

The Dune Model – or: How to Describe Cultures

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Can one describe “cultures” in an intellectually authoritative, universal manner that may be seen as objective? Presumably not – perceptions of cultural fields of agency are always perspective-dependent. This is seen clearly in an example provided by B. Mandelbrot, used with in a text concerning fractal geometry. A Spanish encyclopedia once claimed that the length of the common border between Spain and Portugal was 616 miles, while a Portuguese encyclopedia believed it to be 758 miles. “How long is it then? A useless question“ (Mandelbrot/ Hudson 2007, 188). The question is, indeed, useless as an inexhaustible array of perspectives and measurement criteria exist that would lead to a multicity of varying results. This is true also, according to Mandelbrot, in relation to the measurement of a length of coast; differing results would follow were one to measure at low and high tides, while various measurements would also accrue were cliff faces or rock formations to be taken into account (Mandelbrot 1967).

This conclusion is also applicable to the describing of cultural fields of agency; the closer one zooms upon such a field the more differentiated and multifaceted the relationship networks (local culture, group culture, couple culture etc.) will be deemed to be, the further one zooms away the more undifferentiated and homogenous such a field will appear (organizational culture, ethnic culture, national culture etc.). One can, logically enough, not speak of a “correct” or “false” perspective; *every* perspective retains a certain level of validity, and only through their interaction may the multi-layered nature of cultural fields of agency become transparent (see here also Appadurai 1996, p. 31ff). One would avoid, thus, a loss of orientation (“One cannot see the woods for the trees”), as well as the danger of overgeneralization and stereotyping (one sees a homogenous area of forest, but cannot recognize the individual trees any longer).

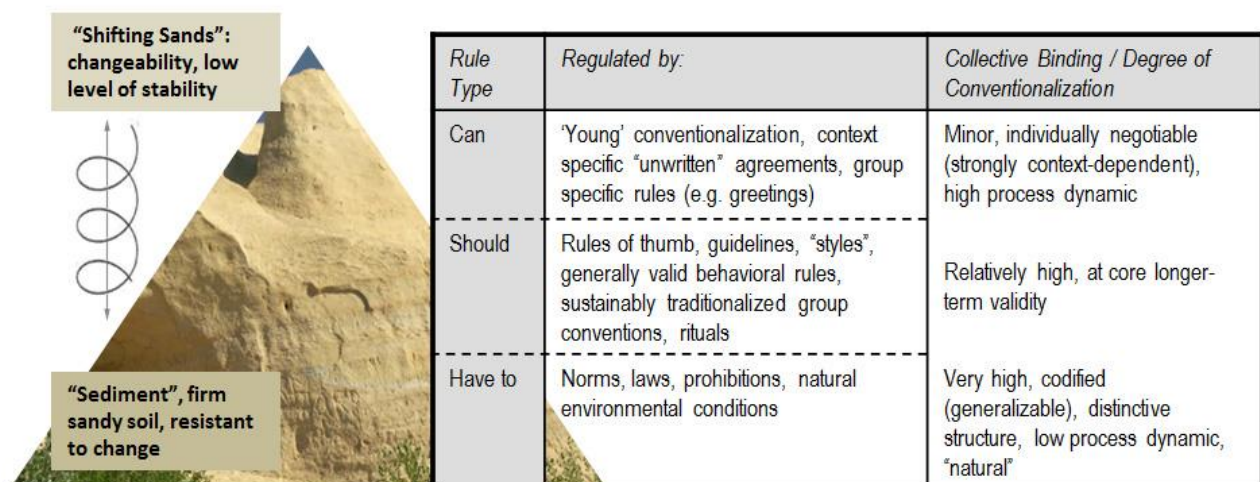
In the practice of cultural description and in intercultural trainings the homogenizing “woods” perspective dominates. Orientation and structure is given through the use of a number of supposedly explanatory binary oppositions; e.g. mono-chronological – poly-chronological, individualist – collectivist. If one zooms closer to the cultural field of agency, one instantly sees the questionable nature of such clear-cut certainty (“Culture X is collectivist”). It may be discovered, for example, that a dissimilar understanding of “collective” exists within the field of agency from the one imposed upon it from outside¹, or that the agents, depending on context, may act both in a collective and individualist manner. Such clearly presented binary (explanatory) logic proves factually, thus, to be instead an element of a more highly complex multivalent logic. Cultures cannot be clearly bordered; their edges appear, rather, as a confluence of diverse transcultural networks. Cultures are inherently uneven, or fuzzy.

¹ Sinha et al (2002) prove, using a multiplicity of convincing examples, that the understanding of collectivism used in European and American intercultural research is not necessarily valid in other parts of the world, as here “collectivism” and “individualism” are not seen as opposites but instead are viewed as interwoven.

This differentiated perspective will initially unsettle or alienate the person viewing the culture (the “endurance” of such alienation represents, of course, a key characteristic of intercultural competence). In a manner similar to the zoom function of “Google Earth”, it is undoubtedly also valid, when describing cultural fields of agency, to zoom away at times to re-acquire orientation. One should, at least, then know that the woods actually consist of various types of tree and that blanket judgments or stereotyping should not be engaged upon. On the other hand, when zooming in again, one would be less inclined to lose oneself within unknown parts of the field of agency, as one would then also be conscious of the variety of interconnections with other network areas.

An integrated method of continuous zooming in and out when describing cultures is helpful; in order to do justice to a culture as a structure, and as a process. Regarding the structural viewpoint, a culture’s mainstream, its “core”, may indeed be validly viewed as “individualistic”. The fact that this structure is also simultaneously fuzzy, and constantly transforms itself via a series of change processes, must also be taken into account to the very same extent.

Visually, an approach that integrates perspectives may be seen as analogous to the formation of a sand dune: behavioral rules that are practiced within a field of agency by a large number of agents – due to formalized laws or due to traditionalized rules of interaction that have been continuously practiced – retain binding force functions and appear to the socialized agents, usually in an unquestioned manner, as “normal” and plausible. They constitute, in conjunction with natural environmental elements, the foundation or core of a cultural field of agency. As we are dealing here with, at times, traditionalized rules of action that may be centuries old, the transformational dynamic in this area may indeed be minor. The further away from the core that one views the foundation – in the sense of the dune metaphor – and examines the areas that are structurally less consolidated, the more multiple, competitive, questionable and, thus, unbinding do the rules of action appear. There exist, accordingly, a variety of temporal “can rules”; perhaps “fashionable” for shorter periods and smaller fields of agency, but which are not, largely, structurally creative in a long-term, sustainable manner. They may be, metaphorically, “blown away” relatively quickly or they may become lost within the foundation via a long process of filtering and sedimentation because, according to “broad-based opinion”, they lack relevance and/or plausibility.



In order to appropriately describe a cultural field of agency, it is important to vary the perspective, through the use of valid sources (from legal texts to texts dealing with belief principles to trend reports), so that the entire spectrum of both process-oriented and structure-oriented aspects can be taken into account. By zooming to and from these diverse expanses, interconnections between the various areas within the field of agency should become transparent. One has to bear in mind that every observable cultural field of agency is bordered only for the purposes of better and more pragmatic 'knowability'. It is, in fact, an arbitrary intersection within an infinitely networked field of action. In this sense, it's a *fuzzy* dune.

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