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## Book Review: The Culture Map by Erin Meyer

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## Book Review

### *The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business*

By Erin Meyer

New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2014

288 pages

USD \$28.00, Hardcover

Reviewed by Kenneth Nehrbass. Kenneth holds a Ph.D. in intercultural studies. He is an associate professor of Global Studies for the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University.

Those who have been using the seminal theories within intercultural studies, such as Geert Hofstede's *Dimensions of Culture* and Edward Hall's *Silent Language*, will feel familiar with the eight dimensions in Meyer's *Culture Map*. Meyer's original contribution is that she has named each of the dyadic categories. She refers to the high/low context dyad as the "communication" dimension; the egalitarian/hierarchical dyad is the "leading" dimension; the task/relationship-based continuum is "trusting;" and flexible/loose time orientation is along a continuum called "scheduling." Meyer's other four dimensions are less discussed in the field of intercultural studies. They include evaluating, persuading, deciding, and disagreeing.

While much of this theory is introductory, albeit updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and aimed specifically at the business world, Meyer does solve a few problems that have plagued the field of intercultural studies. First, critics claim the cultural domains discussed in the field of intercultural studies rely on essentialism. "Isn't it just a sophisticated form of stereotyping to say that Germans are blunt, and Italians are emotional, or

that Americans are more punctual than Brazilians?” Meyer recognizes this weakness in intercultural studies; but she explains the differences between cultures are not like plots on a graph, contra Hofstede’s *Dimension*—instead, there is overlapping distribution. Much of what an American encounters while working in a Japanese business context will feel familiar. At times though, an American will notice differences that can be readily explained by cultural tendencies such as the expected patterns for providing feedback or building trust.

Meyer digs deeper into these cultural domains than many other introductory texts. For example, interculturalists often indicate erroneously that English is a low context language whereas Japanese is high context. Meyer posits that language itself is neutral and is neither low nor high context. It is the *national culture* that impacts speakers’ tolerance of ambiguity. English spoken in the US is very low context, whereas context is higher in the UK and even more contextual for English speakers in India.

Another way in which Meyer has pushed intercultural theory is her disaggregation of the concept of “direct/indirect speech.” Americans, she notes, tend to be highly direct, but they beat around the bush when giving criticism. Israelis are the opposite. They tend to be proud of their ability to deliver indirect speech in many domains of life yet give their criticism directly. Overall, the recognition that a national culture’s value orientation can vary *by domain* is a significant contribution to the field.

Meyer also innovatively deals with the question of whether there is such a thing as American culture. Much of the variation across the U.S. can be described by interpersonal, rather than cultural, differences. Americans are keenly aware that Southerners are quite different from New Englanders or Californians—until they go to New Delhi! Then they begin to think in terms of “Americans,” as an aggregate, in contrast to South Asians. Meyer argues that much of the variation we encounter in the workplace is due to regional or interpersonal differences; nonetheless, national-level cultural preferences have helped tens of thousands of culture-crossers to understand their host culture and to adjust appropriately.

The text relies almost entirely on rich anecdotes to substantiate the eight dimensions. Unfortunately, Meyer seldom interacts with empirical research. Because of this methodological weakness, the text serves as an introduction to the concepts, but those who teach graduate courses in intercultural studies would also want to include qualitative or quantitative studies related to these domains.