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STANDING IN SEVERAL WORLDS AT ONCE: A THEORY OF MULTI-FIELD CULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC AND DIPLOMATIC SETTINGS

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Abstract:

Cultural intelligence explains how an individual adjusts to one other culture, and boundary-spanning explains how a leader bridges two groups; neither explains the situation of a leader who must act within several cultural fields at once, whose expectations conflict and cannot be satisfied in sequence. This conceptual paper develops multi-field cultural leadership as a concept for that situation, common in diplomatic, public-service and internationalised settings. Synthesising the literatures on cultural intelligence, cross-cultural code-switching, biculturalism, boundary-spanning leadership, the multiple-audience problem and public leadership, it identifies a gap none of them fills, defines the construct, specifies five dimensions, differentiates it from adjacent constructs, and advances seven propositions and boundary conditions. Multi-field cultural leadership is defined as leadership exercised within three or more cultural fields that are simultaneously present and make conflicting claims, where the leader must compose single acts intended to be legible and defensible across plural cultural audiences at once, rather than adapting to each in sequence. Its distinctive demand is simultaneity and reconciliation rather than adjustment. The paper moves beyond the dyadic assumption in cultural intelligence and the two-sided assumption in boundary-spanning, giving cross-cultural public leadership a construct that matches its actual complexity.

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Multi-Field Cultural Leadership, Cultural Intelligence, Cross-Cultural Code-Switching, Boundary Spanning, Biculturalism, Public Leadership, Diplomacy.



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Introduction

Some leaders act inside one culture. Others, working across borders, must act inside several at the same time. A public officer who represents one state to another while also leading a community of that state's citizens abroad stands, at every moment, within at least three cultural fields at once: the expectations of the home authority, the norms of the host society, and the culture of the community they lead. These fields do not take turns. They press simultaneously, and their demands often conflict: what satisfies the home authority may offend the host, and what serves the host may unsettle the community. Leading well under this simultaneous and conflicting pull is a real and demanding task, and the leadership literature has no settled name for it. This paper proposes one: multi-field cultural leadership. The task is not exotic. It is the daily condition of consuls and ambassadors, of education and trade officers posted abroad, of the directors of internationalised universities, and of community leaders who speak for a minority to a majority while answering to a homeland. That so common a task has no settled name in the leadership literature is itself a reason to supply one.

The claim that the field lacks a concept for this follows from an assumption shared by the literatures that come closest. Cultural intelligence theorises an individual's capability to function in culturally diverse settings (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007), a capacity consolidated in meta-analysis (Schlaegel et al., 2021) and framed as adjustment to a culture other than one's own: essentially dyadic, a person and another culture. Cross-cultural code-switching is likewise theorised as movement toward one other culture at a time (Molinsky, 2007), and boundary-spanning leadership as bridging across a single divide (Williams, 2002; Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011). Even the comparative tradition treats culture as a property of one society at a time (House et al., 2004). None of these frames captures the leader who does not move between cultures in turn but must satisfy several at once, in a single act, under their conflicting gaze.

This paper argues that leading within several simultaneously present and conflicting cultural fields is a distinct form of leadership worth naming and theorising. The aim is theoretical: to give scholars and practitioners a vocabulary for a task the field has reduced to individual adjustment, and to match cross-cultural public leadership to its real complexity. The paper shows that no existing construct captures the phenomenon; defines multi-field cultural leadership and its dimensions; differentiates it from adjacent constructs so that it is a contribution rather than a relabelling; and advances propositions and boundary conditions with an agenda for empirical work. The construct is presented as a general theoretical proposition

with particular relevance to the Asia-Pacific, whose diplomats, education and trade officers, and leaders of internationalised institutions routinely stand between home, host and community, though the paper offers little regional evidence and its distribution there remains to be established.

Theoretical Basis

The Dyadic Assumption In Cross-Cultural Leadership

Cultural intelligence is a mature and productive construct, and its assumptions are instructive. Earley and Ang (2003) defined cultural intelligence as the capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings, and the four-factor model, metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioural, has been measured and validated extensively (Ang et al., 2007; Van Dyne et al., 2008; Rockstuhl & Van Dyne, 2018) and linked to a range of intercultural outcomes (Leung et al., 2014; Schlaegel et al., 2021). Powerful as it is, the construct is built around a person adjusting to a culture other than their own. Its paradigm case is the sojourner, expatriate or negotiator who reads and adapts to one unfamiliar setting. Cultural distance, novelty and adjustment are theorised as relations between the individual and a single other culture, and the capability is exercised, and improved, one encounter at a time. Recent scholarship continues to extend and refine the construct (Semenov & Randrianasolo, 2024), yet even these reconceptualisations keep the individual-adjusting-to-an-other-culture frame at their centre.

Cross-cultural code-switching sharpens the same assumption. Molinsky (2007) theorises the act of adapting one's behaviour to the norms of a foreign culture as a demanding psychological accomplishment, requiring the actor to suppress ingrained responses and produce culturally appropriate ones under identity and affective strain. The account is illuminating precisely because it takes the difficulty of adaptation seriously; but its structure is sequential and dyadic. The code-switcher enters one foreign setting, adapts to it, and, on returning, switches back. The model presumes that the actor faces one cultural audience at a time and can present the appropriate face to each in turn. It has no place for the actor who cannot switch because two or more audiences observe the same performance at once. The point is not that code-switching is mistaken but that its unit is the encounter, not the role. A diplomat may code-switch superbly within each bilateral meeting and still be undone at the multilateral table, where the audiences that were separate become simultaneous, and the switch that served each in private now reads, to all, as inconsistency.

Boundary-spanning leadership widens the picture but keeps a two-sided shape. Williams (2002) describes the competent boundary spanner who builds relationships and brokers across organisational divides, and Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011) theorise leadership that bridges groups; recent public-administration work extends this to local governance and collaboration (Stephens et al., 2024). The characteristic image, however, is of a leader standing between two groups and connecting them. The comparative leadership tradition, in turn, maps the dimensions along which national cultures differ and how leadership expectations vary with them (House et al., 2004); it is indispensable for knowing what any one field expects, but it treats each culture as a discrete context and does not theorise the leader who must answer to several such contexts in a single act. Even the literature on multicultural individuals, which recognises that some people internalise more than one culture (Hong et al., 2000; Fitzsimmons, 2013), theorises the person's internal plurality, the cultures carried within, rather than the external situation of being answerable to several cultural audiences at once.

The persistence of this assumption is not an oversight but a reasonable simplification that has outlived part of its usefulness. Treating cross-cultural encounters as a series of dyads, one actor before one other culture, made the phenomenon tractable and yielded measures, models and a cumulative science (Ang et al., 2007; Leung et al., 2014), and it holds wherever cultures are in fact met one at a time, as in the classic expatriate assignment or the sequenced negotiation. What it cannot accommodate is the role in which the dyads collapse into a single moment, where the home authority, the host society and the led community are not three successive encounters but three simultaneous observers of one act. The leader in such a role does not adapt to one other culture, switch faces between settings, or bridge one divide; they act under the concurrent and conflicting expectations of three or more audiences, each judging the same act by a different standard, with no sequence in which to satisfy them one at a time. For this case the dyadic frame does not simplify but mis-describes, because the central difficulty, the conflict among fields that must be resolved within the act itself, is exactly what a sequence of dyads assumes away. If cross-cultural leadership is theorised only as adjustment to another culture, this leadership has, definitionally, nowhere to be described.

Partial Resources From Adjacent Literatures

The adjacent literatures each supply part of what a theory of multi-field cultural leadership needs, without providing the whole. Cultural intelligence supplies the individual capability. The metacognitive and behavioural capacities it names, reading a cultural setting and adapting conduct to it (Ang et al., 2007; Rockstuhl & Van Dyne, 2018), are necessary to multi-field leadership, but the construct assembles them around a single other culture and offers no account of what happens when several cultures must be read and answered at once, with the reading of one bearing on the response to another. Code-switching (Molinsky, 2007) adds a fine-grained account of the effort adaptation costs, but frames that effort as movement into and out of one foreign setting, not as the impossibility of switching when several audiences share the room. Recent scholarship has extended cultural intelligence from the individual to the team, theorising a collective cultural intelligence that emerges as members interact (Liao & Thomas, 2025); but this too locates plurality in the diversity within a bounded team rather than in the several external fields that judge a single act at once.

The strategic-communication literature supplies a resource the cross-cultural field has not drawn on: the multiple-audience problem. Fleming et al. (1990) show that a communicator addressing two audiences at once, who must decode the same message differently, faces a distinctive strategic difficulty, since a message tuned to one audience may misfire with the other, and the speaker cannot simply present each with a separate message. This is the communicative core of the multi-field situation, generalised from two audiences to several and from a single message to the whole conduct of a role. It establishes that addressing plural audiences simultaneously is not reducible to addressing each in turn, but the literature treats it as a problem of message design rather than of leadership and does not connect it to culture or to the accountable public role. Read across to leadership, it implies that the multi-field leader cannot solve their difficulty by better targeting, because there is no separate channel to each field; the difficulty is structural, not a deficit of skill, and it is this structural feature that a theory of the role must capture rather than exhort the leader to overcome.

This communicative structure has intensified in ways that make the multi-field condition both more common and more acute, and that connect it directly to the concerns of government and communication. The strategic-communication literature now treats the management of plural,

and often conflicting, audience expectations as central to the standing of any public entity (Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft and Werder, 2018). Simultaneous observation, in addition, no longer requires the audiences to share a physical room. Digital and social media produce what has been called context collapse, the flattening of multiple distinct audiences into a single setting in which one utterance is received at once by all of them (Marwick and boyd, 2011). A speech, a policy statement or a symbolic act by a public representative is now decoded in real time by the home authority, the host society, the diaspora community and a global public, each applying its own standard, with no backstage in which to address them separately. The multiple-audience problem thereby becomes a standing condition of public and representative roles rather than an occasional predicament, which is one reason a leadership construct built around it is timely for scholarship concerned with law, government and communication.

Boundary-spanning supplies the relational and interstitial work. Williams (2002) and Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011) show how leaders connect groups by building trust and brokering across divides, and recent public-administration scholarship documents boundary spanners in governance and collaboration (Stephens et al., 2024); but this is theorised across one boundary at a time, whereas the multi-field leader occupies the interstice among several fields at once and must connect them without being captured by any. The literature on biculturalism and multicultural individuals supplies the personal capacity to inhabit plurality: research on cultural frame-switching shows that biculturals shift between internalised frames as cues prime them (Hong et al., 2000), that the degree to which they integrate their identities varies and shapes their functioning (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005), and that such individuals can bring distinctive value to organisations (Fitzsimmons, 2013; Brannen & Thomas, 2010). The global-leadership literature traces the shift from cross-cultural management to leading across many cultures (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016). Yet these accounts locate plurality inside the person, as identity, cognition or repertoire, rather than in the external structure of a role. Public leadership, finally, supplies the setting, the accountable exercise of leadership in a public role (Van Wart, 2003; Vogel & Masal, 2015; Backhaus & Vogel, 2022; Dandalt, 2024), including a recent strand on integrative public leadership for boundary-crossing collaboration (Parkkinen, 2025), but treats culture as context rather than as the simultaneous and conflicting field within which such leadership is exercised. Set side by side, these literatures describe a space none of them occupies, and multi-field cultural leadership is proposed to occupy it.

Two qualifications keep this novelty claim within proper bounds. First, the boundaries drawn above are lines of emphasis, not walls: cultural intelligence, boundary-spanning and the neighbouring traditions have all developed considerably, and some studies within them already reach toward multinational, networked and institutionally complex settings, so the claim is not that these literatures are silent on complexity but that none has made the simultaneous and conflicting presence of several cultural fields the constitutive condition of a form of leadership. Second, the multi-field problem sits close to several literatures not yet drawn on here: role conflict, which analyses the strain of incompatible expectations attached to a single position (Rizzo, House and Lirtzman, 1970); institutional logics, which theorises how actors navigate plural and competing orders of value (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012); polycentric governance, which describes decision-making dispersed across multiple overlapping authorities (Ostrom, 2010); and public diplomacy, which studies the relational cultivation of standing before foreign publics (Zaharna and Huang, 2022). Each names part of the multi-field predicament, incompatible expectations, competing logics, dispersed authority, and audiences abroad, but none joins them to the cultural and representational demands of a single observed act. The contribution claimed here is correspondingly precise: to identify what remains

unexplained once these neighbours are given their due, namely simultaneous cultural accountability, the requirement to answer several culturally distinct audiences for one and the same act at the same moment.

The value of internal plurality has itself been studied, and the finding is suggestive for the multi-field role without settling it. Bicultural individuals can bring cognitive flexibility and a fuller repertoire to cross-cultural tasks, and the global-leadership literature argues that leading across many cultures is a qualitatively different competence from managing within one (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016). This establishes that plurality may be a capability and not only a burden. Yet it continues to locate the plurality in the leader, treating the several cultures as resources the leader carries or competences the leader acquires, rather than as external audiences that judge the leader's every act at the same moment. The distinction matters: a leader may be richly plural within and still fail the multi-field task if they cannot compose an act that survives the simultaneous gaze of fields to none of which they belong, just as a monocultural leader may succeed at it through disciplined field mapping and reconciliation. What the multi-field role demands is not a particular cultural identity but the capacity to hold conflicting external fields together in a single accountable act.

Method

This paper is conceptual: it develops a new construct rather than reporting empirical data, and it follows an explicit procedure so that readers can judge how the construct, its dimensions and its propositions were derived (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). Of the four templates for conceptual work that Jaakkola (2020) distinguishes, theory synthesis, theory adaptation, typology and model, this paper is primarily a theory synthesis: it integrates several established but separate literatures to characterise a phenomenon none of them fully addresses. In MacInnis's (2011) terms the contribution is chiefly one of envisioning and relating, marking out a construct and specifying how it connects to its neighbours, and it is written in the propositional style that theory-building work of this kind calls for (Cornelissen, 2017).

The synthesis proceeded in four steps. First, we identified the phenomenon of interest, leadership exercised under the simultaneous and conflicting presence of several cultural audiences, from documented public and diplomatic roles, and used it to select the literatures most likely to bear on it. Second, we assembled those literatures through searches in Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar carried out between 2000 and 2025, combining terms for the cultural side (cultural intelligence, cross-cultural leadership, cultural code-switching, biculturalism, cultural frame-switching), the relational side (boundary-spanning leadership, brokerage), the communicative side (multiple-audience problem, strategic communication, context collapse), and the role side (public leadership, global leadership, public diplomacy). We concentrated on the conceptual anchors and most-cited statements of each stream, together with recent work from 2020 to 2025 that extends them, rather than attempting exhaustive coverage of any single field.

Third, we read each stream against the target phenomenon and recorded, for each, the part of the multi-field problem it illuminates and the part it leaves aside; this comparison is reported in the review of adjacent literatures and is what exposes the dyadic assumption the streams share. Fourth, from the gap the comparison revealed we abstracted the construct's defining features, derived the five dimensions as the distinct capabilities the phenomenon requires, and stated the propositions as conjectured relations between those capabilities and their outcomes.

Two features of this procedure bear on how its results should be read. The synthesis is selective rather than systematic: it does not claim exhaustive coverage of each literature, and a different reading might weight the streams differently, so the route from existing scholarship to the proposed construct is offered as transparent and arguable rather than as proven. And because the construct is new, the propositions are advanced as testable conjectures rather than findings; the research agenda below sets out how they might be examined empirically.

Development of the conceptual framework

Defining Multi-Field Cultural Leadership

Multi-field cultural leadership is defined here as leadership exercised within three or more cultural fields that are simultaneously present and make conflicting claims on the leader, in which the leader must compose single acts intended to be legible and defensible across the plural cultural audiences at once, rather than adapting to each field sequentially. The definition describes what the leader attempts, composing across fields, and deliberately does not build success into itself: whether such acts in fact win acceptance, trust or legitimacy is treated as an outcome to be explained by the propositions, not as part of the construct. Three elements of the definition do the work.

By a cultural field we mean an audience or constituency that brings to the leader's conduct a distinctive set of normative expectations, together with the standards by which it judges whether those expectations are met. The term is used in the sense of an institutional order or logic, a configuration of values and taken-for-granted assumptions that gives conduct its meaning for that audience (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012), and it is close to Bourdieu's (1984) notion of a field as a structured space of expectations, applied here at the level of the audiences to which a public role must answer rather than in a strictly demographic sense. Fields in this sense often coincide with national cultures, host societies, home authorities, professional communities or diaspora constituencies, but two audiences form distinct fields only where their normative expectations of the same act genuinely diverge; where a shared institution or a common professional code aligns their expectations, they function as one field rather than several. Throughout the paper, terms such as audience, constituency and stakeholder denote the concrete groups that occupy a field, while field names the distinctive logic and standard of judgement each brings.

Two further clarifications fix the construct's status and level. Multi-field cultural leadership is, first, a property of a role and its situation before it is a property of a person: it names a structural condition, a role positioned within several simultaneously present and conflicting fields, together with the leadership practice that condition calls for. The unit of analysis is therefore the role-in-situation, even though individuals differ in how well they meet the condition. Second, the construct is multidimensional and formative: the five dimensions set out below are constitutive components that jointly compose the construct rather than interchangeable symptoms of a single latent trait, so a role that is weak on one dimension is not thereby shown to be weak on the others. The dimensions also operate at different levels, field mapping is cognitive, simultaneous legibility and reconciliation are behavioural and communicative, positional brokerage is structural, and representational stewardship is normative, and it is their coordination across these levels, rather than any one of them alone, that constitutes the leadership the construct names. Future measurement should accordingly treat the dimensions formatively, as necessary components assessed separately, rather than reflectively.

The situation is plural and simultaneous. The leader is not before one other culture but within several fields at the same time, each with its own expectations, each observing the leader's conduct. The paradigm case is the public representative abroad, answerable at once to a home authority, a host society and a community they lead, but the situation recurs wherever a role sits permanently at the meeting point of several cultures rather than passing between them. This is what distinguishes the situation from the sequential adjustment of cultural intelligence and from the enter-and-exit structure of code-switching (Molinsky, 2007): the fields do not wait their turn, and there is no backstage in which to switch faces, because the audiences share the stage. The reference to three or more fields marks a threshold of degree rather than a strict constitutive count. What makes the condition distinctive is not the number of fields as such but the combination of their simultaneity, the divergence of their expectations, their interdependence, and the representational accountability the leader carries: two fields whose demands are sharply divergent and interdependent may already generate the condition, while three audiences whose expectations largely align may not form distinct fields at all. Three fields is offered as the point at which conflicts typically cease to lie on a single axis, so that no one act of bridging can compose them and the two-sided logic of boundary-spanning runs out, but the underlying variable is the degree of simultaneous, divergent and interdependent claim, of which the number of fields is an indicator rather than a definition.

The demand is reconciliation, not adjustment. Because the fields are present together and their expectations conflict, the leader cannot simply adapt to each in turn, as cultural intelligence envisages. A single act must be composed to work across the fields at once, either by finding a form that honours the plural logics together or, where that is impossible, by managing the trade-off openly and bearing its cost. This is the multiple-audience problem (Fleming et al., 1990) raised to the level of a leadership role and extended across culture: not the design of one clever message, but the sustained conduct of a role whose every act is decoded differently by several cultural audiences. Reconciliation, rather than optimisation against a single standard, is the characteristic labour of the role.

The stakes are representational. Because the multi-field leader typically stands for one field, the home authority, while operating within the others, every act carries representational weight: it is read not only as the leader's conduct but as a statement of who the home stands for and how it regards the host and the community. Multi-field cultural leadership is thus the leadership that holds several cultural fields together in a single accountable practice, under their simultaneous and conflicting gaze.

These three elements are analytically separable but practically fused. In the representative's working day, a single message is at once plural in its audience, conflicting in its demands, and representational in its weight, so the leader cannot attend to one element without the others. Cultural intelligence addresses plurality by sequencing it, code-switching addresses conflict by exiting one field before entering the next, and ordinary public leadership addresses representation without the cultural plurality; only the multi-field role must hold all three together in the same act, which is why it calls for a construct of its own rather than a combination of the existing ones.

Dimensions Of Multi-Field Cultural Leadership

The concept can be specified through five dimensions, which together distinguish it from individual cross-cultural adjustment on one side and from single-boundary spanning on the other. Table 1 summarises the dimensions and the proposition each mainly informs.

Field mapping. The first dimension is reading the several cultural fields in play at once, their expectations, their sensitivities, and above all the points at which they conflict. Comparative frameworks of cultural difference (House et al., 2004) inform this reading, but the reading required here is not of one culture against a baseline; it is relational and combinatorial, grasping not only what each field expects but how an act calibrated to one will appear from the others. Where cultural intelligence reads a single setting, field mapping reads the interference pattern among several settings that observe the same conduct. A practical instance is the choice of language and register at a shared occasion: the officer must know not only what each field expects of the language used, but how the home authority will read deference to the host tongue, how the host will read an assertion of the home language, and how the community will read either, all before a word is spoken. The reading is therefore anticipatory and cross-referential, and its failure is not ignorance of one culture, but a misjudgement of how the fields will refract a single choice.

Simultaneous legibility. The second dimension is acting so as to be understood and accepted by several cultural audiences at the same time, rather than switching register between them. This is where the multi-field role parts most sharply from code-switching. Code-switching presents a different, culturally appropriate face to each audience in turn (Molinsky, 2007); simultaneous legibility is required precisely because the audiences share an observed space and see the same act, so that the multiple-audience problem (Fleming et al., 1990) cannot be dissolved by addressing each separately. The leader must compose conduct that reads acceptably across the fields concurrently, accepting that it will rarely be the ideal performance for any single one. The competence at stake is closer to composition than to adaptation: the leader assembles words, gestures and symbols whose meaning holds up when decoded by several cultural grammars at once. Where a code-switcher can be, in turn, wholly the person each setting wants, the multi-field leader must be a single person legible to all, which sets a lower ceiling on fit with any one field and a higher floor under coherence across them.

Reconciliation of conflicting expectations. The third dimension is the characteristic labour of the role: composing acts that honour the plural cultural logics together where possible, and, where they cannot all be met, choosing and managing the trade-off openly rather than pretending it away. This is the dimension that most clearly makes the work leadership rather than adjustment, because it requires judgement about which field to foreground when reconciliation fails, and the willingness to bear the cost of that judgement before all the fields at once. Two moves distinguish the accomplished reconciler. The first is inventive: finding a form, a phrasing, a sequence, a symbol, that lets conflicting logics coexist where a blunter act would force a choice. The second is candid: where invention fails, naming the trade-off and owning it, rather than presenting each field with the version it would prefer to hear. The candid move is risky, because openness before one field about a concession to another can read as disloyalty; but concealment is riskier still in a shared space, because the fields compare what they were told and punish the leader who told them different things.

Positional brokerage. The fourth dimension is occupying the interstitial position among the fields and connecting them, in the manner of the boundary spanner (Williams, 2002; Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011; Stephens et al., 2024), but among several fields at once rather than across a single divide, and without being captured by any one of them. The multi-field leader is a broker who must remain legible and trustworthy to all sides simultaneously, so that brokerage here is constrained by the same simultaneity that constrains legibility: a move that builds trust with one field must not read as betrayal to another watching the same move. The brokerage is also asymmetric in a way single-boundary spanning is not: the multi-field leader usually belongs to, or stands for, one of the fields they broker among, so their neutrality is never complete and must be continually earned, lest the fields they do not represent suspect capture by the one they do.

Representational stewardship. The fifth dimension is the management of representational weight. Because the leader stands for one field while operating within the others, their conduct projects the home's regard for host and community; multi-field cultural leadership is attentive to this projection, treating each act as representation and not merely as transaction, and guarding the home's standing while honouring the others. This dimension links the construct to the accountable, public character of the roles in which it is most at stake and distinguishes it from culturally skilful conduct that carries no representative charge. A private individual who moves among several cultures deftly answers only for themselves; the multi-field public leader answers, in every act, for the entity they represent, so that a lapse is read not as personal awkwardness but as the home's disregard, and a grace note is read as the home's respect. Representational stewardship is therefore the discipline of remembering, in the moment of composing an act, that the act will be archived by each field as evidence of what the home thinks of it.

A stylised illustration, drawn from no particular case, shows the dimensions working together. Consider a public representative who hosts a cultural event abroad attended at once by home-country officials, host-country dignitaries, and the representative's own diaspora community. A single speech is heard by all three fields simultaneously (simultaneous legibility): it must affirm the home authority's message, show genuine respect for the host's customs and language, and speak authentically to the community, expectations that pull in different directions (field mapping). The representative composes remarks and gestures that honour all three where possible and, where a tension is unavoidable, chooses openly which to foreground (reconciliation), while connecting the audiences to one another (positional brokerage) and knowing that every choice will be read as a statement of what the home stands for (representational stewardship). The illustration is generic; its purpose is only to show the dimensions in combination, and the concept must still be tested in the ways set out below.

Table 1: The Five Dimensions of Multi-Field Cultural Leadership

Dimension	What it involves	Related proposition
1. Field mapping	Reading the several cultural fields at once, their expectations and, above all, the points at which they conflict	P1
2. Simultaneous legibility	Composing conduct that reads acceptably to several	P2

	cultural audiences at the same time, rather than switching register between them	
3. Reconciliation of conflicting expectations	Honouring plural cultural logics together where possible, and managing the trade-off openly where they cannot all be met	P3, P4
4. Positional brokerage	Occupying the interstice among the fields and connecting them without being captured by any one	P1
5. Representational stewardship	Managing the representational weight of each act, since the leader stands for one field while operating within the others	P5

Note: P6 and P7 concern how leadership demand and the cost of failure scale with the number and divergence of the fields and apply across the dimensions rather than to any single one.

A Conceptual Framework And Propositions

The five dimensions form a connected practice. Field mapping supplies the reading; simultaneous legibility and reconciliation supply the composition of acts; positional brokerage supplies the connecting work; and representational stewardship runs beneath the whole, since every act projects the home's standing. The propositions below connect the dimensions to outcomes conceptually distinct from them, the acceptance an act wins across fields, the durability of relationships, and the standing of the home, rather than restating the dimensions; so framed, each can be wrong. Figure 1 summarises the framework as a whole, distinguishing the multi-field context, the five dimensions, the mechanism through which they operate, the moderating role of field conflict, and the outcomes.

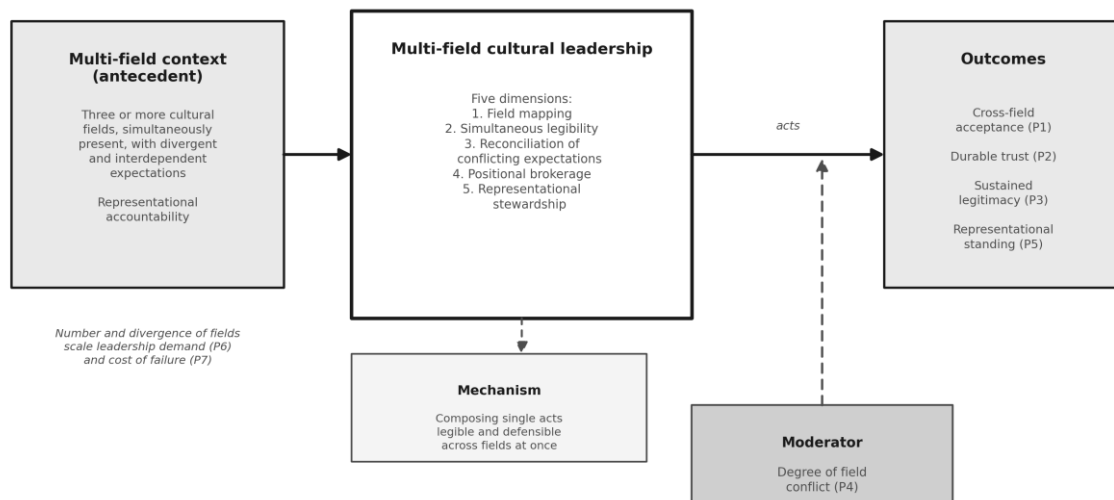


Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework of Multi-Field Cultural Leadership

Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

The propositions share a common logic. Each hold that a capacity the concept names, exercised under the simultaneous and conflicting presence of several fields, produces an outcome that ordinary cross-cultural competence, exercised one field at a time, would not. They are therefore strongest, and most sharply testable, under field conflict; where the fields align, the concept expects its effects to fade into general competence, which is itself the content of P4. Read together, the seven propositions describe not a checklist of behaviours but a single claim: that holding conflicting cultural fields together in one act is a distinct capability with distinct consequences for acceptance, trust, legitimacy and standing.

P1. Leaders who map the several cultural fields comparatively, grasping how an act in one is seen from the others, compose acts that win acceptance across more of the fields than leaders who read each field in isolation. Comparative field mapping is the antecedent; cross-field acceptance is the outcome.

P2. Where a role sits within several simultaneously observed cultural fields, simultaneous legibility produces more durable trust than code-switching, because audiences that share a space detect inconsistency between the faces a code-switcher presents. Mode of conduct is the antecedent; durability of trust is the outcome. The relationship is expected to hold where the several fields share an observed space; where confidentiality, security or the conduct of sensitive negotiations legitimately require differentiated or restricted communication, simultaneous legibility is correspondingly constrained, and the proposition is bounded accordingly.

P3. When cultural expectations genuinely conflict, leaders who manage the trade-off openly sustain legitimacy across the fields better than leaders who conceal it by telling each audience what it wishes to hear. Openness in reconciliation is the antecedent; sustained cross-field legitimacy is the outcome. This claim is bounded to conditions in which openness is feasible

and appropriate; in matters subject to diplomatic confidentiality, crisis communication or security considerations, candour may be limited, and legitimacy may then rest on visibly principled discretion rather than on full disclosure.

P4. The degree of field conflict moderates the relationship between multi-field cultural leadership and its outcomes: where the fields conflict sharply, the distinctive value of the leadership is strongest and most visible, whereas where the fields happen to align, its effects converge on those of ordinary cross-cultural competence. Field conflict is thus a boundary condition on the construct rather than a simple antecedent.

P5. Because the multi-field leader stands for one field while operating in others, acts read as representational carry greater consequence for the home's standing than acts read as merely transactional; attentiveness to representational weight therefore predicts better protection of the home's standing. Representational attentiveness is the antecedent; the home's standing is the outcome.

P6. The greater the number and divergence of the cultural fields a role must hold at once, the greater the leadership demand the role imposes. Number and divergence of fields is the antecedent; leadership demand is the outcome.

P7. The greater the number and divergence of the cultural fields a role must hold at once, the higher the cost of failure borne by the leader and the home, because a misjudged act is legible to more audiences and damages more relationships at the same time. Number and divergence of fields is the antecedent; the cost of failure is the outcome.

Taken together, the framework locates the distinctive value of multi-field cultural leadership not in any one capacity but in their coordination under simultaneity: field mapping without reconciliation yields paralysis, reconciliation without legibility yields acts no field can read, and legibility without representational stewardship yields fluency that squanders the home's standing. The propositions isolate these capacities analytically so that they can be measured and tested, but the practice fuses them, and it is the fusion, sustained under the conflicting gaze of several fields, that the concept is meant to name.

Scope And Boundary Conditions

Multi-field cultural leadership is not a claim about all cross-cultural work. It applies most clearly where a role sits permanently at the meeting point of three or more cultural fields that are present at the same time and make conflicting claims, as in diplomatic and consular representation, the leadership of diaspora and international communities, and the direction of internationalised public institutions. It bears less directly on settings where cultures are encountered one at a time, and on single-boundary brokerage. Its representational dimension is strongest where the leader visibly stands for one field before the others, and its simultaneity is sharpest where the fields share an observed space rather than separate channels. Two contrasts sharpen the scope. A trade negotiator who meets counterparts from several countries in succession is not, on this account, exercising multi-field leadership, because the cultures are sequential and private to each meeting; a consul who addresses home ministry, host government and diaspora in a single observed ceremony is, because the fields converge on one act. Likewise, a manager of a culturally diverse team approaches the multi-field condition only insofar as the members' cultural expectations are simultaneously present and genuinely

conflicting; where the organisation supplies a shared culture that subordinates those differences, the condition weakens. The construct thus picks out a specific structural feature, simultaneous and conflicting external fields, rather than cultural diversity as such, and naming these conditions makes it testable.

Discussion

Differentiating From Adjacent Constructs

A new construct earns its place only if it is not an existing one renamed. Multi-field cultural leadership is related to, but distinct from, several neighbours. From cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007; Schlaegel et al., 2021) it draws the individual capability to read and adapt to culture, but cultural intelligence theorises adjustment to a single other culture, whereas multi-field leadership concerns the composition of acts under several cultures at once, where adapting to one may unfit the act for another. From cross-cultural code-switching (Molinsky, 2007) it draws the recognition that adapting behaviour across cultures is effortful and identity-laden, but code-switching presumes an actor who faces one foreign audience at a time and can present the appropriate face to each in turn, whereas the multi-field leader cannot switch because the audiences share the space. From boundary-spanning leadership (Williams, 2002; Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011; Stephens et al., 2024) it draws the interstitial, brokering posture, but boundary-spanning is characteristically two-sided, whereas multi-field leadership occupies the meeting point of three or more fields simultaneously.

The construct must be distinguished, in particular, from the study of multicultural and bicultural individuals, with which it might be confused. That literature theorises internal plurality: the cultures a person carries within, how they switch between internalised frames as cues prime them (Hong et al., 2000), how far they integrate those identities (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005), and the value such internal plurality can create in organisations (Fitzsimmons, 2013; Brannen & Thomas, 2010). Multi-field cultural leadership theorises external plurality: the structural situation of a role that must answer to several cultural audiences at once, whatever the leader's own cultural make-up. A monocultural leader can occupy a multi-field role, and a deeply bicultural one may still face fields to which neither of their internalised cultures belongs. Internal plurality may be a resource for the multi-field task, but it is not the same thing; the plurality that defines the construct is in the role, not in the person.

The construct is also distinct from the comparative and global-leadership traditions with which it shares a subject. Comparative leadership research maps how expectations of leaders vary across cultures (House et al., 2004), knowledge the multi-field leader needs but which does not exhaust the task, since knowing what each field expects does not tell the leader how to act when the fields expect incompatible things at once. Global leadership, in turn, theorises the broad competences of leaders who operate across many cultures (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016), but treats the many cultures largely as a sequence or a portfolio the leader traverses over a career, rather than as a set of audiences converging on one act. Multi-field cultural leadership narrows the lens to the moment of simultaneity that both traditions pass over: not how cultures differ, nor how a career spans them, but how a single accountable act is composed when several of them are watching together.

It is fair to press the objection harder, because a label is worth little if it only renames cultural intelligence. What makes multi-field cultural leadership more than fast or plural cultural intelligence is a mechanism the dyadic constructs do not contain: the demand for simultaneity and reconciliation. Cultural intelligence and code-switching can be exercised sequentially and privately, improving each adjustment on its own terms; multi-field leadership requires a single act, publicly observed by several fields at once, whose fit with one audience is bought at some cost to its fit with another (Fleming et al., 1990), so that the leader must reconcile rather than optimise. The construct draws on a recognisable lineage, boundary-spanning (Williams, 2002) for the brokering competence and cultural intelligence for the reading capability, and it does not deny the family resemblance; it is a cousin of cultural intelligence, code-switching, boundary-spanning and biculturalism, and inherits from each. What the literature has not done is treat the simultaneous and conflicting presence of several cultural fields as the constitutive condition of a form of leadership rather than as a series of adjustments made one at a time. That condition, not the capabilities the construct shares with its neighbours, is what is genuinely new, and naming it lets the field study, on its own terms, a task its existing constructs have been stretched to cover.

Theoretical Contributions

The concept makes four theoretical contributions. To cultural intelligence and cross-cultural code-switching, it moves beyond the dyadic assumption, showing that the capability to adjust to one other culture (Earley & Ang, 2003; Schlaegel et al., 2021) and the skill of switching into a foreign setting (Molinsky, 2007) do not by themselves equip a leader for the simultaneous and conflicting presence of several cultural fields. To boundary-spanning leadership, it generalises the two-sided image to the interstice among several fields at once (Williams, 2002; Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011; Stephens et al., 2024). To the study of multicultural and bicultural individuals, it complements the account of internal plurality (Hong et al., 2000; Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Fitzsimmons, 2013; Brannen & Thomas, 2010) with an account of external plurality, and it imports into cross-cultural leadership the strategic-communication insight of the multiple-audience problem (Fleming et al., 1990), which the field had not connected to culture or to leadership. And to public leadership, it treats culture not as background context but as the simultaneous and conflicting field within which cross-cultural public leadership is exercised (Van Wart, 2003; Vogel & Masal, 2015; Backhaus & Vogel, 2022; Dandalt, 2024; Parkkinen, 2025). Across the four runs a single move: relocating cultural plurality from a property of the person, or a sequence of encounters, to a structural feature of a role, which shifts where the difficulty lies, from the leader's skill to the structure of the situation, and so changes what counts as good performance and how it should be developed and judged.

Implications For Practice

Beyond these scholarly contributions, the concept has a use for those who prepare and manage public officers in cross-cultural roles. If standing within several cultural fields at once is a distinct form of leadership, three implications follow. First, preparation should go beyond building cultural intelligence for one-culture adjustment (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016) to rehearsing composition under conflict, for instance through exercises in which trainees must satisfy several briefed audiences with one act and then defend their trade-offs. Second, selection and appraisal should credit the composition of acts that hold conflicting fields together, look for evidence of reconciliation and candour under conflicting demand, and resist scoring officers on each field's satisfaction separately, which rewards the very code-switching

the role cannot sustain. Third, the design of postings and mandates should treat the number and divergence of fields as a workload and a risk to be managed, spreading them across officers or sequencing them where the mission allows, rather than loading them onto a single representative and treating the resulting strain as a personal failing. The concept also reframes what looks, from any single field, like inconsistency or divided loyalty. An officer faulted by the home authority for deferring to the host, and by the host for asserting the home, may not be failing but succeeding at a task none of the fields can see whole. Recognising the work as multi-field cultural leadership lets institutions, and the officers themselves, judge it by the standard proper to it, the quality of the reconciliation achieved across the fields, rather than by the standard of any one field it is bound at times to disappoint.

A Research Agenda

Because the paper is conceptual, its purpose is to open inquiry rather than close it. The dimensions await operationalisation: instruments could capture comparative field mapping, simultaneous legibility, openness in reconciliation and representational attentiveness, distinguishing the construct from cultural intelligence, code-switching and single-boundary spanning. Antecedents deserve attention, whether the capacity for reconciliation is a stable disposition or is cultivated by experience and training, whether internal plurality helps or is beside the point, and how the design of a role structures the fields it must hold; so do outcomes, whether leaders who lead in the way the concept specifies win more durable acceptance and protect the home's standing better than those who adjust one field at a time. Several designs suit these questions. Critical-incident and diary methods could surface how officers resolve simultaneous conflict; experimental vignettes could vary the number and divergence of fields and observe effects on judged acceptance and trust, testing P1 to P4, P6 and P7 under controlled conflict; comparative case studies of missions facing the same occasion, a state visit, a crisis, a contested commemoration, could hold the occasion constant and vary the leadership; and longitudinal work could ask whether reconciliation capacity is trainable and whether it predicts the outcomes the propositions specify. These fit within a staged programme: qualitative exploration with serving officers to refine the dimensions, item generation and content validation, measurement development, tests of discriminant validity, and examination of the nomological network linking the construct to its antecedents and outcomes. The propositions are worth more as hypotheses others can falsify than as claims the paper asks readers to accept.

Conclusion

Much cross-cultural leadership is theorised as adjustment to another culture, one at a time. But many public and diplomatic roles are not lived one culture at a time; they are lived within several at once, under the simultaneous and conflicting gaze of home, host and community, where a single act is judged by plural standards and no sequence of adjustments will do. That work is leadership, and it is exercised under a condition the field has not theorised: the simultaneous presence of conflicting cultural fields. This paper has proposed multi-field cultural leadership to name and theorise it, as field mapping, simultaneous legibility, reconciliation, positional brokerage and representational stewardship, held together by the demand to compose acts that work across several fields at once. In moving beyond the dyadic assumption, the concept asks the field to match its theory of cross-cultural leadership to the plural reality in which such leadership is actually exercised. The propositions and boundary conditions offered here are an invitation to test whether the concept holds.

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