A Structured Snowball Model Approach to Cross-level Cultural Analyses

INTRODUCTION

What is culture? This is the essential question that has puzzled scholars from a variety of disciplines. Scholars commonly consider it notoriously intangible and complex (Boyacigiller, Kleinberg, Phillips, & Sackman, 1996; Shenkar, 2001), thus it is not surprising that studies with different assumptions and purposes, have little consensus about the definition or measurement of culture (e.g., Smircich, 1983). Kroeber, Kluckhohn and Untereiner (1952), identified more than 160 definitions of culture. Nevertheless, most agree that culture originates in anthropology (Smircich, 1983; Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013).

However, when the construct of culture was introduced to the field of management (i.e., cross-cultural management and organizational management) around the 1980s, the emphasis changed substantially (Smith, Peterson, & Thomas, 2008; Crane, 1994) as scholars found that a consistent and coherent culture was more ideal than real (Crane, 1994: 4). This breakthrough and adaptation to management research can be attributed to the connection of the psychological concept of values (Smith, Peterson & Thomas, 2008).

Hofstede (1980) considered national culture a static entity with different dimensions. This method paved the way for subsequent management scholars and provided the legitimacy for the other influential studies, including the value inventory of Schwartz (1992), the cultural dimensions of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), and the GLOBE project by House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman and Gupta (2004).

Hofstede’s (1980) seminal work heavily influenced cross cultural management (CCM) and international business (IB) scholars’ enthusiasm in applying his dimensional measurements. Many scholars (e.g., Earley, 2006; Chen, Leung & Chen, 2009) call for moving beyond Hofstede’s dimensional measurements in search of new approaches to better serve cross-
cultural management research. Tung (2008) encouraged stepping out one’s own literature to seek intelligent insights and resources from other related disciplines.

To respond to this call and propose an alternative approach to the study of cross-cultural management, we also venture beyond existing literature and borrow some intelligent ideas primarily from culture research in sociology and organizational management, which have arguably conducted numerous studies by taking somewhat different approaches, mainly influenced by earlier American and European sociologists. In so doing, we expect a better understanding and application of the construct of culture in future cross-cultural management research and IB. We also expect to provide practitioners with an applicable taxonomy of antecedents of cultural change to better facilitate their decision making in international expansion. Differing from previous research in cross-cultural management and international business (IB) studies, we see culture with a feature of duality, meaning culture is not only a product, but also a process. At any point of the process, culture is changing with a temporary status of equilibrium. Thus, culture is its own product of the previous change process. In this study, we integrate two somewhat dichotomous research trends, namely culture values-orientated and expressive symbols-orientated, into one culture model with the core originating from the organizational founders. We contend that culture is a cross-level construct and emphasize that culture is a set of resources which can be used by individuals, organizations and even nations strategically different purposes. In general, our aim is to propose a new approach to make this intangible construct more tangible and understandable, and to find a better way to compare and measure cultures.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: we first review cultural research in sociology and organizational management to present a relatively different picture of cultural studies from the ones in cross-cultural management and IB. We then take the most salient ideas to apply to our newly proposed approach to study culture with the aid of cognitive theory and neo-institutional theory to better tackle this intricate construct.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Because culture research is such a broad area in which scholars from different disciplines have been involved, by no means can we exhaustively review all existing culture research streams or approaches. We thus concentrate on reviewing some closely related contemporary culture research streams in sociology and organization management with brief illustrations of their intellectual roots. By focusing on contemporary culture studies, we intend to map out and stress the insights, based on which we then develop our alternative approach to future culture research.

**Baseline review of culture studies**

Given that culture is such a broad research area, finding a way to clearly present its picture is especially important. Earlier scholars (e.g., Schneider & Bonjean, 1973; Wagner, 1975) argued that although the construct of culture has been studied extensively, it has not changed significantly, reflected in the elements it contains. Peterson (1979: 137-138) advocated this opinion and summarized culture’s four types of elements, namely “values: choice statements that rank behavior or goals; norms: specifications of values relating to behavior in interaction; beliefs: existential statements about how the world operates that often serve to justify values and norms (beliefs in turn are often justified by reference to common sense, science, religion and the like); and finally, expressive symbols: any and all aspects of material culture... (such elements often directly represent beliefs and imply values and norms).” We accede to this approach as the baseline to examine how different research streams approach culture (i.e., starting with which element) and the variance in weights that different research streams ascribe to different elements. We believe this way clearly illustrates the differences and evolutionary patterns of culture research.

Indeed, the four cultural elements were manifest in some early and more recently developed cultural models, all of which reflect a layered image of the four cultural elements, although there is some discrepancy in using the terms for different layers at different level of analyses. For instance, Hall (1976) proposed an iceberg metaphor to capture the culture of a society, a small portion of which, including human behaviors and some beliefs, is visible while a larger
portion of which, including values, thought patterns and some beliefs, is invisible and hidden. Hofstede (1991) proposed his well-known onion model to describe national culture by assimilating different layers of culture with the skins of an onion (Hofstede, 1991: 7). In this model, the core of the onion is values which are historically influenced, relatively stable and embodied by the three layers, namely rituals (traditions and habits), heroes (role-models in certain societies) and symbols from inside to outside. Schein (1983) presented a three-layer model of organizational culture, including the underlying patterns of assumptions, which unconsciously influence group members’ perception or cognition and determines the other two layers, namely values, explaining why people behave in certain ways, and visible artifacts (e.g., public documents, office layout and visible behavioral patterns, etc). These three culture models hold the same assumption that the inner part (i.e., values and some norms) unilaterally determine the outer side (i.e., some beliefs and expressive symbols) and all the four cultural elements nicely fit together (i.e., a given set of values corresponds to a set of compatible norms, beliefs and expressive symbols) to form an integrated culture.

**Culture research in sociology**

Along this line of examining the profile of culture elements in each culture research stream, Peterson (1979) did an excellent job in summarizing a then contemporary research of culture in sociology. Peterson (1979) examined four cultural research streams (i.e., culture mirrors social structure, homo pictor, manipulated code, and culture produced), each starting with expressive symbols, and circumventing the earlier overly emphasized concepts of values or norms. According to Peterson (1979), culture research in sociology originated from the view of early anthropologists (e.g., Benedict, 1934) which is to say that culture and social structure mirror each other. We summarized the key points as shown in table 1. Nevertheless, although culture research in sociology has centered on the relationship between culture and social structure, in Peterson’s (1979: 160) opinion, “none of the perspectives discussed here has been successful in demonstrating the utility of its image of the relationship between culture and society at large”.
Culture research in organization management

Pettigrew (1979) first introduced the construct of culture into organizational studies in his seminal work in the journal of Administrative Science Quarterly (e.g., Schneider, Ehrhart & Macey, 2013). Although the entrance of the culture construct into organization management took a variety of approaches, drawing heavily and systematically from cultural anthropology, sociology and social psychology (Weber & Dacin, 2011), scholars influenced by these earlier cultural studies, in the 1980s conceived of culture as a consistent system with collective meanings or shared values (Morrill, 2008). However, organizational culture presents variation, dissonance and plurality, increasingly questioning the problem of empirical validity of earlier conclusions about organizational culture (Smircich, 1983; Weber & Dacin, 2011). In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars in social science gradually realized that culture is partial of a broad range of social processes (e.g., DiMaggio, 1997). Thus, as Weber and Dacin (2011: 287) summarized, paralleling with this overall trend, culture research in organization management gradually transferred to a second wave, where scholars emphasized the cultural constructive perspective, meaning “culture serves as a broad theoretical and methodological lens rather than a distinct object of study”.

Generally, as Weber and Dacin (2011) outlined, there are two trends that emerged in the evolution of contemporary culture research in organization management. First, the emphasis of organization culture research has shifted from organization culture as persistent and coherent constraints (e.g., shared norms and beliefs) in individuals’ thoughts and actions to organization culture as resources that individuals and organizations can flexibly draw upon to form and develop different strategies of action to achieve different goals. This trend is influenced by Swidler’s (1986) toolkit approach, as well as Sewell’s (1992) discussion about the relationship between and among culture, social structure and agents. More recently, these individuals or cultural agents are also referred to as bricoleurs (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Rao, et al., 2005) who choose a set of cultural materials to reach their own pragmatic purposes. Second, organizational
culture is considered not only “private culture” (symbolic interactions among members of an organization), but also “public culture” (external audiences who observe and evaluate although do not directly participate in organizational culture construction) are involved. Thus, organizational culture is more and more apt to be influenced by its contexts. This trend can be traced back to Goffman (1959, 1967) and the influence of early institutional theorists such as Meyer and Rowan (1977). The external influential force varies depending on the feature (e.g., more passive or more aggressive) of the audience.

In sum, the value orientation theory (Kluckhohn & Strodbeck, 1961) prospered in cross cultural research after Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) seminal work. In cross cultural management studies, culture is considered an explanatory variable, almost equivalent to a country (Ajiferuke & Boddewyn, 1970). The original culture research stream in sociology, namely *culture mirrors society*, also reflects earlier American sociologists’ (e.g., Parsons and his followers) ideology that human cultural values determine the other cultural elements, such as behaviors and symbols (Atkinson, 1971). Therefore, earlier research in both cross cultural management and in sociology, scholars put more, if not all, weight on values and norms and believe *values* to be the key factor that determines all other aspects in society.

Subsequently, cultural research in cross culture management continued to develop along this direction with the dominant tone set by Hofstede and Kluckhohn and Strodbeck (1961) and others such as Schwartz (1992), while the research in sociology moved away from values-focused to expressive symbols-focused, as portrayed by the research streams such as the production of culture perspective (Peterson, 1979) and Swidler’s (1986) culture as toolkit metaphor. The culture research in organization management has been strongly influenced by the research in sociology, thus, the current culture research in organization management largely parallels with the one in sociology. Noticeably, the construct of culture in sociology and organization management is that of a toolkit containing a set of small and discrete ‘bits of meaning’ (Lamont, 1992; Swidler, 1986) and less as a “web of meaning” as Hofstede (1980) defined. Hence, at least in the culture research in sociology and organization management, as Weber and Dacin (2011: 288) stated, “the past 30 years has not only witnessed general ebbs and
flows of cultural research but also a re-conceptualization of culture itself.” In the next section, we present our proposed cultural model based on the knowledge we have obtained from extant culture research and try to forge the link between the somewhat dichotomous research streams, namely value-focused and expressive symbol-focused approaches, in responding to the call that was made as early as 1979 by Peterson (1979: 160), who was concerned with the danger that each may develop into a self-contained school for itself.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF CULTURE

We first present the three poles that support our culture model, namely Sewell’s (1992) discussion of the relationship between culture and structure, Swidler’s (1986) metaphor of culture as a toolkit, and Schein’s (1983) organizations’ learning perspective. We then we illustrate our culture model by incorporating the strengths we obtained from those previous studies with the aid of some additional organization theories, such as neo-institutional theory and cognitive theory.

Building on two well-known arguments Giddens’ duality of structure and Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, Sewell (1992) introduced the theory of structure. Giddens (1976, 1979, 1981, 1984) insisted that structures are dual, because they are “both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems” (Giddens, 1981: 27). Individuals’ activities are empowered and constrained by structures and inversely, individuals’ activities also influence structures. Thus, structure is dynamic and is the outcome of a continual social interaction process (Sewell, 1992). Sewell (1992: 5) clearly stated that cultures are generated and transferred by the actions of agents or individuals who are structurally empowered and constrained.

We agree with this position about the relationship between and among culture, structure and agents. These three components of a social system interact with each other while at the same time interact with the outside environment of the social system in which they are embedded. This relationship is critical in understanding our further illustration of our alternative culture model. The following figure describes the three components of our culture model and
the relationship between and among them.

***INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE***

**Culture as a toolkit**

Peterson (1979) foreshadowed the consumption of the cultural perspective when he proposed the production component of the culture perspective. Swidler (1986) made this cultural consumption perspective more perspicuous. However, this approach has been criticized for narrowly focusing on individuals as users of cultural resources while neglecting the mechanisms on how individuals take cultural resources differently (Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle, Irwin & Mao, 2011), although Swidler (2001) complemented it with some new factors whereby individuals choose cultural tools from the toolkit by indicating their preference for certain cultural resources that can represent their self identity rather than randomly or equally picking tools.

By no means we here criticize Swidler’s (1986, 2001) toolkit approach. Conversely, we see significant value in Swidler’s viewpoint of culture as discrete resources that individuals can strategically use for certain purposes. However, we incorporate some new points to enrich this cultural toolkit metaphor.

First, the toolkit metaphor conveys an impression that it is fixed or static with certain boundaries whereby individuals unilaterally take cultural elements from the toolkit while having no feedback or contribution to the cultural toolkit in which individuals are embedded. In fact, we believe the cultural toolkit should be dynamic and the interaction between individuals and the toolkit is ceaseless and bilateral. Second, the toolkit metaphor implies that the tools within a toolkit are static with fixed spatial distance from each other. Although we consent that cultural elements are discrete, we insist that cultural elements influence each other and are closely related to each other. The relative spatial location between each tool is always changing. Third, the toolkit metaphor also implies the structure is static, while in fact, structure is dynamic too as we reviewed earlier (Sewell, 1992). For instance, a growing firm has different structures to adapt to and influence the business.
Culture as a learning process with its core created by its founders

At the organization level, Schein (1983) perceived organization culture as a combination of a set of cultural elements, which he defined as *discrete learned solutions to problems*, and not an organization values or norms. Focusing on the construction of organization culture, Schein (1983) strongly emphasized organizations’ learning process and the dynamic evolutionary forces in the growth and change of organizational culture. In his culture model, he emphasized the influence of an organization’s founders on the organization’s culture formation. Schein (1983) also noted that the founders set the dominant theme, providing initial solutions to encountered issues for the organization’s trial and error procedures, and as with the growth of any organization, group members become involved. Leaders then monitor, diagnose and intervene in the change of the organization’s culture to ensure it is in line with the organization’s goal. As the group accumulates its own experiences, group members negotiate their own solutions with the earlier ones so that the process becomes an interactive one. Leadership is more important in a turbulent situation when the group needs to decide a new direction. Thus, in an organization’s development process, the formation of the organization’s culture is influenced by, on the one hand, the founders’ desires, which unavoidably are influenced by the social influence and the founders’ personal experiences of the time (Stinchcombe, 1965). The founders’ influence and desires remain and last; on the other hand, organization’s learning experiences in coping with its “its external and internal problems”. In general, Schein’s (1983) culture model introduced the process of organization culture’s formation into the model but sees organization culture more as an ultimate product of an organization’s repeated and gradual learning processes. This approach also implies individuals within an organization are able to take initiatives to draw from cultural resources rather than are constrained by culture.

An alternative culture model

Building on the above three poles, we now present our alternative culture model. Concerned with the culture research of overly expressive symbol-focused in sociology, Peterson (1979) called for building the link between values-focused approach and expressive-
focused approach in subsequent research. Although this suggestion was made in 1979, we are surprised to find there are few attempts thus far. As perhaps among the very first few, we humbly consider the combination of the three poles we discussed can help bridge the two approaches. Thus, in this section, we concentrate on how our alternative model brings a comprehensive perspective that reflects the intrinsic features of culture.

We use a new metaphor of culture as a structured snowball to illustrate our conceptualization of culture. A snowball is compared to an intra-organization culture, an organizational culture, a national culture or a global culture. According to Schein (1983: 6), “there cannot be any culture unless there is a group which ‘owns’ it.” Hence, as long as a group (of people) can be clearly identified, there exists a culture because culture is created by a building group. In our view, this group can be an intra-organizational group, an organization, a nation, or a cluster of nations if, according to Schein (1983), this group has existed for a long time in sharing and solving problems and has taken and transferred information to new members. A snowball is comprised of a set of snowflakes. With this metaphor, snowflakes are compared to cultural elements, or tools obtained by the group of people or agents from a larger toolkit in following Swidler’s (1986, 2001) metaphor. By saying a structured snowball, we intend to emphasize the significance of the structure and the group of agents behind the formation of a snowball. Thus, in this metaphor, the structure and the group of agents are hidden while without them, the snowball cannot stand-alone. In other words, the group of agents is enabled by the structure to act in certain ways, resulting in the formation of the group culture. In general, the snowball, the structure and the group of agents interact with each other, while at the same time, interacting with the outside world, resulting in a dynamic snowball with a dynamic equilibrium at any given point in time. We then define a cultural entity as an integration of a group of people or agents, a snowball (their culture repertoire at the collective level), and a structure.

Referring to socio-linguistics who distinguish between a register (at a social level) and a vocabulary (at an actor level), Weber (2005) termed cultural register to indicate cultural resources at the broader and collective level, from which actors can draw cultural elements to form their own cultural toolkit or cultural repertoire. Weber (2005: 228) defined cultural
repertoire as “the entirety of cultural material at the disposal of individual actors or collectives”. Therefore, cultural toolkits or repertoires are subsets of cultural registers. To be aligned with these existing concepts, we clarify that a snowball is a cultural repertoire, embedded in a cultural register, with which the group of agents continuously interact with the cultural register to form and maintain the snowball.

Following Schein (1983), we define culture elements as “learned solutions to problems” (Schein, 1983: 8). In a collective sense, besides the three aspects we reviewed earlier, we situate our culture model from two additional aspects, namely, (1) culture is a cross level construct (with agents and structure), (2) culture is a duality construct.

**CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In this paper, we started with the call that a new approach to culture is needed for cross-cultural and IB research due to the increased critiques of Hofstede’s dimensional measurement of national culture and the construct of cultural distance. We then reviewed the assumption of individuals’ psychological values originating in psychology, sociology and organization management. Building on the intellectual contributions of those cultural studies, we formed a new approach, which we call a structured snowball model, to better understand culture cross all levels with the aid of neo-institutional theory and cognitive theory. We contend that culture is a cross-level structure, a learning process with the core originating from its founder group that persistently interacts internally with its agents and the co-existing structure and externally with its cultural register, a broader pool of cultural elements which can be considered as resources.
References


## Appendix

### Table 1: Summary of Peterson (1979)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research streams</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>What</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture mirrors</td>
<td>American sociologists working in the first decade following World War II (e.g., Parsons and his followers)</td>
<td>Scholars focus on cultural values and norms, and believe culture mirrors society. Works that emphasize expressive symbols were largely ignored.</td>
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<tr>
<td>social structure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Homo pictor</td>
<td>French sociologists (e.g., Foucault)</td>
<td>“Homo Pictor” – this construct is borrowed from Daniel Bell (1976). This construct assumes “human social interaction is based on expressive symbols and can only be understood in these terms”. Expressive symbols constitute the code for creating and recreating the society from encounter to encounter and from generation to generation. (the potency of symbols)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulated code</td>
<td>Humanistic Marxism on both sides of the Atlantic (e.g., Bourdieu, Durkheim)</td>
<td>Cultural expressive symbols have the power to shape beliefs and values, and then to affect behavior. Culture code is sometimes deliberately and sometimes accidently manipulated in order to maintain or change the power of various groups within society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture produced</td>
<td>Richard Peterson and his followers</td>
<td>This stream focuses more explicitly on the special environments where symbols are deliberately produced. Expressive symbols are deliberately created, stored, evaluated and disseminated from specialized milieux such as the arts, science, religion and the law. Symbols are continually reshaped in this process in the elite realms of fine art and the mass media-disseminated popular culture. Thus, expressive symbols never reflect directly the society at large.</td>
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Adapted from Peterson (1979).
Figure 1.

Founding stage

- Internalized cultural elements & founders’ contributions to initial culture of a culture entity at founding stage
- Core of the snowball (Culture repertoire)

Development stage

- Cultural core
- Infused cultural elements
- Cultural register
- Cultural repertoire
- Cultural element 1
- Cultural element 2
- Cultural element 3
- Cultural element 4
- Cultural elements from a culture entity