John Branch

Note on Culture

In anthropology, culture is often defined as the sum total of a society. Indeed, it is thought that if you put a group of people together, inevitably they will begin to construct things in common: behaviors, physical objects, greetings, even worldview. It is this holistic, panoramic perspective on culture that anthropologists attempt to capture with their principle research method of ethnography. Combining the Greek words ἔθνος (ethnos) which means folk, people, or nation, and γράφω (grapho) which means to write, ethnography is the systematic and comprehensive study and documentation of a society. It calls on researchers to 'go native', immersing themselves in the society, often for many years, in order to appreciate the magnitude and nuances of culture.

In sociology (another social science which concerns itself with culture), culture is defined more as the behavioral guidelines of a society. That is to say, culture provides the rulebook which steers how members of a society ought to behave. Sociologists recognize that there is variability in behavior among members of a society. But they argue that culture provides a kind of pressure on these members to behave in a certain way. Sociologists also rely on ethnography and other qualitative research methods, including participant observation, interviews, and focus groups.

Nothing can replace the experience of being immersed in another society for an extended period of time. Indeed, anthropologists and sociologists alike would argue that to understand culture, it is imperative to live it. But international managers rarely, if ever, have the same luxury of time as anthropologists and sociologists. Consequently, they most often become 'armchair anthropologists', relying on cultural frameworks which provide a kind of cultural distillation. This note introduces several of these cultural frameworks.

A caveat: most proponents of the ethnographic tradition hold these cultural frameworks in contempt, arguing that their reductionism trivializes and disregards the enormity of culture, and dismisses its subtlety. From a more practical perspective, these cultural frameworks can also give international managers a false sense of security when operating in other societies by suggesting that a simple list of cultural dimensions will enable them to avoid all cross-cultural pitfalls.