

Postcolonial Interculturality

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ABSTRACT

Understanding intercultural collaboration is a thorny problem in CSCW and organizational studies that grows every more important as globalization generates increasing intercultural interactions between individuals, groups, and technologies. We suggest that Postcolonial Studies may offer richer frameworks for analysis than taxonomic models of culture such as Hofstede's dimensions of difference. A postcolonial perspective sees culture as dynamic and always changing, stressing the importance of colonial histories, uneven economic relations, and local knowledge systems in framing and designing information technologies.

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H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Working through cultural difference has long been recognized as an challenge of organizational interaction, whether interactions are parts of temporary partnerships, remote collaboration at great distances, or diverse colocated teams. Guides to "foreign" cultures include characterizations of broadly held habits and values, such as greetings, ceremonies, and attitudes towards authority. Geert Hofstede's work dimensionalizes attributes of cultures to predict how culture as "the software of the mind" might condition the behaviors of foreign others.

Yet in a world of globalization, shaped by the transportation networks as well as economic and social histories of empire, the viability of drawing borders around cultures and identifying an individual with one culture or another is increasingly tenuous.

Consider this scenario, fictional but based on fact:

Sanjoy works at Google's Indian facility, located in Bangalore. There, he works on creating Internet-based tools, part of the Google internet suite, that are designed specifically for the Indian technical and cultural context. To do so, he works closely with colleagues from Google's research and development facilities in Mountain View, California. This is relatively easy for him, because he himself worked there until recently. He grew up in Silicon Valley; his father, who graduated with a degree in

aerospace engineering from IIT Delhi in the early 1960s, emigrated to the United States to pursue the opportunities that his engineering education afforded him there, and Sanjoy grew up as an Indian-American. Now, with the growth of the information technology sector in India, Sanjoy had the opportunity to move his family back "home," while still working for a US-based company. Bangalore is a very different place than Silicon Valley, but the density of information technology companies and people is very familiar to him.

What sorts of stories might this scenario open up for us? It might lead us to talk about recent trends in outsourcing and offshoring, and the movement of engineering jobs from the industrialized West to other parts of the world, as well as the anxieties those job flows can trigger in the West. It might lead us to talk about the complexities of international collaborations in software development, where a single organization engages in development efforts that combine the activities of people the world over, in a 24-hour cycle. It might lead us to talk about the transnational migrations of people, technology, and capital, and the historical circumstances that have shaped them. It might lead us to talk about the difficulties of design for different cultural contexts, and the ways in software development methodologies, application needs and design strategies can be imported and exported. Most importantly, it might lead us to recognize that these questions cannot easily be separated.

How might we analyze such stories, and why are these analyses important to the development of collaboration in a transnational world? In this paper, we examine this new global configuration of technology, cultural practices, economic relations, and narratives of development under an interdisciplinary rubric we label "postcolonial computing."

This approach is shaped by research within three fields: Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW), Science and Technology Studies (STS), and Postcolonial Studies. From CSCW we draw on ideas about how to approach interactive systems design in culturally complex settings. From STS we draw on theories about the relationship of culture to knowledge and what it means to know. From Postcolonial Studies we use the theoretical lens shaped by examinations of encounters between the "developed" world and "emerging" nations within the historic, cultural, and

economic contexts brought about in the time during and since colonization of the latter by the former. Using theories and experiences from these three fields, we explore how insights from Postcolonial Studies may reveal new aspects of problems increasingly evident in the new technocultural encounters of globalization.

We understand the “postcolonial” here not as the historical period after European colonialism, but rather as an approach to thinking about how local practice operates in contemporary transnational contexts affected by histories, relations, and logics of colonialism. The lens of postcolonial analysis calls our attention to complex, historicized encounters among actors with different locations, varied forms of power, and disparate readings of modernity. Ex-colonial people and nations function in a variety of ways in many interconnected global economies. As anthropologist Aihwa Ong comments [19]:

In many parts of the world, we must move beyond an analysis based on colonial nostalgia or colonial legacies to appreciate how economic and ideological modes of domination have been transformed in ex-colonial countries, as well as how those countries’ positioning in relation to the global political economy has been transformed.

We draw upon this aspect of postcolonial studies – “how economic and ideological modes of domination have been transformed” – to see how these always transforming modes of domination, such as neoliberalism and development projects [12], shape intercultural relations.

In what follows, we look at how interculturality has been dealt with in systems design and studies of culture in groups, and suggest how postcolonial theory suggests new aspects of intercultural encounter relevant to collaboration.

TAXONOMIZING CULTURES

Collaboration is always challenging; collaboration at a distance is more so [18]. Attempts to anticipate and make sense of conflicts and surprises in international collaborations sometimes diagnose cultural differences as the cause.

ICT researchers faced with such questions often draw on the work of Geert Hofstede [13] in grappling with cultural differences in organizations and with respect to design [5,8,20]. Hofstede, a social psychologist, studied international IBM employees in the 1970s and argued for the existence of several dimensions along which national cultures could be measured and differentiated. While the promise of quantifiability has made Hofstede’s framework popular in organizational behavior and social informatics, many studies have found the Hofstede’s dimensions analytically weak in explaining observed conflicts [6] and differences in technology use [7].

The tension between this work and the perspective we take here lies largely in the distinction between two uses of the concept of “culture” – one taxonomic and one generative.

The taxonomic view takes culture as a means to distinguish and classify people, activities, and settings – to be able to speak of Latin versus Asian cultures, for instance, in terms of systematic differences. The focus on “cultural difference” as a topic for system design reflects this view [5,15]. The taxonomic view, though, suffers from a range of problems. These cultural categories are frequently rooted in geographical separation, but where does one cultural zone end and the next one begin? How can we account for the global traffic in cultural concepts that characterize contemporary (and not-so-contemporary) living [3,16]? How do we account for cultural categories that go beyond ethnicity and geographical particularism?

Taxonomic models such as Hofstede’s can also be limited by a focus on the culture *of* an individual. Hofstede’s model is that culture is “software for the mind,” shared by people of the same nation [14]. This presumes that culture is a characteristic that is acquired rather than an active, ongoing construction that may change over a life course. Though he acknowledges variance within nations, he provides averages among his provided dimensions as the expected value of an individual. Hofstede’s framework cannot speak to the resistances and norm-shifting of technologies, social movements, or even everyday reconfigurations of practice that are consequential to understanding technology and its meanings in practice. By taking a synchronic snapshot and generalizing not only across people but across time, psychological frameworks like Hofstede’s also elide the ways cultural differences and preferences, especially with respect to material cultures, can be rooted in the particularities of local, material infrastructure, politics, and histories. It is precisely those particularities that those designing and analyzing technologies require.

Hofstede also problematically relies on nation-states as a foundation for analysis. Nations cannot be taken as analytically independent of technology when technologies such as language and radio have been instrumental in the imagination, creation, and maintenance of the nation-states [17,21] on which Hofstede grounds his analysis. Indonesia, for example, has many languages and cultural groupings constructed as a common group through film, radio, and the Melayu language, reflecting Anderson’s analysis of nation-states as “imagined communities” of heterogeneity rather than stable, homogeneous groupings [2]. Media technologies can change the very national cultures designers seek to understand through Hofstede’s national models of difference.

As technologies and collaborations around them have come to span national boundaries, cultural encounters have come into focus. The generative view of culture that we employ here, on the other hand, is one in which culture is a lens through which people collectively encounter the world, a system of interpretive signification which renders the world inter-subjectively meaningful. From this view, an individual may participate in many cultures – cultures of ethnicity, nationhood, profession, class, gender, kinship, and history –

each of which, with their logics and narratives, frame the experience of everyday life.

DYNAMICS OF CULTURE

Recognizing the rigidities and problems of culture as taxonomy, we suggest an approach that strives to understand how relationships, technological objects and knowledge practices of everyday life arise as contingent, processual and dynamic materializations whose boundaries are not set in advance. We argue that postcolonial studies offers a richer, more complex account of cross-cultural encounters and hybridizations that include conflicts, hidden resistances, and even cooperation and complicity [9] at many different scales – not just that of the individual in the nation-state. These dynamics blur and shift “borders” between cultures. This allows us to see similarities, differences, and ways in which those comparisons are not fundamental attributes of people or groups, but instead different positions in relation to multiple flows of people, capital, discourses, and media – flows and phenomena that can change and be changed over time.

Rather than seeing cultures only as geographic or ethnic categories of habits, traditions, and values, we extend our sights to other aspects of cultural encounters brought into focus through postcolonial studies and STS. These perspectives may lend themselves less to quantitative characterizations, but they give a richer account of the how and why of intercultural collaboration, conflict, and practice.

Power relations

While Hofstede’s framework characterizes national cultures according to “power distance” – the level of deference accorded those in formal authority roles – it has little to say about how forms of authority or, more generally, power emerge in collaborative contexts. Authority cannot be separated from conditions such as uneven economic, legal, and racial relations that ground transnational cultural life especially in ex-colonial contexts.

Postcolonial histories also tell us that power cannot be analyzed only at the nation-state level. Colonial encounters were not simply encounters between the dominators and the dominated. Colonizers did not have an exclusive hold on power, though colonial administrators often misrecognized resistance and non-compliance as incivility or inability to perform [11]. These histories suggest that while structures and institutions are important, many complex factors might become especially consequential in international encounters.

Modernization Projects

Many excolonial countries came to be independent through nationalist movements that simulataneously valorized local cultures and worked towards becoming some conception of a modern nation. This work to construct the identities of emergent, postcolonial nation-states involved diverse, modernizing projects. These modernizing projects are an

important aspect of the historical backdrop of many transnational encounters.

In India, for example, understanding of technology was one way that British colonizers judged the civility and, essentially, the human worth of so-called natives [1]. This history of colonial judgement influenced debates about the role of industry and science in India’s postcolonial economies – could India become “modern without being Western” [4]? In the decades that followed, India was the site where entrepreneurialism, hierarchy, and the role of technology were contested by politicians, publics, technologists, and even Non-Resident Indians. There was no unitary modernizing project. Instead, there was a contest between many such projects, all of which emerged in response to complex, historical postcolonial contexts, marbled with concerns of caste, nationalism, class [4].

In studies of technology and collaboration, then, the meanings, uses, and appropriateness of the technology are influenced by factors beyond the site and moment of collaboration into cultural histories contesting technology and social formations.

Hybridity

In grappling with the entailments of colonial encounters, postcolonial historians, anthropologists, and theorists have recognized the ways new cultural forms can emerge from contact – “a novel form of cross-communication between speakers of different ideological/cultural languages” [9].

In some cases, pidgin languages emerge from these contacts. These languages are sufficient for the work being done even though ontological experiences of the world remain incommensurable and unresolved. Marilyn Strathern describes a dispute over enviornmental impact between Papua New Guineans and Western mining companies in which the dispute was resolved not by coming to see the situation the same way, but when the mining company publicly acknowledged that PNG plaintiffs did not accept Western science [22]. The plaintiffs simply wanted their ontology acknowledged and legitimized, rather than subsumed.

But in other cases, new cultural hybrids emerge that have their own coherence and are not resolvable to the cultural forms they draw upon. To be Asian-American is not sometimes being “Asian” and sometimes being “American.” The cultural history of this identity group has its own history, developed for over a century in the United States. Of course, many intercultural encounters have much shorter histories, or are even ephemeral. Cultural theories such as structuration, used prominently in CSCW and organizational sociology, may offer a starting point for understanding how hybrid cultures emerge. Structuration describes culture as dynamic, always reproduced through interactions between agentic individuals [10]. Culture changes and responds to interruptions and historical events. A postcolonial perspective on intercultural collaboration

highlights the relevance of cultural change and dynamics in understanding intercultural encounters.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that culture as taxonomies of people that predict values, behaviors, and habits is fundamentally limited in an age of globalization. Instead, we look to Postcolonial Studies and its concepts for understanding intercultural encounters – the coming together of people from different places, who know and expect different things.

Postcolonial theory brings certain kinds of research questions around intercultural collaboration into focus:

- How do authority claims get made and contested in decision making processes or knowledge production when contestations may not be recognizable as such?
- How do historically and locally particular causes of conflict warrant new ways of thinking about team formation, norming, and conflict resolution?
- What kinds of assumptions interpersonal relations are tacit in “best practice” processes such as structured brainstorming? How does the introduction and adoption of such processes in turn change cultures?
- How do hybrids team norms emerge when they do and how does that affect collaborative work?

Thinking about differences in cultural locations informed by postcolonial histories can enrich understandings of intercultural encounters, in part through the recognition that nobody represents a pure national culture. Instead, people are subject to and identify with culturally constructed categories such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, race, institutional affiliation, or subculture in complex ways that shape their interpretations and actions in the world. Transnationals, the very poor, the highly educated, and even researchers become unique and intelligible actors in a postcolonial, dynamic model of culture.

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