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There are literally hundreds of articles, papers, and books that have been written from the view of various social scientists and other theorists to explain Cultural DNA. We are in complete agreement with many of these folks who believe culture is learned and passed down (or on) from generation to generation. Our purpose in this article is to metaphorically compare those biological perspectives to what we elect to call American Cultural DNA. Our approach is to look at American Cultural DNA components as having the same labels (or identities) across cultures in America. The difference is the way those identities operate in their given American Cultural Experience. After all, we are all the same in the United States, right?

We agree that every individual has their own unique DNA (biological makeup), the basic building block for cellular development in all forms of life. DNA represents the nucleus of our identity. Additionally, we propose that in today's global system, knowledge and understanding of 'American Cultural DNA' is as critical to understanding, analyzing, interpreting, and predicting behaviors of people from different cultures as genetic DNA is to cellular development. Further, when looking at the U.S. Military as a case study, the ability to understand one's cultural DNA is a critical enabler for developing the individual war fighter and for mission success.

What History Tells Us

"History is to the nation as memory is to the individual." – American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

Historically, America is a nation of immigrants. Other than American Indians or Alaska Natives (some will argue that they too migrated to this land thousands of years ago), American Culture is multi-faceted and shares so many dimensions that we often forget how different Americans really are. Like Biological DNA, Americans are as different in their own American Cultural DNA identity as they are in unique cellular patterns.

When we are identified as American by people from other countries, we tend to acknowledge that the person making that particular identity statement is correct. Most people from other countries know a great deal about American history, the U.S. economy, and our political issues. They are aware of American foreign policy because it impacts people around the globe; likewise, most are able to separate the policies and behavior of the United States government from the values and beliefs of individual Americans. While it's certainly true that their sources of information, especially movies and television, often distort their understanding of the United States, they still know more about our country than most Americans know about any other country beyond their own (Weaver, 2009).

We Are What We Learn

An example of cultural learning could be the way Disney World in Orlando Florida hires cast members at EPCOT? Disney uses international exchange students to work in EPCOT as cultural representatives for the park's country village scenes. Cast Members (International Exchange Students) take on the roles for being the subject matter experts sharing ideas about the culture of their home country. These young (normally college level) people are surveyed prior to coming to the United States and asked to describe U.S. Americans. The comments normally received included stereotypes about being loud, pushy, disrespectful, rich, obnoxious, rude, flashy, overbearing, mean, and others. After working at Disney for a year to eighteen months, the same survey is administered as these cast members are preparing for their return to their homeland and the results are much more positive as they indicate such words as; fun-loving, honest, helpful, warm, caring, humble, religious, protecting, charitable, and loving to describe the same group. The cast members are asked where their comments originated and most respond with; "This is the way we have seen Americans portrayed on television and media in our home country, so it is the most prevalent way to identify or describe them." Some would argue that culture is not depicted in this scenario. We believe that these ideas (or stereotypes from the cast members) are in fact culture or cultural components that are frequently noted by non-Americans from around the world. The components listed or described are not a total composite, but they can be included in any list that tends to build cultural identities.

Likewise, if we are in the presence of other Americans that are inclusive of our particular group, we quickly accept how easy it is to identify an American; however, if we are in the presence of Americans who differ from our particular group, we might not welcome the identity that others prescribe to us. Within the United States, Americans are as different culturally as they are different in understanding their own culture and / or the culture of others.

This article argues that to understand another culture we must first understand differences between Americans, as well as the basic Cultural DNA makeup of who we are within American Culture, individually and collectively. Just as biological DNA patterns differ, American Cultural DNA is comparatively (metaphorically) different. The multi-facets of American Culture such as: values, family, religious beliefs, behaviors, norms, thought patterns, attitudes about what is good or bad, right or wrong, in-group, in group/out-group, social status, and many others can be patterned to show American Cultural DNA differences. A poignant example of American diversity comes from a Jewish immigrant writer / historian in the early-mid-twentieth century, Oscar Handlin. His words still resonate to this day (paraphrased): ‘Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America, but then I discovered that the immigrants were American history’ (Bonvillain, 1999).

So what is our American Cultural DNA? We are not born with a set of pre-programmed American cultural characteristics, e.g., Mom, Apple Pie, and the American Flag; rather we acquire our primary culture very informally growing up in a particular family and within a particular society. In other words, we learn culture and we pass it on. Whether we are Hawaiian or Floridian, Alaskan, Texan, or Californian, southern or northern, European or African, we are all culturally different (McGuire, 1999 and 2003). Unlike biological DNA, where terms such as cells, chromosomes, nuclei, etc, are part of the common terminology, we might look at American Cultural DNA as metaphorically similar. As we look through a biological microscope for differences in DNA - with the microscope being the lens - we can say that the American Cultural lens is not so clearly or scientifically defined. Consequently, we use terms such as “We’re all Americans” or “Americans are all the same” as if everyone clearly agrees with or understands the meaning of being an American.

We Do Learn Differently

We propose that American Cultural DNA would be the differences in American Cultural Identity Groups; such things as: ideas about family, food (and the way we eat), religious beliefs (or not), how we treat each other within that particular culture (hierarchical rules of etiquette), concepts of time, how people are expected to behave based on gender, and other facets, tend to label our in-group culture as the primary ethnocentric group. American Culture is as diverse as people elect to see and define it through their individual cultural lenses. This separation of American Groups is not always seen or discussed (or even accepted) in educational sessions unless the session is focused on equality or diversity. Cultures (to include American Culture) are learned and evolve over time, as people tend to take on the values, beliefs, interests, behaviors, norms, mental models and information of family and community that classifies or qualifies a particular culture. It’s clear that culture is extremely complex. We unconsciously bring to any situation our own mental background, the accumulation of our life experience in the society we grew up in: everything we have been taught or picked up from the media, in turn, shapes our opinion. We struggle to understand how anyone could possibly think differently; some even label those who do as stupid, reactionary or trouble-makers.

American Culture becomes even more complex when we start embedding that culture into, for example, our military services such as the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard (an asset of the Department of Homeland Security) – all of which have their own unique organizational culture.

Bringing It All Together

American Cultural DNA is like a container within which our values and beliefs form and fit, and which attracts and repels others, containing behavioral instructions that are passed from one generation to the next, a bio-psycho-social-spiritual code that underlies every aspect of our lifestyle and culture and holds it together. Every form of cultural expression is a manifestation of it - our forms of government, architecture, language, religious expression, moral views, creative arts, amusements, sports and sense of identity (Wilke, 2005).

Fifty years ago Clare W. Graves, professor of psychology at Union College New York, was so frustrated by all the conflicting theories that he resolved to get to the root of what differentiates people, why they perceive the world so differently and why their reactions to physical, emotional and social challenges are so dissimilar. Decades of research followed, in many countries and at all levels of society. The result was *Spiral Dynamics* (Beck and Cowan, 1996) a revolutionary theoretical model of the development of consciousness and human value systems. Understanding the progressive stages through which individuals, organizations and cultures evolve provides a key to resolving major conflicts and global problems, so many of which stem from clashes between different ways of thinking.

According to *Spiral Dynamics*, human nature is not fixed and it changes as our life conditions change. When our circumstances change, we have the innate capacity to develop more complex thinking to handle new problems, and we change our psychology and rules for living to adapt to the new conditions. But the old ways of thinking do not disappear; we carry them within us and call on them when necessary.

According to Graves' theory, each spiral builds on the one below, and everyone has to progress through each in turn. Not everyone within a society exists at the same level. We cannot leapfrog a stage because it doesn't appeal to us, or lift ourselves to a higher one without experiencing and learning the lessons of the ones below. Nor, significantly, can one country impose its way of life on other countries that have not lived through the stages of similar development (Wilke, 2005).

In essence, “humans are more than just biological beings: we are also social beings. It is our culture which functions as our social DNA, determining much of our behavior, in conjunction with our biological DNA. Social or Cultural DNA, like biological DNA, is invisible in our day-to-day activities: while it serves as the fundamental determinant on the social side for how we behave, we don't see it, the same way that biologic DNA is invisible in determining our biological selves. However, every aspect of our social lives, from the way individuals interact with each other, organize ourselves into businesses and

families and neighborhoods, and the way that nation states behave, can be seen as a result of our culture, the Cultural DNA at the invisible heart of our social selves.

Once we decode the Cultural DNA of any given culture, “we can understand better why it does what it does, whether we are looking at the behavior that exists between individuals, in organizations, or between nation states. And, much like biologic DNA, while social DNA determines much of our social behavior, we need not be prisoners of it: once we are aware of it, we can control it, and choose alternative ways of behaving, organizing and living with others on this increasingly fragile planet” (Foster, 2009). Cultural DNA provides a metaphorical framework for understanding the complexities of American Culture. It’s useful as a conceptual model for increasing cultural competence by comparing and contrasting American culture with foreign cultures.

BIOGRAPHY



Dorothy Guy Bonvillain is currently Chief of Partnership for TRADOC Culture Center (TCC) / SETA / ISC Consulting Group, Inc. at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Prior to taking this position, she served as a trainer / developer at the TCC.

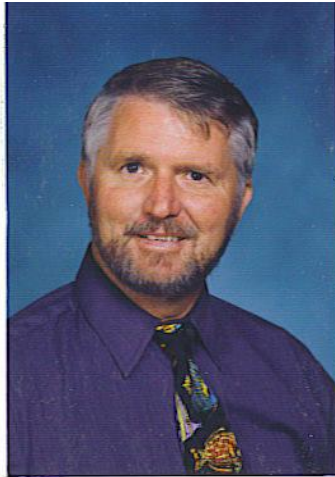
She earned a PhD in Educational Administration / International Education at American University in Washington, DC in 2000, where her passion for work in culture education and training was fostered by Professor / Dr. Gary Weaver, Director of the Intercultural Management Institute. She has served as Principal for a high school in Arizona, Director of Educational Outreach for the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington, DC, Special Consultant to the Minister of Education in the Sultanate of Oman, Program Manager for Dr. John Duke Anthony at the National Council on US-Arab Relations in Washington, DC, presented lectures at Foreign Service Institute, Arlington, Virginia, for Americans preparing to live and work in Saudi Arabia, as well as American University: “*Pluralism in the Americas: Gender, Ethnicity, and Race*”.

Publications include:

- Bonvillain, Dorothy Guy, PhD, “Cultural Awareness and the War on Terror,” *Field Artillery Journal*, March-April 2007, 22-28.
- Cultural Pluralism and the Americanization of Immigrants: The Role of Public Schools and Ethnic Communities, Baltimore 1890 -1920. PhD Dissertation, American University, 1999.
- Bonvillain, Dorothy Guy. Traditional Handicrafts of Oman. Sultanate of Oman: Ministry of Education and Youth, 1990.

Dr. Bonvillain spent years as a military spouse living and working abroad in Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, and Malawi, Africa.

Biography



Providing open and current discussion on Cross Cultural Competency (3C), Unity Diversity, Equal Opportunity Language, Gender Communications, Facilitation Skills, Generational Similarities and Differences, the Myers Briggs Type Indicator in the Workplace, and Communications Across Differences, Dr Wm Gary McGuire brings more than 20 years of private and government experiences to the public for discussion.

His most recent articles published on the website Conceive, Believe, Achieve, concerning the “hidden discrimination” not captured in the push to embrace Diversity provide thought provoking dialogue from manager’s and employees alike. His article titled “My name is Keisha,” provides a unique look at how a person’s first name can lead people to overtly discriminate against less dominate groups in business without the applicant knowing why or how the discrimination took place. In another article titled “Hi, I’m Marty El Khouri,” Dr McGuire uses the last name of a person to help others think about how discrimination can take place using a common Western Asian (Parillo, Vince, 2004) last name.

In 2003, Dr McGuire produced an “Equal Opportunity Language Guide” to help senior leaders in the government (civilian and military) better define whether what they say is appropriate (discriminatory/derogatory) or not in today’s ever changing use of words in communications. The guide defines several hundred English words (US) vocabulary used over many years and gives the reader another way to see and say things to people. Dr McGuire is a renowned speaker and has provided training and discussion in many businesses and government agencies across the world. A brief list of some recent presentations includes:

NATO Conference on Homosexual's in the Military, Netherlands	2009
Joint Equity Diversity Training Center (JEDTC), Shrevinham, UK	2009
Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research (SIETAR)	2009
Intercultural Management Institute Conference Speaker	2009

Dr McGuire is a graduate of the University of South Alabama (Undergraduate), SD Bishop State (HBCU), the University of Maryland (Masters), and the University of Florida (PhD) with concentrations in educational, behavioral, and clinical psychology. He has written numerous White Papers, Articles on Culture and Diversity and How to Facilitate Behavior Groups, as well as co-authored numerous articles and works on various topics. He is currently employed by the United States Department of Defense as the Senior Research Analyst and Director of J92 at the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute at Patrick Air Force Base, Florida and serves as the Cultural Subject Matter Expert for 3C Development in the DoD.

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