Problems in the field

Knowing your culture

The difficulty of measuring culture

Document design theorists and practitioners will all agree on one thing: that culture plays an important role in document design. We can all site examples where culture seems to have an influence on the way in which a document is designed. In this very series on problems in the field I discussed the example of the document design of banking brochures in South Africa (De Stadler, 2002), showing how, assuming the cultural divide between individualistic and collectivistic cultures in South Africa, these particular documents reflected a strong individualistic bias in their content and other design features. I also indicated how alienating these designs could be, but to research this alienating effect in a scientifically acceptable manner would entail, among other things, that we do reader-focused research where the cultural orientation and associated values of respondents would take center stage.

The question is of course, whether we have the instruments to determine the cultural orientation of the readers that participate in the document design or document research processes that we keep ourselves busy with?

The EPIDASA project

To demonstrate that we might have a problem here, I would like refer to a large project on the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS documentation in South Africa. This project, called the EPIDASA project (The Effectiveness op Public Information Documents on AIDS in South Africa), is a joint project run by colleagues from six universities (the Universities of Nijmegen, Tilburg, and Twente in the Netherlands, and the universities of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria and Stellenbosch in South Africa) under the leadership of Piet Swanepoel from UNISA. The larger project has five subprojects, namely

- Persuading people to have safer sex: using fear appeals
- Persuading people to report for HIV/AIDS counselling, testing and referral
- Persuading people to have safer sex: using credible sources
- Using verbal and visual presentation formats to instruct people
- Designing and testing public information documents on HIV/AIDS

In all these projects culture takes a central position and it is therefore vitally important that we develop clear definitions of the different cultural dimensions that play a role in the context of AIDS communication.

In an earlier contribution to Problems in the Field I discussed the cultural dimension of individualism-collectivism, a dimension that seems to play an important role in the EPIDASA project just referred to:

> "Individualism and collectivism is a very important defining feature in the South African community, with the traditionally African cultures described as collectivistic and the more European cultures as individualistic. A lot of research has actually been done on the African brand of collectivism, relating it to the African spirit of *ubuntu* ('I am because we are') and the socio-economic frame of reference associated with Africa (harsh landscape and difficult circumstances almost necessitating a collectivistic social structure). The differences between these two very large groups are varied and complex. I will simply mention a few specific features to illustrate the dividing line.
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> Members of the individualistic culture normally form part of a smaller, more immediate family. They do not have the same strong family ties found in the more collectivistic cultures. Within the individualistic culture, as the name suggests, you develop your own, preferably unique identity, an identity not necessarily associated with that of the group that you belong to: the 'I' is the dominant concept. People in individualistic cultures are outspoken: You say what you think. A mistake leads to feelings of guilt and loss of self-respect. Training improves your economic value and self-respect, the goal of training being to learn in order to live. The relationship between employer and employee is seen as a contract based on mutual gain. Your work is more important than your personal relationships. Personal initiative and achievement are very important; self-fulfilment and personal goals are paramount. Self-construal: '… involving a sense of oneself as an agent, as a producer of one's actions. One is conscious of being in control over the surrounding situation, and of the need to express one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions to others …' (Gudykunst 1994:42).
>
> In the collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, members form part of a larger, more extended family, including more than only your blood relations. Your identity is derived from that of the group (the spirit of *ubuntu*, 'I am, because we are'), your well being is tied directly to the well being of the group: 'we' seems to be the dominant concept. In the group members strive towards harmony. A mistake leads to shame and loss of face for you and the group. Training improves your chances to become a member of a status group, and the goal of training is to learn to do. The relationship between employer and employee is seen as a moral and social tie, almost to be compared to a family tie. Personal relationships in the group are more important than your work, since you cannot survive without the support of the group. The emphasis is on membership of the group and the well being of the group; my gain is your gain; group goals have precedence. Self-construal: '… focuses on an attentiveness and responsiveness to others that one either explicitly or implicitly assumes will be reciprocated by these others, as well as the wilful management of one's other-focused feelings and desires so as to maintain and further the reciprocal interpersonal relationship. One is conscious of where one belongs with respect to others and assumes a receptive stance toward these others, continually adjusting and accommodating to these others in aspects of behaviour …' (Gudykunst 1994:42).

So, we seem to have a wealth of anthropo-cultural knowledge about these and other dimensions of culture, but are we able to translate them into usable instruments to measure culture when the need arises in our research or design processes?

Examples from the EPIDASA project

Andrea Hagen, one of the post-graduate students working in the project, did research on the influence of culture on the appreciation of documents using strips to convey important messages. One of the research questions that she addressed in her project was

> Do South African youth from different cultures differ in their appreciation of the use of strips used to convey persuasive information on HIV/AIDS?

For this study she needed to measure the cultural orientation of respondents on an individualism-collectivism scale. She developed a questionnaire, one part of which contained so-called profiling questions, among them questions to determine to what extent the respondent felt part of his or her culture (first set) and questions to determine the respondent's view of his or her placement on an individualism-collectivism scale (second set). These questions were designed on the basis of questions developed in Gudykunst (1991). She asked questions like the following (30 statements in total, with possible answers on a five-point scale ranging from "always true" to "always false" in the case of the first type and "opposed to my values" and "very important to me" in the case of the second set; I only present a few examples):

Strength of cultural identity

- Being a member of my culture plays a large role in my life.
- I rarely choose to express my culture in the way I communicate.

Individualism-collectivism

- Being successful by demonstrating my competency
- Having an exciting and challenging life.
- Avoiding the violation of social norms.
- Preserving the welfare of others.

Even though expected, given the groups that participated (ranging from typically individualistic european cultures to truly collectivistic African cultures), no significant differences were measured.

In another project, colleague Carel Jansen and two post-graduate students, Eefje Bouwmans and Jos van Baal did an extended replication study on the interesting research by Murray-Johnson, Witte, Liu, et al. (2001) on the effect of fear appeals. In both these studies interesting and especially troubling results followed from the measurement of cultural orientation on the individualism-collectivism dimension.

The study by Murray-Johnson and co-workers researched the possible difference between American and Taiwanese students. They therefore needed to measure the cultural differences between these two groups, using the IND-COLL scale developed by Triandis and colleagues. On the basis of existing anthropo-cultural knowledge one would expect that the American students would measure higher on the individualism part of the scale and Taiwanese students higher on the collectivism part of the scale. The surprising result was that exactly the opposite results were achieved. The Taiwanese students came out as the individualists and the American students as the collectivists!

Jansen, Bouwmans and Van Baal took cognisance of this outcome and refined their measurement instrument. Following suggestions made by Murray-Johnson et al. they designed a questionnaire (with 43 questions) taking into account the more refined division between horizontal and vertical individualism-collectivism a division that develops in the following way:

horizontal individualism
      individual sees self as autonomous
      individual sees self as equal in status to others
vertical individualism
      individual sees self as autonomous
      individual sees others as different
      inequality is expected; competition is important
horizontal collectivism
      individual sees self as aspect of in-group
      members of in-group are regarded as equal
vertical collectivism
      individual sees self as aspect of in-group
      members of in-group are regarded as different
      inequality is accepted

After doing all the relevant analyses they still found that the instrument for measuring cultural variables on an individual level was of a questionable validity with low reliability measures associated with it.

Explanations?

Obviously, one would like to explain this phenomenon. Within the context of the EPIDASA project some explanations lurk in the background, but they still need to be researched properly. One possibility lies in the fact that the respondents in both cases

were young people (e.g. students from different universities) and that these respondents react in very neutral ways to questions about their values, attitudes and norms, possibly because they prefer to conform to some kind of general norm for young people in South Africa. Another explanation might be that respondents find it very difficult to introspectively reflect on deepset values, attitudes and norms related to their particular cultures.

Solutions?

It is clear that we seem to have a problem in the EPIDASA project and that we desperately need to find solutions to this problem, solutions that are not in the offing at this moment. We need to return to the drawing board and do extensive research (of qualitative and quantitative nature) into the defining characteristics of the different cultures in our environment. Carel Jansen from Nijmegen drew my attention to one such study, namely that of Corder (2001). Corder did extensive research on the parameters that would allow for a reliable multi-ethnic typology, among them parameters such as value characteristics (adherence to customs, nostalgia for the past, denial of individual freedom, tolerance for the values of others, etc.), African humanism (as embodied in the spirit of ubuntu – "I am because we are"), society issues (respect of nature, being a victim of circumstances, the value of group protests, etc.), activities, hobbies and pastimes, sport, intellectual activity (media consumption and book reading, for instance), fashion, music. On the basis of extensive analyses he develops five value types that he calls conformists, transitionals, progressives, non-conformists and todayers. This typology seems to provide an interesting starting point for discussion on the particular problem in the field presented here.

By developing a better understanding of these and other parameters of culture, we may be able to develop instruments that deliver better and more consistent results compared to those that we have at present.

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References

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