

Chapter 2

Culture Across Disciplines

Culture is complex to define and yet implicitly known. The difficulty in defining *culture* is evident by the myriad of ways people within and across disciplines (e.g., psychology, anthropology, and sociology) have attempted to define and operationalize it. The term “culture” has shifted in meaning from its early use, centuries ago, to refer to agriculture to its current use in psychology as a collective set of meanings, beliefs, and behavioral norms (Jahoda 2012). Despite this general understanding of what culture is, a specific and agreed-upon definition by scholars in the field remains elusive, and there are many criticisms of how culture as a construct has been used (cf. Poortinga 2015). As Landis (1972) noted, “there have been many definitions of culture. None are adequate, for how can one define that which makes up almost the totality of human experience?” (p. 54). Given the enormity of the construct, any attempt to operationalize culture will necessarily be incomplete, but without such attempts it is not possible to understand the influences of culture. Thus, culture is a concept that is a derivation of the agent’s point of view: a condition, a process, a product, or any combination thereof.

2.1 Psychology

In psychology, researchers attempt to discover both universal (etic) and culture-specific (emic) psychological principles (Segall et al. 1998). Typically, *cross-cultural* psychologists search for etics whereas *cultural* psychologists search for emics. For cross-cultural psychologists, culture is learned and bounded by a group’s behavioral norms, values, beliefs, and symbols (Hofstede 1991). It is believed that these culture-bound constructs can be used to understand and explain similarities and differences in psychological processes across cultures (Triandis 1996) and that, in order to study similarities and differences, various psychological methods for assessment can be employed, including qualitative (e.g., interviews), quantitative research (e.g., surveys), and computational modeling.

Cultural psychologists will use many of these same methods, and in addition may engage in ethnographic and experimental approaches to examine the intersection between culture and cognition, focusing on how sociocultural practices influence mental processes (Shweder 1991). The cultural focus deals with psychological processes that implicitly or explicitly constitute cultural systems within which members (or individuals) function (see Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). The foundational theory for this approach is situationalism, which asserts that “social context creates potent forces producing or constraining behavior” (Ross and Nisbett 1991, p. 9). As such, culture results from contextual pressures, as well as internalized cultural values or beliefs that in turn affect how individuals interpret or understand their experiences. Culture takes on “a life apart from the situations that gave rise to them and can endure well beyond the demise of those situations” (Ross and Nisbett 1991, p. 176).

The values and beliefs held by a group of individuals can neither be directly assessed nor measured. Rather, a group’s values and beliefs are inferred on the basis of group members’ actions that people label from their point of view (as observers) or that researchers measure, usually using multiple items to operationalize a construct. From the results of these measures, the existence and the relative strength of values and beliefs are established.

Further, while specific behaviors may be observed, the reasons for those behaviors are not necessarily accessible through traditional survey measurement of values or beliefs. Researchers in India (Sinha et al. 2002) and Canada (Kwantes et al. 2007a, b) used scenario-based methodology to examine values-based behaviors and intentions. Specifically, respondents were given multiple scenarios and asked to choose what action they would take in that circumstance, for example, if a person has two job offers, one in her own town where her parents live, and a better offer in a distant town, what should she do? The options reflected behaviors consistent with values, behaviors incongruent with values, or a mix of the two. Given the fact that individuals often endorsed behaviors that appeared to reflect one value while at the same time agreeing with a contrary underlying motive for that behavior suggests that merely measuring cultural values with a survey does not necessarily provide information about behavioral choices.

Culture, then, may only be inferred, and its multifaceted and multilayered nature reflects a great deal of complexity. In order to simplify or draw on cognitive shortcuts to understand culture, much of the organizational theory and research in Industrial and Organizational Psychology has focused on specific aspects of culture. This reductionist approach has both positive and negative implications. Organizing culture along categorical labels to describe groups of people who share some similar backgrounds may help to understand antecedents or consequences of some facets of culture, or to measure aspects of culture.

However, such labels also create barriers to a more inclusive understanding of what culture is, and its effects on human behavior. As noted earlier, the connection

between values and behavior is not always a strong one, meaning that values are not always good predictors of behaviors. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) indicated that global, general values (such as those suggested by Hofstede 1980; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998; Schwartz and Bilsky 1987) are typically poor predictors of specific behavioral outcomes. The Social Axioms Survey was developed as a way to capture culturally taught beliefs about how the world works, and reflects individual expectancies about outcomes for specific behaviors (Leung et al. 2002), thus allowing for a stronger ability to explain culture's effect on behavior when combined with values. Although social axioms are measured at the individual level, they are generated through experiences and therefore reflect general cultural tendencies or norms. For example, one social axiom is that of *reward for application*, or the expectancy that increased layout of resources will result in increased rewards or positive outcomes. A cultural context where hard work does result in desired outcomes provides a setting to teach this belief in "how the world works" to its individual members. Similarly, a cultural context in which hard work does not result in outcomes that differ in any meaningful way from not working hard at all does not "teach" this belief to its members. "...values and social beliefs are different domains of discourse, as the correlations between these two constructs are generally low or absent. ...values ...tap... self-aware motivational systems, and social axioms ... tap... conceptions of the social context within which an actor must navigate her or his behavior in negotiating outcomes from the world" (Bond et al. 2004, p. 189). Thus beliefs in how the world works, or social axioms, can add meaningful explanation for how culture affects behaviors (Leung and Bond 2008).

In contrast to psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists have generally resisted the dimensional, or categorical, approach to studying culture and insisted that the construct must be treated holistically (Jahoda and Krewer 1997). As a result, these academic disciplines employ different methodological approaches to understanding culture.

2.2 Anthropology

Anthropology, employing a phenomenological approach to studying culture, investigates cultural experiences as expressed through the lived daily life of a group of people (not individuals), investigating both current and past cultures (Boas 1928/1962, p. 13). Cultural anthropology, which focuses on cultural variations in groups of people, and cognitive anthropology, which studies shared knowledge and transmission systems, are specializations within anthropology that are particularly relevant to understanding culture.

Some anthropologists may apply a functionalist perspective, which emphasizes the role of the sociocultural context as shaping cultural beliefs (including cosmological myths), values, or norms (see Malinowski 1922/1961). Other anthropologists may apply a structuralist perspective and study a culture's systems of embedded meaning or thought patterns (e.g., how various kinship systems produce

different taboos; Geertz 1990). Data for anthropological inquiry are gathered through fieldwork, whereby information is derived from observations and/or gathered from informants' descriptions of phenomena of culture or civilization (Mead 1965; Radcliffe-Brown 1958), as well as through historical analysis, ethnology, interviews, content, and discourse analysis.

Cognitive anthropologists are particularly interested in understanding how culture *shapes* people's experiences and their interpretations of events (Rubinstein 2003), and how culture bounds people's expectations (D'Andrade 1982). In other words, a major focus is the meaning created by the interplay between one's social constructions and one's psychological states. Part of the meaning is derived from cumulative life experiences and mental schemas provided by the culture (Strauss and Quinn 1997). People's experiences are accumulated through interactions within social structures such as family, marketplace, political settings, and education systems. Over time common meaning is imposed on the value and relevance of the social structure, which can then serve to reinforce normative practices in how people interact, what people know, or how reality is created (D'Andrade 1982).

Particularly important to understanding culture from these research perspectives is the aspect of the traditional cultural anthropological approach to studying group phenomena. Anthropologists will seek to view cultures as those on the inside of the culture see them, taking into consideration the "...complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1871/1924, p. 1).

2.3 Sociology

Sociology is the broad study of society and social activity, with society conceptualized as a complex whole with distinctive but interconnected parts. Social relationships form a central theme of this discipline, with a focus on interpersonal relationships, inter-group, inter-institutional level relationships, such as governments, as well as interactions between these relationships, such as the power that institutions can exert over its citizens (Weber 1962). Scholars of sociology study multiple layers of groups, including groups organized around religion, race or ethnicity, job roles, gender, sex, etc., and assume that individuals shape and are shaped by value systems and acceptable behavioral norms within subcultures (Weber 1962). For sociologists, culture is not objective and cannot be quantified. Sociological studies attempt to qualitatively and quantitatively describe society's influence on populations within a group setting.

Sociology, then, adds to our understanding of culture with its focus on groups, their norms, shared expectations, beliefs, and ways of doing things. Cultures are generally thought to develop as societies deal with the geography that the group inhabits and the resources available there. Julian Steward (1972), for example, suggests that the development of culture is inextricably linked with a group of people's adaptation to the environment. These adaptations, according to Steward,

are functional in that they foster the survival of the group. Culture is maintained, therefore, by members of a culture teaching newcomers (either by birth or by immigration) the values, processes, and behaviors that have been perceived as contributing to the group's survival. "Different cultures are produced when individuals get together to live their lives differently" (Anderson 2010, p. 27).

2.4 Business

Not surprisingly, business disciplines focus on culture mainly at the organizational level, that is, organizational culture, and at the level of the economy. Organizational culture is viewed as developing from the ideas of institutionalism, or institutional theory. Meyer and Rowan (1977) refer to "formal and informal organizations" and point out that organizational behavior is determined in part by the dictates of the organization, such as the specific work that must take place (e.g., accounting, production, marketing, etc.; viz., the formal organization), as well as by relational networks (the informal organization). In fact, they suggest that these relational networks are key to understanding how day-to-day activities are coordinated and, in turn, become part of the standard operating procedure of the organization. The meanings that employees give to activities are important to understanding organizational practices and are related to the cultures that organizations develop (Harris 1994).

Business disciplines also study culture from micro- and macro-economic points of view. For example, a company wishing to expand its business to another country may be motivated by economic gains. Analysts will identify business opportunities, features of available human capital (e.g., potential employees' education levels, access to transportation), costs and laws associated with business development, and competition in the area. For example, off-shoring call centers from the USA to India was deemed an economically feasible way of maximizing profits given potential employee education, payroll savings (for both day time and night time work), and available technology infrastructure, such as making the costs of long-distance calls virtually zero through computer-mediated communication services (Ellram et al. 2008).

The focus on culture from the business perspective adds to our understanding of culture with its emphasis on the specific constraints that being a member of an organization provides, and how those shared constraints result in specific shared meanings. While organizations develop in response to an identified need, actors in the environment place constraints and boundaries on organizations' performance. These constraints may include factors such as the legal milieu, industry, geographical location, or any combination of these. These environmental factors also create parameters around who will be a part of an organization. From a cultural perspective, despite movement of employees through its permeable boundaries, as employees come and go, an organization's culture tends to remain fairly stable over time, because the values of its founders set a tone and the reason for an

organization's creation changes when there are major changes to environmental factors, but less so on individual contributors who come and go. While individuals can affect an organization's culture, particularly when there are changes in top leadership and typically a result of business pressure, the organizational culture may not substantially change. The balance between the macro and the micro approaches in business perspectives on culture provides insights into the many forces that can potentially shape a culture.

2.5 Summary

Culture is such an integral part of human existence that it defies any single, simple definition. Different disciplines have approached culture from different angles, and at different levels, to explain the phenomena of interest to that particular discipline. While this may necessitate isolating elements or layers of culture at times, it is imperative to remember that this approach results in only a partial understanding of culture. Culture as an individual phenomenon, that is, internalized cultural values, beliefs, or practices, still exists in a social context, and therefore by definition "culture at the individual level" operates within a context of "culture at the group level." Each discipline's perspective on culture adds to the understanding of what culture as a totality and as a holistic phenomenon is, and how it operates.

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Kwantes, C.T.; Glazer, S.

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