Crossing disciplinary, epistemological and conceptual boundaries in search of better cultural sense-making tools

A review of principal cultural approaches from business and anthropology literatures

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to compare three cultural approaches from anthropology and business literature: National Culture Approach (NCA), Corporate Culture Approach (CCA), and Transactional Culture Approach (TCA). The author grounds these approaches in different epistemological standpoints and locate them at different positions on the unity-infinity continuum. The author outlines their strengths and weaknesses, and offer the Douglasian Cultural Framework (DCF) as a transactional tool for cultural sense-making.

Design/methodology/approach – Reviewing conventional NCA/CCA frameworks reveals that while their simplicity renders them attractive to users, their assumption of stable, internally homogenous and coherent cultures has its limitations. Conversely, reviewing anthropology-based TCA literature reveals that while TCA overcomes some limitations of NCA/CCA frameworks, it also has its weaknesses – it overemphasizes "self-interest" as the preferred form of rationality, and some TCA scholars render cultural comparisons impossible by supporting cultural infinity. Finally, examining DCF reveals that it overcomes some limitations of NCA/CCA frameworks, while simultaneously advancing TCA. Nevertheless, DCF too has limitations which are also exposed.

Findings – Most NCA/CCA scholars support the "unity" argument of culture, while some transactional scholars support the "infinity" argument. DCF finds a perfect balance between the two through "constrained relativism". Also, since DCF focuses on human transactions, it is not limited in its applications to specific levels and scales. It can therefore be applied to scenarios spanning across levels and scales. Finally, it offers a compromise between the differentiation and fragmentation perspectives of corporate culture, and brings out the best of the interpretivist and post-modernistic traditions.

Research limitations/implications – The exposition of DCF opens up new avenues for research which have hitherto remained unexplored for want of appropriate frameworks, for instance the UN Peace Corps., NATO, Medecins Sans Frontiers, etc.

Originality/value – By focusing on human transactions, the paper allows for a much more dynamic conceptualization of culture as compared to static NCA/CCA frameworks.

Keywords Interpretivism, National culture, Corporate culture, Douglasian cultural theory, Functionalism, Transactional culture

Paper type Literature review

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Introduction

Business and anthropology literatures offer a wide variety of approaches for cultural sense-making. In this conceptual paper, we compare three such approaches: the National Culture Approach (NCA), the Corporate Culture Approach (CCA) and the Transactional Culture Approach (TCA). We outline the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and offer the Douglasian Cultural Framework (DCF) as a transactional

tool for cultural sense-making. We argue that DCF not only overcomes some of the weaknesses of NCA and CCA frameworks, but also contributes towards enriching TCA. As such, our present paper builds on past literature in three ways: first, while Patel and Rayner (2012) reviewed NCA and TCA, our present work also includes CCA literature in the discussion, thereby offering a richer comparison between the three approaches and a more thorough overview of business and anthropology literature on culture; second, it grounds the three approaches in different epistemological standpoints, and third, it locates the three approaches at different positions on the unity-infinity continuum. We begin by outlining the varied definitions of culture and by presenting the unity-infinity debate.

For Louis (1981) culture is a "shared system of values, norms and symbols" and "conveys an entire image, an integrated set of dimensions/characteristics and the whole beyond the parts" (Alvesson, 1987, p. 4). For Hofstede (1980\1984, p. 25) culture is "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the member of one human group from another". Adler and Doktor (1986, p. 181) suggest that "culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior, acquired and transmitted by symbols constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values". These definitions imply that culture has a traditionally derived stable core that distinguishes one social entity (e.g. nation or company) from the other, that members of a social entity have shared values or a common "programming", and that these result in similar behaviors among members of that entity. We call this the "unity" argument of culture.

Other scholars disagree with the idea of a traditional "essential core" or that culture represents some kind of "distinctive achievement". Instead, they argue that culture is made afresh each day through social interactions and is primarily concerned with everyday experience (Douglas, 1970). For instance, Alvesson (1987, p. 13) conceptualizes culture as changing "ideologies" or as "organizational frames of reference". Many organizational scholars conceptualize culture as changing patterns of beliefs and values (Westley and Jaeger, 1985). Other scholars extend the argument even further and claim that there are as many cultures as there are social contexts (Geertz, 1980), thereby rendering cultural comparisons across entities impossible. This is the "infinity" argument of culture. While supporters of the unity argument dictate that culture within a social entity is homogenous and stable, and that members will have similar behaviors, proponents of the infinity argument declare that there are as many cultures as there are social contexts. In the present paper, we seek to minimize this unity vs infinity divide, and seek to find ways of explaining both similarities and variations in human behavior within and across social entities. Doing this is important for better understanding of culturally complex scenarios – where using the unity argument may be overly simplistic and using the infinity argument may be futile due to resulting lack of comparability.

Cultural discourse is further complicated by the variety of epistemological stances that scholars have adopted in past years. Functionalist researchers "freeze" culture by representing its characteristics in a static way, resulting in static models that facilitate cultural comparisons (e.g. Hofstede, 1980\1984), but are incapable of explaining cultural change (Schultz and Hatch, 1996). Functionalist scholars also insist that "culture implies stability" (Schein, 1991, p. 245). On the other hand, interpretivists seek to understand the construction of culture through a cyclic processes of interpretation, sense-making, understanding, and action (Hatch, 1993). Finally, postmodernist scholars

focus "on the processual as opposed to structural character of human institutions" and on "disparity, difference and indeterminacy" (Cooper and Burrell, 1988, pp. 100-101) rather than the origin of things. The postmodernist stance in its extreme is illustrated by Baudrillard's (1988) conception of culture as a "network of floating signifiers that offers momentary seduction rather than the ability to store and transmit meaning" (Poster, 1988, p. 3). We find this postmodernist tradition to be consistent with the infinity argument of culture, and the functionalist tradition to be coherent with the unity argument. We position ourselves between the interpretive and the postmodernist traditions. For us, culture is the outcome of ongoing interactions between individuals and their social contexts. People's behaviors change as they move from one context to another. Yet, the "network of floating signifiers" may not be as momentary as Baudrillard claims. We believe that despite the semblance of chaos, a systematic pattern can be discerned in people's behaviors.

In subsequent sections, we review NCA and CCA frameworks, which are commonly cited in business literature, and assess their strengths and weaknesses. Next, we introduce anthropology-based TCA, which has hitherto been neglected by business scholars. Then we offer the DCF as a transactional tool for cultural sense-making. We show how DCF offers some advantages over NCA and CCA frameworks while also advancing TCA literature. The limitations of DCF are also discussed. We conclude by drawing a comparison between these approaches and by offering suggestions for future research.

NCA

Proponents of NCA treat culture as being stable and homogenous within a nation, society, and/or geographic region. For instance, after studying 72 countries and regions, Hofstede (1980\1984) identified four cultural dimensions as distinguishing members of one country from another: high vs low power distance, uncertainty-avoidance vs risk-taking, individualism vs collectivism, and masculinity vs femininity. Subsequent research led to the generation of another dimension labeled "Confucian dynamism" or "long-term orientation" (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). Scores were attributed to countries on afore-mentioned dimensions. For instance, India and France received scores of 48/100 and 71/100, respectively, for individualism, implying that India is more collectivistic than France. Hofstede's model has inspired several replication studies (Deshpande and Farley, 1999) and has been the framework of choice for many scholars (Meschi, 1997; Barkema and Vermeulen, 1997). Following Hofstede (1980 \1984), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) offered seven cultural dimensions believed to distinguish societies and influence how businesses are conducted between them. The seven cultural dimensions are: first, universalism vs particularism; second, individualism vs collectivism; third, affective vs neutral in expressing emotions; forth, specific vs diffused relations; fifth, achievement vs ascription-oriented; sixth, sequential vs synchronic attitude to time; seventh, internal vs external locus of control. The GLOBE project is another study which offers nine cultural dimensions distinguishing societies from one another. These nine dimensions of societal culture are: first, uncertainty-avoidance; second, power distance; third, collectivism-I; forth, collectivism-II; fifth, gender-egalitarianism; sixth, assertiveness; seventh, future-orientation; eighth, performance-orientation; ninth, humane-orientation (House *et al.*, 2004). Based on scores obtained on these dimensions, significant similarities within societies and significant difference between them were identified with regards to leadership effectiveness (House *et al.*, 2004).

Hall's (1960) typology of high-context vs low-context cultures is also frequently cited in cross-culture communication literature (Cardon, 2008). In high-context cultures information is widely shared, thereby requiring extensive cultural programming while low-context cultures are the opposite. With regards to varied conceptualizations of time, Hall and Hall (1990) explain that in monochronic cultures (e.g. US, Germany) time is used in a linear way making it possible for people to concentrate on one thing at a time, while polychronic cultures (e.g. Mediterranean countries) are characterized by the simultaneous occurrence of many activities. Hall and Hall (1990) also classify countries based on their treatment of time as being past (e.g. Iran, India), present and future-oriented, with occasional overlaps between categories (e.g. USA is both present and future-oriented).

Taking a slightly different approach, Schwartz (2004) conceptualizes cultural dimensions as a set of problems that individuals need to resolve. He offers three main cultural dimensions: first, conservatism vs autonomy: relation between the person and the group; second, hierarchy vs egalitarianism: the extent to which equality is valued by members; third, mastery vs harmony: members' relations with the natural and social world. Schwartz explains that these dimensions often occur concomitantly in societies because they are grounded in common underlying values (e.g. the coexistence of egalitarianism and intellectual autonomy in Western Europe). Based on data from 67 national groups, Schwartz (2004) offers seven transnational cultural groupings: West European, East European, English-speaking, Latin American, South Asian, Confucian-influenced and sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, he cautions against excessive reliance on transnational categorizations and stresses the importance of in-group variations. He also reveals considerable universalism in human motivation across countries (Schwartz, 2006).

As seen in this section, most NCA scholars (barring Schwartz, 2004, 2006) have traditionally adhered to the unity argument of culture, and have propagated broad generalizations at the national/societal/regional level. Nonetheless, recent years have seen significant changes in this area of research. For instance, drawing from psychology literature, Leung *et al.* (2002) have expanded the dimensional map of culture by creating a social axiom survey, the robustness of which has been confirmed through subsequent studies (Leung and Bond, 2004). As another example of recent developments, Taras *et al.* (2010) show that the predictive power of Hofstede's (1980 \1984) and Hofstede and Bond (1988) dimensions is significantly lower than personality traits and demographics for certain organizational outcomes, but higher for others. Thus, they place boundary conditions within which Hofstede's framework may be effectively used. Inspired by cognitive psychology, other scholars such as Leung *et al.* (2005) argue that the human mind is fluid and interacts dynamically with the environment, resulting in changing human behavior. Similarly, Tinsley and Brodt (2004) analyze cultural differences in conflict behaviors through a discussion of frames, schemas, and scripts. In addition to a much-desired shift from static to dynamic conceptualizations of culture (Leung *et al.* 2005), such studies also reveal a move away from unity and towards the infinity argument of culture. Notwithstanding these developments, the use of "nation' as a proxy for culture continues – a practice that has attracted much criticism from other scholars (see Child and Tayeb, 1983; Usunier, 1998; Tung, 2008). Therefore, while we applaud these developments, we suggest that scholars look for explanations of human behavior beyond nationality.

In conclusion, we summarize the strengths and weaknesses of NCA frameworks. A major strength of NCA frameworks is that they allow for broad comparisons across

nations/societies/regions and are therefore considered useful by some practitioners and scholars. Conversely, these frameworks ignore the existence of multiple cultures within a country (McSweeney, 2009). They neglect that people's workplace behavior could be influenced by factors other than culture (Cullen *et al.*, 2004), and assume homogeneity of management practices within nations (Tung, 2008). When applied to cross-border business collaborations, NCA frameworks focus excessively on cultural differences between firms from different nations, rather than on the connectivity and potential similarity between them (Angwin and Vaara, 2005). Finally, most NCA scholars treat national identity "as a passive embodiment of a predetermined cultural template" – a viewpoint contested by Ailon and Kunda (2009) who show that national identity is a flexible cultural creation to which people actively attribute changing meanings.

CCA

Here we call upon Martin's (2004) review of CCA and her categorization of past studies as following one of three perspectives: integration, differentiation or fragmentation. Proponents of the integration perspective conceptualize corporate culture as shared beliefs and values that help individuals to understand the company and guide their behaviors (Weick, 1985). We find that Hofstede *et al.* (1990) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (1997) frameworks are consistent with this perspective. Hofstede *et al.* (1990) propose six dimensions which help define the culture of an organization: first, process vs result-orientated; second, employee vs job-orientated; third, parochial vs professional; forth, open vs closed communication; fifth, loose vs tight control systems; sixth, normative vs pragmatic. Similarly, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) suggest that a company may have one of four kinds of corporate cultures: the Eiffel tower, incubator, family, and guided missile cultures. Martin (2004) explains that integration scholars (e.g. Schein, 1985) believe (rather simplistically) that once the top management announces a set of espoused values, these are accepted by all employees, and are reinforced through subsequent recruitment and socialization. If deviances are observed, these are explained away as failure to achieve a "strong" culture. Cultural change is seen as a systematic attempt to replace the old way of working with a new one. Martin (2004) concludes that despite its promise of a harmonious and controllable culture, the integration perspective has little empirical support.

Contradicting the integration viewpoint, Alvesson (1990) argues that it is highly unlikely that employees will adhere to a commonly defined organizational identity. Corporate culture, Alvesson (2002) explains, is simply a partially successful attempt by management to exercise control over lower ranking employees. Other scholars favor the idea of overlapping, nested subcultures that co-exist in an organization in relationships of intergroup harmony, conflict or indifferences (Martin and Siehl, 1983). According to this viewpoint, which Martin (2004) calls the differentiation perspective (e.g. Bartunek and Moch in Frost *et al.*, 1991) subcultures appear along functional, occupational and hierarchical lines. While differentiation studies question the over-simplified coherence of the integration view, they continue to emphasize consistency, consensus and clarity within sub-cultures, and continue to relegate ambiguities to the interstices between sub-cultures (Martin, 2004).

A third group of scholars argues that each employee is affected by corporate culture through socialization and also actively re-creates corporate culture through daily networking (Smircich, 1983). According to this viewpoint, which Martin (2004) calls the fragmentation perspective, corporate culture is dynamic. Like differentiation scholars, fragmentation scholars believe in the co-existence of multiple corporate

cultures. However, in fragmentation studies (see Robertson and Swan, 2003) claims of clarity, consensus and consistency (even at the sub-cultural level) are believed to undermine organizational complexity. Rather than underplaying ambiguity, fragmentation scholars consider it integral to organizational culture. For them, "if consensus exists, it is (within) issue-specific networks, which disappear as soon as the issue disappears […] culture looks [...] like a roomful of spider webs, constantly being destroyed and rewoven" (Martin, 2004, p. 10-11). This is consistent with Thompson and Wildavsky's (1986) observation that in no organization can a single well-defined organizational goal be sustained for long. It soon gives way to a variety of conflicting goals, and to the emergence of mutually competing sub-groups. For fragmentation scholars, change is never-ending because new cultures are created and old ones disappear as individuals move in and out of networks. Since cultural change is beyond individual control, these scholars offer few guidelines for the same.

We observe that most fragmentation scholars favor post-modernism, while most integration scholars prefer functionalism. Further, most integration scholars favor the unity argument, while most fragmentation scholars support the infinity argument of culture. Interestingly, while differentiation scholars attempt a compromise between unity and infinity, they end up emphasizing stability and consistency at the sub-cultural level. Although CCA offers a variety of ways for exploring culture at the organizational level, it suffers from certain drawbacks. First, CCA scholars tend to juxtapose organization and culture (Alvesson, 1987), implying that an organization's boundary surrounds a culturally homogenous entity. This is problematic, especially in complex structures such as multinational companies or international strategic alliances, which bring together people not only from different nations and organizations, but also from different professions, interest groups, and sub-units. Such entities are characterized by ongoing mergers, acquisitions and take-overs, resulting in continuous restructuring, evolving corporate boundaries and increased diversity of goals (Angwin and Vaara, 2005). Therefore, assuming cultural homogeneity in such structures is simplistic and erroneous. Second, many CCA frameworks are grounded in the assumption that companies are embedded within larger national cultures (Leung *et al.*, 2005) or that corporate cultures are influenced by national cultures of leaders (Hofstede, 1980 \1984). This viewpoint is strongly contested by scholars such as Fredrik Barth (1992). Finally, one cannot neglect the inherent contradiction of holding both NCA and CCA frameworks simultaneously (Barth, 2007; McSweeney, 2009), which would imply little difference between corporate cultures within one country – a viewpoint heavily contested by companies who pride themselves for their distinct corporate cultures.

Having reviewed NCA and CCA from business literature, we now turn towards anthropology-based TCA in search of alternative tools for cultural sense-making.

TCA

A review of anthropology-based TCA literature reveals substantial richness and variety. Ekeh (1974) divides the literature broadly into "individualistic" and "collectivistic" theories. While the former derive from the British and American social anthropological tradition, the latter have their roots in European sociological tradition, more precisely in the work of Levi-Strauss, Durkheim and Mauss (Kapferer, 1976). In contrast with conventional NCA and CCA frameworks, TCA scholars (Barth 1966a, b) uphold that cultures are neither the outcome of national/corporate affiliations, nor are they carried in heads and hearts of people. Cultures are created daily through social transactions which involve patterned transferences of material and immaterial items between individuals

and groups (Kapferer, 1976). Guided by their postmodernist standpoint, TCA scholars believe that cultures are dynamic; they transform both meaning and behavior. Understandably, TCA scholars have little tolerance for structural-functional approaches to culture.

Barth (1956, 1959a, b) disagrees with the structural-functional depiction of the world as divided into separate yet internally coherent "societies". Instead, he argues, that since individuals form the elementary parts of every social interaction, they will hold memberships in groups at a variety of levels and scales, and also in groups which transect boundaries (Barth, 1992). We find Barth's explanation to be more convincing than NCA/CCA frameworks in the context of modern organizations where employees are members of varied and overlapping groups, and where predicting people's behavior on the basis of their membership in one group – either country or company – might be overly simplistic. Second, Barth (1992, 2007) argues that rather than being determined by larger frameworks (such as society or nation) within they are located, smaller social entities (companies, clubs, etc.) also exercise their own autonomy and influence on the former. Hence, it would be unfair to apply generalizations drawn at the national level to other lower levels (Barth, 2007). Consequently, rather than viewing modern organizations as being subject to the national cultures within which they are located, one may view them as housing many different cultures within themselves, which dynamically influence one another across levels. Third, Barth (1953) recognizes the futility of identifying a community or a place as an object of study. This is consistent with our dissatisfaction with juxtaposing organization and culture. Instead Barth prefers to focus on conceptualizing both variation and conformity of human behavior, an endeavor in which he was joined by Leach (1954) and Geertz (1973). Finally, Barth (1956) calls upon anthropologists to study those transactions that produce generally shared meaning and to construct generative models of culture, rather than simply categorizing cultures (Barth, 2007). Similar calls have also been made by Thompson and Ellis (1997).

Since Barth (1966b) was not convinced by structural-functional explanations of human behavior, he began investigating alternative explanations, an endeavor which led him to the idea of "rationalities". When people enter into a new social environment, he explained, they do not really know how to behave. However, they have a set of disparate values to choose from, and they choose to act according to those values which they believe will benefit them most. If individuals are rewarded for their actions, their behavior will be reinforced. If they are punished, they will adjust their values and behaviors accordingly. Through repeated interactions an individual's repertoire of values will become systematized and consistent with those around her. In such social transactions, each party attempts to gain a value that is greater than or at least equal to the value lost.

While Barth's transactional model and his idea of rationality were well-received and while they overcame many limitations of structural-functional orthodoxies, they also received some criticism. For instance, Thompson (1996, p. 18) pointed out that "transaction theory has no directions. It simply has this systematizing, integrating and homogenizing process, and the idea that we follow it: we start off all over the place and we all end up at the same place." In contrast, in Thompson's (1996, p. 18) understanding "social life is absolutely not a one-way journey to a single destination". Barth's concept of rationality was also criticized for its frequent reference to actors pursuing "self-interest". Other scholars like Skvoretz and Conviser (1974, p. 60) revised the definition of "interest" and showed that human behavior is guided by a variety of

rationalities: individualism, competition, group-gain, equity or reciprocity. They also replaced the idea of individuals seeking "maximal benefits" with the notion that individuals pursue "satisfactory benefits". While this constitutes a valuable revision of Barth's initial model, more work on the variety of rationalities is desired. Also, some transactional scholars inadvertently propagated the infinity argument of culture. For instance, in his study of the Balinese culture, Geertz (1980) explains that in certain contexts culture is so unique that reducing it to the dichotomous categories preferred by western social scientists is erroneous. Instead, one ought to treat each culture as distinct and unique. While we share Geertz's dissatisfaction with dichotomous cultural frameworks, we do not agree that each culture is unique. The idea that each culture is unique is consistent with the infinity argument, and would render cultural comparisons impossible.

To summarize, we have so far reviewed three cultural approaches in this paper: NCA, CCA and TCA. Most conventional NCA and CCA frameworks support the unity argument of culture, which is inadequate for cultural sense-making in complex business structures. Conversely, TCA and Barth's concept of rationalities enable a better understanding of complex cultural realities, but this advantage is partially mitigated by an excessive focus on self-interest and by the fact that some transactional scholars promote the infinity argument of culture. We reckon that an optimal transactional cultural framework would be one that offered richer explanations of rationalities, while simultaneously resolving the unity-infinity dilemma. Mary Douglas offers one such a framework.

DCF as a transactional tool

In this section, we present an overview of the work of Mary Douglas, the famous British anthropologist. Although many experts refer to Douglas's work as "Cultural Theory", Douglas herself always insisted that her invention was a framework or a heuristic device, not a 'theory". Hence, we choose to refer to her work as the DCF. Using DCF as a label also helps avoid confusion with other cultural frameworks and theories which abound in business literature. When Douglas (1970) first presented her four-fold cultural framework, it was perceived by many as a static classificatory tool. It was only later that Thompson (1996) related the four cultures of DCF to four forms of rationality, thereby converting this seemingly static model into a dynamic transactional framework, and simultaneously addressing past calls for richer explanation of rationality.

According to DCF, human behavior is the result of ongoing interactions between an individual's preferences on two social dimensions –"group" and "grid" – and her social context (Douglas, 1970). "Group" represents the extent to which people are restricted in thought and action by commitment to a larger social unit, while "grid" is the extent to which people are controlled by role differentiation due to criteria such as gender, color, rank, descent, or age (Gross and Rayner, 1985). Gross and Rayner (1985) offer five predicates for group: proximity between members, transitivity of relationships, frequency of interactions among members, impermeability of group, and scope of a person's involvement in the unit's activities. They also offer four predicates for grid: specialization of roles, asymmetry in role exchanges, entitlement and accountability. Four cultures emerge from different grid-group configurations in which people arrange themselves (see Figure 1).

These four cultures of DCF should not be confused with the cultural categories offered by conventional NCA/CCA frameworks. While the latter explain people's behaviors based on their national origin/corporate affiliations, DCF explains people's behaviors as a

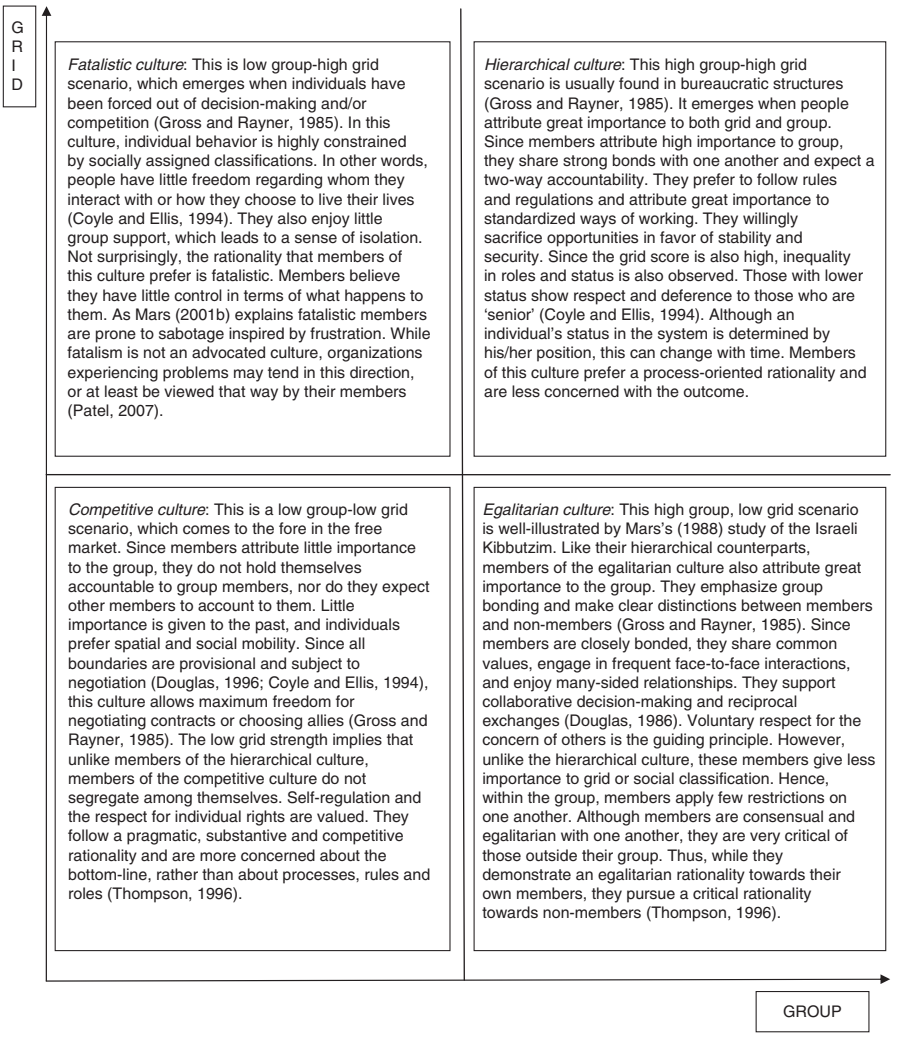

Figure 1.
The four cultures of DCF, their values, rationalities and behavioral preferences

Source: Adapted from Patel and Rayner (2012); Patel (2007); Mars (1988, 2001b) and many others

function of their grid-group preferences. Also, since people arrange themselves along different grid-group configurations at different times and in different contexts, the four cultures are not rigid categories (Mars, 2001a; Mars, 2008), but shifting patterns of preferences. Considering that the four cultures emerge from different preferences of grid and group, assessing the strength of these dimensions becomes crucial for cultural sense-making. Fortunately, Mars and Mars (1993, 2004) offer a solution in the form of a qualitative instrument called LISTORG. A more sophisticated version of the same instrument – now called LISTOR-SPARCK[1] – was recently presented by Mars (2012).

DCF scholars explain that members of different cultures are held together in a relation of mutual competition and interdependence. The competitive, hierarchical, and

egalitarian cultures are active cultures (see Mars, 1972, 2005 for illustrations; Mamadouh, 1999) and their members compete with each other for a dominant position in the system by converting others around them to their own worldview (Thompson, 1996). They organize perceptions and knowledge in line with their way of life, and socialize new entrants accordingly (Rayner, 1991). Members of the fatalistic culture, being passive, simply align themselves to whichever culture is strongest at the time. Members of different cultures also depend on one another for their survival, so that if one culture were to disappear, they would all disappear (Thompson, 1996). For instance, the principled and rule-based hierarchical culture provides a way of countering the excessive market-focused rationality of the competitive culture. While the latter helps harness opportunities for creativity and entrepreneurship (see Patel, 2007 for examples), it also counters hierarchy's excessive affinity for rules and procedures. While the egalitarian group helps members of the hierarchical and competitive cultures to bridge their differences (Thompson, 1996), the fatalistic culture makes a less-obvious but valuable contribution to the system by offering coping mechanisms in the face of adversity (6, 2003). Thus, each culture has its own strength and weakness, and eliminating any one would lead to the collapse of the entire system. The question therefore is not which one is right, but rather which one is more appropriate than the other in a specific context (Thompson and Wildavsky, 1986). In light of the perpetual tension between the members of the four cultures, one may ask how they manage to transact with one another. Thompson (1996) explains that when forced to work with one another, members of different cultures bring forward their similarities and temporarily underplay their differences. In so doing, they attempt to create a workable coalition with one another. Not surprisingly, such alliances cannot last forever. Differences soon resurface between the members of different cultures, eventually leading to a rupture (Thompson, 1996).

Like other cultural frameworks, DCF has also been subject to much evolution in past years. While earlier scholars (like Douglas) supported the stability hypothesis – the notion that individuals look for stability and consistency in the different social environments in which they operate, this soon gave way to the mobility hypothesis – the notion that DCF can best be used to explain people's behaviors within specific contexts (Rayner, 1992) (Tansey and O'Riordan, 1999). This shift from static to a dynamic conceptualization of culture is consistent with similar shifts in NCA and CCA literature. Also, there is considerable divergence among DCF scholars on many issues. For instance, while many scholars consider belonging to the fatalistic culture to be the outcome of coercion, others uphold that for some individuals withdrawing themselves from the influences of other cultures might be a voluntary choice. This has led Thompson (1997) to propose a fifth culture – the hermit – which he locates in the center of the grid-group framework. Notwithstanding this debate, for the purpose of the present paper, we continue to use the more commonly cited fourfold model of DCF. Next, we compare DCF to conventional NCA/CCA frameworks and outline its strengths and weaknesses.

Comparing DCF with NCA/CCA frameworks

Comparing DCF with conventional NCA/CCA frameworks results in six interesting insights. First, while proponents of NCA/CCA frameworks ground their explanations of human behavior in national/societal origin and/or corporate affiliations, DCF scholars offer a richer understanding of people's behaviors by evoking four different kinds of rationalities. As Thompson (1996) explains members of the hierarchical culture follow a process-oriented rationality, and are guided in their behavior by rules and procedures. Following the communal and critical rationality, members of the egalitarian culture

behave in ways that support communal interests of their members. The substantive rationality of the competitive culture encourages its members to behave in ways that optimize self-gains, even if this leads to compromising rules or communal interest. Finally, people adhering to the fatalistic rationality pay lip-service to whatever measure contributes to their self-preservation. Second, since DCF focuses on transactions, and since transactions occur at every level of human interactions, DCF can be used for cultural sense-making at the national, international, regional, and/or corporate levels. Thus, DCF allows researchers to transcend national, societal and corporate boundaries, making it an appropriate device to study complex business scenarios.

Third, although discussing "levels of culture" becomes moot when one focuses on transactions, if applied to the corporate level, DCF offers an ideal compromise between integration, differentiation and fragmentation perspectives. Unlike integration scholars, DCF scholars favor cultural plurality. However, the four cultures of DCF are not static internally coherent sub-cultures (as differentiation scholars would argue). In fact, even within sub-cultural groups individuals are constantly shifting positions due to changing grid-group preferences, but these movements do not always lead to crossing cultural boundaries. Conversely, when individuals do cross cultural boundaries, these shifts need not always be as unpredictable as fragmentation scholars contend. Most people shift between cultures when they move from one issue-based network to another (Thompson, 1996). Individuals "flit like butterflies from context to context, changing the nature of their arguments as they do" (Rayner, 1992, p. 107-108). This is illustrated in Price and Thompson's (1996) example of Swiss villagers who switch from competitive to egalitarian behaviors in their forest management when avalanches threaten their homes. Therefore, by studying people's underlying preferences and their changing contexts, cultural shifts can be understood, and their direction can also be anticipated.

Fourth, DCF scholars explain conformity and variations in collective action in grid-group terms. They explain that any two individuals/entities with similar grid-group preferences will display similar behaviors in that context (Douglas, 1970). This conformity is neither permanent nor is it a function of people's national origin/corporate affiliation. Also, individual behavior is a function of the social pressure that individuals experience within a context (Thompson, 1996). Therefore, the same individual may experience different degrees of social pressure and may behave differently at different times. Alternately, different people within an entity may experience different degrees of social pressure resulting in considerable behavioral plurality within that entity. Consider Patel's (2007) example of an Indo-French alliance where one manager cited company policy to explain his reluctance to being recorded, while other managers in the same company were either unaware of such policies, or simply chose not to follow them. Thus, DCF explains both conformity and variations in human behavior.

Fifth, DCF offers a resolution to the unity-infinity dilemma. The unity argument to which conventional NCA/CCA frameworks adhere, does not explain behavioral diversity within a social entity. Conversely, the infinity argument results in an inability to compare across cultures (Thompson, 1996). Since DCF explains human behavior in terms of grid-group preferences, and since the grid-group preferences from one scenario can easily be compared to those in another, it explains behavioral diversity without subscribing to infinity. DCF supports the idea of cultural plurality, and plurality obviously introduces relativism. However, cultural relativism need not be unlimited. It is in fact, subject to constrained relativism (Thompson *et al.*, 2005). This concept of constrained relativism helps bridge the conceptual divide between unity and infinity.

Finally, in our understanding, DCF can best be positioned between interpretivist and postmodernist traditions. Consistent with the interpretivist stance, DCF scholars relate people's underlying preferences to their actions. Also, in the post-modernist tradition, DCF scholars believe in ongoing cultural change. Yet, unlike extreme post-modernists, DCF scholars do not consider cultural change to be chaotic and unpredictable. In fact, they explain that when faced with cultural change there are only 12 possible alternatives – three directions that members of each of the four cultures may choose to pursue. What remains impossible to predict though is the precise direction that an individual will choose to take. Thus, DCF scholars attempt to bring forward the best of both the interpretive and post-modernistic traditions, thereby allowing for better cultural sense-making.

Notwithstanding its strengths, DCF also has its share of criticisms. We discuss five of these in this section. First, Mamadouh (1999) points out that the variety of labels used for the four cultures has led to considerable confusion in past literature. For instance, the high grid-high group culture has been called hierarchy (hierarchist or hierarchical) or bureaucracy, and the low grid-low group culture has been variously referred to as markets, competition, entrepreneurs, individualism (individualistic or individualists). The use of such confusing labels has encouraged scholars to use DCF as a classificatory rather than an explanatory device. Tansey (2004) shares this concern and adds that the use of labels such as "individualists" and "hierarchists" have led researchers (e.g. Sjöberg, 1998) to incorrectly assume that the four cultures are personality or psychological types rather than emerging cultural patterns. He explains that this might also be the outcome of using positivistic methodologies (e.g. survey instruments), which are inappropriate for theoretical frameworks like DCF. He recommends qualitative instruments such as interviews and participation-observation for studies grounded in DCF. Second, applications of DCF are prone to illustrative examples and bird-spotting (Mamadouh, 1999). In other words, some DCF scholars remain content with simply spotting the presence of the four cultures in a social system. We believe that this tendency can be overcome by focusing on the how the four cultures are generated, rather than simply pointing out that they co-exist in a specific context and using systematic criteria for assessing grid and group (e.g. Mars's [2012] LISTOR-SPARCK). Third, some scholars (e.g. Renn, 1992) complain that DCF fails to capture the full richness of observed behavior. This criticism, we believe, is grounded in a wrong understanding of DCF's objectives. It is not the goal of DCF to force-fit every observed behavior into the four cultures. The objective is simply to understand dynamic human interactions between members of the four cultures (6 and Mars, 2008). Although cultures often exist in hybrid forms (see Rayner, 1994), discussing them in their pure forms is only required to facilitate an understanding of the framework. Four, some scholars (see Milton, 1996) complain that DCF does not give sufficient importance to human agency. We disagree. In our understanding DCF conceptualizes human behavior as the outcome of an ongoing interaction between individuals and their contexts. It neither attributes human behavior solely to the individual, nor solely to the context. Finally, DCF has sometimes been criticized for not clarifying the level of analysis. DCF scholars defend their stand by explaining that cultural interactions are independent of levels and scales – if transactions fall into a number of distinct spheres, the same individual could be a member of different cultural groups across levels and scales in different contexts (Thompson, 1997; see also Barth, 1992). While many scholars consider this flexibility an asset, others worry that frameworks (like DCF) that are too widely applicable may have weak predictive powers (Mamadouh, 1999).

Theoretical implications

We offer two main theoretical implications. Since proponents of most NCA/CCA frameworks assume cultural homogeneity within nations/societies/regions and/or companies, they consider cultural differences to be problematic (Meschi, 1997; Barkema and Vermeulen, 1997). While cultural similarity or lesser "cultural distance" between the national and/or corporate cultures of collaborating firms is considered a pre-requisite for sound inter-firm relations (Vanhonacker and Pan, 1997), a large "cultural distance" is deemed to have a negative impact on the viability of the relationship (Hallen *et al.*, 1979; Hofstede, 1980\1984). Since most NCA/CCA scholars ask questions in line with their "difference-oriented" lens, it is not surprising that the responses they get are also along the same lines (Ofori-Dankwa and Ricks, 2000, p. 173). This practice inadvertently feeds into reinforcing "the symbolic production of a sense of difference" (Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003, p. 1090). Conceptually speaking, these approaches are not very different from past approaches in comparative anthropology, wherein the "procedure of comparison consisted of a morphological matching of forms so as to locate differences" (Kapferer, 1976, p. 3). In contrast, using DCF for cultural sense-making draws our attention away from the dead-end argument of national/corporate culture differences and towards cultural transactions as an alternative cultural lens. Proponents of DCF show that cultural differences are not only inevitable, they are also required for the viability of social relations.

Second, studies using conventional NCA/CCA frameworks often cite culture as "an explanation of last resort' (Thompson *et al.* 2005). Patel (2007) notes a similar tendency among international managers who evoke cultural differences when all other explanations of failure (bad planning, poor design, inadequate resources, etc.) are found wanting. Sometimes, managers cite culture as an "uncaused cause". This means that while culture is seen as causing problems, it is itself incapable of being explained (Thompson, 1996). We reckon that as long as managers/scholars continue to focus selectively on national origin/corporate affiliations to make sense of people's behaviors, they will inevitably continue to treat culture as "an explanation of last resort" and as an "uncaused cause". Conversely, DCF not only explains people's behaviors without relying on their national/societal origin and/or corporate affiliations, but also relates their underlying values with behavioral preferences and subsequent actions. Table I summarizes our findings.

Conclusions, limitations and suggestions for future research

In recent years many scholars (Child and Tayeb, 1983; Angwin and Vaara, 2005; Ailon and Kunda, 2009) have expressed dissatisfaction with the way culture has been conceptualized in business literature. They have urged researchers to desist from using "nation" as a proxy for culture and have called for new angles in cultural research. Notwithstanding, business literature continues to be dominated by national origin/corporate affiliations based explanations of people's behaviors due to lack of alternative frameworks. By proposing DCF as an alternative tool for cultural sense-making, we partly address this void. We also address Leung *et al.*'s (2005) call for new ways of conceptualizing the dynamicity of culture. While these scholars rely on cognitive psychology, we draw on anthropology-based transactional culture literature to explain human behavior. Finally, following Barth (2007) we offer DCF as a generative model of culture which explains how cultures emerge – thereby countering the tendency among culture scholars to simply categorize cultures. Although DCF has enjoyed much popularity in anthropology (Thompson and Ellis, 1997), political science (Thompson *et al.*, 1990) and public administration (Wildavsky, 1987), its use in business studies remains fairly limited. We hope that our present paper will partially redress this disequilibrium.

Table I. Comparing NCA, CCA, TCA, and DCF as a transactional framework

	NCA	CCA	TCA	DCF as a transactional framework
Focus on	Culture at the national/societal/ regional level Cultural differences as being problematic	Culture at the company/ organization level Integration and differentiation perspectives: cultural differences as being problematic Fragmentation perspective: cultural ambiguity	Human transactions (at and across a variety of levels) Cultural transactions rather than cultural differences	Human transactions (at and across a variety of levels) Cultural transactions rather than cultural differences, cultural differences considered essential for social viability
Treatment of culture as […]	Static, as an uncaused cause, an explanation of last resort	Integration perspective: static at the organizational level Differentiation perspective: static at the subcultural level Fragmentation perspective: dynamic and chaotic	Dynamic	Dynamic, but behavioral patterns can still be discerned
Standpoint on the unity-infinity argument	Conventional NCA: Unity argument Recent NCA frameworks: Infinity argument	Integration perspective: unity argument Differentiation perspective: between unity and infinity Fragmentation perspective: infinity argument	Infinity argument	Constrained relativism: cultural pluralism without implying cultural infinity
Epistemological standpoint	Conventional NCA: Functionalist Recent advances: post-modernist	Integration perspective: functionalist Differentiation perspective: functionalist Fragmentation perspective: post-modernist	Interpretivist, post-modernist	Between interpretivist and post-modernist

(*continued*)

Table I.

	NCA	CCA	TCA	DCF as a transactional framework
Strengths	Facilitates broad cultural comparisons across nations/societies/regions	Facilitates cultural comparisons and offers a rich variety of frameworks to study culture at the corporate level	Explains human behavior through discussion of "rationality" rather than national origin/corporate affiliations	Offers richer understanding of rationalities, transcends national/societal/corporate boundaries, offers a compromise between integration and differentiation perspectives, explains conformity and variations in collective action, overcomes the unity-infinity dilemma
Limitations	Incapable of explaining cultural change, ignores existence of multiple cultures within a country, neglects the impact of factors other than culture on behavior, assumes homogeneity of practices within nations, focuses excessively on cultural differences, treats national identity as a passive embodiment of culture	Juxtaposes organization and culture, assumes that companies are embedded within national culture, holding NCA and CCA simultaneously generates a conceptual contradiction	Focuses excessively on 'self-interest', some transactional scholars promote the infinity argument, thereby rendering cultural comparisons impossible	Tendency to use DCF as a classificatory device, confusing labels, four cultures sometimes wrongly treated as personality or psychological types, applications vulnerable to bird-spotting, may be seen as having weak predictive powers

Our present paper suffers from certain limitations. First, while it offers a satisfactory appraisal of different cultural approaches from a theoretical angle, this appraisal remains incomplete due to insufficient reflections on the methodological underpinnings of different approaches. Studies grounded in NCA generally follow a positivistic epistemology, and therefore rely on quantitative methodologies, which produce broad generalizable results. Conversely, studies grounded in frameworks such as DCF are inspired by either the interpretive or the post-modernist tradition. Such studies generally tend towards qualitative methodologies and favor depth of understanding over broad generalizations. Since the choice of frameworks, choice of methodologies, and epistemological preferences are intricately linked with one another, an in-depth reflection on methodological appropriateness is required for a more complete appreciation of cultural frameworks. Therefore, our present criticism of different cultural approaches is partial, at best. The second limitation of our work is that due to space constraints, we have, at best, offered a superficial appreciation of popular cultural approaches from business and anthropology literature, without being able to expose their full conceptual and empirical richness. Our coverage of cultural approaches from business and anthropology literature is far from exhaustive.

To conclude, in this paper we argue that DCF enjoys certain advantages over other commonly cited cultural approaches. Nevertheless, this does not release DCF scholars from the responsibility of making appropriate methodological choices. As Tansey (2004) explains, if combined with inappropriate methodologies, DCF will be reduced to just another classificatory tool (e.g. Sjöberg, 1998), not very different from the ones we criticize in this paper. Therefore, we recommend discretion and care in the way scholars use DCF. Second, while our present paper encourages business scholars to use DCF, the scope of DCF's applications should not be limited only to business studies. Many features that characterize modern business entities – for instance, constant change, plurality of identities and belief systems, dynamicity – are also found in non-business entities, such as the NATO, the UN Peace Corps and "Medecins sans Frontiers". Each of these entities brings together people from different nations, professions, religions, and backgrounds to interact with one another in challenging, unstable and dynamic environments. Therefore, transactional frameworks such as DCF can also be used for cultural sense-making in such entities. Finally, we recommend that future scholars follow Barth's (2007) advice and develop other generative frameworks of culture like DCF. Such generative frameworks will open up avenues of research hitherto left unexplored due to lack of appropriate tools.

Note

1. LISTORG is an acronym for: labor, information, space, time, objects, resources, and group incorporation. This instrument was then revised to LISTOR-SPARCK, where SPARCK stands for: **s**election and promotion, propinquity of residence, association at work, roll over of work and leisure, common histories, and kinship.

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