

Take Off Your Hat: You're in the Presence of Culture

Stephen R. Balzac

Why do we take off our hats when entering a building? There's no reason for it; it's something we do. It's part of our culture. While it probably had meaning at some point in time, that meaning is now lost. But we do it anyway because culture is bigger than we are. In fact, culture is not only bigger than we are, it's bigger than almost anything we can imagine. Culture is not just what we wear, what we eat, or what religion we believe in. Culture is a vast ocean that informs and directs our thoughts, perspectives, and views on how to approach the world and other people in it. According to MIT's Ed Schein, culture is everywhere; it is such a pervasive part of our lives that we are not even aware of it. This gives rise to several questions: What is the value of culture? How is culture transmitted? And, of course, what is culture?

What Is Culture?

There is an oft-cited, albeit probably apocryphal, study involving four gorillas. The gorillas are placed in a cage with a ramp at the top of which is a bunch of bananas. As soon as one of the gorillas starts to go after the bananas, the high pressure hoses are turned on, knocking the gorilla off the ramp and soaking all of them. This happens until no gorilla will go near those bananas. At this point, the hoses are removed and one of the gorillas is replaced by a new gorilla. When the new gorilla tries to get the bananas, the other

gorillas all jump on him and drag him back. This continues until that gorilla has learned to not go after the bananas. Eventually, the cage contains four gorillas none of whom have ever been hosed, but none of whom will go near the bananas. Whether or not this story is true, it does accurately capture some fundamental concepts of culture.

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At the most superficial level, culture is "the way we do things around here." However, it is extremely dangerous to assume that's all there is to culture (Schein, 1999). The more significant questions are why is that the way we do things? In what way does it benefit us to do things in a particular fashion? In the case of the first set of gorillas, the Taboo of the Bananas meant not getting hosed. However, that's no longer the case for successive generations. For them, passing on the Taboo of the Bananas

means that they don't get beaten up. The hoses are gone, and all that remains is the tradition that the bananas are forbidden.

Ultimately, what culture is doing is providing us with a map of how the world works. As such, culture serves to tell us how we fit into the world, teaches us how to behave, be successful, be happy, and so forth. In short, culture is an anxiety-reducing agent (Schein, 1990). As such, culture is extremely resistant to change. Changing a culture means changing our fundamental view of how the world works. This is extremely frightening to many people: one has merely to consider how the Church responded to Galileo, or the modern debate over gay marriage, to see how strongly

people will resist alterations to fundamental cultural views.

Transmitting Culture

Culture is transmitted in a variety of ways. For our gorillas, the transmission is through being beaten up by other gorillas if you happen to go after those bananas. More generally, though, cultures are transmitted through formal and informal means. Formal methods include education, religion, and family values. Informal methods include stories, songs, artifacts, and social signals.

Education is a fundamental tool of cultural transmission, be it societal or organizational culture.

What American students are taught in school shapes their understanding of American culture; what employees are taught on the job shapes their understanding of their corporate culture. Religion, and religious teachings, provide another avenue of cultural transmission. Finally, family rituals, beliefs, and customs all serve to transmit that family and ethnic group's particular nuances of culture. Sometimes, these may be in contradiction to aspects of the larger culture. For example, the debate between evolution and creationism is not a debate about science, but a debate about which culture should tell us how the world works.

The stories we tell and repeat also serve to transmit cultural values: from Robin Hood and King Arthur to Paul Bunyan, Davy Crockett, Superman, Batman, James Bond, and Star Trek, our stories both reflect and transmit cultural values. Captain Kirk, for example, the quintessential hero of the 1960s, is tough, charismatic, willing to buck the system, and almost always gets the girl. Captain Picard is a 1990's hero. In other words, he plays by the rules, is moralistic, cerebral, and pretty much never ends up with the girl. Reflecting society's changing values, James Bond has

morphed over the years from the urbane, sophisticated secret agent played by Sean Connery to the much more psychologically ambiguous character portrayed by Daniel Craig.

The other artifacts of our culture include songs, institutions, symbols, and buildings. Artifacts can also include how we use time, where we park, how we address others, where people live, and so forth. The artifacts are constant reminders of how culture works and what it stands for. The meaning of those artifacts, however, may change, or may be viewed differently by different groups within the culture. For example, burning an American flag is viewed by some as a legitimate expression of protest, and by others as the moral equivalent of sacrilege. One of the most difficult

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tasks for a newcomer to a culture is to determine what meaning the artifacts have; it doesn't matter whether the culture in question is a foreign country or a new corporation. For example, having a parking spot near the doors might be a sign of high status in one company, meaningless in another, and low status in a third. Offices on higher floors of a building tend to indicate higher

status, but not always (Schein, 1999).

Alex Pentland's work at MIT on social signaling suggests that unconscious forces may also drive the transmission of culture. How we decide what to pay attention to, whom to listen to, and which lessons to take seriously, is profoundly and subtly influenced by social signals. These signals are so powerful that the outcome of days of debate can often be predicted by an analysis of the social signals exhibited in the first few minutes (Pentland, 2008). The implications for cultural transmission are immense.

Residues of Success

The question still remains, what is culture? Ed Schein defines culture as the residue of success: the

accumulated wisdom of what does and does not work in dealing with the world. Although this seems like a simple, straight forward definition, it requires some explanation. Success is not always what it appears to be. Our gorillas, for example, have achieved success in learning how not to get hosed. They, at least, have created a cultural tradition that has its roots in an actual causal relationship. That is not always the case.

A significant force in cultural development is *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. That is, people assume that the success of a particular action is due entirely to how that action was performed or what they did immediately before the action, and not to external forces or even actions performed weeks or months ago. Thus, a rain dance is believed to bring rain or the wearing of a particular outfit will bring success in battle. A modern example is the blue suit and tie image favored until recently by IBM. How poor are people at correctly associating cause and effect? Very. In my own work on serious game design, I've frequently had the experience at the end of a simulation of being told by participants that the scenario was broken because the outcome was inevitable given the initial conditions... even when the scenario had been run many times with radically different results. Only the participants changed.

What we see is that the *perception* of cause and effect is enough to cause a behavior to become a cultural value. Assuming that the behavior and the result occur together often enough, the behavior will come to be taken for granted. Nokia, for example, was lauded a few years ago for its innovative management and held up as an example in organizational psychology classes; however, it was not long before it became painfully clear that most of Nokia's success was due to having a hot product in a rapidly growing market (e.g. the cellphone). When the tech bubble burst in

early 2000, so did Nokia's profits. The innovative management techniques made little difference at that point. However, members of the culture will no longer question the behavior, because within that culture it is now a basic tenet of how the world works. Other cultural values will arise to support and enable the behavior. In the end, a simple behavior leads to an interlocking network of beliefs, assumptions, and values. Attempting to change any piece is extremely difficult because every other piece attempts to pull it back into place. Cultures, whether at the family, organizational, or societal levels, do not change easily.

Culture as Automaticity

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To digress briefly, the concept of automaticity is an extremely familiar one to athletes and teachers. A skill is said to be *automatized* when you can perform that skill with little or no conscious effort. Think of a basketball player dribbling a ball, or a student reciting a poem from memory. In each case, the actions are so ingrained that they are executed automatically when

the appropriate stimulus is presented. Relatively complex series of actions can be practiced and automatized, a process sometimes referred to as "chunking." The advantage is that the chunk can be performed without calling upon cognitive resources. The disadvantage is that an automatized chunk is very hard to change; it's even difficult to interrupt yourself once the chunk is triggered. If you are interrupted, it's often extremely disorienting and virtually impossible to pick up where you left off. Instead, you usually have to start again at the beginning. Cultures operate in an analogous fashion: sequences of behavior come to be taken for granted, and once started, cannot easily be stopped. The advantage is that resources are not constantly expended in reanalyzing the same situation.

The disadvantage is that the situation may be more nuanced than the chunked behavior can handle. For some good examples, think of the more egregious Zero Tolerance debacles in schools.

What makes understanding culture particularly difficult is that two cultures can develop completely different ways of manifesting the same stated values. This is easy to see in the corporate world where both the PC and the Mac claim to be easy to use. They both are, but in very different ways, and for very different audiences. PC hardware and software can be easily customized by the user, provided that user is reasonably knowledgeable in the field. The PC user can do almost anything, but can also screw up quite thoroughly. The Mac, on the other hand, provides a very slick, clean interface that may limit what you can do, but also prevents major disasters. Similar cultural values: very different results.

Ultimately, a culture can be thought of as an encapsulation of concepts, values, and behaviors. Members of a culture will default to the culturally determined heuristics if they haven't developed a more specific version or override of their own. The reasons behind the values and behaviors are hidden within the encapsulation, becoming "it's just how we do things."

Origins of Cultures

Modern cultures do not spring forth out of nothing. Cultures build on existing cultures. A new business may create its own unique corporate culture, but that business is not starting with a blank slate: rather, it is inheriting its initial culture from the dominant culture in which it is located and the cultural values brought by the founders and early employees. It is thus possible for a culture to inherit from multiple parent

cultures. For example, an American business dedicated to teaching Japanese martial arts might draw from the cultures of America, Japan, and the educational community. This can create some interesting, and sometimes contradictory, behavior patterns, especially if the version of Japanese culture inherited from comes from the perceptions of Americans who never really understood it. I have seen American instructors insist on a particular behavior in class because they are teaching a Japanese art, even though that behavior would be almost completely unrecognizable to a native Japanese instructor.

Forming Subcultures

Cultures also differentiate, or form subcultures, based on specific situational needs. Ed Schein observes that all businesses form three distinct subcultures: executives, engineers, and operators (Schein, 1996). The executive subculture is concerned with making the organization run, the engineers with solving the problems faced by the organization, and the operators with actually implementing the solutions and dealing with the outside world. Executives create rules and

mechanisms to make the organization function smoothly: we call it bureaucracy. Engineers seek to develop elegant solutions that cannot be screwed up by people: despite all the complaints and problems with batteries in Apple's iPods, the iPhone still does not have a user replaceable battery. To do so would be to violate a cultural belief about making the device elegant and hard to damage. As a further example along those lines, Apple just announced a new laptop that will not have a user-replaceable battery.

There are two common characteristics of the executive and engineer cultures. One is that they both are focused on minimizing the effects of that very

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irritating random component, people. The other, is that they both have their reference groups outside the organization: executives and engineers look respectively to other executives and engineers as their peers. For example, during the Cold War, we saw scientists on both sides more likely to find common ground than their political masters.

On a larger scale, subcultures form in response to organizational needs, geographical constraints, and anything else that requires adapting to various environmental conditions. A large corporation, such as IBM, has subcultures broken out by country and task. Counter-cultures also form within the larger culture. A counter-culture in this context is a subculture that deliberately rejects certain aspects of the parent culture, while still remaining committed to the parent culture's goals. For example, during IBM's blue suit and tie heyday, the research division was determinedly informal. Unlike the rest of IBM, jeans and T-shirts were common, and ties were rare. On a societal level, we can see the same sort of breakdown of the national culture into subcultures, along both geographic and functional lines.

What Makes a Successful Culture?

A culture is successful if it is in harmony with its environment, and unsuccessful if it is unable to function in its environment. Here's the catch: environments change faster than cultures. When the environment changes, the mechanisms of the culture may not be valid in the new environment. As we've already discussed, a culture is an encapsulation of information and procedures for dealing with the world. Just because those procedures are no longer working doesn't mean that they immediately fall out of favor. First, the procedures are chunked, so they are carried out at an almost reflexive level. Second, the prospect

of change can, and often does, engender more fear and anxiety than the actual failure. Acknowledging that these fundamental cultural lessons are wrong is tantamount to admitting that the world does not work the way we thought it did. Some cultures can adjust, others cannot. In general, the best way to change a culture is not to introduce something new, but to strengthen an existing aspect of the culture.

In 1992, IBM imploded. The company posted a loss for the first time in its history, closed down numerous divisions, and even instituted layoffs. IBM's survival was in serious question. However, IBM's culture contained a very strong ethic of "analyze the problem, determine the solution, and execute the solution even

if it's unpleasant." IBM realized that it needed a fresh perspective, so they brought in Lou Gerstner, the first non-IBMer to become CEO. As Ed Schein points out, Gerstner came from a very similar marketing background to IBM's founder, Tom Watson, Sr. Gerstner didn't so much change IBM's culture, as revitalize an aspect of it that had become

dormant. Over the years, IBM's engineering culture had become dominant, and the marketing culture had faded into the background. In restoring the latter, Gerstner also restored the company's fortunes.

Digital Equipment Corporation, on the other hand, was the victim of its own success. As Ed Schein discusses in depth in *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*, they were experts at building high quality scientific computers. DEC was never able to adapt to the advent of the PC. The engineering culture at DEC saw the PC as beneath their skills; they could not bring themselves to design a machine for the hoi polloi. The company also had a cultural view, based on its founder's engineering background, that the way to solve all disagreement was by arguing the merits until the other side was convinced. If the other side couldn't be convinced, then the market would decide. The net

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result was that DEC produced three competing PCs and, to make a long story short, no longer exists today.

Cultural Mismatch and the Immune Response

One of the problems DEC had in its later years, as did Atari, and Apple under John Scully, was a CEO who didn't share the culture's fundamental culture. In general, the leader of a cultural entity, be that entity company or country, has tremendous power to influence the entity. However, the degree to which the leader meshes with the existing culture will determine his success. When there is a mismatch, the culture will reject the interloper in much the same way as the immune system will respond to a virus. The ideas of the leader are actively or passively opposed, and the members of the culture may leave, become discouraged, or experience other signs of stress and depression. The leader may be forced out, as happened to John Scully, or the organization may be destroyed, as happened to DEC. On a national level, a leader can revitalize a country or plunge it into a depression, depending in large part on which aspects of the national culture the leader most resonates with. There is a great deal of truth to the old belief that the health of the king is the health of the land.

Manifestations of Culture

Where is culture? Culture is in the minds of the people who make up the culture. Once a group has enough common experiences, culture starts forming. It is expressed through the gestalt of their actions. People interpret the world and act according to their cultural heritages, often without realizing it.

This suggests some interesting implications for how culture influences our lives and the decisions we make. Recall that by telling us how the world works, culture is an anxiety-reducing agent. Anxiety, however, is a hungry beast. The more we feed it, the bigger it gets. In a cultural context, when a culture is threatened by something in its environment, be that a new idea or another culture, it becomes more *itself*. In other words, those cultural elements which appear to be most appropriate to reducing the anxiety are triggered to deal with the threat. More diverse cultures are likely to attempt multiple simultaneous solutions, while more monolithic cultures are more likely to view all problems as the nail for which they are the hammer.

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For example, let's look at a real company called, "Shrinks-R-Us" or SRU for short. SRU provides mental health services, and is paid primarily through insurance. Over the years, SRU developed a system of paperwork that is the envy of bureaucrats everywhere. Why? No one seems to know, and it no longer matters. What matters

is that today paperwork is seen as the answer to every problem. If employees make too many mistakes or attempt to streamline the process, the company adds another layer of paperwork. One therapist commented that the paperwork is so complex, they have to use checklists – metapaperwork – to make sure that they've done it all. There is even a quality assurance committee that reviews the internal paperwork with a fine-toothed comb, sends back anything with an error, and puts out weekly reports that people are expected to read. The bulk of therapists' time is controlled by the need to do the paperwork. Quality is no longer about the success of therapy, but the accuracy of the paperwork. Fundamentally, the culture has developed the organizational equivalent of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

We can see the same phenomenon playing out at the international, national, and regional levels. A culture which believes that the good of the group is dependent upon every member of the community acting a certain way will, given time and opportunity, seek to exert an ever-greater degree of control over its own members, and potentially over members of those cultures around it. Conversely, New England Yankee culture is famous for its, "I mind my business, you mind yours," attitude. This right to privacy has two purposes. The ostensible one is that it supports my individual right to do as I please within the law. But at a deeper level, it is again a way of managing anxiety: if I don't look at what you're doing, I don't have to notice that your actions contradict my assumptions about how the world works. Taken to its logical extreme, it can produce an unhealthy degree of isolationism. The abortion debate is, at root, a struggle between two cultures which hold diametrically opposing views about how the world should work. The pro-life movement must act to destroy the pro-choice movement because the latter threatens the very foundation of the former's belief system. If pro-life were ever successful, it is highly likely that they would quickly find that they had only fed their anxiety and would need to further tighten control over people's sexual lives.

Fortunately, though cultures are not doomed to extremism, it is painfully obvious how easily that can happen. Although I have not seen any research that directly addresses the question, it appears that the more subcultures and counter-cultures that exist within a culture, the less likely the culture is to polarize into an extreme position, or to stay there if it does. The more cats you have, the harder they are to herd. By implication, the more divergent subcultures that exist, the more the overall culture is effectively

open to new ideas and approaches. Because individuals can be part of multiple subcultures, they potentially have multiple paths to explain the world, and hence can more easily handle the anxiety of new ideas. And, of course, some cultures have a belief that the way to manage the world is to actively seek out new ideas and concepts.

What About Alien Cultures?

Now, this is a science fiction magazine. What does this discussion of culture tell us about possible non-human cultures and how we might interact with them?

To begin with, it is virtually certain that any culture will be based on success. Why? Cultures based on failure rarely survive. Even if the success is in surviving the catastrophic failure, there has to be someone to carry on the culture. Next, human cultures serve to chunk information and processes. It is likely that alien cultures will do the same. Why? Any life form is going to have finite processing capacity. The amount of information available in an ecosphere is

far greater than what a living creature can absorb and process. Therefore, there need to be ways of short-cutting that processing load. By explaining how the world works, culture provides heuristics to enable rapid decision making. Also as in human cultures, it is likely that alien cultures will contain dormant elements that can be activated by the appropriate triggers, as well as elements for which the original meaning is long since lost. For all these reasons, we can safely bet that aliens, like humans, will act according to the dictates of their cultures, quite probably without always realizing it.

Truly, culture is bigger than we are.

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About the Author:

Stephen Balzac is a consultant, speaker, and, in his spare time, a professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology. An MIT alumnus, he started his career as a researcher in artificial intelligence. His interests in martial arts, serious games, human systems, and organizational culture led him back to graduate school to study Sport and I/O Psychology. His firm, 7 Steps Ahead, LLC, specializes in helping businesses improve their financial performance by enabling them to develop an understanding of their own cultural blind spots. He has published extensively in technical, business, game design, and martial art journals. You can find out more about Steve's work at www.7stepsahead.com.