

A new look at culture and its influence on individuals and organizations

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Whether you are an executive, an entrepreneur, or even an MBA student, the ability to bridge cultural gaps and leverage foreign ideas and opportunities is critical to success in today's increasingly global business environment. However, this skill is more elusive than many think.

How do some people collaborate effectively all around the world, while others succeed only with people of similar backgrounds? Why do some diverse firms enjoy cosmopolitan creativity, whereas others suffer from cultural clashes?

New research from Columbia Business School suggests that traditional models of understanding culture and human behavior are, at best, incomplete. Why? Traditional research categorizes individuals by their culture of origin and identifies cultural influences with differences between cultures, which often lapses into stereotyping. Polyculturalism rejects this view, and contends that individuals' inheritance from cultural traditions is both partial and plural. For example, an individual from the United States internalizes and enacts only some aspects of American culture and takes some influences from other cultural traditions.

Polyculturalism views cultures as networks not categories. Whereas the traditional research paradigm of culturalism, and its entailed policies of "multiculturalism," emphasize differences among cultures, the research paradigm of polyculturalism, and its entailed policies of "interculturalism," emphasize interconnections among cultures.

"It's time for a paradigm shift in our understanding of culture," says Michael Morris, the Chavkin-Chang Professor of Leadership at Columbia Business School and lead author of the study. "At a time when so many businesspeople live and work in multiple cultures, categorizing people based on their passport or birthplace just doesn't ring true. Polyculturalism offers a better lens for understanding cultural complexity and how it affects collaboration, negotiation and leadership."

The paper, "Polycultural Psychology," was published this month in the 2015 edition of the *Annual Review of Psychology*. It was co-authored by Morris, Chi-yue Chiu of the Nanyang Business School in Singapore, and Zhi Liu, a PhD student at Columbia Business School.

For polyculturalists, cultural programming is not an underlying "operating system" instilled in childhood, but rather a set of "apps" acquired through various life and career experiences. We select and develop our cultural proficiencies by engaging with institutions of our culture of origin, and as well as institutions of other cultures. These proficiencies also serve as cultural capital, allowing us to understand, communicate, and collaborate with others.

The paper reviews recent research conducted at Morris's lab at Columbia Business School that identified both conscious and subconscious learning processes used to acquire cultural proficiencies. Based on these discoveries, the researchers suggest new ways to select and train employees for assignments abroad or for roles working with culturally diverse partners and clients.

As the authors discuss in the paper, the polyculturalist paradigm not only gives insight into how individuals acquire and manage intercultural knowledge and relationships; it also offers new ways of understanding how cultures change. Cultures are linked to other cultures via individuals, and individuals' responses to foreign ideas and the social

movements that often ensue from those responses can spark cultural change. Cultures often change by borrowing or adapting useful ideas or practices from a foreign culture, but they sometimes change in the opposite way, in reactionary contrast to foreign ideas. Polyculturalist research identifies factors that predict when each of these dynamics is most likely.

The paper also discusses culture-related policies that follow from different scientific paradigms about culture:

- Colorblindness policies that prevented discrimination based on backgrounds were important developments in the mid-20th century; they were rooted in universalist research elucidating the commonality of human psychology and countering racist folk beliefs.
- Multiculturalism policies that recognize and support several distinct cultural or ethnic communities within a society or organization developed in the late 20th century to support fuller inclusion of minority cultural groups; they were rooted in culturalist research showing that cultural identities are motivating and they carry distinctive valuable perspectives.
- Interculturalist policies that foster inter-cultural interactions, increasingly adopted in Europe these days, are rooted in emerging polyculturalist research which shows how cultural traditions regenerate themselves through interaction and hybridity.

"These three basic cultural policies all have important roles in diverse organizations and societies," said Morris. Some societies have commitments to one of these policies—for example, colorblindness (France), multiculturalism (Canada), and interculturalism (Catalonia)—but all societies can benefit from understanding these three different approaches. "Likewise, corporations may find that some

aspects of human resources are best handled through colorblindness, others through multiculturalism, and still others through interculturalism."

Provided by Columbia Business School

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