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## **Culture, Norms, and the Assessment of Communication Contexts: Discussion and Pointers for the Future**

Helen Spencer-Oatey, Katharina Lefringhausen and Carolin Debray

The various papers in this special issue have offered a range of perspectives on the complex nexus of culture, context and norms. One of the main aims of this special issue was to gain deeper insights into the role of context and so we start by reflecting on this aspect.

Stanley and Fischer (this issue), on the basis of their findings, suggest that situations may have an impact on norm effects. Moreover, as Hogan (2009, p. 249) and Rauthmann et al. (2014, pp. 698-699) both point out, the key issue is people's perceptions of situations and the facets that are perceptually salient to them. Four of the papers in this special issue have thrown light on this.

- Kiyama et al. found that participants' individual personal characteristics (P1 in terms of Figure 1 in Lefringhausen, Spencer-Oatey & Debray, this issue) affected people's decision making about issuing invitations;
- Kiyama et al. and Buchtel et al. both found that participant relations, in terms of power and distance/closeness (P4 and P5 in terms of Figure 1 in Lefringhausen et al., this issue) affected respectively people's decision making about issuing invitations and the injunctive norms associated with role enactment;
- Buchtel et al, Park et al, and Vine all found that people's conceptions of role responsibilities (the contextual parameter 'roles' in terms of Allwood's (2007) framework) affected people's (beliefs about) role enactment;
- Buchtel et al. and Vine both kept the communicative activity (Allwood, 2007; S4 in terms of Figure 1 in Lefringhausen et al., this issue) constant, implying that any change in communicative activity would affect people's (beliefs about) role enactment.

In other words, these four studies have demonstrated that several different facets of the situational context affect people's behavioural expectations and communication behaviour. These findings are all in line with much sociolinguistic/pragmatic research (e.g. Allwood, 2007; Brown & Fraser, 1979; Hymes, 1972). However, as Terkourafi (this issue) points out, the various features of the situational context function in a dynamic and holistic way, with different facets gaining more (or less) salience in specific interactions. She introduces the notion of 'minimal context' to capture this perspective and maintains that there is "no pre-determined, fixed set of objective variables to look out for" because people's behaviour may be influenced by 'new' variables (e.g. unexpected social group identifications) that the researcher is unaware of. Nevertheless, we would argue that having a detailed framework of possibilities is a useful starting point, so long as the researcher is still open to the possibility of other facets (unexpectedly) emerging as salient. Moreover, we would suggest that communicative activities, including role relations, are particularly useful units of analysis.

How, then, does culture fit into the picture? Stanley and Fischer's study (this issue) has shown that certain cultural values (individualism/collectivism and monumentalism/flexibility) as well as the cultural variable, tightness/looseness (Gelfand et al., 2011) can affect behavioural norms. They also argue that the effects of such cultural factors are behaviour specific and possibly situationally contingent; in other words, that their impact varies across different types of behaviour and may also be influenced by the situational context in which the behaviour occurs.

Two of the papers in this issue (Buchtel and Guan, as well as Park et al.) compare the conceptualisation of different features of the situational context, role obligations and role enactment, held by members of different national groups. Park et al. wanted to find out whether people of different national backgrounds hold similar or different conceptions of a given social role ('team player', in their case). They found that members of all national groups (US American, South Korean and Chinese) identified similar role responsibilities, but that their relative emphasis on task versus social roles differed somewhat. They also found, though, that the specific expected behaviours for carrying out each role responsibility were noticeably different across national groups. Buchtel and Guan went a step further, carrying out a cross-cultural investigation of a number of different such role conceptualisations. Interestingly, they found that people's conceptualisations of the behavioural obligations associated with a given social role had both similarities and differences with the obligations associated with other social roles; in other words, people's conceptualisations of role obligations had both normative and distinctive features. Moreover, there was evidence of a larger 'common core' of cross-role behaviours among the American participants than among the Chinese, who showed a greater degree of distinctiveness in the behaviour required/expected across different social roles.

Buchtel and Guan's finding on distinctive and normative role obligations, along with associated cross-national differences, is actually highly compatible with other linguistic research. Many years ago Hill, Ide, Ikuta, Kawasaki, and Ogino (1986) carried out a Japanese-US American cross-cultural study to explore what range of linguistic wordings were thought suitable for making a request of different people/situations. They found that there was greater distinctiveness in choice of phrase among Japanese respondents than among Americans; in other words, American respondents felt able to use a given linguistic pattern in a much wider range of contexts than Japanese respondents felt able to do. A very recent study by Culpeper and Kan (2019) have also drawn on the concept of distinctiveness and normativity in investigating communicative style.

We suggest, therefore, that the link between situational strength and situational distinctiveness be given a higher profile. In fact, Gelfand et al. (2011, p. 1101) refer to the connection in their explanation of tightness and looseness in situations:

Strong situations have a more restricted range of appropriate behavior, have high censoring potential, and leave little room for individual discretion. Weak situations place few external constraints on individuals, afford a wide range of behavioural options, and leave much room for individual discretion.

However, there has been a tendency to give greater weight/attention to the constraint element of tightness-looseness; Meyer, Dalal, and Hermida (2010), for example, in their proposed facets of situational strength, do not refer to it. More research is needed, therefore, to gain deeper insights into the notion of situational strength.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

In view of these findings, we make a number of recommendations for future research.

Firstly, we recommend that more cross-cultural research is carried out into the notion of situational strength, especially in terms of situational distinctiveness. One possibility for doing this would be to investigate people's conceptions of role obligations and role enactment for a range of different social roles and role dyads, building on and significantly extending the studies in this issue by Buchtel and Guan as well as Park and colleagues, thereby gaining more insights into situational distinctiveness across cultures.

Secondly, we suggest that the notion of communicative activity (e.g. business negotiation meeting, lecture, job interview) is a useful unit of analysis, and that cross-cultural research should be carried out into people’s conceptions of the different parameters of communicative activities, including the degree to which the various facets are prescribed or permitted. Levinson (1979, p. 368), in his definition of activity types, refers to ‘constraints on participants’ and to ‘allowable contributions’ which fits closely with the notion of situational constraints. Allwood’s (2007) specification of parameters (see Lefringhausen, Spencer-Oatey & Debray, this issue, for an outline) provides a particularly helpful framework through its designation of four key elements: purpose, roles, artifacts, and environment. Research in sociolinguistics/pragmatics (e.g. Marriott, 1990; Roberts & Campbell, 2006; Tyler, 1995) has identified clear cultural differences in people’s behaviour in different communicative activities, along with misperceptions as to what was expected. However, the focus has primarily been on the misunderstandings that have occurred in a specific interaction, rather than a systematic investigation of people’s conceptualisations of the parameters of a given communicative activity, and the extent to which they are prescribed or permitted. There is therefore clearly scope and need for more research in this area.

Thirdly, in line with Leung and Morris (2015), we maintain that culture needs to be seen as integrated with situation and behaviour, rather than separate from it. Cultural socialisation affects not only values, but also conceptions of situational variables and behavioural norms, leading to various kinds of cultural patterns, all of which affect behaviour in complex and interacting ways. We build on and extend Leung and Morris’s (2015) framework in two ways. Firstly, we add content to their depiction of scripts, rather than just describing what activates them. Secondly, we draw a clearer distinction between cultural influences and behavioural enactment, to draw attention to: (a) the difference between the dynamic perceptions of situational context that occur in real-time interaction and the conceptualisations that influence those perceptions, and (b) the difference between beliefs about what one normally says or does and what one actually does in the dynamic thrust of real-life interaction. Figure 1 offers an attempt to represent this complex nexus of culture, context and behaviour diagrammatically.

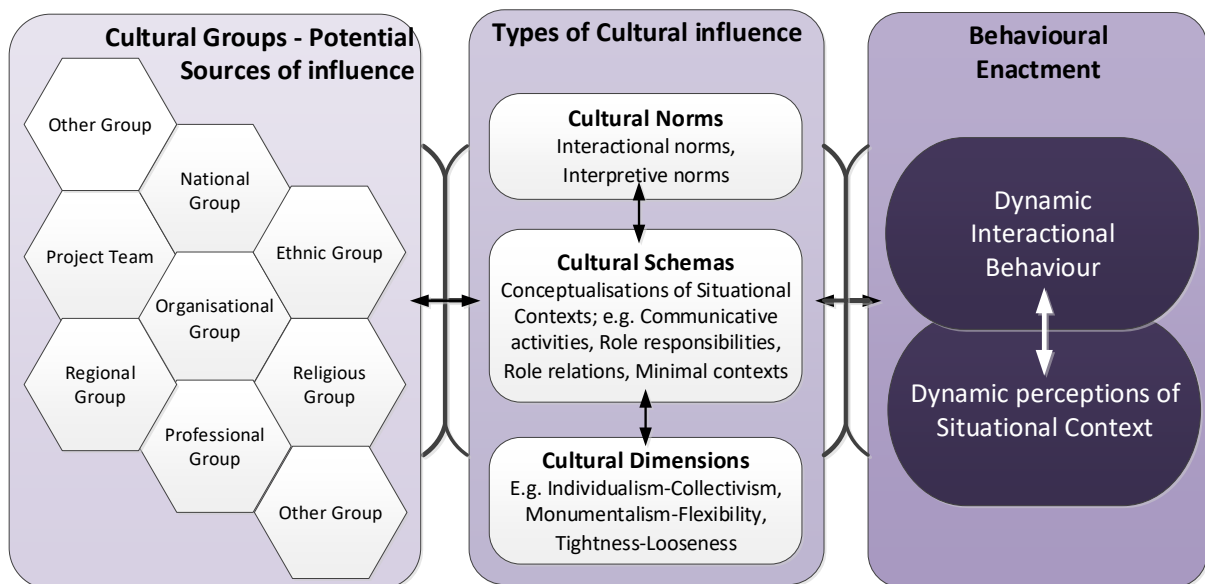


Figure 1. Interconnections between Culture, Contexts and Behaviour

In reflections to develop this figure, we became increasingly aware of the difficulty of specifying and delimiting exactly what norms (and particularly behavioural norms) refer to. For example, with

regard to role responsibilities, on the one hand they can be regarded as norms; on the other, they form part of people's conceptions of communicative activities, such as an international diplomacy meeting, which can have expected, non-behavioural aspects to it, such as the goals and purpose of the meeting and the type of furniture required. It does not seem appropriate to refer to the latter as norms, if the latter is linked with behaviour. So we have used the term 'schema' instead (drawing on Leung and Morris' (2015) terminology). We are aware, though, that all the parameters of communicative activities give rise to normative expectations, descriptive and/or injunctive, and so from another perspective can be regarded as norms. Further conceptual clarification is needed in this area.

Finally, from a methodological point of view, the articles in this issue represent a wide variety of approaches: meta-analysis, decision-tree analysis, closed survey, open survey, and authentic discourse data. Kiyama et al.'s (this issue) decision-tree design presents an insightful way of exploring the relative impact of different contextual variables. Vine (this issue) and Terkourafi (this issue) draw attention to the insights and validity benefits that can be gained from analysing authentic discourse data, rather than only data collected through self-report measures. This is in line with the approach taken by discourse psychologists, who also investigate situated behavioural norms. However, dealing with authentic discourse can be very time-consuming from both collection and analysis points of view. Corpora could be a valuable way forward, and there are now increasing numbers of corpora available (for a methodological overview of conducting psychological discourse analysis, see Goodman, 2017). However, for cross-cultural research there are still major challenges, especially for spoken interaction. These include: identifying units of analysis (e.g. communicative activities) that are comparable; gaining access to record interactions in the chosen context in different countries/cultural contexts; transcribing the interactions; dealing with translation when more than one language is involved; carrying out the analyses. However, technology is developing fast and such challenges are gradually reducing. Meanwhile, we would argue that there is plenty of scope for gaining more insights into the complex nexus of culture, context and normative behaviour by taking forward the ideas mentioned in this discussion. We also hope that this special issue and its component articles will stimulate new ideas and further debate.

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