Metaculture Matters

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Abstract: *One essential component for training students in international communication includes the attention to culture and intercultural interaction. However, since the process of globalization has spread many common practices across the surface level of society, it is critical to consider its effects on our current representation of culture and cultural practices. This includes a reexamination of the cultural models which have traditionally been taught. Specifically, I propose that certain global behaviors are apparent and frequent enough to constitute a collective of shared norms and practices, and I call this level of shared behaviors the metaculture. The metaculture provides us with a convenient way to look at how people act within a globalized context and helps us define certain traits or values that take on a more universal acceptance. I argue that by its very nature, the metaculture is constantly being redefined, and offers us a unique paradigm through which to approach our experiences in the context in which they take place. I also propose a sliding scale model of cultural interaction which offers a more dynamic and context-based approach to describing interactional behavior.*

Keywords: *globalization, cultural interaction, global culture.*

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a paradox in the field of intercultural studies. In our well-intentioned attempt at describing human interactional behavior, many people assume an outdated homogeneity of geographical cultures, mostly referred to as national cultures. But things really aren't that simple, and we know it. It is possible to speak of French culture, German culture, etc., but all of us know that not every French person hates to speak English, and not all Germans are direct. In this paper, I explore the application of popular cultural models to our post-globalized world and suggest that the current models for describing human interactional behavior are not only inadequate, but they also miss the critical development of the rise of a global culture.

Scholars from multiple fields (sociology, anthropology, intercultural studies, etc.) gravitate towards popular and well-known models of cultural description. E.T. Hall and Hofstede's cultural dimensions model (1976; 1984) are possibly the most well-known, although Trompenaars dimensions (1994) and Meyer's mapping model (2014) are also widely cited. To be fair, these models initially served scholars well when trying to identify cultural behavior patterns and describe interaction with precision, because they identified important behavioral constructs. Over time, however, it has become apparent that while helpful, such paradigms fall short of explanatory power because of their limitations – on the one hand, most models draw their conclusions from a sub-set of a culture's population, and on the other hand, non-national culture groups are (often) not represented.

The main problem with such an approach is that people have been traditionally assigned a particular behavioral pattern based on their regional or geographical origin, which raises enormous objections. What about multiculturals? What about immigrants? What about TCK's? Global nomads? Not to mention, of course, that culture is not limited to regional or national boundaries – culture can define a gender or sub-gender group, religious groups, peer groups, organizational groups, and so on. A simple yet broad definition of culture could be *the way that people act and interact with one another in a given social context*. With this definition, virtually any group, sub-group, or collective can form a culture or a sub-culture.

Of course, even this simple definition is not without its problems. Does interaction have to be meaningful? Can it also be automatic? Must it involve a certain number of people? Must the intended meaning be decoded?

2. THE METACULTURE

Most of us have long since moved past the national boundaries that traditionally defined a culture. People move, ideas move, products move, and cultures become cross-pollinated (Bird & Stevens 2003). Information has spread, exponentially, and there are growing global connections between and among societies. In addition to all the various complexities we face in defining or describing cultural behavior, we also see a level of shared norms globally – norms which are not only practiced but also expected. Often mediated by technology, many of the tools that are used to construct meaning are globally shared (Held 2004). Since the private ownership of technology has skyrocketed, so too has the exposure, influence, and adaptation of people's behaviors.

This level of shared global practices, norms, and behaviors is what I elsewhere called the *metaculture* (Moll 2012, 2018). Airports, tourism, news broadcasts, hospitals, popular fashion, and even some foods can be found in this global layer of cultural norms. While not all airports function equally efficiently, there are certain set protocols in place that one expects, whether the airport is in Toronto or Saigon. Newscasts follow certain procedures and formats globally, even though the amount and type of information broadcasted might differ or be censured. Music, movies, fashion, and other forms of popular culture can be found globally. What is meant by metaculture can be seen in the following visual:
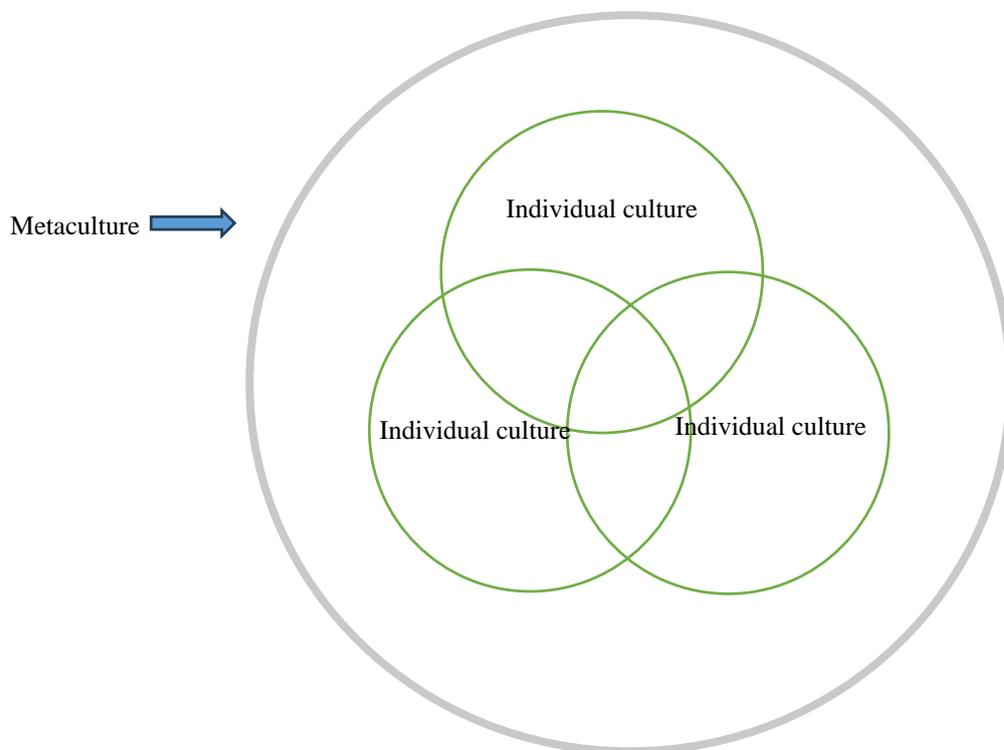
Figure 1.1. *The Metaculture (own representation)*

These global connections are not new, of course, and we are not only now noticing them. Even as early as the 1990s, a slew of papers was written about a globalized culture. Over 100 books on globalization and its effects were published, and even popular journals such as National Geographic featured highlights on the 'global culture'. On the academic side, scholars such as Byram 1997, Kramsch 1998, and Hannerz 1990 have traditionally offered characterizations of cultural hybridity, or even 'creolism'. In other words, as a result of interaction between two or more cultures, new forms and practices could be seen to emerge that shaped into a separate, broad level of shared behavior. Other scholars, such as Lechner and Boli (2008), see a common notion of understanding globally, rather than tangible, material similarity.So, while the notion of a shared global culture, or metaculture, is not new, neither is the outcome adequately understood. Questions remain as to the functionality, scope, and complexity of a metaculture. Some view the metaculture as a positive, progressive development.

A global village, characterized by diversity, should be celebrated and encouraged. Globalists and internationalists typically fall into this category. The shared global culture represents a salute to progress in communication (Doku and Oppong 2011).

On the other hand, some see the profound impact on national cultures as an erosion of authentic culture, propagated by what they call 'cultural imperialism'. By forcing a mostly Western set of norms on the global society, we by default contribute to growing inequalities, and provide an 'ersatz' replete with tensions, competitions, and conflict (Held 2004). The idea is that the West dominates any other 'peripheral' nation because of the unidirectional flow of ideas, products, and cultural expectations (such as language). Sensemaking and human interactional behavior are thus forced, in a sense, to adapt to the incoming information. As a response, scholars argue, we witness the backlash of growing and at times aggressive nationalism in various regions (see, for example, the review provided in Walter 2021).

Not everyone sees the picture as a binary, unidirectional influence. Transformationalists, such as Diana Crane (2016), present models of global culture that suggest people actively engage in strategies for protecting important cultural heritages. While they are open to transforming traditions, they nonetheless are aware enough to interpret incoming information in a way that is not automatically deterministic. Studies conducted which review television programming, music, and other forms of entertainment support the transformationalist or reception construct. Here the claim is that people select elements of individual cultures presented to them depending upon the context as well as individualized factors, such as age, gender, and class (Franklin, Lury, and Stacey, 2000).

While interactional systems operate in a highly contested third space, the speed and spread of technology makes it a bit difficult to track and adequately describe. What seems clear is that not only is a metaculture visible to even the average observer, but that a growing group of people identify and share some level of membership in this culture. Held (2004) suggests that a generation of people have grown up with a global consciousness and tend to behave in ways that he terms 'delocalized' – that is, they seem to be more comfortable with a metaculture than with the local or regional one in which they find themselves. How do we know this? Held refers to their dress, mannerisms, and even choices of sports (in the examples he gives a picture of extreme rollerblading). Further evidence for a metacultural generation is found in post-graduation reporting of life priorities or career goals across the globe, he adds. Membership in the metaculture requires meaningful interaction.

Such a creation of global natives only strengthens the emergent global culture, and some scholars even suggest that the global culture consists of people who are *self-selected* or who enculturalize themselves (Bird and Stevens 2003). While that statement is admittedly controversial, it is true that membership might not require close personal or physical contact – a virtual encounter can be transforming or inspiring. The internet has changed how we purchase, what we purchase, what we view, eat, drink, and so on.

How much of a national culture a person retains, when interacting in the metaculture, is not clear. Political opinions, social preferences, worldviews, and religious convictions offer rich areas of analysis to the social scientist who is trying to tease out the complex relationship between a geographical and global culture. Certainly, there are notable tensions between those who are global and those who are not. Non-globals might consider globals as defectors, so to speak, from the regional or national culture. Globals could view non-globals as static, not open to change, and obsolete. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the conflict often appears between a national/regional culture and the global culture, and not as clearly between a different cultural group (such as gender, age, class, etc.). What this suggests is that we see members of all genders, all ages, and all classes participating in the metaculture. To what extent this is true should be investigated more fully.

3. A Sliding Scale Model of Interaction

At this point, it is worth asking the 'so what' question. How does recognizing the metaculture affect how we understand and approach human cultural practice? It is clear that we need more complex models of human interactional behavior. Models of interaction need to be dynamic; people are multicultural and act in various ways depending upon the situated context. Mannerisms, behaviors, and dress are not static, and can change with life cycles and given social environments. The truly global native knows how to adapt to the metaculture, but also to accommodate deeply-rooted traditional values and expectations in their context.

To solve this, I propose a model using a sliding scale, which allows for considerable flexibility in describing interaction. Using a scale of +/-, people can fall anywhere on the scale in a certain behavior, depending upon the context in which they find themselves. For example, a person might use highly indirect communication style in one setting but a more direct one in another. Or a person might tend to

highly value schedules and on-time arrivals in certain situations, but in others, they are more flexible with their time. To illustrate, consider the following figure that describes time-related behavior. Note that the diagram offers tendencies, not absolutes, and allows for dynamic and flexible behavior descriptions based on the context in which the person finds themselves. It also allows researchers to couple multiple behavioral dimensions when they occur together (i.e., monochronic behavior and low context cultural behavior, or polychronic tendencies and high context cultural behavior).
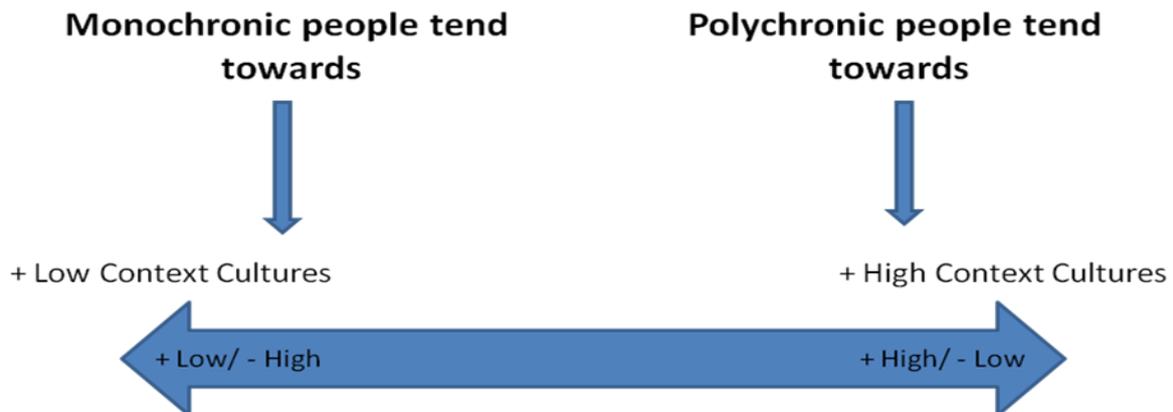

Figure 1.2. *The Sliding Scale Model (own representation)*

This method allows one to adequately describe the interaction without recourse to a static dimension, or even a map (which, itself is constrained since behavior is assumed to conform to the lines drawn). In some cases, a person might be more direct, in others, less. As mentioned above, the same can be applied to people's approaches to time – in some cases, punctuality is critical, but the same person can transform that characteristic in another situated context to be highly flexible with time (such as between friends at dinner, for example).

The sliding scale model can also be helpful when dealing with employee training. Organizations could approach training in a dynamic way by recognizing the discursive nature of interaction: people act differently in different contexts but also depending on the other participants. Incorporating such a method allows trainers to be flexible and provide multiple reasonable options, as well as enabling them to better understand their employees' behaviors. Training and development, and even performance evaluations can be approached using the sliding scale model.

A further advantage of the model is that it is equipped to address all forms of culture, not simply nationalistic or regionally based ones. Gender, age, race, and even religious practices can be described using the sliding scale. This holds true for the metaculture as well. People will adapt based on their situated context, which includes other participants. Not adapting usually results in a situation where those who have the necessary cultural competence become obvious or evident in relation to those who do not.

4. CONCLUSION

To summarize this brief discussion, the metaculture is dynamic, and constantly shifting, growing, expanding. Members of the metaculture are impacted by, but also have a profound impact on its stability and growth. National cultures are of course affected, and there is, at times, considerable tension between the behaviors of those who we could describe as globals and those who would better fit the description of non-globals. I have also argued for more dynamic, sophisticated models of human interaction. On the one hand, people are not defined by boxes; we cannot use outdated, homogenous representations of cultural behaviors. On the other hand, we still need ways to provide testable (and repeatable) descriptions (Bader 2001, Walter 2021).

Naturally, other important questions arise in this discussion. What are the psychological ramifications of a metaculture? Do people suffer a loss or crisis of identity if they see themselves as global as opposed to national or even bicultural? What is the extent to which the metaculture is shaped primarily by the West? What are the implications of a metaculture for training – how can people acquire desired competencies in order to function and interact successfully in our globalized world? In conclusion, many of our current students would qualify for the generation who grew up in a globalized environment

– most of them were born after the introduction of the cellphone, and some since the advent of the smartphone. On one hand, deeply rooted values and transmitted world views are not always visible on a surface level of behavior, which leads to a complicated understanding of interaction. On the other hand, surely it is obvious to them that people operate in complex, dynamic ways, and that regional cultural boundaries are often most marked by superficial constellations, such as what one experiences in Europa Park or Disney's Epcot center? Ultimately, our goal as scholars is to effectively delineate the impact of a global contextual culture on people's interactional behavior. In other words, the metaculture is real, it is here to stay, and it matters.

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Melanie Moll is a Professor of Intercultural Management and Business Communication at the Euro-FH. She earned her doctorate in Linguistics and Anthropology from the University of South Carolina, and has taught for 25 years in the United States, Germany, and Switzerland. Further, she conducts seminars and coaching for multinational companies in Germany and Switzerland. Moll's research interests include intercultural interaction in various business sectors, including healthcare, as well as the development of a post-globalized metaculture. She is particularly interested in developing efficient, digitally accessible training of intercultural competence for business professionals.