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# *In Practice*

## Caveats for Cross-Border Negotiators

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*Scholars and practitioners have detailed a number of ways that differences in national culture can affect bargaining behavior: from surface etiquette and protocol to deeper cultural characteristics and to systematic variations in decision making and governance. Such cross-national analysis can be quite useful but is prone to at least four hazardous fallacies described in this article and illustrated, in some cases, by probabilistic reasoning. Along with suggestions for avoiding them, these fallacies include: (1) "The John Wayne v. Charlie Chan Fallacy" (stereotyping); (2) "The Rosetta Stone Fallacy" (overattribution); (3) The Visual Flight Rules Fallacy (skewed perceptions and information processing); and (4) "St. Augustine's Fallacy" ("When in Rome. . .").*

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A virtual cottage industry has grown up in and around the academic community to analyze cross-border negotiations and provide culturally relevant advice to the involved parties.<sup>1</sup> Some authors (e.g., Axtell 1998) focus on gestures and body language. Others dissect systematic differences in surface etiquette, deportment, and protocol (e.g., Acuff 1993; Morrison, Conaway, and Borden 1994; or Leaptrott 1996). Others delve into deeper cultural characteristics that may give rise to more specific behaviors (e.g., Hall 1959; Hofstede 1984 and 1991; and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998). Still others probe differences in organizational decision processes and corporate governance across national borders to uncover their tight links to dealmak-

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ing practice (see Sebenius, 1998, 2001, and 2002). And finally, some scholars link current research to explicit frameworks for international negotiation (e.g., Brett 2001; Salacuse 1991; and Weiss 1994a and 1994b). These areas of focus overlap, but collectively form an impressive edifice touching major elements that distinguish cross-cultural negotiations from those that take place within the same culture.

While some of the work on culture and negotiation is at best superficial, much of the relevant academic literature is well grounded and accompanied by careful statements as to its limits and the conditions under which it should apply. While holding on to the truth that some characteristics do systematically vary across national borders, however, there is often a general uneasiness about unwarranted use of purported cross-cultural insight.

To help address this set of concerns, some years ago Frank Sander and the late Jeff Rubin wrote a brief and wise cautionary article in the *Negotiation Journal* entitled "Culture, Negotiation, and the Eye of the Beholder" (Rubin and Sander 1991). My purpose in this essay is to further their mission, in part by drawing on new insights, in part by using simple probabilistic examples to make certain points more precise, and in part by gathering their caveats and those of others from the many places they are now scattered into one place for useful reference. My objective is to make analysts and negotiators more sophisticated consumers of this advice by suggesting four classes of caveat, each with a slightly tongue-in-cheek name that will, I hope, be usefully evocative.

## **1. The John Wayne v. Charlie Chan Fallacy: Stereotyping National Cultures**

Start with the obvious: All American negotiators are not like John Wayne and all Chinese negotiators are not like Charlie Chan. Or Bill Gates and Mao Zedong. Or Michael Jordan and Zhu Chen, the phenomenal women's world chess champion who recently also defeated the world men's champion. We also know that some negotiators in southeastern France may bear more resemblance to northern Italian negotiators than to their Parisian compatriots. Likewise, the culture of western Chinese Uighers is far more akin to neighbors in Pakistan than comrades in Beijing. On another front, what is distinctively "Canadian" when its citizens vary from francophone Québécois to traditional anglophone Torontonians and to transplanted Hong Kong tycoons now living in Vancouver? In the face of such internal variation, we wisely caution ourselves against mindless stereotyping by nationality (as well as by gender, religion, race, profession, or age). Even so, in many situations it remains all-too-common to hear offhand remarks such as "all Chinese negotiators. . ." (as well as generalizations about "women. . ." or "engineers"). To combat this, a strong version of the anti-stereotyping prescription calls for ignoring nationality altogether in preparing for negotiation.

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That advice by itself is too strong. Nationality often does have a great deal to do with cultural characteristics, particularly in relatively homogeneous countries like Japan. The careful work of many researchers confirms significant associations between nationality and a range of traits and outcomes (see, e.g., Brett 2001 and Salacuse 1998). It would be foolish to throw away potentially valuable information. But what does information on a particular group's behavioral expectations or deeper cultural characteristics really convey? Typically, cultural descriptions are about *central tendencies* of populations that also exhibit considerable "within-group" variation. Suppose that a trait like "cooperativeness" (versus "competitiveness") is carefully measured by a psychological testing instrument for the citizens of Country X. The results will be a *distribution* with a few citizens rating highly cooperative, a few rating highly uncooperative, and the majority clustered around a more middle range.

Suppose that this distribution was a normal or bell-shaped curve with the most likely value equal to the mean of the distribution (see Figure One). Extremely homogeneous cultures would be characterized by a "tight" distribution around the mean; the greater the heterogeneity on the cooperative-competitive dimension, the more "spread out" the distribution would be.

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**Figure One**  
**Cooperative and Competitive Negotiators of Country X**

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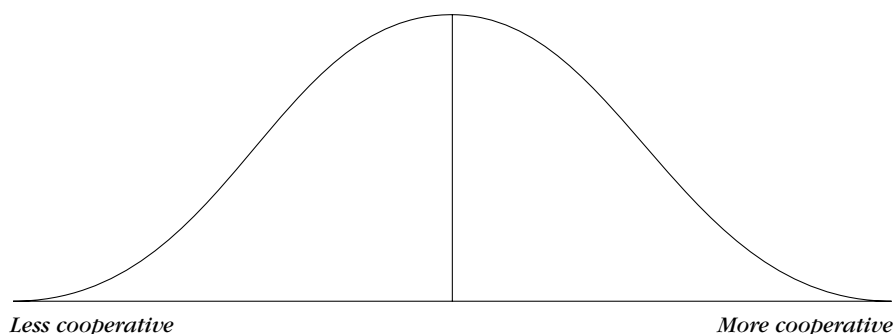


Figure One offers useful information that can, nonetheless, be easily misinterpreted. Social psychologists describe the "prototypicality error" or tendency to treat people from a given population group as if they would exhibit the group's most likely tendencies; that is, knowing that someone is from Country X, one naturally assumes that this person is about as cooperative as the mean or most likely point in that distribution. Yet a bit of statistical reasoning exposes some of the dangers of this common-sense

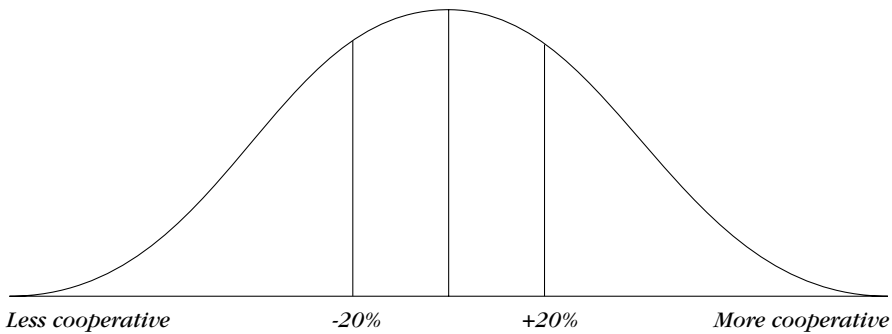
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approach. Take a randomly chosen citizen of Country X whose distribution of cooperativeness is accurately portrayed by Figure Two. Question: How likely is it that this randomly chosen citizen displays a level of cooperativeness somewhere within the range of 20 percentile points above or below the mean, which is the most probable description? (See Figure Two.) Answer: There is only a 40 percent chance that this person exhibits cooperativeness 20 percentile points above or below the most likely value for Country X. Equivalently, there is a 60 percent chance — more than even odds — that this person displays a level of cooperativeness *outside* this centrally representative, most likely, range.

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**Figure Two**  
**The Individual Country X Citizen**

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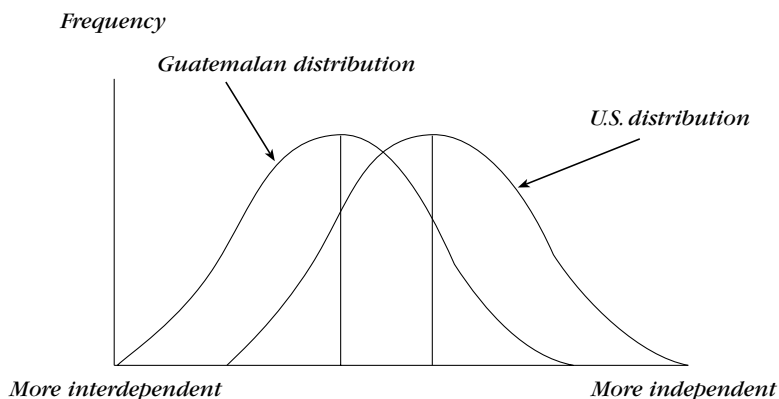
This means that even the most likely trait for a population as described in Figure Two will not likely apply to a given individual from that group. Remember, you negotiate with individuals, not averages.

What does it actually mean for one culture to be, for example, more oriented to interdependence than another? Take for example the bell curves shown in Figure Three, gleaned from Hofstede's (1980) study, representing the independent vs. interdependent nature of Americans and Guatemalans. This chart<sup>2</sup> reflects that the average American is more independent-minded than the average Guatemalan. Yet both cultures exhibit a range of orientations, and there is considerable overlap between them.

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**Figure Three**  
**Hypothetical Distributions of Independent/Interdependent Value Scores in an Individualist and a Collectivist National Culture**

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Even though the central tendencies of two different national groups for given traits may systematically differ, correct inferences about how given individuals from the two countries compare can be quite tricky. Consider a second thought experiment comparing individuals from two countries, which we'll call COOP and COMPET. Say that, on average, citizens from COOP are twice as cooperative as those from COMPET. To make this more precise, suppose that we represent the two countries by a pair of dice, each with six sides. Say that a green side represents a cooperative personality while a red side represents a competitive one. Therefore, the die representing COOP has four green sides (and two red ones) while the COMPET die has four red sides (and two green ones). Thus to be from COOP is, on average, to be twice as likely to be cooperative as your COMPET counterpart.

Question: If a randomly chosen citizen from each country were going to negotiate, what are the odds that the citizen from COOP is more cooperative than the one from COMPET? This is equivalent to saying that you roll the dice and ask what the odds are that the COOP die ends up green while the COMPET die ends up red. Despite the overall likelihoods, and the fact that there are *twice* as many competitors in COMPET than in COOP, the answer is "*less than half*" (4/9 to be precise). To see this, remember that there are 36 possible combinations of reds and greens when two dice are rolled. The cases in which a COOP is strictly more cooperative than a COMPET correspond to the dice rolls in which COOP comes up green while COMPET is red. There are four green sides to the COOP die and four red sides to a COMPET die implying 4x4 (or 16) possible outcomes with a green COOP die and a red COMPET die. 16/36 (or 4/9) is, therefore, the right answer.

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The broader point? Inferences about individuals from central tendencies are often misleading or wrong. *You negotiate with individuals, not averages.*

But viewing the world without the aid of stereotypes is difficult. Forming stereotypes is a natural reflex that helps order the overflow of information that barrages people. Social psychologist Ellen Langer (1989) argues that a solution to the negative effects of stereotyping is “mindfulness,” which she defines as a willingness to create new categories, an openness to new information, and an awareness that more than one perspective exists. Rather than straining against forming stereotypes, a more realistic strategy is to allow stereotypes room to change, multiply, and adapt to new information.

In sum, remember that “national traits” — as well as traits supposedly associated with gender, ethnicity, etc. — are *distributions* of characteristics across populations, not blanket descriptions applicable to each individual. Be very cautious about making inferences about characteristics of specific individuals from different groups — even where the groups are, on average, sharply different. Avoid stereotyping and the “prototypicality” error of assuming an individual will exhibit the most likely group characteristic. Even if U.S. negotiators are on average more impatient, deal-focused, and individually oriented than their Chinese counterparts, be careful not to help amplify that stereotype in the mind of the other side. It is highly unlikely that many U.S.-Chinese negotiations will feature the equivalent of John Wayne pitted against Charlie Chan. Or Bill Gates against Mao Zedong. Or Michael Jordan against Zhu Chen.

## **2. The Rosetta Stone Fallacy: Overattribution to National Culture**

National culture clearly matters. But there is a tendency to see it as the Rosetta Stone, the indispensable key to describe, explain, and predict the behavior of the other side. Of course there are many possible “cultures” operating within a given individual. Beyond her French citizenship, an ABB executive may well be from Alsace, have a Danish parent, feel staunchly European, have studied electrical engineering, and have earned an MBA from the University of Chicago. National culture can be highly visible but, obviously, it is only one of many possible influences. For example, Jeswald Salacuse (1998) surveyed executives from a dozen countries to determine national tendencies on ten important bargaining characteristics, such as negotiating goal (contract v. relationship), orientation (win-win v. win-lose), formality level, communication style, risk-taking, etc. While his results showed significant national differences, he also analyzed the data according to profession and occupations of the respondents such as law, engineering, marketing, the military, diplomacy, accounting, etc. These categories, too,

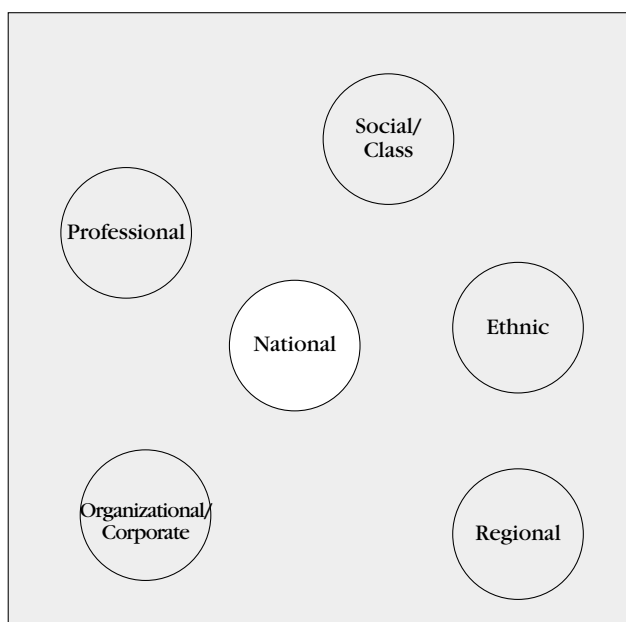
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showed systematic association with different bargaining styles. Finally, Salacuse could also differentiate many of these style characteristics by gender. Other extensive studies extend and elaborate analogous findings: Nationality often matters when considering someone's bargaining characteristics but so too does gender, ethnicity, functional specialty, etc.<sup>3</sup> Figure Four reminds us that national culture is but one of many "cultures" that can influence bargaining behavior.

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**Figure Four**  
**The Many "Cultures" that Influence Bargaining Behavior**

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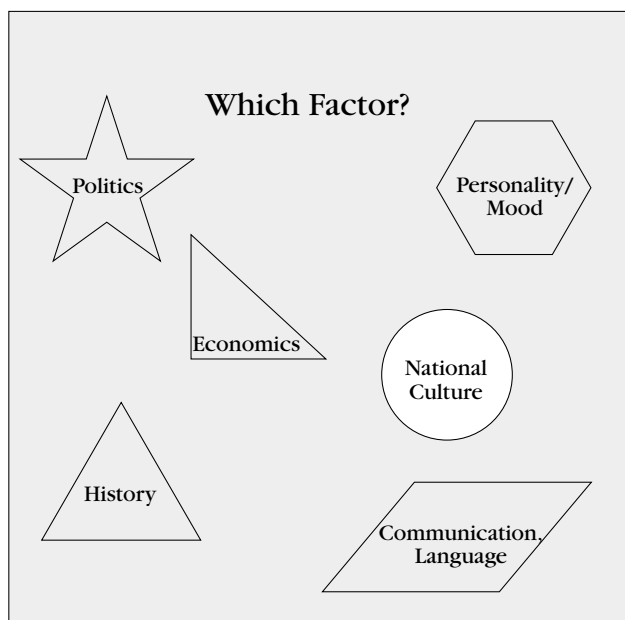


Just as there are many cultures influencing bargaining behavior, there are many other potential contributing factors such as personality, finance, business fit, politics, and strategy. Figure Five makes this point graphically. In a study of the performance of a number of companies that had been acquired by "foreign" entities, Rosabeth Moss Kanter and Ian Corn (1994) carefully sought to account for post-acquisition outcomes. While business and technical factors were often determined to be the dominant factor, the first explanation advanced by managers of the target firms was "cultural."

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**Figure Five**  
**Other Factors Affecting Bargaining Behavior**

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*Attribution bias.* Cultural differences, often evident in surface behavior, are easy to see; richer contextual factors frequently are not. In unfamiliar cross-border settings, factors like strategic incompatibility, politics, or even individual personality are less likely to be “blamed” for undesirable outcomes. The powerful but unconscious tendency to overattribute behavior to culture, all too often clouds negotiators’ vision of the full range of factors that can affect a negotiation (Gilbert and Malone 1995). Psychologists have extensively documented this dynamic, a systematic tendency to focus on supposed characteristics of the person on the other side of the table, rather than on the economic or other powerful contextual factors.<sup>4</sup> The antidotes? First, remember that “culture” doesn’t just mean nationality; instead there are many potentially influential “cultures” at work. Second, beyond “culture” are many other factors that have potential to affect negotiation behavior. Nationality can carry important information, but with many other cultures and many other factors at work, you should be careful not to treat your counterpart’s passport as the Rosetta Stone.



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### 3. The “Visual Flying Rules” at Night Fallacy: Falling Prey to Potent Psychological Biases

Just as trying to pilot by “visual flight rules” (VFR) at night or in a storm is hazardous, the psychology of cross-cultural perception can be treacherous. Beware the witches’ brew of biases and psychological dynamics that can bubble up when one begins to label “other” groups, attribute characteristics to them, and act on these perceptions.

*Self-serving perceptions of our own side.* There is a powerful tendency, formally studied as “biased assimilation,” for people to interpret information in negotiation self-servingly (see Robinson 1997a). For example, experimenters give a number of people identical information about a pending court case but randomly assign them to the role of plaintiff or defendant. When each person is asked for his or her private assessment of the probability that the plaintiff will win, those assigned the role of plaintiff on average give much higher odds than those (randomly) assigned to the role of defendant (but, again, on the basis of *identical* information). People tend to “believe their own lines” or self-servingly interpret information. Similar results have been found for corporate valuation results — done on the basis of the same data — by randomly assigned buyers and sellers. And this tendency runs deep: Back in the 1950s, researchers<sup>5</sup> conducted an experiment at a boy’s camp, sponsoring a jelly bean hunt among the campers. After the hunt, the boys were shown an identical picture of a jar of jelly beans. Each boy evaluated the total number of beans in the jar according to whether he was told the jar belonged to his own team or to the other side. The same photograph was estimated to contain many more beans when it was presented as “your team’s” and far fewer when it was alleged to be the “other side’s.”

*Partisan perceptions of the other side.* If our capacity to process information critical of our own side is flawed, it is even more the case for our assessments of the other side in a conflict or negotiation. In part, this stems from the in-group/out-group phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> Persons from different cultures, especially on the opposite side of the bargaining table, are more readily identified as belonging to an out-group, or the *Other*. Once that labeling is in place, powerful perceptual dynamics kick in (beyond the tendencies toward stereotyping and overattribution). Robert Robinson (1997b:2) describes extensive research over the last 40 years, documenting an unconscious mechanism that enhances “one’s own side, portraying it as more talented, honest, and morally upright” while simultaneous vilifying the *Other*. This leads to a systematic exaggeration of the other side’s position and an overestimation of the extent of the actual conflict. As a result, negotiators are often unduly pessimistic about their ability to find common ground, and can be unwilling to pursue it (Robinson et al. 1995: 416).

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*Self-fulfilling prophecies.* Such partisan perceptions hold the power to change reality by becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. The effects of labeling and stereotyping have been documented thoroughly to show that perceptions have the power to shape reality. Experiments testing the effects of teachers' expectations of students; diagnoses on mental patients; and platoon leaders' expectations of their trainees are only a few of many studies confirming that expectations prod behavior.<sup>7</sup> At the negotiating table, the same principle holds true: clinging firmly to the idea that one's counterpart is stubborn, for example, is likely to yield intransigence on both sides, precluding the possibility of a compromise that might have occurred had the label of "obstinacy" not been so rigorously affixed (see Rubin and Sander 1991).

In short, just as a pilot trying to navigate by visual flight rules at night or in a storm is prone to dangerous misjudgments, the psychology of perception in cross-cultural situations is rife with biases. Not only do we stereotype and overattribute to nationality, we are also poor at interpreting information on our own situation, vulnerable to partisan perceptions of the other side, and likely to act in ways that become dangerously self-fulfilling.

#### **4. St. Augustine's Fallacy: "When in Rome. . ."**

Assume that you have undertaken a full analysis of the culture of the person you will meet on the other side of the bargaining table. St. Augustine gave the classic cross-cultural advice: When in Rome, do as the Romans do. While this admonition certainly has merit, it is not always good advice. Steven Weiss (1994a and 1994b) has extensively developed the point that much better options may be available. For example, learning that the Chinese, on average, are more hesitant than North Americans to take risks is only a first step. Clearly, a responsive strategy would not mimic this hesitancy, but effectively anticipate it.

Rather than learning to behave as the Romans do (while in Rome or elsewhere), strategies should accommodate the degree of cross-table understanding each side has of the other. For example, consider the best approach for a U.S. manager on his first visit to Japan dealing with a Yale-educated Japanese executive who has worked extensively in Europe and North America. Here it would be sensible to let the Japanese take the lead. If a negotiator is far more familiar with a counterpart's culture than vice versa, the best strategy might be to embrace the counterpart's negotiating "script." If both sides are equally "literate," an improvisational and mutually-accommodating approach might be most appropriate. A lower degree of familiarity dictates bringing in locally familiar expertise, perhaps on your side and perhaps even as a mediator (Weiss 1994a: 54).

A great deal depends on how familiar you are with "Roman" culture and how familiar your "Roman" counterpart is with your culture. And of

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course you want to avoid the previous fallacies as well. The nationalities across the table from each other may be Chinese and U.S., but both players may be regulars on the international business circuit, which has its own, increasingly global negotiating culture. Again, assess — etiquette, deeper traits, negotiation-specific expectations, and caveats; do not assume and project your assumption onto your counterpart.

## In Conclusion

Cross-cultural negotiation analyses offer insight as to systematic differences in gestures and body language, etiquette and deportment, deeper behavioral traits, as well as organizational decision-making processes and forms of corporate and public governance. Accurately applying the very real insights from such studies can be challenging, but the difficulties perhaps lessened by thinking of four unlikely categories that themselves derive from cultures most dissimilar: John Wayne and Charlie Chan, the Rosetta Stone, VFR at night, and St. Augustine.

## NOTES

I would like to acknowledge the energetic and insightful research assistance of Rebecca Hulse and Ron Fortgang as well as the useful suggestions of David Lax, Guhan Subramanian, and Rob Robinson. This essay was adapted from part of my Harvard Business School Working Paper, "Assess, Don't Assume, Part I: Etiquette and National Culture," August 2001.

1. Standards in this field include Edward Hall's (1960) *Harvard Business Review* essay, "The Silent Language of Overseas Business" and his (1959) book of the same name, as well as Edward Hall and Mildred Reed Hall's (1990) book, *Understanding Cultural Differences*. Major empirical survey studies by Geert Hofstede have become staples of this area, including Hofstede (1984 and 1991) and Hofstede and Usunier (1996). A particularly well-presented, recent survey book is by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (1998), *Riding the Waves of Culture*. Theoretically-focused works include Janosik (1991) and Faure and Rubin (1993). Several excellent, practice-oriented sources on negotiation include Jeswald Salacuse's (1991) book, *Making Global Deals*; Jeanne Brett's (2001) book, *Negotiating Globally*; Raymond Cohen's (1991) book *Negotiating Across Cultures*; and two *Sloan Management Review* essays by Stephen Weiss (1994a and 1994b). A large number of books and articles targeting specific countries or regions exist; very nice examples include Hodgson, Sano, and Graham (2000) and Chen (2001).

2. Based on Smith and Bond (1993: 41). This graph is only indicative, not precise.

3. See, for example, Chapter 15 of Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner's (1998) book, *Riding the Waves of Culture*.

4. Discussed in Rubin and Sander (1991).

5. Sherif and Sherif (1953), as cited by Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim (1994: 103).

6. For more in-depth explanation see Tajfel (1982) and Howard and Rothbart (1980).

7. E.g., see Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim 1994: 100-101; Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Rosenhan 1979; and Eden 1990.

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