From othering to being in relationship: 

Reflexively reframing the use of intercultural theories.

Carolina Bouten Pinto, Mmgt (Hons)
Department of ERHR, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Brisbane Australia

Email: c.boutenpinto@griffith.edu.au

Abstract:
In this paper, I reflexively engage with a number of established intercultural models and explicate why these models, rather than facilitate the development of meaningful, respectful and inclusive intercultural relations, perpetuate static and essentialised notions of culture. From this reflexive engagement, rather than discarding these models altogether, I propose and provide examples of how these models can be reframed to contribute to reflexive, dialogical and relational processes as informants. I conclude by suggesting these processes to be underpinned by principles and skilful practices and aided by the reframed models as informants when required, we move into the open space of co-creation.

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In this paper, I reflexively engage with a number of established intercultural models and explicate why these models, rather than facilitate the development of meaningful, respectful and inclusive intercultural relations, perpetuate static and essentialised notions of culture. From this reflexive engagement, rather than discarding these models altogether, I propose and provide examples of how these models can be reframed to contribute to reflexive, dialogical and relational processes as informants. I conclude by suggesting these processes to be underpinned by principles and skilful practices and aided by the reframed models as informants when required, we move into the open space of co-creation.

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Explicating a Number of Intercultural Models:
I have been and continue to be an active member and a contributor to ponderings that take place in the many intercultural discussion groups on Linkedin; a business oriented online social networking site. Through this engagement, I am continuously reminded of the vast range of understandings that people have about the influence of cultural differences on interactions, as well as the range of application of intercultural theories in the business context. I also realise that the ‘intercultural industry’ is alive and well and growing. For example, an increasing volume of post where people ask others to provide the ‘top 10 tips for doing business in XYZ country’, has led to the emergence of a number of new businesses that, based on online activity, seem to be doing quite well. They used an innovative way to capitalise on what I believe to be a growing level of awareness amongst people who realise that doing business internationally is often not the same as you would do at home. On the other hand the rise of
these types of businesses has also troubled me, as it reiterates to me that the intercultural industry revolves largely around peddling in notions about how to deal with or understand ‘the other’. In a way, this is not surprising, as in order for one to notice difference, one requires to first become aware of the existence of difference. Giving credence to the adage, you don’t know what you don’t know until you know you don’t know it.

This initial awareness of difference most often manifests first in noticing the ‘strangeness’ of the other. Bennett’s (Bennett, 1986, 1993) model for developing intercultural sensitivity touches on this notion. His model positions people’s ways of understanding and thinking about cultural differences on a linear continuum moving from an ethnocentric stage (our way is the best) to an ethno-relative stage (there are many ways). Bennett claims that through exposure, interaction and education such experiences incrementally deepen our understandings, acceptance and ability to interact with people from different cultures. Bennett postulates that once we have reached the ‘integration’ stage of the ethno-relative perspective in our development, we will automatically approach subsequent interactions with people from different cultures from this perspective and thus construct a ‘multicultural identity’ (Bennett, 1993: 13). However, whilst I like Bennett’s model conceptually, as it identifies the processual nature of developing intercultural awareness, I am dissatisfied by its prescriptive-ness, as I believe that developing cultural sensitivity is neither a linear nor an incremental process, and that it is also not only about the ‘other’. Also, my troubles are not so much associated with this initial level of awareness of the difference of ‘the other’, but more so with how this, and many of the other theoretical models which I will discuss elsewhere in this paper, go about and capitalise on this ‘othering’. I believe that by providing opportunities for developing understandings and insights that predominantly focus on the strangeness of the other; the opportunity to engage with another person through a dynamic relational process that occurs between people who are trying to make sense of each other in a variety of different contexts, rather than representatives of cultures is omitted.
Generally speaking, in both the academic and practitioner intercultural literature, people are provided with ‘essences’ of culture through cognitive models and theories about behaviours, concepts and values orientations and disembodied processes. Moreover, many intercultural models position notions of culture as static; as something that is out there, which can be found, learned, analysed, shifted and changed. In addition, influential theories are positioned as dyads; ‘either-or’s’, that negate the increasing complexity of cultural diversity located within mono-culturally presented geo-political borders. For example: Hofstede (Hofstede, 1991, 2009) provides six dyadic dimensions for making sense of cultures: 1) High or Low Power Distance, 2) High or Low Uncertainty Avoidance, 3) Individualism versus Collectivism, 4) Masculinity versus Femininity, 5) Long term versus Short term orientation and, 6) Indulgence versus Restraint. Based on his research, 93 countries are given a numeric value on the continuum between each dimension, indicating where on the continuum a country/culture is located. In a similar vein, Trompenaars (1998) also provides insights about national cultures around the following six dyadic concepts; 1) Universalism versus Particularism, or to what extent cultures value relationships over rules; 2) Individualism versus Collectivism or to what extent cultures value the individual or the group; 3) Affectivity versus Neutrality or to what extent cultures express emotions; 4) Specific versus Diffuse or to what extent cultures value task over relationship; 5) Achievement versus Ascription, or how status is accorded; 5) Orientation to Time, or to what extent time is commoditised and managed, and; 6) Relationship with Nature, or to what extent nature controls us versus we control nature.

Both the Hofstede and Trompenaars models purport that a comparison between countries reveal insights into how to interact effectively with the people from this culture. I am not suggesting that comparing and contrasting numeric values in order to make sense of the other is not helpful, I think it has its place and can be a part of the puzzle. However the dyadic nature of the dimensions proffered also implicitly mirrors a ‘right/wrong’ good/bad dyadic relationship that potentially reinforces embedded underlying ethnocentric assumptions about one’s own superiority over the ‘strange’ other (Holliday, 2011).
In addition, the notion that we can understand and make sense of people during interactions, if we describe generalised behaviours, then further narrow these behaviours down into a handful of underlying assumptions and notions that we believe are embedded in these behaviours also troubles me. Firstly, through such processes, we are trying to get to the essence of what these ‘others’ are about, based on an assumption that knowing about someone equals effective interaction. If it were so simple, why then would we continue to grapple with these issues in both the international and the domestic multicultural contexts?

Secondly, my troubles are not only about this essentialising of cultures and ultimately vast groups of people, but also about what it is we do with our findings once we think we have figured ‘the other’ out. Frequently these essential notions about the other become the mantra for how to engage with, or the truth about the other, reinforcing a perceived value in, for example, the ‘10 tips for doing business in Country XYZ’. This constructed pre-conceived notion of truth, then takes on a life on its own and as we engage with and encounter people, we may realise (often after the fact) that rather than helping in sense making during interactions, these pre-conceived notions of truth get in the way. I suggest this is because they fail to take into consideration that an encounter takes place between embodied human beings, not representatives of concepts of culture. In addition, the extent to which these constructed notions of culture/truth influence people’s individual sense of identity and behaviour may be quite different from the information embedded in these preconceived notions of truth, and this may not become clear until one is in or has had an encounter with the so called ‘other’.

Personally, I consider and have experienced such encounters as complex and requiring conscious reflection to achieve a deeper awareness of factors influencing our own identity and the ability to relate to others. As such, I perceive these ever-expanding understandings as circular, being gained from reflexively re-engaging with previous embodied encounters, not simply adopted through learned categories. In 1997, I set out to develop a working model that would express my ideas more clearly. This model expanded Bennett’s frame to include a community capacity building exercise represented through a ‘spiralling’ conception to illustrate and describe what happens when groups begin to work
cooperatively (Robinson & Cox, 1995). At the time I concluded that the more we learned from the experience of encounters, the greater our capacity would become to operate from a reflective state of awareness. This in turn would enable subsequent encounters to be approached from more ethnorelative perspectives. However, I have since realized that this model is also based on narrow taken for granted assumptions. For example, while I viewed this approach as more complex than Bennett, it built on positive experiences only. However, individuals also rely on negative experiences in their sense-making processes which in turn, also affects our sense of identity (Chang, 2007). In addition, I became aware it was still abstract in that it failed to account for powerful discursive political processes which also play a significant role in identity formation related to specific contexts (Gagnon, 2008). This suggests there are likely to be a multitude of interceding factors operating at any one time. Holliday (2007) describes this as ‘cultures of dealing’ where individuals take up distinctive and often ambiguous ways of responding to diversity encounters, for which the dyadic models referred to earlier, nor the 10 steps approach purported online, would adequately prepare anyone. Hence, I now suggest that the stages identified in both Bennett’s and my own model at the time, operate simultaneously and influence each other rather than operating as incremental steps.

**Reflexively Reframing Intercultural Models**

My ongoing work as a more critically informed practitioner and as a critical management studies PhD student therefore leads me to propose a reframing of these dualist intercultural theoretical models into multidimensional, relational sense-making matrixes which are operationalised by principles and practices. Cultural diversity processes between people (in organisations) are influenced by the interplay between values and emotions, which affect reactions to dominant discourses and perceptions about self identity, other identity and cultural differences (Gagnon, 2008). I suggest that these factors operate simultaneously in the moment as shared processes of engagement continuously influencing the interactions between people who co-construct what is, or what is perceived as possible in the moment.
Other models like Cross-Cultural Social Intelligence (Ascalon, Schleiger, & Born, 2008) or Cultural Intelligence (Thomas et al., 2008) also purport to operationalize the development of cultural sensitivity as well as being able to measure this development as a progressive process. These approaches, however, also tend to be applied in de-contextualized and apolitical ways. While Ascalon et al., defines cross-cultural social intelligence as ‘an amalgam of knowledge, skills and abilities’ (2008: 111), and Thomas et al., depicts cultural intelligence as a ‘system of interacting knowledge and skills, linked by cultural meta-cognition, that allows people to adapt to, select and shape the cultural aspects of their environment’ (2008: 127); both these definitions emphasize ‘cultural intelligence’ as an measurable acquisition gained through deliberative processes purely related to individual cognitive developments. This ignores the fundamental inter-subjective, relational aspects of sense-making processes, the likely variety of values involved, the case of in-the-moment emotive reactions, and importantly the situational influences of power and politics involved. In addition, these definitions seems to continue to position these factors as an amalgam of something ‘out there’ waiting to be found by the individual, who is making sense of the ‘other’, rather than factors operating within a relational process which occurs when human beings interact (Hosking, 2011).

As such, these models fail to outline how cultural sensitivity/intelligence processes are actually operationalized. In the context of organisations, Doorewaard and Benschop (2002) advocate for organisations to remedy the limits of organizational change models by: 1) acknowledging the individuals desire for encountering authenticity in terms of relationships at work; 2) seeing their staff as embodied beings not just cognitive resources, and: 3) becoming more aware of the power relations that are embedded in all manner of organisations. I propose that these suggestions also apply to intercultural models. In addition, Cunliffe (2003, 2004) suggests a ‘reflexive dialogical practice’ approach could serve as a means to build a more holistic and embodied way to make sense of (culturally) diverse contexts and encounters. Cunliffe describes this approach as exposing our everyday sense-making processes to critical questioning and in this way encountering tacit not just explicit knowledge (Cunliffe, 2003: 36). The relational constructionist perspective proffered by Hosking and Pluut (2010) expands on this by proposing the notion of reflexivity as a discourse of
‘ongoing dialoguing’, where the reflection-action-reflection cycle (Cherry, 1998; Dick, 2006; Reason, 2001) facilitates an ongoing process of relational deconstruction (i.e., uncovering and examining taken for granted assumptions) and reconstruction (i.e. focusing on the how of relating and what is possible) and thus given credibility by the participants involved in the moment. This reflexive dialogical relational approach could allow for Bennett’s model, my own representation and those proposed by Ascalon et al. and Thomas et al., to operate simultaneously but in tension where one informs as well as serves as a resource to critically reflect on the others. The use of these models then takes the role of acting as resources in relational processes. This reframed use would also render the measurement of any particular ‘acquisition’ redundant. Also, the cultural information provided through Hofstede and Trompenaars could potentially provide initial concepts, focus and language for such critically reflexive dialogues. However, rather than comparing and contrasting ‘national scores’, the dialogue could then revolve around the deconstruction and reconstruction of these and other concepts, and how they are perceived by the people involved as relevant and/or contributing to or getting in the way of making sense and developing understandings. In addition, through these relational activities, embedded underlying ethnocentric assumptions about one’s own superiority over the ‘strange’ other, can also be deconstructed. This then provides a ‘space’ where the many perspectives present are acknowledged as valid for the people involved.

However, in order for such a critically reflexive dialogical, relational approach to take place, and for the use of these intercultural models to be reframed, I propose that guiding principles and sets of practices need to be considered.

Guiding Principles and Key Practices for Intercultural Engagement

Thus far I have drawn on the notions of Reflexivity (Alvesson 2003; Cunliffe 2004; Alvesson, Hardy et al., 2008; Cunliffe 2009; and Hosking and Pluut, 2010) and Relational Constructionism (Hosking, 2011) to demonstrate how the use of current intercultural theoretical models could be reframed. Hosking, in particular, discusses dialogue and relationally engaged practices as a means to “give
space to multiple simultaneously existing local realities as local rationalities or forms of life” in order to “facilitate ‘power to’ go on in different but equal relations” (Hosking, 2011: 4). This is important as I propose that the ultimate reason we pay increasing attention to the dynamics of cultural differences internationally, in a domestic multicultural and in organisational contexts is that we inherently begin to realise that in order to build robust, inclusive relationships, being able to engage in exchanges that are meaningful and productive for all participants and stakeholders is required. I particularly like Hosking’s reference to power as a dynamic force embedded in encounters that enables, rather than a dyadic cultural phenomenon as proposed by Hofstede and Trompenaars that exists and needs to be considered in order to what I perceive as gaining ‘power over’.

Hosking’s reference to ‘giving space’ resonates with me also. The consideration of ‘space’, both symbolic and physical, as influencing perceptions of ‘what is possible’ in interactions is often also not considered in intercultural models. I suggest that recognising and acknowledging the need for and the power embedded in a safe and respectful space is paramount to achieve meaningful dialogue. Such symbolic and physical space would potentially enhance and make the experience for participants engaging in collective sense-making about areas that matter to them, more meaningful and more equitable. I propose that at the core of creating such a space, is the embodiment of fundamental principles. For example, for years, my work as a practitioner has been based on the principles of: Respect, Relevance and Inclusion. I do not advocate that these are the only, best ones to consider. Rather, I believe that identifying, defining and clarifying principles and what they would look like in practice are a fundamental part of the dialogical process in which people would engage. Within this process, as a practitioner, rather than imparting cultural models, and information I perceive myself as responsible to skilfully ‘hold’ the space and facilitate when required, so that trust can be developed and the chosen principles can be honoured, and relationships can be forged. For example, this could take the form of 1) providing a comfortable and respectful environment where participants can safely experience, examine and question their own beliefs and assumptions; 2) begin at the level of understanding of the participant, and monitor for relevance to context such as work, life and/or issue,
and; 3) acknowledge and honour everyone’s perspective as valid for them and explore and build on experiences and learning opportunities embedded in the encounters.

In addition, the ‘holding of this space’, and facilitation would enable people to focus on sense-making and developing skilful practices such as, for example, becoming/being conscious and mindful of judgments made (Nagata, 2004), becoming/being critically reflexive of where these come from and of the influence of the privileged/marginalised/othering discourses we are inevitably part of, create and perpetuate (Cunliffe, 2004; Holliday, 2011); becoming/being a heartfelt/deep listener (Holliday, 2011; Hosking, 2011; Hosking & Pluut, 2010), becoming/being vigilant about recognising and acting upon the potentials for inclusion of others within our own spheres of influence; taking personal responsibility and thus stepping into the potentials for relational leadership created.

A focus on principles and practices in the process of in the moment sense-making about cultural differences also gives credibility to the context in which these understandings are gained, which in turn enables co-creation by participants. Thus, rather than the individual achieving a level of ‘cultural intelligence’, instead a collective state of cultural consciousness could be created in the moment. As such, as facilitators focus on holding the space and facilitation, participants can focus on sense-making and mastering skilful practices in relationship, thus exploring and co-creating possibilities for more inclusive, democratic and innovative ways of being in organisations.

In conclusion, engaging in this reflexive exercise has enabled me to reframe existing intercultural models and propose a focus on practices and principles, in order to uncover and co-create possibilities that are inherent in intercultural encounters, develop relationships and achieve a level of shared cultural consciousness in the moment. This renewed focus would free us to use the current models as potential informants when required, rather than an adherence to their static and often prescriptive nature. As such, I propose we move, into the open space of co-creation.


