Chapter 2: Transforming cultures: what the literature tells us

Merah Hashmi and Peter W Tait.

The purpose of this chapter is to place the presentations from the Transforming Cultures series within the context of the broader literature on cultural transformation and change more generally. The literature largely agreed with or added caveats to the viewpoints of the presenters. Where differences with presenters and between different writers were noted in the literature, a more nuanced view of transformation is possible. The Transforming cultures presenters added valuable findings to the sections on Communications/Marketing, Biosensitivity and the Role of the Arts.

Further, this review highlights the interconnection of some of the ideas presented. One cross cutting emergent theme was that transforming cultures is a process of social evolution. Various factors such as leadership and technology could be seen as providing selection pressure within that social evolutionary perspective. The other intercurrent theme is that transformation requires an interplay of individual level and community change happening in parallel.

Methods

Online literature searches were conducted in four databases: ProQuest Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect and Web of Science in April 2018. There were initially 68 records identified through the database search, and a further six records found through referenced works which appeared frequently in the identified literature.

Search terms

Cultural change	Cultural transformation
Social contract theory	Social transformation
Environmental policy	Socio-economic change

Inclusion criteria

Systems-change approach	Technology and cultural change
Resilience	Workplace and organisational change
Tipping points	Scenario-planning
Nudge theory	Anthropology of social change
Public health	Biosensitivity

Exclusion criteria

American Medicine	Patient-centred case
Indigenous knowledge	Early modern Europe

Post-communist	Post-war
Film	Global media
Sports	Television

Article inclusion criteria

Criteria	Application
Relevance to topic	Articles must be directly related to the topic; different contexts and scales of cultural transformation are acceptable
Peer reviewed	Articles must be peer-reviewed
Age of material	Articles must be less than five years old
Design of studies	Qualitative studies should be included

Eligibility

49 articles were assessed for eligibility and selected. Abstracts and conclusions were analysed to rule out articles based on relevance or applicability to the topic.

The review was then narrowed down to 27 articles. Following a systematic reviewing of all relevant articles, a thematic analysis was used to identify overall themes and identify specific examples.

The literature suggested four main topic domains, with a fifth assemblage of factors not fitting clearly into the main four. These are grouped into: resistance to change, community based movements, policy and leadership lead initiatives, non-regulatory approaches and the role of research and scenario planning.

Resistance-to-change factors

There is extensive resistance to change influenced by various factors and, as such, much discussion of how that resistance can be addressed and contested. Power and Hollo view culture as a social construct, and found that because of this, it can be deconstructed and changed; when culture is contested, tensions arise that provide openings for change, and exploiting these openings can lead to rapid change. Lyon and Parkings (2013) agreed with this assessment, stating that culture and cultural change are deeply dependent on existing social structures, and that historical factors and societal traditions are critical to the ability of a community to undergo, adapt to and sustain cultural transformation. While Ekdale et al. (2015) also stated that cultural transformation must be contextualised within the culture being addressed, they found that reactions to change are difficult to predict and depend on compatibility, intricacy and relative advantage. This implies that the situation is more nuanced than Power and Hollo suggested, and it may not be as simple as exploiting certain lead-ins for bringing about change.

Costanza discussed socio-ecological systems change, presenting cultural transformation as an evolutionary process. This allowed them to examine an approach to large-scale systems change which regarded influences into the system as selection pressures. They argued that culture is composed of worldviews, institutions and technologies, which are subject to selection pressure. This is primarily because subcultures within a dominant culture tend to hold and practice different attitudes, values, institutions and technologies; these differences allow a selection process in response to pressures from the biophysical and social world. Messner (2015) held similar views, adding that the increasing debate and discussion on the topic of transforming culture for a lower carbon future, in itself, reflects a shift in values in society. Hansen et al. (2014) further added that rather than traditional values and heritage acting as a barrier, they provide an alternative method of forming cultural change. Ellis (2018), on the other hand, stated that changing the dynamics of social structures is very challenging and achieving a cultural shift would require overcoming substantial technical and empirical challenges on every level. This suggests that the differences in subcultures may both cause cultural transformation to be more challenging as well as enabling openings for change to occur.

Community-based movements

Morland aimed to determine what causes societies and individuals to become more ethical, citing several examples, and determined that morality is key; inspired moral leadership and laws based on ethical principles are what can pave the way for cultural change. This begins with individuals and then extends to community-based scales. Barr and Prillwitz (2014) concurred, stating that widespread behavioural change and transformation, at their core, start at an individual level. Messner (2015) had a similar perspective, stating that gradually changing individual values is what sets the stage for new standards of development. Hartijasti and Toar (2015) further emphasised this through a case study which demonstrated that cultural shifts are much easier to accomplish and sustain at smaller scales and tend to be more effective when implemented as such rather than on larger levels.

Moreover, when considering behavioural change from an organisational planning standpoint, Willis et al. (2016) deliberated that establishing a collaborative workplace culture can make shifts within that culture much easier. Jones and Harris (2014) had similar findings, particularly in terms of the role of social cohesion aiding organisational growth and behavioural development amongst employees. Thus, Brown (2014) found that recognising where the strengths of a community lie in terms of social cohesion is crucial to adapting to and minimising the drawbacks of cultural change.

Pipkorn, in their discussion of transition towns, proposed that the nature of systems is to adjust; if there is enough of a push from a community level, policies, bureaucracy and regulatory structures will change as a result. Additionally, they implied that grassroots movements and governance have a reciprocal relationship, which the literature further verified. Jones et al. (2014) suggested that policies driving cultural change must be

'coproduced' with communities and Barr (2014) agreed, stating that the gradual integration of community-led cultural change within policy and research findings is vital. Lewis (2015), however, had an opposite outlook, specifying that the importance of grassroots initiatives is the way in which they allow individuals and societies to adapt to policy change with ease.

Policy and leadership-led initiatives

Tait et al. discussed the importance of dismantling power structures in initiating cultural change. They acknowledged that changing how political power is exercised requires a transformation of governance, but argued that socio-political culture is what will drive this. In particular, communities taking the lead on this transformation is vital to addressing the equity issues which are rampant in power structures. Power determines what is known and what cannot be known, what can be discussed, and what is not even considered. The existing power dynamics within a society are largely culturally determined, but they also play a key role in determining culture. The literature supports this, with considerable discussion on community resilience and social cohesion as a means through which policy can be adapted by communities to encourage cultural transformations (Brown 2014). In addition, Jones et al. (2013) also found that existing political climates and policy instruments determine and shape the effectiveness of future policies, adding that considering the context of different regions when applying policies is critical to their success. This links to Constanza's evolutionary view of change, in that existing political climates and policy help select the direction of change.

Correspondingly, Thomson discussed similar themes from a parliamentary standpoint, suggesting that the current system of governance is failing primarily due to the focus on neoliberal culture and economic growth rather than the health and wellbeing of citizens. They compared Australia and countries with similar governance to Scandinavian countries, which follow more pragmatic models of governance and, as a result, have positive social and economic outcomes and strong public support. Thompson identified specific foci for parliamentary process reform in starting cultural change: restricting campaign financing, continuous open disclosure of donations, limits to political advertising, and transparency of all government reports and public money decisions. Sabadie (2014) supported this perspective, stating that the best outcome would require a combination of policy, social innovation and community-based movements. Aside from this, Thomson's findings were largely new to the discussion of cultural transformation, providing a unique, active member of parliament perspective going forward.

Douglas stressed the importance of leadership and clearly enunciated vision in implementing policies for cultural change, citing 1950s Cuba as an example of rapid transformation through visionary leadership and concurrent strong policies. They suggested that growing inequality in Australia is perhaps a reflection of a corrupt government, which would be a possible trigger for citizens to unite against them and elect a new government. Once in power, Douglas suggested, the new leadership would have to

rapidly implement change. Further, there was discussion of the need to establish a Public Interest Council with sufficient resources to propagandise society and government and to advocate and communicate the current situation and new vision. These views were largely supported by literature in the field of employment relations and organisational change. Hartijasti and Toar (2015) stated that managerial aptitudes are key to social change, while Jones and Harris (2014) specified the importance of policies for cultural change being disciplined and structured, with strong leadership. Willis et al. (2016) added that leadership must consider context and regular performance evaluations and motivational management styles provide a foundation for adaptation. In terms of policy, this could translate to government transparency, monitoring and regulation.

Furthermore, Denniss determined methods through which power could be exercised and maintained through existing power systems to bring about cultural change. They suggested that framing policy issues, such as climate change governance, should be done in a manner which is favourable to voters; that is, by promising what they want to happen immediately after the primary goal is achieved. Further, Denniss stated that contesting a political opponent's view is critical, but framing it as poor policy rather than intentional deceit is key to maintaining positive reinforcement, in the manner of nudge theory. Accumulating political capital on any issues and using it to the advantage of a specific agenda was another recommendation offered here, with Denniss citing John Howard's use of gun control following the Port Arthur massacre to introduce a GST. Calabrese and Cohen (2013) had similar findings through a study of employment relations, affirming that positive and optimistic methods of leadership allowed employee perspectives to shift, thus creating a constructive work environment where employees felt safe and healthy, with plenty of room to grow. However, Milbourne and Cushman (2015) disputed this, maintaining that the complexity of culture and the diversity of individual views towards social change have limited solutions and are difficult to predict. Barr and Prillwitz (2014) were equally critical, questioning the likelihood and effectiveness of nudge theory in shaping choice architecture, particularly in long-term scenarios. Instead, they suggested that regulatory and non-regulatory approaches to implementing cultural change should be implemented in tandem. This confirms a view that a single influence for change is less likely to succeed than several influencers working together.

Non-regulatory approaches

i.   Technology

Faunce noted that technology is a possible pathway to eco-centric governance, arguing that corporations have constructed our culture in a manner which advances their own agendas. Having a technological pathway, they argue, would permit social change. For instance, artificial photosynthesis takes the capacity to generate energy away from corporations by decentralising energy production, and in doing so provides abundant energy in a sustainable manner. The use of this technology would support the development of local and democratic energy governance while enabling the economy to

flourish, thus freeing people up to spend more time on meaningful cultural activities which are unrelated to work. Messner (2015) added that discourse around cultural transformation for a more sustainable future is crucial to bringing about economic and technological transformation, implying that these goals are heavily linked to culture.

In addition, Hepp et al. (2015) found that, in recent years, digital media has been the cause of several significant cultural shifts; examples include education becoming increasingly open-access and affordable, influencing social structures and organisations, and directly and indirectly influencing audience perceptions of various issues. However, Sabadie (2014) disagreed, arguing that although technology can help enhance cultural change, as seen with the Arab Spring, it cannot sufficiently act as the primary tool. Ekdale et al. (2015) agreed, adding that change does not occur in isolation, and it can be twofold. They cited the journalism industry as an example, acknowledging the new voices entering the field and changing how reporting occurs as a result of technology and social media, with the caveat that this change has substantially affected the relationship between journalists and readers (Ekdale et al. 2015).

Costanza, on the other hand, discussed the link between technological advancement and shifts in attitudes, citing new technologies as a tool to change perceptions directly. Kral (2014) stated that the evolution of communication technologies has provided a way to enhance and change identities and perceptions, particularly within youth culture, as social interactions have greatly transformed. Linking back to organisational culture, Camisón and López (2014) discovered, through a survey of numerous industrial firms, that advancements in technology provided managers with a greater capacity to lead, and employees with a stronger ability to adapt. Hansen et al. (2014), however, cautioned that developing countries are likely to be more resistant to cultural change through forms of technological advancements.

On balance technological innovations might be a trigger for cultural change (think mobile phones) but are not of themselves sufficient. Nor does introducing a technology direct cultural transformation in any particular way; in an evolutionary sense it is only a selection pressure.

ii. Communications/marketing

Power and Hollo discussed the power of narratives in shaping culture; stories create our 'reality' and maintain societal norms. Therefore, new stories have the ability to create a new reality. King argued for the use of marketing expertise, grounded in psychological knowledge, as a pathway for cultural change. Marketing techniques can be employed to reframe situations and motivate individual behaviour. Unlike previous cultural transformations that were in the midst of major historical or technological shifts the current situation requires a new context for change, and marketing can lead the way. King noted that any marketing tactics used must be employed ethically. This perspective ties into Power and Hollo's suggestions for shifting narratives, and provides a way forward.

Botta (2016) agreed with this point of view, describing communication as a valuable tool which can be a means of encouraging social innovation. However, they noted that public and financial support is necessary for any initiative to shape culture. Although communication is valuable for shifting public perceptions, it is far more challenging to garner financial support.

Gaines noted the importance of communication in terms of inspiring and motivating change. Affecting people's worldviews in a healthy way is challenging but also an influential leverage point. Gaines described the two main aspects to improve in this regard: improving people's frameworks for making sense of things and improving their way of acting in the world. They also stated that those in leadership roles within educational and organisational structures can shift their institutional cultures through this method. Hacker (2015) agreed, citing extrinsic motivational tactics as a key point for inspiring cultural change in structured settings. Hartijasti and Toar (2015) also found that positive reinforcement and encouraging outlooks make cultural shifts more likely to be effective and resilient.

iii.   Biosensitivity

There was much discussion of transitioning to a biosensitive society by reframing the cultural issues with which we are currently dealing. Newell determined that understanding the world and cultural behaviours are core aspects of planning change in any system. Goldsworthy noted several barriers to biosensitivity within our current culture, including: the lack of understanding of how interconnected human health is with planetary health; the operation of societies without considering the extent of our impact and limits of ecosystems, and the prevailing view that sustainability is largely impractical. To address this, Goldsworthy suggested, it is crucial to establish a clear and shared vision of the desired outcome towards which we must head. This vision must captivate and motivate communities by activating key human qualities such as our capacity for empathy, compassion and collaboration. Boyden added that to avert the current socio-economic paradigm which is heading in the direction of causing irrevocable damage to the environment, bio-understanding must be created through communities and political leadership. Timko (2013) also stated that a cultural transformation for a sustainable and resilient future requires a shift towards bio-understanding. These considerations added valuable insights into the discourse on cultural change as there was previously very limited academic research on biosensitivity.

Along a similar vein, Hancock proposed the reframing of environmental issues as public health issues as a means to garner backing, funding and societal support. This would provide a valuable pathway for informing communities of the adverse impacts of climate change and establish a deeper understanding of how planetary health affects human health. Hancock suggested documenting the potential health impacts of atmospheric change, pollution, biodiversity loss and resource depletion and proposing an action agenda for public health. These shifts would reduce the vulnerability of those dependent

on certain ecosystems and increase their capacity for resilience and adaptation. Lewis and Townsend (2015) also found that establishing a collective awareness of environmental effects on public health would lead to humans developing a more harmonious relationship with nature.

iv.   Role of the Arts

Hollo discussed the unlikelihood of addressing the effects of climate change within the confines of our existing socio-political culture. Key to changing that culture, Hollo argued, is music; music has been pivotal in bridging racial divisions across North America and Britain, and musicians play a critical role as cultural influencers. They also cited lessons from history showing that cultural change is unlikely to occur without such influential cultural processes at play, and artists play a pivotal role. Boulton had similar claims of the power of philosophy. They argued that it allows our narratives to shift by changing ideas about human agency; we have influence but not control. This encourages new questions and, as such, narratives about our identities and roles on the planet to emerge, paving the way for creating a new future. Discussion of these factors was heavily limited, but scholars such as Serra et al. (2017) had corresponding discoveries about the role of the arts; they stated that the use of art for political change and activism enables us to reach new people and express challenging ideas clearly. Such methods are valuable for encouraging cultural shifts among communities.

The role of research and scenario-planning

Stafford Smith identified the role of research in accelerating change, finding that research can help transformation by seeking unanswered questions and providing a framework for designing and planning change. This involves: giving information – however incomplete – to assist with managing uncertainty; providing a compass to help people navigate the chaos and fear that comes alongside large-scale change and uncertainty, and monitoring progress along the journey and advising course corrections. This specific framework is new to the world of research assisting cultural transformation, but there is academic merit to the general idea. Ossewaarde (2017) found that research studies around scenario-planning would contribute to improved understanding of group-culture, particularly in an organisational context, and that this could be used to influence cultural change and shift intrinsic beliefs. Thus, research undeniably plays an important role in encouraging social change.

Likewise, Costanza described scenario-planning as a methodology for envisioning and testing out a set of possible futures. Benefits of this framework included presenting real scenarios to people who may be unsure of why a cultural change would be necessary in the first place. In addition, it would allow people to practice different cultural variations to see which ones would be more effective in adapting to and creating a better future. Bennett et al. (2016) conducted case studies of community-based scenario-planning which had comparable results; participants found the process to be productive and

enjoyable, and a major takeaway was that scenario-planning is an effective tool for adaptation research. However, caveats included that the sample sizes were relatively small and larger experiments may be more complex and have different results. Nonetheless, Bennett et al. (2016) maintained that implementing scenario-planning in cultural change research is helpful and noted that more frequent applications of scenario-planning may promise more effective learning, innovation and action.

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