Concepts and Questions

1. Do you believe that most people are prepared to engage in intercultural communication?
2. In how many circumstances do you find yourself in situations where increased facility in intercultural communication would be useful?
3. How can knowledge of the basic principles of communication be useful in day-to-day life?
4. How do the authors define culture? Can you think of other definitions of culture that might serve you in understanding intercultural communication?
5. What is the purpose of culture?
6. What do the authors mean by the statement that "culture is learned"? Can you think of instances in your life that demonstrate the learning dynamic of culture?
7. Suggest several relationships between culture and communication.
8. What are cultural values? How do they relate to individual values?
9. Distinguish several ways in which verbal behavior may differ between cultures.
10. What role does context play in communication? How does context affect intercultural communication?

Imagining Culture with a Little Help from the Pushmi-Pullyu

Aaron Castelan Cargile

Pushmi-pullyus are now extinct. That means there aren't any more. But long ago, when Doctor Dolittle was alive, there were some of them still left. . . . They had no tail, but a head at each end, and sharp horns on each head. . . . [Most animals are caught] by sneaking up behind them while they are not looking. But you could not do this with the pushmi-pullyu—because, no matter which way you came toward him, he was always facing you. And besides, only one half of him slept at a time.

Lofting, 1920/1988, p. 73

Just what is this "thing" called culture? Although nearly everyone has some sense of the concept, hardly anyone agrees as to what it is exactly, least of all cultural scholars. When the field of intercultural communication first began after World War II, there were at least 164 definitions of culture (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952), and there are no fewer than 300 around today (Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht, & Lindsley, in press). This begs the question, how are we supposed to learn something about culture when we're not even sure of what it is we are studying? Well, I believe that there is something to be learned if we can first appreciate a little bit of fuzziness and a lot of contradiction when it comes to culture. To do this, we will need a little help from the pushmi-pullyu.

The "problem" of the fuzziness of culture has been present from the beginning, when Tylor first defined the concept in 1871 as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [sic] as a member of society" (1871/1958). The notion of a complex whole set many scholars down the path of itemizing everything that culture could include. Quite predictably, then, they ended up with

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lists that looked a little bit different, one from the other. For example, Small stated that "culture is our whole body of technical equipment" (1905, p. 59), Harms suggested it is "the learning acquired by the members of a group in the process of living as they live" (1973, p. 32); and Glenn defined it as "the sum of total meanings shared by [a] population" (1966, p. 251).

Over the years, scholars have tried to prune down the concept for the sake of clarity (culture includes this but not that; e.g., Weiss, 1973), but like a plant, the idea of culture has grown back more fully than before. This is because we have all been romanced by Tylor; we concur that the root essence of culture is some sort of complex whole. Thus, how can any one definition, no matter how precise, ever take hold? It is highly unlikely. Consequently, most textbooks have given up on picking a single definition for culture and have focused instead on describing its general features. According to Samovar and Porter, "regardless of the definition employed, most people agree about the major characteristics of culture" (2003, p. 8). As they describe it, culture is widely agreed to be symbolic, learned, transmitted, changing, and ethnocentric. To this list I propose adding a sixth characteristic: Culture may also be considered dialectical in nature. Although not yet widely agreed to, imagining culture through the lens of dialectics will help us understand Tylor's notion of a complex whole more richly, thereby adding to our appreciation of this "thing" we call culture.

Before we go to such effort, however, it is useful to ask, why bother? Don't we understand culture well enough with the characteristics already listed? Indeed, we do understand quite a bit about culture, but our grasp of some important aspects of the complex whole remains underdeveloped. In particular, our desire to know something definite about a group of people and their culture has gotten in the way. Few of us want to end up seemingly uncertain about culture after having studied it, so most of us content ourselves with knowing only the unmistakable patterns. For example, you might "know" that the national culture of the United States is individualistic or that the national culture of Japan is collectivistic.

In many ways, this sort of clear, descriptive knowledge is both valid and valuable. However, culture is called a *complex* whole for good reason; there is more to it than that. As you may have noticed, the national culture of the United States is also collectivistic in many respects, just as that of Japan is individualistic as well. Indeed, some textbooks point out that cultural patterns are often contradictory. For example, Samovar and Porter note that "in the United States, we speak of 'all people being created equal,' yet we observe pervasive racial prejudice" (2004, p. 51). Researchers have also recognized these inconsistencies (e.g., Triandis, 1995). Thus, we are left to wonder how much we really understand culture by describing it using only the five widely agreed upon characteristics. It is this lack of appreciation for cultural contradiction that leads us back to dialectics and the pushmi-pullyu.

A DIALECTICAL PERSPECTIVE

The idea of dialectics is hardly new. In fact, it is one of the oldest of philosophic concepts, dating back to 900 B.C. (Lavine, 1984). In antiquity, Heraclitus, Lao Tzu, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were among those who wrote about it; more recently, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Bakhtin have further developed the idea. Although each philosopher has defined dialectics in unique ways, the basic notion is one of *opposition*. Much like the four elements of antiquity (earth, air, fire, and water), things exist as part of a larger whole, and more specifically, in dynamic, push-pull relationships. For example, water was believed to offset the force of fire, and air balanced earth. In this manner, constant opposition, as symbolized by the pushmi-pullyu, is seen as a necessary and defining characteristic of dialectics.

Although important in many ancient philosophies, dialectics did not develop into a full philosophical worldview until the nineteenth century, thanks in large part to the work of Hegel. Hegel believed that all concepts are based within a structure of opposition that requires specification of what things *are not* in order to define what things *are*. In his words, "Every concept is rational, is abstractly opposed to another, and is united in comprehension together with its opposites. This is the definition of dialectic" (Hegel, 1959). For example, understanding the concept of "up" depends upon delimiting its negative—either "not up" or "down." Similarly, the notion of whiteness as a racial category depends upon the marking of nonwhiteness or "color." As Loewen reminds us, "there were no 'white' people in Europe before 1492. With the transatlantic slave trade, first Indian, then African, Europeans

increasingly saw 'white' as a race and race as an important human characteristic" (1995, p. 67).

According to Hegel, although human concepts are grounded in opposition, people are nonetheless drawn to reconcile such opposition through a *synthesis* of contradictory positions (*thesis* and *antithesis*). Ideally, synthesis preserves the respective truths embodied within the thesis and antithesis while transcending their opposition. For example, head and heart are conceived as independent and opposing forces within Western thought; as a business executive once explained, "a good leader needs to have a compass in his [sic] head and a bar of steel in his heart" (Townsend, 1997). Even so, there is a rich history of philosophers and laypersons alike who have their own explanations as to how head and heart may work together (i.e., a synthesis; see Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Such attempts at synthesis illustrate that dialectics are defined not only by opposition, but equally by *time* and *transformation*. Dialectics are *never* static, in part because a final, perfect synthesis of forces such as the head and the heart is unachievable in a world where contradiction and change structure rational thought itself.

Following Hegel, Marx subsequently developed dialectics, perhaps most famously with his notion of dialectical materialism. Seeing Hegel's dialectical worldview as too idealistic, Marx sought to locate it in a material world defined by social class. Rather than treat human consciousness abstractly, Marx viewed consciousness as both a product of social structure and a means of transforming it. Because capitalism alienated and oppressed workers, the state of consciousness that came about as a result of this material oppression was the very vehicle to change it (i.e., let the workers rise up!). According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), Marx's application of dialectics to concrete practices of society provided a systematic explanation of *praxis*—a dialectical characteristic whereby people's prospects are constrained, though not determined, by previous actions and conditions. As one saying goes, we are all our own ancestors and heirs—devising our future while inheriting our past.

As is apparent in the preceding discussion, dialectics in its most general sense is a meta-theory about the process of relating entailed in human activity (Georgoudi, 1983). As such, it has been widely applied within many academic traditions, such as anthropology (e.g., Karp, 1976), psychology (e.g., Adams, 1977), sociology (e.g., Valverde, 1996), and interpersonal communication (e.g., Rawlins, 1992). Although not as common, it has also been applied to understanding culture (e.g., Peng & Nisbett, 1999). From a dialectical perspective, contradiction is not a characteristic of culture to be ignored or explained away; it is instead a defining feature. As Baxter and Montgomery clarify, "contradictions are inherent in social life and not evidence of failure or inadequacy in a person or in a social system" (1996, p. 7). In this light, culture is seen as "a problem that cannot be solved" (Nuckolls, 1998).

DIALECTICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE

So what do the pushmi-pullyu and culture have in common? In order to best appreciate both of them, we should focus not only on the faces that they present, but also on the complex and dynamic interplay between the faces. Returning to the example of equality and racial prejudice in U.S. American national culture, historian James Horton points out,

> African-American history raises the blatant contradiction in American society. . . . How can we be a people committed to [equality], believing in [the Bill of Rights and the Constitution] when, at the same time, the people who wrote those documents, who articulated those beliefs, were themselves the holders of human beings in human bondage? (Dyer, 2001)

When we use dialectics as a tool for imagining culture, we transcend the trap presented by this example. The status of African Americans does not represent an exception to the "rule" of equality within the United States, nor does it signify a complete disregard for fairness. Instead, the struggle of African Americans (and others) illustrates that the tides of equality and inequality ebb and flow in an interconnected manner. While this culture has been the site of movements toward justice for all, it has also sponsored movements reinforcing the power structure (e.g., see Harris, 1993). From a dialectical perspective, this is unsurprising because equality and hierarchy are viewed as two faces of the same coin. These forces may be evenly balanced at times, or the scales may tip in one direction or the other, in either small or large measure. Regardless, neither the practices of equality nor of inequality will ever finally dominate this (or any other) culture

because they are eternal partners in the ongoing labor of group life.

Perhaps one area where the dialectical nature of culture can be seen most clearly is at its core. Because all cultures are built around group life, every one of them must address the paradox of individuals living collectively. On the one hand, human beings operate in physically sovereign bodies and thus naturally develop some sense of independence and autonomy. On the other hand, we are also social creatures whose very survival and development demand connection. As a result, none of us can ever be entirely independent from, nor entirely dependent upon, other human beings. Instead, we must all manage the unavoidable tension between the pushes of individualism (autonomy) and the pulls of collectivism (interdependence).

Describing culture dialectically thus means that no society is completely free of the influence of either individualism or collectivism. Rather, these forces are present everywhere, the constant pushing and pulling of which result in unique and dynamic configurations that we may use to characterize a culture. For example, as mentioned earlier, the mainstream culture of the United States is both individualistic and collectivistic, with a historically heavy emphasis on the former. Because of the political context in which this country was established (Europeans seeking religious and other freedoms), as well as the material circumstances that were provided (low population density and great economic wealth; see Murphy & Margolis, 1995), the national culture has tilted, very heavily at times, toward individualism. This tilt has been so great that the culture is frequently characterized almost exclusively in individualistic terms (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999; Ting-Toomey, 1988). Despite this, collectivistic currents remain, often rising and falling in response to practices of individualism itself.

From the beginning, U.S. American individualism has been intertwined with two important collectivist traditions, religion and civic republicanism (see Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). Religious traditions have been the center of countless communities throughout the nation, drawing people together in both worship and personal relationship. Similarly, the national culture has always extolled the virtues of civic responsibility, encouraging citizens to take responsibility for the welfare of their fellows and for the common good.

Collectivism has also manifested itself in countless other ways (and to various degrees) throughout U.S. history. The New Deal introduced many important programs and policies to support the general populace in times of economic depression, including social security. During World War II, victory gardens were planted in empty lots and tended to by entire neighborhoods in an effort to support the war. People also gathered in community around the radio to hear President Roosevelt's fireside chats, updating them about the fighting abroad. Much more recently, select articles (e.g., Marma, 2003) and programs (e.g., A Force More Powerful) have featured ways in which, despite the onslaught of individualistic forces, the communal spirit is still very much alive in the United States through practices such as volunteerism and habitat protection. As the producer of one such series, *Humankind*, commented regarding his inspiration for the show, "American culture has unfortunately gotten very fragmented. People feel disconnected in their cars and in their living rooms. . . . We need some way to forge deeper bonds with community" (Matsumoto, 1999, p. F2).

The push and pull of culture are experienced as a contest not only between individualism and collectivism, or equality and hierarchy, but also between divergent resolutions of any issue fundamental to group life. Such issues include the tolerance/intolerance of "nontraditional" cultural practices and the assimilation/differentiation of cultural (sub)groups. In the United States, the tolerance issue has played out on the political stage as the continuous engagement of conservative and liberal forces. The modern religious right emerged as a political power in the 1970s primarily as a response to the social movements of the '60s that promoted feminism and civil rights for homosexuals, among other things. As they have effectively championed the restriction and even prohibition of "nontraditional" practices in arenas such as marriage and birth control, the very recent revitalization of liberal forces is unsurprising; it is a direct response to conservative success. When viewed dialectically, we can appreciate that this struggle will never finally end.

Another issue that will be forever deliberated is the ideal degree of assimilation or differentiation among cultural groups. Because the existence of culture depends on the existence of groups, the regulation of membership—who is included and who is not—is always a central concern. The borders between cultural groups

are rarely defined clearly and are always subject to negotiation. One reason people never settle completely in their groups is our psychological need to fit in, but only to a point; Brewer (1991) calls this our desire for "optimal distinctiveness." We belong to groups in order to feel connected, yet when too many people are granted membership, the benefits of connection diminish. Thus, we are constantly changing our affiliations as large groups splinter into small ones and then possibly merge with other similar groups (e.g., does someone born in the Philippines and raised in the United States identify as "Asian," "Asian American," "Asian/Pacific Islander," "Filipino," "Malay," or "American"?).

A second reason that we will always push and pull over group membership is that our groups are located in a changing material world. As the world changes, so too do our ideas of what makes up a cultural group. For example, even though we take the idea of a national culture for granted in this day and age, there was a time before the development of nation-states when people identified only with those who lived locally. Moreover, there may be a time in the near future when nation-states are largely meaningless cultural categories, when people are socialized instead by a variety of transnational groups, including networks such as al Qaeda. Changes in technology undoubtedly play a large role in shifts such as these. Indeed the U.S. culture that binds people from diverse places such as Lafayette, Indiana, and Los Angeles, California, would not be possible without television. As Poniewozik writes, "mass culture flattened out dialects and provided new Americans with a quick if superficial means of assimilation" (2003, p. 150). Because the technology of mass choice has now finally been adapted for mass communication (we have moved from "broadcasting" to "narrowcasting" as consumers select from hundreds of media options), it remains to be seen in what ways our ideas of nationhood, and who qualifies as a real "American," will be affected.

As dialectics encourages us to imagine opposition, time, and transformation as fundamental features of culture, it also helps reveal our own capacity for action. The idea of praxis suggests that although we are influenced by cultural prescriptions, we are not trapped by them. Instead, culture is like a well-worn path through the woods; we may often follow the markers but may sometimes blaze our own trial. Consider, for example, the case of the woman who climbed up the house. A local woman arrived at a house in Nepal to be interviewed by several foreign researchers. As the host went downstairs to greet her, she "somehow crawled up the vertical outside wall, made her way around the balcony to an opening in the railing, came through the opening, and sat down" (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 10). In dialectical terms, we could say that the woman was praxically constrained: In the usual circumstances of community life, she would not be allowed to enter the house because it belonged to a higher-caste person, yet she needed to get to the second-floor balcony. In response, she came up with a spectacular improvisation that reflected both her own agency and the restrictions of culture. Seen in this light, culture comes to be an important source from which to fashion the stuff of action. "One's history-in-person is the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 18).

Recognizing that there are no "right" answers when it comes to defining the complex whole of culture, it is my hope that the brief appreciation of dialectics developed here will prove useful in your continued journey toward understanding human groups, including your own. Don't forget that according to the dialectics of culture, what comes around will go around, and around, and around because contradiction is fundamental to group life, not something to ever be irrevocably resolved. Maybe that's why at the height of the U.S. infatuation with sport utility vehicles, the following billboard could be spotted on the streets of Los Angeles: "Someday we'll look back at big cars and laugh. The Mini."

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Concepts and Questions

1. What does Cargile mean when he refers to culture as being fuzzy?
2. How would you define culture?
3. What does Cargile imply when he states that culture is dialectical?
4. How does the use of a dialectical perspective permit understanding of the inconsistencies present in any culture?
5. How does Hegel's concept of synthesis apply to understanding culture?
6. What does Cargile mean when he says that dialectics is a meta-theory about human relationships?
7. Discuss how a dialectical approach helps us understand the presence of both individualism and collectivism in a culture.
8. How does the pushmi-pullyu metaphor help explain the dialectical perspective advanced by Cargile?
9. What does Cargile mean when he states that "we will always push and pull over group membership"?

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