

Cultural Differences Matter, and They Don't: Transcending Polarized and Polarizing Cultural Stereotypes in Diversity Training

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Abstract

Based on reported primary and secondary research, this paper proposes an improvement to the way organizational diversity training (DT) is usually designed and delivered. The focused-upon DT shortcoming is its customary emphasis on instructing trainees about cultural differences in such a way that overstates and oversimplifies those differences, typically contributing to poor outcomes such as lack of change in participant attitudes and behaviour, or even a worsening of them (Kowal, Franklin, & Paradies, 2013).

The proposed improvement is to instead instil in DT trainees a more accurately nuanced intercultural mindset that this author terms *non-binary*: an appreciation of how the world's cultures are both distinct and alike, and how even the most basic differences are often underpinned by paradoxical similarities. By way of concrete example, the sub-construct of Japanese *interiorized individualism* is modelled. The paper concludes by discussing how such non-binary truths, and an accordant behavioural flexibility in cross-cultural interactions, might be fostered in DT trainees through non-traditional pedagogical approaches such as “embodied learning” (Wilson, 2013) and “paradoxical frames” (Miron-Spektor, Gino, and Argote, 2011).

Keywords: diversity training, intercultural theory, individualism/collectivism, *non-binary* cultural orientation, *interiorized individualism*, *exteriorized individualism*

Section I: Introduction

Ia. Overview

Based on reported primary and secondary research, this paper proposes an improvement to the way organizational diversity training (henceforth, *DT*) is usually designed and delivered. The focused-upon *DT* shortcoming is its customary emphasis on instructing trainees about cultural differences in such a way that overstates and oversimplifies those differences, typically contributing to poor outcomes such as lack of change in participant attitudes and behaviour, or even a worsening of them (Kowal, Franklin, & Paradies, 2013). The proposed improvement is to instead instil in *DT* trainees a more accurately nuanced intercultural mindset that this author terms *non-binary*: an appreciation of how the world's cultures are both distinct and alike, and how even the most basic differences are often underpinned by paradoxical similarities. By way of concrete example, the sub-construct of Japanese *interiorized individualism* is modelled. The paper concludes by discussing how such non-binary truths, and an accordant behavioural flexibility in cross-cultural interactions, might be fostered in *DT* trainees through non-traditional pedagogical approaches such as “embodied learning” (Wilson, 2013) and “paradoxical frames” (Miron-Spektor, Gino, and Argote, 2011).

Ib. Organization

Section II begins the paper by briefly explaining the genesis of its reported primary research, conducted in 2014 with the aim of generating fresh insights into *DT*. The perceived problematic that generated this objective was that scholarly commentary on *DT* has been almost universally sharply critical (e.g., Vedantam, 2008; Dobbin & Kalev, 2013). The primary research consisted of a small-scale, qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews and one focus group, conducted with *DT* trainees, in which they reflected upon their experience. These sessions and subsequent study was guided by the following research question: *How do respondent reflections upon their DT relate to the scholarly literature's assessments, in terms of confirming, contradicting, complicating, or adding to them?* The initial explanation of this primary research is followed by a literature-review summarization of the secondary research into scholarship on *DT* that inspired this research project, by indicating the widespread failure to design and deliver effective *DT*.

Section III methodologically details how the primary-research interviews and focus group were designed and undertaken, then how the session transcripts were qualitatively analyzed, in a process informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), thereby isolating the core construct of *non-binary* cultural orientation as a promising pedagogical focus for *DT*. Analytic limits to this approach involving the research-participant sample's non-representativeness are addressed in the section's conclusion. This frames the study's data as yielding initial and exploratory insights worth testing and refining through larger-scale, survey-based quantitative study (Ivankova, 2014). Methodological literature is also drawn upon to support the *qualitative* robustness of this study's primary-research findings, notwithstanding their lack of generalizability (e.g., Silverman, 2010).

Section IV relates how this paper's operational concept of non-binary cultural orientation, first struck upon in primary-research transcript analysis, was fully formulated in light of a new round of secondary research into contemporary theoretic debates within cross-cultural scholarship, surrounding the field's central conceptual pairing of *individualism* and *collectivism* (henceforth often *I/C*). Discussion here centres on an emerging body of work that challenges, often with reference to Asian philosophy, the “binary” thinking undergirding cross-cultural contrasts such as *I/C* (e.g., Chen, 2002; Herdin, 2012). Drawing on this vein of

theory, the author identifies non-binary thinking with a paradox-attunement that can perceive overlaps between similarity and difference. By way of concrete example with regard to Japan, the author argues that the Japanese are most accurately conceived of as *differently* individualistic and collectivistic in comparison with westerners (specifically, Canadians), rather than *more so*. In this explanation, two *non-binary* sub-concepts are introduced: *interiorized* and *exteriorized individualism*.

In recognition that didactic explanation of non-binary thinking will be insufficient for cultivating this cultural orientation in DT trainees, Section V concludes the paper by reviewing pedagogical scholarship and assessing experiential-learning approaches for their potential efficacy in such regard. The literature on DT yields a cognate teaching tactic with Wilson's (2013) "embodied learning"; however, its focus on anti-racist intervention, conflict resolution and emotional catharsis is argued to have limited applicability across the wide range of organizational and intercultural milieus and dynamics addressed by DT. Although not designed for DT purposes, Miron-Spektor, Gino, and Argote's (2011) described "priming exercises" for teaching students to think through "paradoxical frames" are discussed as a promising example of experiential-learning techniques that could be adapted to non-binary DT.

Section II: Study Background and Initial Secondary Research / Literature Review – DT Scholarship

During March 2014, the chance read of a *Harvard Business Review* blog entitled "Diversity Training Doesn't Work" (Bregman, 2012) inspired the author to conduct first-hand research into whether and why the blogger's assertion was true, and how DT might be improved. This was followed by two months of secondary research into the scholarship on DT, focused upon determining faults in the field's practice especially emphasized by researchers, but also gaps in the research that the author might begin to engage. The subsequently-realized aim of this diagnostic literature review was to afterward conduct some primary research involving local (Albertan) DT trainees, thereby exploring major findings from the literature review, in hopes of offering original insights and recommendations regarding DT.

In prefatory lit-review summation, the flaws besetting DT as practiced are many, and highly contingent upon organizational contexts or idiosyncrasies as well as organizational goals; however, a common vein of critique targets oversimplification of the nature of cultural differences – for oft-noted example, inflating "cultural misunderstanding" or outright racism as the sole or primary cause of lack of managerial diversity, as opposed to broader, societally structured, political-economic inequalities. More generally regarding the oversimplification of "culture," there is a tendency to implement DT haphazardly as a hoped-for "quick fix" to various perceived shortcomings.

As for research gaps, a substantive body of DT scholarship has developed during the past decade, nearly all of it quantitative, based on survey reports and statistics, forming a bedrock of empirical data. However, it is likely that bringing to bear more qualitative research – in-depth interviews, rhetorical analysis, speculative theory-building – will fruitfully cross-pollinate this new field, particularly given the persistent failure of DT to sufficiently account for the subtle complexities of cultural difference (Ivankova, 2014; Silverman, 2010). This bifold research gap – under-theorization and the lack of qualitative insight generation – constitutes a basic problematic that subsequent primary research and the writing of this paper has sought to help redress.

Research conducted on DT is heavily critical. Especially since the mid-2000s, a concentration of research essays and consultant blogs has developed around calling for fundamental changes to DT, or for abandoning such programs altogether (e.g., Bregman, 2012; Clark, 2011; Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007; Kowal, Franklin, & Paradies, 2013; Vedantam, 2008; Von Bergen, 2013). The argumentative thrust of these findings is summed up by economist and DT consultant Marc Bendick: “If you ask what is the impact of diversity training today, you have to say 75 percent is junk and will have little impact or no impact or negative impact” (as cited in Vedantam, 2008, p. 2).

As to why diversity programs are so often ineffective, critical commentary on DT offers up a plenitude of reasons, most specific to the type of DT and its sponsoring organization’s stated DT goals. In terms of the most general critiques, it is frequently noted that the design of DT is often given little thought by management, especially when organizations implement these programs to fulfill or fend off legal obligations (e.g., Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2006; Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007; Kalinoski et al., 2013). Moreover, even when cross-cultural understandings and attitudes seem to measurably improve, this usually fails to translate into more hiring or promotion of minorities, higher productivity, increased job-satisfaction levels, or other desired results (Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2006; Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007).

The most widely-cited DT researchers are Frank Dobbin, Alexandra Kalev, and Erin Kelly (e.g., Dobbin & Kalev, 2013; Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2006; Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007; Dobbin & Kelly, 1998; Kalev, 2014). In a systematic analysis of DT, Dobbin, Kalev, and Kelly (2006, 2007) conducted survey-based and statistical study of 829 U.S. firms over 31 years. They mined this data to determine the effectiveness of different “diversity management” approaches, specifically in relation to the share of women and minorities in management positions. Based on their findings, the authors argue that instead of DT, or DT alone, it is much more effective to focus on mentorship programs and to appoint high-ranking diversity managers and taskforces who are responsible for specific, measurable improvements in diversity (however defined).

Dobbin, Kalev, and Kelly here expose a particular problematic, involving the oversimplification of culture: its faulty aggrandizement as a causative force in organizational inequalities that are politically and economically structured, rather than being a “cultural” matter that can be rectified through DT’s targeting of attitudinal change, however effective it might prove in this regard. By this measure, DT sponsors and practitioners should not expect such efforts to increase the proportional representation of minorities or to effect related organization-structural changes. The bar of their success should rather be set at the still-important but less quantifiable improvement of interpersonal interaction among employees and other organizational workers.

In terms of basic gaps in the DT literature that this paper serves to partly fill, there are two oft-interrelated problematics. A first observation is that its scholarship is largely quantitative in nature. This furnishes a wealth of generalizable data from aggregated trainee and management survey responses and analyzed statistics, but without the complementary, detailed understanding to be provided by in-depth qualitative research (Ivankova, 2014; Silverman, 2010). Secondly, there is little theoretic engagement with the methodological underpinnings of DT as both studied and practiced. This lacuna exists in contrast to cognate, current debates replenishing the broader field of intercultural theory, to which this paper turns in its discussion of primary-research findings (Section IV) (e.g., Herdin, 2012; Hofstede, 2002; McSweeney, 2002; Wang, 2009). Arguably, DT scholarship has run up against the

methodological limits of sole reliance upon either quantitative or qualitative analytic approaches – in this case, the inability to model and apply insights more nuanced or ambivalent than numerical evidence can explain and support (Ivankova, 2014; Silverman, 2010).

There are some partial exceptions. Obliquely hitting upon the methodological hazard of *reification* (overstating the extent to which abstract models of human phenomena capture lived complexities), it is sometimes noted that a clumsily-handled focus on white or white-male privilege often results in a defensive backlash, especially when the DT is mandatory, which it usually is (Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007; Wilson, 2013). In a related vein, Bregman (2012) contends that the re-categorization of broad cultural traits on which most DT is predicated essentially replicates the practice of stereotyping and so fails to assist trainees in relating with others as individuals. Bregman presses that assertion in a *Harvard Business Review* blog rather than peer-reviewed scholarship. However, an analogous point is argued, with broader regard to academic generalizations about culture, in scholarly writings addressing the *ecological fallacy* of failing to account for individual-level differences (e.g., Brewer and Venaik, 2014; Gerhart and Fang, 2005).

Section III: Primary Research

IIIa. Primary Research – Methodology

Concentrated secondary research on DT during winter 2014 was followed, over a period spanning June and July, with exploratory and small-scale primary research in the province of Alberta, Canada. The author conducted nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting between 45 minutes and two hours, and one seven-member focus group lasting three hours, with workers in one oil/gas-industry company who had recently undergone cultural DT and were asked to reflect upon the experience. The organization's stated goals for DT emphasized an improvement in interpersonal employee and management-employee relations/communication, though hopes were also expressed that it might lead to more hiring and promotion of female and non-white workers. In recent decades Alberta's oil-based economic boom attracted a rapid influx of labour from all over the planet. This has influenced, in combination with such factors as attempts to improve relations between First Nations and non-Native society, an increase in DT, along with other types of "diversity management," among Albertan organizations (e.g., Carr, 2007; Faulder, 2016).

The primary-research sessions were secured through personal connections with an executive involved in overseeing the company's recently undertaken DT initiatives. In return for permission to interview and focus-group employees on their DT experience, the author presented an overview of findings to corporate Human Resources and high-ranking management officials. All data were anonymized/pseudonymized, and participants signed up voluntarily for the research sessions, which were held outside the workplace and work hours. Confidentiality forms were provided to all participants. No remuneration was offered for this (unfunded) research, except for beverages provided as an out-of-pocket expense shared between the author and his aforementioned personal contact in the company.

The participant sample for this study was small (n=16), and *homogeneous-purposive*, in that research subjects had all undertaken the same DT for the same company; however, they varied in age, gender, ethnicity and profession. The sample was *convenient* in that participants were also selected based on "practical criteria . . . accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate" (Etikan, Musa, &

Alkassim, 2016, p. 2) This *non-probabilistic/non-random* nature of the sample clearly precludes any claims of statistical generalizability for its yielded attitudinal findings regarding DT. Indeed, the project was undertaken as an initial, exploratory assessment of involved issues, with a view to formulating intercultural theories/hypotheses for possible future, larger-scale hence more quantitatively generalizable studies. This limitation being noted, the author concurs with social-scientific methodologists who argue that small, non-random samples of interviewee/focus group subjects often prove qualitatively robust in two ways when subject to close transcript analysis: (1) yielding a level of informational richness not available to necessarily more cursory survey-based attitudinal reports from mass samples; and (2) establishing that participant perspectives do exist among a populace (e.g., Bryman as cited in Baker and Edwards, 2012; Silverman, 2010).

The primary-research sessions were guided by an *exploratory research question* (Robson, 1993):

How do respondent reflections upon their DT relate to the scholarly literature's assessments, in terms of confirming, contradicting, complicating, or adding to them?

As *exploratory research questions* are theorized by Robson (1993), such inquiries aim for a balance between, on one hand, focusing and guiding study, and on the other hand, being general enough to maintain a directional flexibility that frees unexpected findings to emerge. Accordingly, the focus group and interviews were semi-structured with questions and prompts to keep discussion focused on participant assessments of their recently-undertaken DT, and sessions also addressed themes and findings from the reviewed scholarly literature. However, the author drew on training and experience in such fieldwork to maintain a relatively open-ended conversational flow and guard against “leading questions” that would confirm or disconfirm previous scholarship on DT or the author’s own certain or tentative opinions. The impossibility of totally removing researcher preconception in such scenarios is a qualitative-research commonplace, as is recognition that this bias can be satisfactorily mitigated by self-monitoring *reflexivity* (e.g., Silverman, 2010).

The primary-research sessions were recorded, with participant permission, and transcribed by the author (by hand). Transcriptions were analyzed qualitatively, in a process methodologically informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Grounded theory directs an inductive approach based on researcher effort to suspend preconceptions or hypotheses regarding data – in this case, articulated participant perceptions of DT – thereby increasing the extent to which findings and attendant theories emerge from analysis, and decreasing the extent to which study is guided by pre-existing objectives and orientations.

However, as is often the case with research based on grounded theory, its guidance was partial. This chiefly involves the author’s agreement with those “constructivist” grounded theorists (Charmaz, 2007) who, while finding very useful the approach’s data-analytical techniques, reject the “purist” claim that that researcher preconceptions can be completely bracketed during analysis, as well as the attendant insistence that no literature review be undertaken prior to or during data collection (Junek & Killion, 2012).

Analysis more closely followed the standard grounded-theory procedure of *open*, then *axial*, then *selective* coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2008), an abbreviated description of which follows. First the transcripts were text-analyzed and participant

utterances (sentences and phrases) were *open coded*: labelled according to relatively abstract but relatively specific ideational categories which the utterance is deemed to index (at least more so than other ideas); for example, primarily identifying DT with *oversimplification* or *teambuilding*. Some utterances initially occupied two or more such categories; for example, *instructive* and *important*.

The open-coded utterances were then repeatedly analysed through the *constant comparative method*: conceptually relating and re-relating together participant utterances. Through this practice the textual data was *axially coded*, meaning clustered together into fewer, dominant categories of higher abstraction. This process yielded three axial codes involving participant-utterance orientation towards DT: *positive*, *critical*, and *neutral*, meaning indifferent. Very few utterances wound up coded as *neutral*; most such statements were finally deemed *critical* by implication. (A fourth “axial code” was labelled *ambiguous*, but this categorized utterances as resistant to interpretation and hence unanalyzable.) This process produced two-part axial-category/open-subcategory labels such as *positive-teambuilding* and *critical-oversimplification*.

Finally, *selective coding* was conducted, by which one or more *core categories* are settled upon, reflected upon and refined, as the building blocks of theory construction. For the purposes of this paper, the axial code *critical-oversimplification* was thereby selected as pointing toward insight generation beyond findings and recommendations already disseminated in extant literature. That selection aligned with this paper’s research question: *How do respondent reflections upon their DT relate to the scholarly literature’s assessments, in terms of confirming, contradicting, complicating, or adding to them?*

The following table summarizes the schedule of project research sessions and features representative respondent quotations, along with their *axial-coding* label:

Session date/duration	Session information	Representative quotation(s)
6.13.14 / 1.5hrs	Interview #1: female, admin. assist., “Caucasian,” 23 years of age	“The best part was how they gave different cultures a ‘safe space’ for airing our confusions and even complaints about each other. Kind of blowing off steam. Not so much the lectures, activities, and so on.” ~ Axial code: <i>positive-teambuilding</i>
6.13.14/1.5hrs	Interview #2: male, sales rep., “Anglo-Canadian,” 30 years of age	“The workshops and take-home materials taught me a lot I didn’t know about other cultures, and I think holding the DT during work hours sent the message that this is really important to our company.” ~ Axial code: <i>positive-instructive</i>
6.14.14/2hrs	Interview #3: male, accountant, “Bangladeshi-Canadian,” 27 years of age	“To be honest, I mostly found it a waste of time ... lots of stereotypes, along with stuff I’d never heard of about ‘South Asians’ – and I’m South Asian! ... I guess it might be useful as ‘diversity for dummies,’ for people with no international experience.” ~ Axial-code: <i>critical-oversimplification</i>
6.20.14/1.5hrs	Interview #4: male, field operator, “White,” “mid-to-late thirties”	“Honestly, hearing over and over again about how differently different cultures think about work-related stuff, it gets you wondering how you’re going to be able to work together at all. And, this is after I didn’t think there were many big problems to begin with!” ~ Axial code: <i>critical-exacerbation</i>
6.20.14/1.5hrs	Interview #5: female, sales rep.,	“I learned new things about different cultures, and I think it helps to just be, kind of ‘forced’ to think about

	“Taiwanese,” 30 years of age	what diversity means. The role-playing activities took getting used to, but I think those really drove the points home. I also think the trainers and readings should’ve distinguished more between Asian cultures, including Taiwanese, or Taiwanese-Canadian, and mainland Chinese.” ~ Axial code: <i>critical-oversimplification</i>
6.21.14/1hr	Interview #6: male, IT worker, “Scott- Irish Canadian,” age withheld	“I’ll be honest. I think the company is just covering their asses with diversity training; it’s all about PR. The whole time I was just stressing about a project deadline. Wanted to get back to work.” ~ Axial code: <i>critical-imposition</i>
6.22.14/1.5hrs	Interview #7: female, HR worker, “Eurasian,” 26 years of age	“It was good; the trainers knew their stuff ... But I don’t now how they decide what cultures to focus on; the Philippines joked about being left out. And what about folks like me? There are lots of mixed-race around these days.” ~ Axial code: <i>critical-oversimplification</i>
6.22.14/1.5hrs	Interview #8: male, accountant, “Pakistani- Canadian,” 32 years of age.	“I’m not sure how effective ‘corporate diversity training’ can be, especially when it’s a one-off thing. But I’m glad companies here are trying something. Alberta’s a lot more multicultural than people think, but the Oil and Gas industry is still a little behind the lines.” ~ Axial code: <i>positive-intention</i>
7.5.14/2hrs	Interview #9: female, accountant, “Lebanese,” age withheld.	“For sure these cultural differences matter, and they’re important to learn about. But you’ve got to somehow teach this information while also emphasizing common values, and personality differences, and so on. Is that a bit paradoxical, or something? Probably. But it’s true.” ~ Axial code: <i>critical-oversimplification</i>
7.6.15/3hrs	Focus group – seven participants aged between 20 and 40; varied professions; 4 males self-identifying as Caucasian, 3 females – 2 Chinese-Canadian, 1 Lebanese-Canadian.	“I didn’t think there were any cultural or racial problems in the office. Now, after hearing some people air their grievances, I’m not so sure. Is that a good thing?” ~ Axial code: <i>critical-exacerbation</i> “I think there could be a backlash, or maybe people justifying their stereotypes by pointing to stuff we learned in diversity training.” ~ Axial code: <i>critical-exacerbation</i> “I’m just glad to get diversity training on my employee file and resume. That box, ticked off.” ~ Axial code: <i>neutral-meaningless</i>

Table 1: Representative *axial-coded* respondent quotations

IIIb. Primary Research – Analysis

Transcript analysis yielded some positive assessments, typically to the effect that DT accomplished the organization’s goal of improving interpersonal employee relations, owing to its instruction in cultural differences (axial code: *positive-instructive*). There were fewer expressed hopes related to increasing minority hiring and promotion (axial code: *positive-structural*). It is noteworthy that coding also highlighted a clear tendency in *positive* appraisals to approve of the intent of DT (axial code: *positive-intention*) more so than its content, and to value its sessions especially for the “safe space” provided for “blowing off

steam” or “clearing the air” between different cultural groups (axial code: *positive-teambuilding*).

Mostly, the sessions generated neutral-negative to *critical* reports, for a wide variety of reasons. Many such criticisms reflect complaints commonly noted in the scholarly literature on DT (e.g., Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007; Kowal, Franklin, & Paradies, 2013; Von Bergen, 2013), such as that the DT was a meaningless and/or onerous imposition (axial code: *negative-imposition*), or even that it was tantamount to “white-bashing” (axial code: *negative-reverse racism*), or was otherwise detrimental to cross-cultural relations (axial code: *critical-exacerbation*).

Several respondent complaints, axially coded *critical-exacerbation*, state or suggest that diversity trainers compel employees to focus on cross-cultural incompatibilities that previously were barely noticed, or were rightly downplayed or ignored. By this measure, training sessions meant to improve cross-cultural relations can actually *increase* perceived discrepancies and divisions by managers and among workers:

Honestly, hearing over and over again about how differently different cultures think about work-related stuff, it gets you wondering how you’re going to be able to work together at all. And, this is after I didn’t think there were many big problems to begin with! (Male interviewee, IT worker)

In the final analytic stage of *selective coding*, utterances coded primarily as *critical-oversimplification* were settled on for concentrated reflection. This is because they were deemed to explicitly or implicitly highlight an issue not often addressed in DT commentary: the possible need for DT to adopt a more nuanced conception of culture and cultural difference.

Many such utterances state or suggest that diversity trainers overstate cultural differences, or that they neglect an equally important emphasis on human universals and/or intrinsic individuality:

For sure these cultural differences matter, and they’re important to learn about. But you’ve got to somehow teach this information while also emphasizing common values, and personality differences, and so on. Is that a bit paradoxical, or something? Probably. But it’s true. (Female interviewee, accountant)

With the *critical-oversimplification* code selected as this study’s core category for the purpose of further theory building, the author turned to a second round of secondary research, ranging beyond DT-focused scholarship into its surrounding fields of cross-cultural management and broader intercultural theory. As explained in the following section, this study, and the deliberation it inspired, led to this author’s construct formulation of a *non-binary* intercultural orientation, and the recommendation that DT focus on its cultivation in trainees.

Section IV: Discussion – The Non-Binary Cultural Orientation

IVa. Intercultural Theory and the Binary-Opposition Paradigm

Among respondent utterances coded as *critical-oversimplification*, a significant number, in various ways, stated or suggested a stance that seems at once contradictory but

commonsensical: In order to be effective and accurate, DT needs to duly emphasize the countervailing behavioural influences of cultural difference, human universals, and individual idiosyncrasy. As related in Section II's literature review of DT scholarship, researchers and lay commentators sometimes also highlight or hint at the need for more subtlety in the field's explicit or underlying conceptions of culture and cultural difference (e.g., Bregman, 2012; Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007; Wilson, 2013). However, the called-for nuance is never substantively theorized. Culture remains conceptualized as a fixed variable that, if not precisely quantifiable, is *either/or* or *more/than* in its essence. Such binary frameworks constrain our capacity when comparing cultures, to account sufficiently for differences and similarities that exist simultaneously, or are even co-dependently interlinked "mirror opposites," however ambiguously or paradoxically.

This paper's operational-definition construct of a *non-binary* intercultural mindset received initial impetus from the grounded-theory analysis of transcripts as discussed. However, its full formulation emerged from subsequent secondary research further afield from the extant corpus of DT studies, into current debates among scholars of business culture more broadly. Discussion of those theoretic and methodological disputes will help explain the non-binary orientation and build a case for it constituting a potentially promising pedagogical focus for applied DT.

In their tendency to emphasize cultural difference in starkly oppositional terms – *either/or*, or *more/less* – DT commentators approximate the dominant inclination in intercultural theory focused on organization and management (Chia, 1995). This theoretic tendency has its preeminent exemplar in Geert Hofstede (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). A founding figure in cross-cultural theory, Hofstede remains the most oft-cited social scientist in the world of global business (Herdin, 2012). His work has done much to improve cross-cultural understanding, and draw attention to its necessity, in both the scholarship and practice of intercultural and international commerce and management.

Based on his massive-scale, statistically-modeled surveys of multinational IBM employees undertaken during the 1980s, Hofstede ranked the world's countries along spectrums of five binary-opposite values: high-low *power distance* (authoritarianism/egalitarianism); *individualism/collectivism*; high-low *uncertainty avoidance*; *masculinity/femininity*; and *long-/short-term orientation*. In 2010 he (with Minkov) added *indulgence/restraint*. Hofstede's theorization of *collectivism* versus *individualism* (I/C) has proved by far the most influential facet of the overall model (Herdin, 2012). In the most basic terms, Hofstede defines I/C thusly (with his son Gert Jan Hofstede):

Individualism on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism, is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. On the individualist side we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after her/himself and her/his immediate family. On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents) which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. The word collectivism in this sense has no political meaning: it refers to the group, not to the state. Again, the issue addressed by this dimension is an extremely fundamental one, regarding all societies in the world. (Hofstede & Hofstede, n.d., 'Individualism')

Hofstede's retained position as the paramount cross-cultural scholar in most management studies (certainly among consultants or in other applied research) owes both to the pioneering nature of his theory and the fact that its quantitative approach appeals to those who prefer (or whose employers or sponsors require) their answers presented as unambiguous, predictive data. If for this reason, too often Hofstede's theory has been oversimplified, he cannot bear much blame. Indeed, he has stated: "At times my supporters worry me more than my critics" (2001, p. 73).

However, Hofstede's work has been contested by other scholars. Soon after Hofstede began publishing his studies in the 1980s, other quantitatively-oriented researchers began challenging the details of his survey-based statistical modeling, or argued that he needs different and/or more cultural dimensions (e.g., Triandis, Leung, Villareal, & Clack, 1985; Triandis, 1995; Trompenaars, 1993; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). Typically, Hofstede has refuted such modifications or models on grounds that the posited dimensions are either faulty, or that they in essence replicate all or less of his five (now six) dimensions. For example, in 1993 other leading cross-cultural theorist Fons Trompenaars posited seven dimensions, but in a rebuttal Hofstede argued that only two "can be confirmed statistically" and they "correlated" with his I/C dimension (1996, p. 189). In such debates, Hofstede often also argues for the wisdom of maintaining theoretic *parsimony*: limiting models to as few dimensions as possible (e.g., Hofstede, 2012).

Some scholars have advanced more fundamental attacks against Hofstede, less in regard to the details of his theory, and more so on its base presumptions; for example, pointing out that cultures do not fit neatly into country categories, or that cultures change over time – objections Hofstede has rejected as overstated (e.g., Hofstede, 2012). However, most social scientists and management researchers do not question the basic idea of quantifying culture, or otherwise framing it, according to binary typologies (*either/or*, or *more/less*). There are exceptions. Some researchers have argued that Hofstede's model of nation-cultural collective differences fails to account sufficiently for individual-level differences, or at least that Hofstede's presentation of the model implicitly encourages such a misapplication (e.g., Gerhart & Fang, 2005). Similarly but in more general and philosophical terms, McSweeney (2002) attacked Hofstede's model for its *causal determinism*. In a response to McSweeney (Hofstede, 2002), and elsewhere (e.g., Hofstede, 2012), has defended his methodology on grounds that it only carefully attributes causality, and in terms indicating that he recognizes the epistemic issues at stake: "Dimensions should not be reified. They do not "exist" in a tangible sense" (2012, p. 31).

Recent years have seen an increase in challenges to the binary-difference modelling of cross-cultural comparison inherent to Hofstede's theory and those of similarly inclined researchers. Often this new vein of critique is coming from scholars who are non-western or bi-cultural (Herdin, 2012), and often their criticisms carry the charge of ethnocentrism – arguing that the reification of abstractions such as I/C dualities is a distinctively western peculiarity, rooted in Greco-Roman logic, Judaeo-Christian absolutism, inordinate methodological positivism ("scientism"), and even phonetic alphabets (e.g. Chia, 1995; Wang, 2009). As Herdin (2012) notes:

The recent critique from Asian scholars is based, *inter alia*, on the discrepancies between the Aristotelian linear *either/or* thinking of the west, and the tradition in East Asia based on a cyclic process which can be described as a *both/and* framework

(Chen, 2002) or a Taoist *yin/yang* mode of thinking (Lu and Gilmour, 2006; Wang, 2009). (p. 607)

Certainly, Asian commentators frequently echo the belief in Asian collectivism – sometimes affirmatively, sometimes as a complaint. However, much recent Asian scholarship, perhaps especially out of China, seeks to reject or refine this age-old antithesis between East and West. It is often observed that the “[I/C] typology cannot explain self-evaluations by the Chinese, who see themselves both as collectivists and individualists (Zhai, 1998)” (Herdin, 2012, p. 606; see also Hazen & Shi, 2012). Another common rectification of I/C emphasizes that Asian collectivism is more accurately delimited to small-group or in-group collectivism – “relationalism” – in which one’s attachment is to family, workplace, or other institutions one is personally involved with, rather than to broader society or humanity as a whole (e.g., Wang & Liu, 2010). Such arguments arguably imply a “mirror-opposite” Western collectivism: Liberal ideals of civic responsibility or universalism, such as human rights, mark Western societies as *more* collectivist than many Asian societies, but just on broader scales.

Most of the contemporary surge in critiques of I/C dualism has reflected the global resurgence of interest in China, being written by Chinese scholars and/or about Chinese societies (Herdin, 2012). For example, Fang (2011) writes:

Based on the indigenous Chinese philosophy of Yin Yang, I conceptualize culture as possessing inherently paradoxical value orientations, thereby enabling it to embrace opposite traits of any given cultural dimension. I posit that potential paradoxical values coexist in any culture and they give rise to, exist within, reinforce, and complement each other to shape the holistic, dynamic, and dialectical nature of culture. (p. 2)

The author’s secondary-research immersion in this new trend within intercultural theory was contemplated in relation to primary-research transcript analysis of research-participant utterances about DT coded as *critical-oversimplification*. That deliberation led to this paper’s operational-definition construct of a *non-binary* intercultural mindset, as a potentially promising pedagogical focus for applied DT. The following essay section offers a concrete exemplification of the intercultural insights that can be generated from adoption of a non-binary and paradox-attuned perspective on culture. In accordance with the author’s Japan studies specialization, the explanation is focused on Japanese society, and it models, as non-binary sub-constructs, Japan’s *interiorized individualism*, considered in relation to the west’s (and specifically Canada’s) *exteriorized* variant of the same trait.

IVb. Non-Binary Cultural Orientation Exemplified – Perceiving Japan’s *Interiorized Individualism*

As mentioned, much contemporary paradox-attuned and non-binary cultural theory is focused on Chinese society and thought. However, observers have long associated East Asian thought generally, and perhaps especially Japanese philosophy, with non-binary “dialectical” attunement to *both/and* paradox, often in localized modification of received Chinese principles such as Yin Yang (e.g., Moore, 1967; Nishida, 1966). As well, the differences between Asian and Western cultures are no more pronounced than the cultural differences *within* each region (Saint-Jacques, 2012). Therefore, consideration of Japan sheds a distinctively illustrative light on the deficiencies of an overly binary I/C framework.

Recent cross-cultural management research has moved away from the starkest binary oppositions between Japanese collectivism and western individualism. For example,

Schlunze, Hytell-Srensen, & Ji (2011) note that Northern-European and Japanese organizational cultures share an emphasis on consensual decision-making, and they theorize that this might form the basis of a synergistic “hybrid” management style for European human-resource managers in Japan. In somewhat similar vein, it is fairly common to assert that contemporary Japanese are not as collectivistic as were previous generations – or even no longer more collectivistic than westerners (e.g., Matsumoto, 2002, cited in Saint-Jacques, 2012). Some even argue that the collectivism of Japanese society has *always* been least as much rhetoric as reality (e.g., Befu, 1980; Mouer & Sugimoto, 1986).

As well as deconstructing collectivism, some of these thinkers work to conceptualize a distinctly Japanese individualism. Matsumoto (2002) declares that “there is no support for the claim that Japanese are less individualistic and more collectivistic than Americans” (p. 41, as cited in Saint-Jacques, 2012). He goes on to theorize contemporary Japan’s “individualistic collectivism,” which blends traditional group orientation with modern self-reliance. Yamazaki (1994) emphasizes “the universal principle of individuation, which transcends culture” (p. 120). He then proposes the concept of “gentle individualism,” which distinguishes Japanese from more “rugged” Western variants of his universal, “pre-cultural . . . individuation” (p. 119). Along similar lines, management scholar Aoki (1998) coined “horizontal hierarchy” to capture the paradox that conservative corporate Japan, however authoritarian in many regards, prioritizes “consensual” individual input into decision-making.

Considered *in toto*, such writings support this paper’s conceptualization of a distinctly Japanese *interiorized individualism*. Contemplation of such an orientation, and of a correspondently obverse “Caucasian (or Canadian) collectivism,” illustrates how DT, and intercultural education generally, can avoid oversimplifying I/C without becoming too vague or abstruse. Worked into DT sessions, these insights could enhance trainee awareness that cultures are at once distinct and alike, and that situation-specific contexts determine which element – difference or similarity – is most interactionally salient in any encounter.

Hofstede ranks Japan as being more egalitarian and individualistic than most other Asian cultures, but more hierarchical and collectivistic than any western country. It scores a 54 out of 100 in “power distance” (authoritarianism versus egalitarianism) and 46 in “individualism,” compared with Canada’s respective 39 and 80 (“What about Japan?” n.d.; “What about Canada?” n.d.). Certainly, in some plain and primary senses, Japanese culture is more collectivist than Canadian society. However, it is important to recognize that, in equally basic but substantive senses, Canadians are at least as group-oriented and conformist as the Japanese. For immediately obvious examples, our neighbourhoods are more architecturally homogeneous, arguably reflecting and reproducing conventionality of lifestyle (Al-Hindi & Till, 2001), and our sports fans are more inclined to mob behaviour (Russell, 1995).

Institutionally speaking, in many key respects, North American societies operate under a more paternalistic orientation than Japan does, with more legal restrictions on individual behaviour, for sake of collective comfort or safety. This covers a wide range of areas and activities: restaurant or bar closing hours, open alcohol consumption (Tamura, 2016) and cigarette smoking (Tabuchi, Hoshino, & Nakayama, 2015); the production and consumption of “transgressive erotica” (Madill, 2015, p. 274); the relative lack of laws against “hate speech” (Matsui, 2016). There are many reasons for this Japanese variant of relative or incidental libertarianism. Japan Tobacco, the hospitality industry, and manga and anime publishers operate as powerfully entrenched corporate interests (Cairney & Yamazaki, 2017; McLelland, 2011), sometimes or selectively working against censorship and curtailment of

consumption. Another crucial factor is that Japan's postwar constitution was written largely by American political idealists realizing the opportunity they did not have at home to create democracy from scratch (Moore & Robinson, 2002). At least as importantly, the Japanese are self-restraining enough that giving them freer access to alcohol and ideologically or sexually offensive material does not lead to the societal disorder that, it is presumed, would ensue in North American societies. Paradoxically, then, Japanese collectivism – in the sense of adherence to societal norms – manifests in some increase of individual *libertas*.

This fact of Japanese self-governance or self-discipline involves another aspect of Japanese individualism – what this author terms their *interiorized*, *internalized* or *aesthetic individualism* (with due reference to Matsumoto's (2002) "individual collectivism" and Yamazaki's (1994) "gentle individualism"). It has been observed that the Japanese exaltation of emotional reserve, psychological and physical discipline (*ganbare*), and dedication to study or other duty, all demand a mastery of self that is intensely self-focused and therefore individualistic, if "inversely" so – a matter of self-control and self-improvement rather than immediate self-gratification (Miike, 2012; Chen, 2002).

Moreover, partly in response to social pressure for outward conformity, the Japanese place much greater emphasis than North Americans do on having, as a defining component of self-identity, an artistic, aesthetic, or craft-based hobby, from flower arrangement or karate, to ham radio or jazz-record collection (Reischauer & Jansen, 1977). When it comes to such amateur expertise, broadly comparative demographic statistics between Japan and Canada are not available. However, with an estimated one million Japanese having studied haiku under a teacher's guidance ("Haiku," n.d., para. 2; "Poetry," n.d., para. 13), Japan likely has the world's largest population of poets per capita. Moreover, Japan in general is famed worldwide for its artistic/aesthetic sensibilities – the creation and appreciation of art being intensely if not intrinsically self-oriented (Roald & Lang, 2013).

This internalized or aesthetic individualism definitely differs from western individualism: Westerners are much more concerned with projecting the self outward than we are interested in perfecting it inwardly. Western individualism – which is the definition of individualism most widely disseminated – prioritizes having one's prerogatives and perspective affirmed by others (Miike, 2012). But it is clear upon reflection that neither variant of individualism – exteriorized or interiorized – is more intensely experienced or meaningful than the other.

Section V – Conclusion: Paradox and pedagogy – directions and challenges for future research

This paper has reported primary and secondary research linked to the following research question: *How do [research-participant] reflections upon their DT relate to the scholarly literature's assessments, in terms of confirming, contradicting, complicating, or adding to them?* The interviewee and focus-group subjects reported a wide range of perspectives on DT, including a variety of positive assessments. However, most responses echoed the predominant critiques advanced in the literature, from DT being a pointless and/or time-wasting imposition (axial code: *negative-imposition*) (e.g., Kalinoski et al., 2013), to claims that it amounted to anti-white "reverse racism" (axial code: *negative-reverse racism*) (e.g., Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007; Wilson, 2013), or otherwise exerted a negative effect upon cross-cultural relations (axial code: *critical-exacerbation*).

The participant sample was too small, *homogeneous-purposive, convenient*, and qualitatively treated to yield statistically generalizable findings. However, upon grounded-theoretical, thematic analysis, a subset of utterances coded primarily as *critical-oversimplification* were deemed to highlight an issue overlooked in DT commentary, but worth more analytic and pedagogical focus: the need for DT to adopt a more nuanced conception of culture and cultural difference. Such respondent utterances state or suggest that DT overstates cultural differences, and consequently, neglects due emphasis on cultural universals and/or individual differences. The need for nuance in such matters, and the difficulty of attaining it, is aptly captured in a respondent's aforementioned, comment-closing observation: "Is that a bit paradoxical, or something? Probably. But it's true" (Female interviewee, accountant).

This discursive vein in the transcript data, analyzed in light of cognate, current debates within intercultural theory (e.g., Fang, 2011; Herdin, 2012), led to this paper's operational construct *non-binary* as an intercultural mindset that DT might seek to cultivate in trainees: a simultaneous attunement to cultural universalities and particularities, and even to everyday paradoxes in which the most basic differences are underpinned by similarities. This paper now concludes with consideration of possible approaches for imparting such a mindset and orientation.

However counter to received wisdom, intercultural paradoxes such as "Japanese individualism" (and Canadian collectivism) can be illuminated through explanations and discussion, couched in plain language and grounded with reference to everyday realities. Such didacticism was modelled in the foregoing section. However, more than conscious, explicit knowledge is involved in the *non-binary* intercultural orientation which DT ought to activate within participant subjects. The transformational aim for trainees is for them to become more intuitively adept at oscillating, in tune with situational contexts, between recognizing then responding to cultural difference, common human nature, and individual personality. This orientation is more a habitual attitude than an explicit behavioural code to remember and adhere to:

[D]iversity work concerned with changing behaviour cannot focus upon rational thinking alone Attending to the enactment of difference in everyday life . . . demands a more experimental ethic of cultivation than more traditional forms of diversity training might perhaps allow. (Wilson, 2013, pp. 75–76)

Imparting such tacit knowledge should combine the traditional instruction of explicit knowledge with *tacit* learning – if not through real-life interactions then through pedagogical approaches such as role-playing, story-telling, priming activities, etc. (Wilson, 2013; Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011). However, little research has been published on integrating such implicit-knowledge instructional tactics into DT programs and sessions.

Wilson (2013) offers a partial exception to this dearth of information, describing and discussing a few "embodied learning" exercises aimed at prejudice reduction. In one of these activities, a list of identity markers is called out – from more obvious distinctions such as ethnicity, gender and age, to less visible categories such as social class, sexual preference, religion, and criminal record. Attendees stand up whenever they self-identify with a listed label. Because of category overlaps, typically each participant will find themselves standing at least once with everybody else. This nonverbally highlights the complex interplay of similarity and difference in identities, serving "to remind people that social space is constantly divided by habits of categorisation that . . . create 'false antimonies between

groups’... at the expense of recognising other commonalities” (p. 78). The present author’s interviewees and focus-group attendees reported no relatable learning experiences. It is conceivable that, had they done so, fewer of their DT assessments would have been coded *critical-oversimplification*.

The other DT activities Wilson (2013) describes are less broadly applicable to organizational milieus, being designed to address intercultural tensions in which there is at least the threat of blatant discrimination, if not violence. These “prejudice reduction” exercises target racism at a habitual and emotional level specifically by having participants tap into and articulate feelings of *shame*. For example, an identity category is named repeatedly, and each time, participants say aloud the first thought that comes to mind. Typically, the ensuing list of descriptors forces the utterer to publically confront their own prejudices.

Wilson (2013) offers some cautionary comments. For one thing, “it might be the case that more needs to be done to investigate the lasting benefits of such workshops, [and] perhaps more also needs to be done to understand the long-term consequences of staging such discomfiting exercises” (p. 79). She adds an intercultural concern:

Confrontational approaches and the direct communication of negative messages – along with direct eye contact and physical touch – are essential to the workshop programme and yet can be highly offensive or disrespectful to a variety of cultures – a problem that is yet to find an effective solution despite being vital to such intercultural work and dialogue. (p. 80)

For a range of reasons, this type of “embodied-learning” exercise, with its emphasis on intense emotion and even interpersonal contention, likely has limited transferability across various types of DT milieus. Clumsily handled, such exercises could conceivably aggravate cross-cultural tensions; the general risk of this type of blowback is reflected by the present author’s study in the number of respondent critiques coded *critical-exacerbation*. As Wilson (2013) herself notes, her described activities might need to be modified – “toned down,” in some manner – for usage in workplaces where intercultural communication is a challenge but not (yet) a zone of outright dysfunction.

However, there is no doubt that some form of non-traditional pedagogy is necessary to cultivate the *non-binary* transcultural mindset to be targeted by DT, whatever its organizational milieu. Indeed, recent research is indicating that attunement to ambiguity and ambivalence can boost overall brainpower – not only concerning intercultural relations, but more generally. Reporting experimental results, Miron-Spektor, Gino, and Argote (2011) argue that strategic creativity, “defined as the generation of novel yet useful ideas or solutions to a “problem” (p. 230), can be markedly enhanced by the adoption of “paradoxical frames”: “*mental templates individuals use to embrace seemingly contradictory statements or dimensions of a task or situation*” (p. 229, italics in original). They explain the process in detail:

Instead of eliciting “either/or” thinking, paradoxical frames elicit the type of “both/and” thinking that can result in the discovery of links between opposing forces and the generation of new frameworks and ideas (Lewis, 2000; Luscher & Lewis, 2008). When adopting a paradoxical frame, one acknowledges the tension between opposing task elements, yet understands that combining opposing task elements

tempers the undesirable side effects of each element alone and leads to new solutions that integrate both elements. (p. 230)

The authors describe a number of priming exercises that can prompt this “strategic-creative” mindset in workers and students. In one experiment, some subjects were asked to write down paradoxical statements, whereas other subjects were only given instructions to write “interesting” statements, before performing the Duncker candle problem (Duncker, 1945), followed by a brief creative-writing exercise. The paradox-primed participants performed better on both tasks. It is feasible that lectures and activities built around cross-cultural paradoxes – such as “Japanese individualism” and “Canadian collectivism” – could simultaneously improve intercultural skills alongside other creative capacities. At the very least, it is plausible that such “paradox-priming” exercises, crafted in relation to culture and cultural differences, would have reduced the number of DT assessments coded *critical-oversimplification* in the present author’s study.

More study and experimentation are needed to determine what “tacit learning” exercises can best augment traditional teaching techniques in DT, so as to prepare trainees for the cross-cultural conundrums and contradictions that are an increasingly ubiquitous fact of life – even in Edmonton, North America’s northernmost large city. But it is no stretch to presume that one’s critical faculties are sharpened by whatever education and experience enhances willingness to second-guess ingrained presumptions; and to engage and embrace complexity, rather than just trying to reduce and control it. Indeed, in this age of globalization effective intercultural education – simultaneously illuminating and softening differences in worldviews – makes not just for better thinkers, but more cosmopolitan citizens. However, as presently practiced, DT’s *either/or* oversimplification often exacerbates ill will between cultures, and is usually at best fruitless. Therefore, however much *non-binary* thinking goes against the grain of Western cultural orientations and institutional traditions, thereby making it hard to articulate much less actuate, it behooves us to begin this paradigm shift.

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