance. The goal of this article is to illuminate some of the central issues in international and comparative HRD research by helping HRD researchers to better understand the current approaches to culture and by discussing the methodological problems arising from the current use of the concept of culture. Several alternative approaches to culture in international research are analyzed and criticized. The authors close the article by outlining directions that might overcome the limitations of current approaches, help us to increase the utility of the international and comparative HRD research, and improve our ability to incorporate the cultural influences in our investigations.

Although many scholars in human resource development (HRD) and related fields have pointed to the dearth of international and cross-cultural research (for example, Brewster, Tregaskis, Hegewisch, & Mayne, 1996; Hansen & Brooks, 1994), in recent years, international and comparative research has become one of the fastest growing areas of scholarly inquiry in HRD. Within the Academy of HRD, international membership and the number of international papers presented at the Academy of HRD meetings have increased steadily, and numerous cross-cultural and international articles have appeared in all major HRD publications. Journal editorial board membership has been increasingly international, and several leading journals are located outside the United States.

The reasons for this increased interest in international research were summarized by McLean (in press), McLean and McLean (2001), and Marquardt and Sofo (1999), who argued that globalization of business prac-

tices is inevitably leading to conditions under which most HRD practitioners, regardless of their specialization, need to understand and be able to influence cross-cultural and international HR, training, and organization development practices. For example, McLean (in press) indicated that the existence and continuous expansion of numerous multinational corporations creates a tremendous need for new approaches to organization development and career development because global operations require radically different organization cultures and new strategies for developing managerial talents (for a more detailed discussion of current research directions in international HRD see Marquardt, 1999, and McLean, in press).

As Cray and Mallory (1998) pointed out, all international and comparative studies, regardless of specific topics of investigation, sooner or later refer to culture, and all international and cross-cultural researchers carry their own ethnocentric biases.

So we should not kid ourselves that we can go into [an international research setting] as a *tabula rasa* and just let the culture “speak” to us. . . . The issue, then, is not whether the researcher will start with a priori dimensions in studying the organization, but how broadly he or she will cast the net and what kind of theoretical model the research will start with. (Schein, 2000, p. xxvii)

Although multiple approaches to research design have been identified (Usunier, 1998; Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997), how culture is “staged,” that is, conceptually and operationally treated, is of key significance. The usefulness of the concept, in fact, depends on our ability to “unpack” it (Schwartz, 1994b). For example, Adler (1997) classified international studies into three categories: unicultural (involving one culture or country), polycentric (involving comparisons between multiple countries or cultures), and synergistic (interested in certain phenomena in a multicultural organization or setting without a special regard to the number of individual cultures represented in the organization).

The treatment of culture in international HRD research is a matter of much deeper import than the selection of an appropriate research design and centers on our ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of culture and its role in shaping the phenomena of interest and our ability to even understand cultures (our own or another) in a complete sense. Therefore, the goal of the present article is to illuminate some of the issues and problems in international and comparative HRD research, help HRD researchers to better understand the current approaches to culture, and discuss the methodological problems arising from the current use. We close the article by outlining directions that might overcome some of the limitations of current approaches, help us increase the utility of the international and comparative HRD research, and improve our ability to incorporate the cultural influences in our investigations.

Alternative Approaches to Studying Culture

A useful classification of social science research methodologies was proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (1998), who placed all studies on a continuum, with constructivist and critical science studies on the one side and positivist and postpositivist studies on the other. The studies of the constructivist paradigm assume that there is no single reality out there that can be discovered by the researcher, and the reality is, rather, constructed by humans in their interactions. The postpositivist research, on the other hand, is based on an assumption that reality is—at least to some degree—stable and that, thus, the effort to uncover rules, theories, and models is a worthy goal of research. Following the above classification, in the area of international social science and humanities research, we identify the following major theoretical approaches, which provide alternative treatments of culture: postpositivist studies grounded in cross-cultural psychology, and three constructivist approaches comprising interpretive and ethnographic studies, studies in the cultural-historical tradition, and semiotic studies. In the pages that follow, we will first provide a brief overview of these four strands of research and then point out why we feel that all four fail to provide a satisfactory treatment of culture in the context of international and comparative research. Next, we will propose several strategies for improving our ability to account for the culture's role in international HRD research.

Models of Cross-Cultural Psychology

One treatment of culture has been pursued vigorously by cross-cultural psychologists over the past two decades and has resulted in substantive and methodological advances related to shared cognition, assumptions, and values as fundamental building blocks of culture. A major tenet of cross-cultural psychology is the existence of—or at least the search for—psychological universals, frameworks for making sense of the tremendous variety and complexity of individual behavior and thought across the cultures of the world. The field is thus grounded in a realist conception of science as the search for patterns, regularities, and parsimonious explanatory systems that are pan-cultural without violating local and culture specific interpretation and meaning (Lonner, 2000). The cross-cultural research program has led to advances in theory by indexing countries along dimension of culture and mapping culturally similar regions, calculating value-related distance scores, and investigating the effects of national culture on a range of variables. Values, in particular, play a key role and are, according to Smith and Schwartz (1997), “key elements, perhaps the most central, in [a society's] culture. . . . Value priorities of individuals represent central goals that relate to all aspects of behavior” (p. 79). Values represent beliefs and refer to desir-

able goals; they transcend specific action and situations and serve as standards for and of behavior, people, and events (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Value priorities are thought to be consistent across situations and thus are more reliable than behaviors or attitudes. Values can be described at the personal and—in aggregated form—at the group level. Societal value priorities are meaningfully and consistently related to other societal attributes (Smith & Schwartz, 1997). Countries, for example, where beliefs in self-reliance and civic duty are weak experience higher levels of corruption (Harrison & Huntington, 2000); countries where soft and emotional behaviors are valued tend to donate more in foreign aid than those with norms for achievement-oriented and assertive behaviors (Hofstede, 1997).

Societal values represent ideas about what is good, right, and desirable that find expression in individual behavior of a country's residents and also in that country's institutions as reflected in institutional goals and modes of operation. For example, individualistic societies tend to have economic and legal systems that are competitive (market-driven economies and adversarial legal proceedings), whereas collectivist societies express their value preferences in higher levels of social protection and mediation as a way of settling legal disputes (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). The vast majority of cross-cultural research has been conducted at the national level of analysis, although the degree of within-country variation has led writers such as Triandis (1995) to question this approach, especially in nations with sharp divisions among cultural groups. However, nationality has been shown to account for substantial amounts of variance in a variety of variables (e.g., the meaning of working [MOW] project [MOW International Research Team, 1987]; Kuchinke & Ardichvili's [in press] work on leadership; Salk & Brannen's [2000] study of behaviors in multinational management teams); and this body of research lends support for Hofstede's (1997) assertion that nations exert strong forces toward integration through a single or dominant language, institutions, political systems, and shared mass media, products, services, and national symbols. Thus, much international and cross-cultural psychological research is based on the average value priority among national samples that is thought to represent the central thrust of a common acculturation (Smith & Schwartz, 1997), irrespective of individual differences. Since the 1980s, there have been four major programs of research on national values, and these will be briefly summarized.

Hofstede's values survey. Hofstede's (1980) classification of work-related cultural values is based on large-scale employee survey data collected at IBM and subsidiaries in 40 countries around the world. Data were collected via standardized paper-and-pencil tests intended to measure differences in employee attitudes and consisted of some 150 questions administered in 20 different languages in 1968 and again in 1972. The resulting large databank of more than 116,000 questionnaires reflected responses from seven occupational groups,

including clerical, technical, professional, and managerial, engaged in marketing and servicing. Hofstede used factor-analytic techniques and conceptual item analysis of country-level item scores and arrived at four underlying dimensions: Power Distance, the degree to which unequal distribution of power in institutions is accepted as legitimate by those less powerful; Individualism, the degree to which persons are expected to care primarily for themselves and their immediate families as opposed to caring for the wider in-group; Masculinity, the degree to which achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material success are valued instead of relationships, modesty, caring, and interpersonal harmony; and Uncertainty Avoidance, defined as the degree to which persons are uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, thus valuing stability and conformity. Given the size of the data set and the correspondence of the dimension scores with existing measures, the publication of the results in 1980 raised much interest among cross-cultural researchers, especially with regard to the country differences, the interaction of the dimensions, and the depictions of clusters of countries with similar value scores. Replications and extensions soon followed, among them Hoppe's (1990) survey of more than 1,500 senior administrators from 17 European nations, Turkey, and the United States, which confirmed the ordering of countries along the dimensions a decade after the original data were gathered and with a different population. Bond (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987) extended Hofstede's research by constructing a survey of values based on interviews with Chinese scholars and collected information from students in 23 countries, resulting in an additional factor, Confucian Work Dynamism, subsequently adopted as a fifth dimension of Hofstede's framework as Long-Term Orientation, expressing the orientation toward the future characterized by persistence, thrift, and observation of status versus personal steadiness and stability, protection of one's face, and respect for tradition.

Trompenaars's values survey. Trompenaars's approach to culture is based on sociological literature, in particular by Parsons and Shils (1951), of basic elements of social relationships as a way of tapping into—again—employees' values in business organizations. Initial work with 10 organizations in 9 countries and some 650 participants in the mid-1980s has been expanded to more than 15,000 participants from 50 nations including 9 in the former Soviet Bloc (Trompenaars, 1994), most of whom were upper-level managers and professional employees participating in cross-cultural training programs. Trompenaars's questionnaire, too, was designed originally to measure organizational culture. It included many types of items, such as small vignettes, cases, and forced rankings. Trompenaars posited seven bipolar dimensions, which included Parsons's five relational orientations: universalistic versus particularistic rules for relationships ("what is right and good can be defined and always applies" versus "giving attention to the obligations of relationships and unique circumstances"); individualistic versus collectivistic views of the responsibility of individuals (whose primary obligation is either to the self or to the social group); neutral ver-

sus emotional ways of expressing feelings (either detached and objective or with full force of the underlying emotion); specific versus diffuse modes of involvement in social transactions (persons engaged in their specific roles as, for example, educators or bringing into play all facets of one's personality); and achievement versus ascription as the basis for according status (as either based on performance and accomplishments or on educational record, family ties, gender, age, and other attributes). In addition, this framework included a society's attitudes toward time (as a linear sequence of events versus a synchronous notion of past, present, and future as cyclical, repetitive, and commingled) and stances toward the environment (as subject to human control or requiring harmony and acquiescence).

Country mean scores for each dimension are available (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Trompenaars, 1994), but no further statistical treatment, validity checks, or interaction effects are provided. Later work with this data set by Smith, Dugan, and Trompenaars (1996) subjected a subset of standardized individual item means from 43 countries to multidimensional scaling controlling for demographic variation in the samples and arrived at two overarching dimensions of culture. These consist of (a) varying orientations toward the continuity of group membership and (b) varying orientations toward the obligations of social relationships.

The Schwartz culture-level approach. Schwartz and colleagues, in a series of influential articles, have addressed the structure of individual values in a comparative, cross-national perspective (e.g., Schwartz, 1994a; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990; Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995). Using Kluckhohn's and Rokeach's cross-cultural works on values as a point of departure, Schwartz developed and validated a theory of human values and their underlying motivational goals. Arguing that universal human values are those that represent the basic requirements of individuals (biological needs, requisites of coordinated social action, and demands of group functioning), he proposed 10 motivational types of values, including power, achievement, hedonism, benevolence, and tradition. Specific value systems arise from value types in particular social, historical, economic, and geographic circumstances. As Smith and Schwartz (1997) reported, this framework and associated instruments have been applied in 54 countries and given to some 44,000 individuals, primarily schoolteachers, and is thought to present a comprehensive "near-universal" (p. 88) set of value types at the individual level.

Conceptually independent from this work, Schwartz also proposed culture-level dimensions of values that reflect, at the societal level, solutions to basic social problems. Societal issues are those concerning the assumption of the relationship between the individual and the group, the responsibility of the individual to contribute to the common good, and the role of humankind in submitting to, adapting to, or exploiting the natural

and social worlds (Schwartz, 1994b). Using a subset of the individual-level data, Schwartz calculated country scores and, through multidimensional scaling, determined seven culture-level value types: mastery, hierarchy, conservatism, harmony, egalitarian commitment, intellectual autonomy, and affective autonomy. These value structures cluster into three value dimensions. The first dimension is labeled conservatism versus autonomy, reflecting the views of a culture to see individuals as primarily autonomous or imbedded in a web of social relationships and obligations, both intellectually and affectively. The second dimension, hierarchy versus egalitarianism, describes a culture's way of ordering social relationships by ascribing roles and legitimizing unequal distributions of power, wealth, and influence, or by portraying individuals as moral equals with equal rights and responsibilities. The third dimension, mastery versus harmony, addresses a culture's stance toward the social and natural environments. Mastery cultures seek to influence and change the natural and social worlds for personal and group interests, whereas harmony cultures accept the natural and social worlds as they are and emphasize fitting in harmoniously and adapting to them.

Schwartz sought to validate these dimensions through separate analyses of stratified subsamples of the individual data set (school teachers and college students; rich and poor nations) and reported support for the content and dimensional structure, including same-rank order and high correlations in the ranking of nations on the three dimensions when comparing matched samples of teachers and students (Smith & Schwartz, 1997).

Individualism and collectivism. Perhaps the largest number of empirical studies in cross-cultural psychology and related fields have been based on a single dimension of culture: individualism and collectivism, with Smith et al. (1996) asserting that it "is probably safe to infer that this dimension is the most important yield of cross-cultural psychology to date" (p. 237). Triandis (1995) stated that—from a research perspective—most salient differences in behavior in international comparisons might be reduced to this dimension. Although by no means a new concept—Kâğitçibaşı (1997) traced its roots in social thought to ancient Greece in the West and Confucius in the East—there has been widespread interest in this dimension in the past 20 years. Although included in all three multidimensional frameworks discussed earlier, the large volume of cross-national studies investigating this dimension warrants closer examination and explanation.

Although definitions vary to some degree (see Kâğitçibaşı, 1997, for a comprehensive review), features and component ideas of individualistic societies include the view of the individual as an end in himself or herself and the belief in the obligation to realize the self, to cultivate one's own judgment, and to resist social pressures toward conformity. In collectivist

societies, there is an emphasis on the views, needs, and goals of the group; on social norms and duty as defined by the group; on shared beliefs and traditions; and on a readiness to cooperate and surrender personal goals to group interests. Triandis, McCusker, and Hui (1990) summarized extant research on this dimension. Antecedents of individualism include affluence, cultural complexity, social mobility, urbanism, and technological and economic development. These factors are related to an orientation focused on the self and the immediate family, emotional detachment from the collective, and a view that personal goals have primacy over those of the larger group and that behavior is regulated by rationality and cost-benefit analyses. Consequences of individualism include socialization for self-reliance and independence, adeptness when entering new groups, and loneliness. At the societal level, individualism and economic development have been proposed to be strongly related (Hofstede, 1980).

The many applications of this dimension—including its consequence for a wide range of individual-level variables, interpersonal and intergroup relations, and social institutions summarized by Triandis (1995) and Kâğitçibaşı (1997)—lend credibility to the assertion that it does present a valid, useful, and universal dimension of culture. Current debate concerns questions of whether individualism and collectivism might be more usefully conceived as separate attributes rather than as opposite poles of a continuum, whether each should be viewed as multidimensional, and what part of each might be conceived as trait or situation based. Triandis has recently added to these conceptual refinements by arguing that in both individualistic and collectivistic societies, behavior and attitudes that go “against the grain” are quite common. Triandis (1995) proposed four categories: vertical and horizontal individualism (self and group orientation, respectively, within a self-oriented culture) and vertical and horizontal collectivism (self and group orientation, respectively, within a collectivistic culture). Multimethod probes for the constructs have been published (Triandis, 1995; Triandis, Chan, Bhawuk, Iwao, & Sinha, 1995; Triandis et al., 1990) and applied in a wide range of studies, among them studies related to differences in work groups (Earley, 1993), cooperation in groups (Wagner, 1995), and reward systems and equity norms (Kim, Park, & Suzuki, 1990).

Despite the explanatory power of the dimension, however, and despite the ideal of parsimonious theories, single-variable explanations of social phenomena raise the threat of reductionism and prompted Kâğitçibaşı (1997) to question whether the research program has overreached, calling for careful examination of possible confounding variables, convergent and discriminate validity checks, and continued assessment of causal relationships with other dimensions of culture to determine its limitations, including normative questions of worthy goals for society and the possible confounding of individualism with modernization.

Constructivist Approaches to Studying Culture

After outlining the postpositivist and etic (describing phenomena in terms of constructs that are supposed to apply across cultures) approaches to assessing culture, we now turn to three emic (striving to describe phenomena in terms of the actors' thoughts and self-understanding) frameworks of culture: the ethnographic and interpretive approach, the semiotic approach, and the cultural-historical approach.

The ethnographic and interpretive perspective in international research. A comprehensive discussion of the tenets of ethnographic and interpretive research would be impossible in this short article. Therefore, we refer you to excellent in-depth analyses of this paradigm in Denzin and Lincoln (1998) and in Jessor, Colby, and Shweder (1999). Here, we will point out several major traits of this approach, which are most relevant to our discussion.

The origins of interpretive and ethnographic perspectives can be traced to early psychological studies of folk beliefs (Wundt, 1911) and to cultural anthropologists' attempts to describe cultures from the natives' point of view (Malinowski, 1922; M. Mead, 1948). Ethnographic and interpretive international researchers are more interested in specific cases than aggregate relationships, more accurately grasping and describing the point of view of the actors, gaining more contextually situated understanding, and providing a fuller, "thicker" description of the phenomenon of interest (Becker, 1999). Methods associated with this research paradigm range from ethnographic immersion (Geertz, 1983) to interviews and observations (Goodenough, 1970), and to analysis and interpretation of various texts generated by insiders (Van Maanen, 1990).

A common characteristic of most of these approaches is the interpretive approach to the data analysis and the belief that such analysis can help to identify different concepts and models of truth. For example, interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 1989, 1992) attempts to capture meaning and produce meaningful descriptions and interpretations of social processes from subjective points of view of different actors. The fundamental assumption of this approach is that understanding arises from the act of interpretation, the act of translating "what is said in one language into the meanings and codes of another language" (Denzin, 1989, p. 32).

Semiotic models of culture. An approach to cross-cultural research that attempts to introduce a more encompassing perspective on culture is grounded in semiotics, the study of signs. There are good examples of the application of semiotics in sociology, organization studies, and management research (c.f. S. R. Barley, 1983; Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1998). An example of the application of semiotics in cross-cultural and comparative research can be found in the work of Russian linguist and semiotics scholar, Yuri Lotman. Lotman (1990)

argued that semiotic systems (language, cultural rules, religion, art, science, and so forth) are models that explain the world in which we live, and in explaining the world, they construct it. Among all these systems, language is the primary modeling system, allowing us to comprehend the world (Eco, 1990). Therefore, the study of culture should start with the study of the language system used within this culture; however, we also need to study all the secondary systems, which allow us to understand the world from different angles, allow us to speak about it. The goal of the Lotmanian investigation of culture is not to explain all the phenomena of that culture but an explanation of why that culture has produced certain phenomena. To do this, we can analyze culture as a code, as a semiotic system, discovering both universal to all cultures and specific to certain culture elements.

Lotman argued that no historical period has a sole cultural code and that in any culture there exist simultaneously various codes. He saw a culture as a set of texts and a nonhereditary collective memory (Lotman, 1971). On this basis, Lotman has conducted numerous analyses of different cultures, moving both along the time (historical studies) and space (geographical and cross-national studies) continuum. An example of how to categorize cultures according to the systems of rules and codes used by them can be found in Lotman's *Universe of the Mind* (1990). He suggested that cultures can be governed by a system of rules or by a repertoire of texts imposing models of behavior. By analogy to language learning, Lotman called the former category "grammatical" (in grammatical approach, learners are introduced to a new language by a set of rules) and "textual" (this is the approach to language learning used by small children, who learn through exposure to a variety of verbal strings of language without knowing underlying rules). In a grammar-oriented culture, texts are judged to be correct or incorrect according to their conformity to previously generated combinatorial rules; in a text-oriented culture, society directly generates texts, which propose models to be followed. The rules could eventually be inferred, but this is not necessary.

Thus, Lotman (1984) regarded culture as a semiosphere, a system in which all the elements are in dynamic correlations, whose terms are constantly changing. Therefore, his approach to cultural studies was to investigate it as a single mechanism, to study all aspects of its functioning because only this way we can understand its various aspects. Umberto Eco (1990) explained this approach as follows:

If we put together many branches and great quantity of leaves, we still cannot understand the forest. But if we know how to walk through the forest of culture with our eyes open, confidently following the numerous paths which criss-cross it, not only shall we be able to understand better the vastness and complexity of the forest, but we shall also be able to discover the nature of leaves and branches of every single tree. (p. xiii)

Cultural-historical approach. Is it possible to conduct cross-cultural research that would account for both traits and psychological characteristics of individual players and the complex cultural environment they are situated in? An approach to answering this question could be found in cultural psychology and a cultural-historical research paradigm. Taking a radical stance, Shweder (1991) believed that this question by itself is not a legitimate one: Attempts to introduce culture into psychological investigations are misguided. He argued for adopting a different paradigm, which, instead of viewing human minds as isolated processing devices operating with inputs received from the cultural environment, sees the mind as inseparable from “the historically variable and culturally diverse intentional worlds in which it plays a co-constructive part” (Shweder, 1991, p. 13). The individual behavior is shaping the cultural environment and is constantly being shaped by culture. Therefore, humans inhabit “intentional” worlds within which relationships between persons and their environments cannot be analytically separated and described in terms of dependent and independent variables.

There are numerous other research streams that join to form the cultural psychology paradigm. Thus, Bruner (1990) located psychological processes within the social-symbolically mediated everyday encounters of people in the lived everyday experiences. Bruner argued that these experiences are organized by “folk psychology,” including explanations of how minds work and narrative structures that organize people’s meaning-making processes in their everyday activities.

In Germany, a group of researchers has independently developed an approach to cultural psychology that underscored a developmental approach to the study of human nature (Boesch, 1990). Using a form of action theory, they attempted to link individual change to historical change by interrelating “the three main levels of the concept of development within the same theoretical language: the actual genesis (process), the ontogeny, and the historio-genesis” (Eckensberger, Krewer, & Kasper, 1984, p. 97).

One of the most fruitful approaches to closing the gap between individuals as subjects of cross-cultural research and their environment, between studying individual cognitive processes and environmental variables, was proposed by scholars working in the cultural-historical research tradition (e.g., Cole, 1996; Cole & Engestrom, 1993), which emerged from the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his followers. Central to this approach is rejection of the separation of individuals and their social environment. The major idea of this approach was expressed by Vygotsky (1978) in the “general law of cultural development,” which assumes that any higher psychological function appears “on two planes. First it appears on the social plane and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category and then within the individual child as an intrapsychological category” (p. 57). Vygotsky’s ideas

were further developed by Leont'ev (1978), who emphasized the centrality of activity to a cultural theory of cognition.

Cole (1996) proposed a new approach to cross-cultural investigations by putting emphasis on the following elements: mediated action in a context; importance of the "genetic method" understood broadly to include historical, ontogenetic, and microgenetic levels of analysis; grounding of the analysis in everyday life events; distributed and co-constructed nature of cognition; rejection of cause and effect; explanatory science in favor of science that emphasizes emergent nature of mind in activity; and the central role for interpretation in research.

Furthermore, Cole and Engestrom (1993), grounding their research in Vygotskian theory, developed a methodology that posits the *activity system* as the basic unit of analysis of individual and collective behavior. An activity system is any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction. It could be a family, a study group, a school, a discipline, or a profession. Activity systems are constructed by participants who are using certain physical and cognitive tools. With the social division of labor, numerous ongoing systems or networks of activity arise and proliferate. Individual identity results from the person's history of involvements in multiple activity systems. Each of the three aspects of an activity system changes over time: The identities of subjects, the focus and direction of their actions, and their tools-in-use are constructed and reconstructed over a few seconds or many centuries. For this reason, activity theory is called a cultural-historical theory.

Thus, the cultural-historical approach helps to establish a direct link between the environment and the individual by studying the individuals as situated in multiple levels of cultural environments and activity systems. It helps to overcome the vagueness of the description of cultural environments inherent in ethnographic observations, and it helps to avoid the fallacy of some interpretive studies, which assume that it is possible to understand individuals based on their descriptions of their own feelings and experiences, without trying to understand of what cultural environments consist.

Critique of Current Approaches to Culture

Despite significant contributions made by the above-described research traditions, all of them suffer from a number of methodological problems, resulting in the following paradox: None of the approaches seems to be able to produce the results that they claim to be their main advantages. Thus, postpositivist research is aimed at generation of universal, generalizable models and results, but there are numerous convincing arguments showing that this claim does not stand in international studies. And constructivist researchers pride themselves on their ability to report more accurate, more

realistic pictures of informants' lives, emotions, and feelings, but as numerous critics point out, they fail to do just this.

Criticisms of postpositivist approaches exist on two levels: philosophical and methodological. At the philosophical level, critics point out the fundamental impossibility of capturing and describing the objective cultural reality because, in their opinion, such reality does not exist outside the researcher's and the study participants' fluid and constantly changing perceptions and interpretations (Eco, 1992). The main methodological criticism is that "inferences drawn from aggregate data may not apply to all—or even any—of the individuals making up the aggregate" (Jessor, 1999, p. 12). In addition, international studies grounded in these approaches have been plagued by numerous other methodological problems, which significantly reduce the researcher's ability to extrapolate their findings to larger populations. Among these problems are the inability to establish functional and conceptual equivalence of phenomena and behavior, and translation, sampling, measurement, and data collection errors (Harpaz, 1996). Of these concerns, the lack of conceptual equivalence (do the concepts used in a study have the same meaning across all the cultures involved?) is among the most often discussed in the literature. For example, Usunier (1998) has demonstrated that the concept of trust has different meanings in the United States, France, Germany, and Japan, making any comparative studies based on the U.S. concepts of trust difficult to uphold. Similarly, Usunier argued that another common problem of cross-cultural psychological research is the lack of functional equivalence: In many cases, even when concepts have the same meaning across cultures, these concepts perform different functions. Thus, even though the meaning of friendship may be similar in the United States and China (having, therefore, conceptual equivalence), the functional role of friendship in the two cultures is different (which points to the lack of functional equivalence). In China, friendship is absolutely essential in ensuring good working relationships between parties; in the United States, personal friendships and business relationships are often kept separate because exploiting friendships in business transactions may be considered unfair, even unethical (Usunier, 1998).

Furthermore, postpositivist studies are susceptible to numerous measurement biases. For example, validity of rating scales in a cross-cultural study can be negatively affected by the lack of equivalence of the measurement scales. Thus, perceptions of the distances between scale points on verbal rating scales, held by French and English respondents, are not equivalent, which makes any comparisons based on the use of a single scale in these two languages highly problematic (Usunier, 1998).

Constructivist approaches are most often criticized for the lack of generalizable conclusions. But most studies of this group rest on an assumption of impossibility of any generalizations and concentrate instead on the

generation of localized, context-specific knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Thus, poststructuralists (Foucault, 1980) and postmodern theorists (Lyotard, 1984) prefer to write local narratives about people's work and interaction and reject the notion of generalizability of their results. These narratives take the form of small-scale ethnographies, life stories, historical analysis, and in-depth interviews (Denzin, 1992).

However, what is supposed to be the constructivist approaches' advantage over postpositivist research—researchers' ability to present true accounts of participants' inner worlds and social interactions between them—is being increasingly questioned by constructivist researchers themselves. The reason for the perceived inability to produce credible accounts is the fact that phenomena are studied by poorly informed outsiders who lack the background to understand the intricacies of local cultures and symbolic systems. As Tobin and Davidson (1990) pointed out, "in most cross-cultural educational research, Westerners study non-Westerners, whites study nonwhites, scholars study practitioners, and men study women and children" (p. 271). This practice puts the researchers in a peculiar position, described by N. Barley (1983): "All the talk about the ethnographer being 'accepted' by the natives is nonsense. He can, at best, hope to be regarded as a harmful village idiot" (p. 46).

Recent attempts to address this fundamental problem involved methods of "polyvocal discourse," a "Rashomonian telling and retelling of the same . . . events from different perspectives, an ongoing dialogue between insiders and outsiders, between practitioners and researchers" (Tobin, 1989, p. 176). But, as Marcus and Cushman (1982) suggested, "While it is laudable to include the native, his (*sic*) position is not thereby improved, for his words are still only instruments of the ethnographer's will" (p. 44). The researchers control and distort the informant's voices by imposing their own interpretations, narrative styles, and choices of the elements of the native's text to include in the research report (Clifford, 1983). In addition, as Barthes (1977) argued, the meaning of a text lies less in its origin than in its destination. Therefore, the "original" accounts presented by a researcher are further distorted by the reader's interpretations. These interpretations are likely to be far from the original meaning because each person's idiosyncratic prior knowledge and reference frames create a "knowledge corridor," allowing them to notice and process certain information and ideas but not others (Hayek, 1945).

Are there any strategies that would allow us to overcome the above problems? In other words, is it possible to conduct cross-cultural and comparative research that would produce something more than abstract, removed far from the reality models, or narrative accounts developed by uninformed outsiders?

Directions for International and Comparative Research

The above discussion suggests that both postpositivist and constructivist approaches in international research fail to reach their stated goals: Researchers are unable to generate either true insider accounts or universally usable models. To solve this problem, we would need to find and employ approaches that would improve our ability to understand and present accurately perspectives of different actors (research participants and other stakeholders). The importance of understanding the stakeholders' point of view and experiences was stressed in early anthropology writings (G. Mead, 1934) and in linguistics (Bakhtin, 1981; Clark, 1985). G. Mead (1934) wrote that to be fully human we should be able to maintain an inner conversation with a generalized other. This ability could be construed as an ability to take the other's perspective. Perspective taking happens when researchers and their participants approach each other with a sense of nonjudgmental openness (Tenkasi & Mohrman, 1999). Although perspective taking does not completely solve the problem of accurately describing the insiders' accounts, it helps to alleviate the problem by providing tools for bringing into the investigation multiple voices (those of researchers, the subjects, and other stakeholders) and making different perspectives explicit.

An important prerequisite for true mutual perspective taking is creation of interpretive spaces for mutual meaning making (Tenkasi & Mohrman, 1995). Furthermore, these spaces provide for the opening of one's preconceptions, assumptions, and meaning systems to oneself and to others (Habermas, 1979). These spaces are similar to what Bresler (in press) called "interpretive zones" in the conduct of international research. In Bresler's conceptualization, "zones are unsettled locations, areas of overlap, joint custody, or contestation. It is in a zone that unexpected forces meet, new challenges arise, and solutions have to be devised with the materials at hand" (p. 3). These zones are similar to Vygotsky's (1986) "zone of proximal development," Bakhtin's (1986) "character zones," and Pratt's (1992) linguistic "contact zones." The interpretive zone involves the dynamic processes of interaction, transaction, and negotiation of multiple perspectives. Socially and historically situated, the interpretive zone can be conceptualized as "an imaginary location in which multiple voices converge and diverge through the tensions imposed by centripetal and centrifugal forces in action" (Bresler, in press, p. 3).

Another approach that attempts to promote mutual learning and understanding across cultural contexts is appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Bilimoria, 1993). Used extensively as a methodology for studying global social change, appreciative inquiry is based on the premise that mutual valu-

ing is essential for collaborative learning. This method establishes certain ground rules promoting an open, uncritical approach to others' perspectives and calls for attempts to understand others' points of view without criticizing their knowledge claims (Tenkasi & Mohrman, 1999).

A key to using appreciative inquiry and perspective taking in cross-cultural settings is to involve different actors holding competing definitions of a problem, who can act as "semiotic brokers" (Lyotard, 1984). Actors from various cultures have different social languages, and any cross-cultural encounter is also a complex interplay of various assumptions and interpretations, rooted in these languages. This view of intercultural communication is based on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin who first introduced the notion of multivoicedness. The construction of realities for Bakhtin is dialogic. It is through dialogue that space for new realities is created (Bakhtin, 1981). Therefore, in contrast with most hermeneutic studies (e.g., Gadamer, 1976), the Bakhtinian metaphor for cross-cultural research is not centered on attempts to understand others' perspectives, as if these perspectives were rigid, once-and-for-all given, but a constant creation of new realities in a multivoiced dialogue involving the researcher and the participants.

Wertsch (1991) has further elaborated Bakhtin's (1981) theory to propose four principles of multivoiced meaning creation: moving (a) from literal meaning toward addressed meaning, (b) from isolated toward socio-culturally situated meaning, (c) from a univocal toward a dialogic creation of text, and (d) from an authoritative toward an internally persuasive discourse.

The first principle says that meaning comes during and not before conversation, and an utterance gets meaning because it is addressed to somebody. The second principle builds on the first one and states that meanings should be understood in a larger sociocultural context:

All words have the taste of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293)

The third principle suggests that communication cannot be described by a sender-receiver model, which assumes that a sender transmits an intact message, decoded later by the receiver. According to Bakhtin (1981), any communication is a dynamic process in which multiple voices can be heard at the same time. Thus, meanings are not created outside the interaction: They cannot be packed, sent, and later unpacked by the receiver. Instead, the dialogues create new meanings. The fourth principle concerns the distinction between "authoritative" and "internally persuasive" discourse. In the first case, the meeting of voices is empty; it does not lead to new meanings. A true dialogue occurs in the internally persuasive discourse: "The semantic structure of an internally persuasive dis-

course is not finite, it is open; in each of the next contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever new ways to mean" (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 345-346).

The above approaches are aimed at enhancing the intersubjective understanding. However, before the distance between different participants in the research process can be reduced, researchers should be able to better understand their own culturally conditioned interpretation biases. Usunier (1998) argued for cultural deconstruction as a way of addressing the issue of these biases and suggested that it should be used in both postpositivist and constructivist studies. Because most cross-cultural research situations involve encounters between researchers from one culture and informants from another, it is necessary to start any investigation with a preresearch inquiry phase, which has a lot to do with self-inquiry. "Cultural deconstruction . . . involves a systematic investigation of the basis on which the research design will rest, including a self-assessment of the researcher's own part in terms of underlying concepts and theories, as well as attitudes towards the research practice" (Usunier, 1998, p. 137). In this process, even most fundamental concepts, the meaning of which is presumed to be obvious and universal, should be examined. Usunier argued that we, as researchers, are likely to produce a certain kind of research as a function of our perception of the requirements and tastes of our scientific community (department or university) and the dominant professional culture of the major groups of stakeholders (which are likely to include both academics and practitioners). Furthermore, our interpretations and the way they are presented in our research reports will be significantly biased by our own and the major stakeholders' national culture. Finally, demographic factors, such as the researchers' gender or age, could account for differences in assumptions that go beyond national or professional culture differences (M. Mead, 1948). Therefore, a complex interplay of national, organizational, and professional cultures, and demographic characteristics of researchers and the major stakeholders, results in a unique combination of influencing factors and a unique way each individual research study is reported.

An integral part of the deconstruction should be the discovery of new vantage points from which to look at ourselves. Kristeva (1991) suggested that an ability to see strange in our selves gives us an ability to find new vantage points, new useful lenses for looking at ourselves and our work. Personal development emerges more from an exposure to unknown than known fields and from taking the known as unknown.

Conclusion: Dealing With Complexity

The argument presented in this article suggests that our ability to conduct international HRD research that produces useful results depends not so much on our choice of methodologies but on our ability to incorporate in our

investigation culture as a major influencing factor and to account for culture's influence on phenomena under investigation. And to do this, we need a better understanding of our own and others' culturally conditioned perspectives and assumptions. This understanding is achieved by cultural deconstruction, appreciative inquiry, using the insider/outsider perspectives, and mutual perspective taking. The argument of this article is that, to realize their full potential, these methods should be employed in combination.

However, even if all the above steps are taken, one overarching problem of the international research will remain: A researcher from one country is not likely to possess the necessary cultural background to understand, notice, and record the intricacies of day-to-day interactions between individuals from other cultures and locales or to develop universally valid constructs to be used in quantitative models. A solution to this problem is found in the use of cross-cultural teams of researchers (Teagarden et al. 1995), with individual team members conducting investigations in familiar and geographically proximal locales—although here, too, the cultural divide among the team will present challenges in intersubjective understanding, and much work is required to bridge the gap. The research process will need to create the interpretive zone and provide the space to negotiate meaning to reach true understanding (a model for such reflexivity in cross-cultural projects was recently proposed by Easterby-Smith & Malina, 1999).

It should be noted that we do not regard the use of the proposed methods as a final solution, as a panacea for all the methodological problems of cross-cultural and international research. We believe that achieving an ultimate understanding of others' (or even our own) culture is not a realistic (or a meaningful, for that matter) goal of any research. Therefore, what we propose here is not an ultimate solution but rather a step or a series of steps on a never-ending journey.

HRD and organizational behavior research involving culture, virtually absent only 20 years ago, has increased in volume and frequency. Along with research productivity has come the realization of the complexities—both philosophical and pragmatic—of conducting international, cross-cultural, and comparative work. Although the challenges of doing exemplary international work may seem formidable, there is little sense in a return to simplistic treatments of culture, and advancements are needed at the conceptual, theoretical, and pragmatic levels to reach a fuller and more justified understanding and improve HRD international research and practice.

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