

STATEMENT ON THE CONCEPT OF
PREMISES UNDERLYING OUR EFFORTS
TO DEVELOP PERSONAL NETWORKS



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STATEMENT ON THE CONCEPT OF PREMISES UNDERLYING OUR EFFORTS TO DEVELOP PERSONAL NETWORKS

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To help people of diverse cultural backgrounds appreciate their differences, and to understand the reasons for these differences, we in the Institute are making increasing use of the concept of basic cultural premises, of assumptions, of postulates that underlie all behavior. Since 1980, we have been applying our understanding of cultural behavior to the development of collaborative tools to help people to understand and to appreciate the underlying cultural premises of one another.

Half a century ago the Chinese anthropologists Hsiao-Tung Fei and Chih-I- Chang in their book *Earthbound China: A Study of Rural Economy in Yunnan*, wrote that “Human behavior is always motivated by certain purposes, and these purposes grow out of sets of assumptions which are not usually recognized by those who hold them. The basic premises of a particular culture are unconsciously accepted by the individual through his constant and exclusive participation in that culture. It is these assumptions - the essence of all the culturally conditioned purposes, motives, and principles - which determine the behavior of a people, underlie all the institutions of a community, and give them unity. This, unfortunately, is the most elusive aspect of culture. Since it is taken for granted by the people, the student will not find it formulated verbally. On the contrary, it must usually be inferred from concrete behavior, a process which requires a certain insight on the part of the observer” (1945:81-82).

The important distinction between conscious premises that are recognized and that can be verbalized by most members of a society, and the unconscious premises that lie at a deeper level, is emphasized by the Mexican psychiatrist Rogelio Diaz-Guerrero: “A socio-cultural premise,” he writes, “may be a clearly conscious assumption upon which a given group bases its thinking, feeling and behavior and it may also be unconscious, i.e., a not clearly verbalized assumption which may still - or perhaps because of this - be even more powerful in its effects upon the thinking, feeling and action of the individuals of a given group. As a matter of fact much of what goes on as very natural and unquestioned behavior in a given culture, may be described by its members as ‘just the way we are’ or ‘just the way we do things’ without any clear ability to refer it to a more powerful but un verbalized socio-cultural assumption or premise that may command it. It may also be that these more powerful socio-cultural

premises of a given group are altered and turned into caricatured stereotypes by members of other cultural groups, who perceive them from their own over-powering and unconscious socio-cultural context” (1967:263).

The American anthropologist George Foster, in writing of “the unquestioned assumptions, the basic premises, the unrecognized postulates that underlie the cultural forms and individual behavior of the members of a group,” makes the same distinction: “All members of a group share a common cognitive orientation, a comprehension and interpretation of the world around them which, in effect, set the terms and conditions on which they feel life is lived. Some aspects of this common cognitive cognition are fairly explicit, in that they are found at an overt, conscious level and can be verbalized by most members of a society. Middle and upper class Americans, for example, have no difficulty in expressing their assumption that manual labor has dignity, that hard and intelligent work usually is rewarded with success, and that ‘people are basically alike all over the world.’ (Needless to say, it is the presence of the assumption, rather than whether it is in fact correct, that is significant.)

“Other aspects of cognitive orientations are more covert and subconscious; they represent assumptions and premises so deeply imbedded in the individual’s mind that normally he is not aware of them” (1969:67-68). To illustrate this point, Foster points to the “cognitive judgment” of many peasants that all good things in life - land, wealth, health, friendship, power, and influence - exist in limited, unexpandable amounts, and that consequently one person’s gain is seen as another’s loss. He calls this zero-sum concept the “Image of Limited Good,” and believes that much traditional peasant behavior - stereotypical at least - such as apparent apathy, lack of concern with “progress,” reluctance to stand out from the crowd, tendency to conceal well-being, gossip and back-biting, rejection of compliments - can best be understood as a function, a consequence, of this premise, which peasants themselves do not verbalize.

It is apparent that many cultural forms - perhaps all - are a function of or a response to the shared premises, both conscious and unconscious, of the members of a group. Premises condition attitudes about the appropriate ways of interacting with other people, depending on our perception of role and status underlying interpersonal encounters. They determine how we view work and its rewards, they underlie feelings about religion and the supernatural, philosophies of life, and they establish forms of logic and express basic values structuring behavior. It is not going too far to say that, seen against the background of the relevant premises, all behavior is rational. A particular bit of behavior can be said to be irrational only when evaluated by persons whose premises are quite different, as in the western view that Burmese religious behavior is “irrational,” as described by Spiro in the following paragraphs.

Recognition of conscious cultural premises offers no problems; they are explicit, visible to anyone who looks, listens, and thinks. But how are powerful unconscious premises discov-

ered? The answer is, usually, when students of culture note a striking nonconformity with their own cultures, a contrast that cannot be overlooked. In “Buddhism and Economic Action in Burma,” the American anthropologist Melford Spiro gives a beautiful example of the process of discovery. He points out that descriptions of behavior of the Burmese by Westerners stress their “economic irrationality.” They stress spiritual as opposed to material values: “They build pagodas, support monasteries, and maintain monks, while they themselves reside in thatched huts, live on simple fare, and so on. In short, from observed facts concerning the ‘disproportionate’ allocation of economic resources for religious ends, it is inferred that the motivation for these actions is ‘spiritual’” (1966:1164). Further, the Burmese are often said to have little if any concern for the future, preferring to believe things will take care of themselves. They spend lavishly on religious displays, and manifest little interest in saving (“much less investing”) for future contingencies; they are, it is often said, “improvident.”

But, continues Spiro, he finds on the basis of his field research that most Burmese are much concerned with material things, that they desire money, property, and luxury. “Almost without exception, the Burmese layman, whatever else he may desire, desires good and plentiful food, fine clothes, a ‘pukka’ house, and so on” (Ibid. 1165). How can this apparent lack of congruence between behavior and desire be explained?

The answer, suggests Spiro, lies in the premise of reincarnation. “This means that the duration of ‘life’ is not confined to the mere 60 or 70 years of existence, but extends over an incalculable duration of tens of thousands of years. One’s present existence is but a brief moment in a total life of inconceivably long duration, extending from a remote past to an equally remote future” (Ibid. 1167). Hence, one struggles to amass karma in this life, to enhance one’s chances for a better next life. How is karma amassed? It is due neither to luck nor chance. Rather, it is the net balance of one’s merits and demerits acquired in all of one’s rebirths, including the present one. Merit is acquired by morality, meditation, and especially by charity. And, “the building of pagodas, the maintenance of monasteries, the provision of monks, and so on, is charity par excellence” (Ibid.). Hence, when one sees spending on religious charities in the light of the premise of reincarnation and countless future lives, the building of pagodas, maintenance of monasteries, and provision for monks is the wisest economic investment that a prudent Burmese can make. Economic behavior viewed in Western terms as “irrational” turns out to be highly rational when seen as a function of this basic Burmese premise.

And, it is only when the significance of the premise of rebirth to the Burmese is called to our attention do Americans realize that the apparently trite expression, “You only live once,” is in fact a basic, largely unconscious premise underlying our behavior. Only then do we realize that our life strategy is based on a period of a mere 70 or 80 years. While believers in a hereafter, in heaven, may model some of their behavior in the hope of a new and better life, the situation is quite distinct from that in Burma.

At a practical level, premises - both conscious and unconscious (or unrecognized) - determine policy, and unless the premises themselves, and their implications, are understood, difficulties of many kinds will be encountered. Two examples from the field of education illustrate this point. The first - British overseas education policy - illustrates a conscious premise, while the second - a science education program in Nepal - illustrates the problems encountered because of an unrecognized premise. Eric Ashby, in his monumental *Universities: British, Indian, African. A Study in the Ecology of Higher Education*, wrote "Underlying British enterprise in providing higher education for her people overseas was one massive assumption: that the pattern of university education appropriate for Manchester, Exeter and Hull was ipso facto appropriate for Ibadan, Kampala and Singapore. If we were going to export universities to our overseas dependencies they would of course be British universities, just as the cars we export there are British cars. As with cars, so with universities: we willingly made minor modifications to suit the climate, but we proposed no radical change in design; and we did not regard it as our business to inquire whether French or American models might be more suitable" (1966:224).

Ashby points out that the role of higher education was seen by Britishers to be dual: "to produce 'all-rounder', civilized by the inherited cultures of Greece and Rome and selected primarily on their promise as recruits for the professions or as servants of the public; and... to produce professional intellectuals: men with a rigorous and specialized training in the techniques of science or scholarship" (Ibid. 227). Appropriate as this model may be for Britain, "It is simply unrealistic to suppose that universities in tropical Africa are at this stage [mid-20th century] of their history concerned primarily with the conservation and advancement of western learning. They are concerned with training thousands of men and women who will not become scholars and whose lives will be spent working among communities deeply rooted in an indigenous ancient tradition....If African universities are not to become esoteric, cut off from the mass of people, exposing themselves to the gibe of being 'ivory towers,' their graduates must possess two other qualifications: (i) they must have an objective and scholarly understanding of the society from which they themselves have come, and (ii) their education must be seen, by those who are paying for it, to be relevant to Africa's needs for high-level manpower" (Ibid. 243).

In other words, British premises underlying the rationale for university education in the homeland, carried over unchanged to colonial areas where cultures and needs were quite different, resulted in a type of higher education not well suited to the needs of emerging countries.

Our second example illustrating the relationship between assumptions and education comes from Nepal where, during the 1960s, a joint Nepalese-American effort was made to introduce the teaching of contemporary science in traditional primary schools. At first glance such a project appeared to require little more than the translation of standard texts incorporating the knowledge accumulated over many years from western research, perhaps substituting

examples based on Nepalese life and conditions rather than those in the United States. Implicit in any American approach to the teaching of science is the premise that knowledge is infinite and that the discovery of new knowledge knows no end. Hence, education should be designed to encourage inquiring, questioning, experimental minds.

But, the authors of the article on which this example is based - Frances Dart and Panna Lal Pradhan - believing that “a study of the intellectual environment in which children live can lead to significant improvements in science teaching,” carried out a pilot study in several villages (1967:649). Nepalese students were quizzed about their beliefs about knowledge, and how new knowledge is acquired. When asked about the source of knowledge about nature, “they invariably said that it came ‘from books’ and ‘from old people.’ When we asked how the old people found out or how knowledge got into books they told us it came from earlier generations of ‘old people’ or from other books. When we pressed for some ultimate source, most of our respondents said that these things had always been known” (Ibid. 652).

The researchers found that “the predominant view is one that pictures human knowledge about nature as a closed body, rarely if ever capable of extension, which is passed down from teacher to teacher and from generation to generation. Its source is authority, not observation....When one of us stated that a book, after all, is only a more permanent record of someone’s observations, the idea was treated as novel and faintly suspect” (Ibid.).

As a function of this ‘all knowledge is known’ premise, traditional Nepalese education based on rote learning makes complete sense; it is highly rational. The imaginative scholar or would-be scientist logically searches out a guru with the knowledge he wishes to acquire and then attempts to memorize this knowledge. But to draw up effective science education curricula a great deal more is involved than suitable translation and trained teachers. The planners must be aware of their own unquestioned, largely unconscious assumptions about knowledge, and of how these differ from those of the target group. Only then can a reasonable educational program be drawn up.

Awareness of the critical role played by premises and assumptions such as these underlay the recent USCEI questionnaire (see *Quantum Leap*, Winter 1992) designed to help identify differing Chinese and American professional assumptions that may, unknown to collaborating partners, cause misunderstandings in the behavior of opposites. Fifty-five Chinese and American health and educational professionals were asked to rate the intensity of their feelings about a number of professional values, work attitudes, principles underlying friendship, and the like. We feel that, in spite of a number of methodological shortcomings to the study, the findings revealed critical similarities and differences about how nationals from the two countries view similar situations.

As far as the goals of collaborate enterprises are concerned, we found a high degree of agreement between the two groups. The great majority of respondents reported that they get “great satisfaction” from their work, while 91% of both groups indicated that they enjoy

identifying and solving problems. A large majority of both are concerned to have meaningful careers marked by the exercise of initiative and creativity, and a sense of accomplishment, self-improvement, and service to society. Neither group appears much concerned with achieving power and wealth.

Hence, insofar as basic professional values are concerned, possible differing national premises offer no grounds for concern; collaboration between Chinese and American professionals should present no more problems than collaboration among members of either culture. But in other areas the differences are more marked. Thus, while neither group expressed much interest in achieving wealth, the Chinese placed significantly greater emphasis on financial security than did the Americans. (We see this as a realistic appraisal of the facts of economic life in the two countries: American professionals generally can take for granted reasonable financial security, while the Chinese cannot). Again, recognition of professional achievement by others is seen as much more important to the Chinese than to the Americans. Clearly, in a collaborative enterprise it behooves American researchers to be sensitive to these “felt needs” of their Chinese counterparts, and especially to make sure that full credit for achievements is duly recognized.

Professional strategies turn out to be quite distinct. The Americans tend to assume that their own ability is the primary requirement for a successful career. In contrast, the Chinese feel it is essential to cultivate reciprocal obligations with important and powerful people who at critical times in their careers can offer help and support. Thus, 70% of the Chinese respondents felt that “knowing important people” is of great or moderate importance, as against only 22% of the Americans. Whereas the Chinese appear to have a strong sense of team work, of cooperative approaches, the Americans are significantly more individualistic: while only two-fifths of the Chinese respondents express a preference for freedom to work on their own (in contrast to supervised contexts), three-fourths of the Americans express the desire to make their own basic decisions. Again, on average, the Chinese laid greater stress than the Americans on such behavioral forms as politeness, the showing of respect, giving of gifts on appropriate occasions, the use of mediators to smooth rough points in the road, and the need to maintain harmonious relationships with others.

Simple as this exercise has been, we feel that it is important, in that it makes possible the sensitizing both of American and Chinese professionals to critical shoals to be avoided in collaborative relationships. Misunderstandings arise even between the closest of friends. To the extent that we understand the premises underlying the behavior of friends and colleagues, within our own culture, and especially when working in cross-cultural settings, we increase the likelihood of a successful outcome.

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