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Definition: **culture** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

In anthropology, all knowledge that is acquired by human beings through their membership of a society. A culture incorporates all the shared knowledge, expectations and beliefs of a group. Culture in general distinguishes human beings from animals, since only humans can pass on accumulated knowledge by means of symbolic systems such as language.



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Summary Article: **Culture**

From *Encyclopedia of Identity*

To give a single, uncontroversial definition of the concept *culture* is a difficult task, for any definition of culture is itself an expression of a theoretical stance. With this caveat, the following definition summarizes a conception of culture widely used in contemporary psychology. Broadly, culture is a collection of information (or meanings) that is (a) nongenetically transmitted between individuals, (b) more or less shared within a population of individuals, and (c) maintained across some generations over a period of time. As such, culture plays an important role in the formation of individual and collective self-concepts or identities and has implications for human psychology.

This definition, however, excludes behavior or artifacts (i.e., products of human behavior) from culture. Information or meaning may be inferred from overt behavior or artifacts. That is, behavior and artifacts may act as markers of culture, but they are not part of culture themselves. Culture differs from society in that the latter refers to a collection of individuals and groups, their relationships (interpersonal, intergroup, and group membership), and their institutions. Social institutions such as rituals, laws, and the like are special kinds of artifacts, which often represent cultural information. However, they are not culture themselves. This entry presents the history of culture in academic and popular discourse and then discusses contemporary developments in culture and psychology.

History and Background

Human curiosity about culture has a long history as Herodotus's *History* in Greek antiquity and *Chunqiu* in early China clearly attest. Nonetheless, contemporary academic and popular discourse about culture has its roots in the 18th-century Western European discourse of what is loosely known as the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement away from religious dogmas and superstitious beliefs and customs, and its counterpoint, sometimes called the Counter-Enlightenment or Romanticism. Enlightenment thinkers (e.g., Voltaire) emphasized civilization and human progress driven by the natural and universal human capacity to reason. Rationality, and natural science seen as its epitome, is to enlighten humans away from their superstitions, irrational prejudices, and traditional rulers of the ancient régime. Politically, it was a liberal movement to emancipate people from the traditional power; epistemically, it was an empiricist push for knowledge on the basis of systematic observation of the universe. In contrast, the Counter-Enlightenment or Romantic thinkers (e.g., Johann Gottfried Herder) pit culture against universal civilization, claiming the uniqueness and particularity of a people, their history, and their tradition. A people—often equated with a nation—constructs their culture, using their unique language and following their unique customs. Because they constitute their culture and culture

constitutes their mentality, it is only through a deep understanding of their culture that one can fathom their thoughts and their way of life. Politically, it was often associated with nationalism; epistemically, it was aligned with an achievement of *Verstehen* (understanding) rather than experimentation.

Tension between these contrasting views took the form of an epistemological and methodological controversy between those who favor natural science versus cultural science models of inquiry throughout the history of social sciences. The natural science model is now seen to represent a constellation of epistemic practices that emphasize universal laws, causal explanation, and experimentation. Its primary goal is to establish a universal law-like causal explanation of a phenomenon. Using logico-mathematical expressions, universal natural laws are to be axiomatized, theory-based hypothetico-deductive inferences are made, and experiments are conducted to verify or falsify theories. In contrast, the cultural science model emphasizes cultural and historical specificity, interpretive understanding, and hermeneutics (i.e., a method and discipline to gain a true meaning of a text) rather than experimentation as a method of knowing. According to the cultural science model, human experience and action are interpreted and understood within their sociocultural and historical context. A deep understanding is sought by recursively applying a hermeneutic method and achieving a holistic appreciation of the meaning of the human experience and action within their local milieu.

The natural science model dominated social sciences, and the Enlightenment project of science, technology, and progress dominated the human political and economic affairs of the past century or so. Despite some attempts to integrate the two in the early 20th century, and an abundance of culture-relevant theorizing in the 1920s and 1930s (e.g., Frederic Charles Bartlett, Lucien Levy-Bruhl, Margaret Mead), logical positivism in philosophy of science and its psychological counterpart, behaviorism, pushed the natural science model to the mainstream of psychology by the mid-20th century. With its exclusive focus on observable behavior, behaviorist psychology removed the mind from its scope of inquiry. Even the cognitive revolution of the 1960s, which brought the mind back into psychology, failed to bring meaning and culture with it. Psychology as a science was to be a hypothetico-deductive and experimental endeavor in search of universal laws of human behavior. With this, culture and an emphasis on understanding human particularities were largely lost from academic discourse.

Nonetheless, in the 1970s, social sciences began to reevaluate the legacy of logical positivist philosophy of science, and a contemporary Counter-Enlightenment view began to take hold through the writings of Clifford Geertz, Charles Taylor, and others. In psychology, Richard Shweder defended what he called *cultural psychology*, espousing a more particularistic Counter-Enlightenment view of culture. His insistence on the mutual constitution of culture and mind focused researchers' attention on how culture shapes human mind and, in turn, how the mind makes culture.

The 1980s was the historical period that saw the formation of a visible global market economy. The trans-Atlantic alliance between a U.S. president, Ronald Reagan, and a U.K. prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, promoted free trade across the globe. Economically developing nations around the world, gaining political independence from colonial powers, began to participate in the world economy. The collapse of the Soviet Union, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall, ended the cold war, which structured much of the world affairs after World War II. Some taunted the end of history (Francis Fukuyama), understood as a dialectical progress toward the final resolution of contradictions with the apparent triumph of liberal democracy. In the late 20th century, globalization—roughly understood as an increase in economic, political, social and informational relationships among people across national boundaries in the world—became an obvious reality. With greater human contact and exchange came a

greater exposure to behaviors and artifacts of people whose existence hitherto only remotely mattered to most. Human curiosity about cultures was piqued.

Contemporary Developments in Culture and Psychology

In the 1980s and 1990s, culture and psychology emerged as a major research area. There was a fertile social, economic, and political ground that called out for social psychological research on cultural differences. With the globalizing economy, the unprecedented exchange of people and resources across national borders created a mutual need for knowledge about other cultures.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Geert Hofstede, an organizational psychologist working for a multinational corporation, provided a broad framework of cross-cultural comparison in his 1980 book, *Culture's Consequences*, based on his surveys about work values of IBM employees from more than 40 countries around the world. He identified four cultural dimensions—power distance, individualism and collectivism, masculinity and femininity, and uncertainty avoidance—on which each cultural group may be located. Power distance indicated the extent to which people tolerated power differences in society; individualism and collectivism capture relative emphasis placed on individual or group; masculinity (as opposed to femininity) had to do with the extent to which gender-based roles were clearly differentiated; and uncertainty avoidance indexed the degree to which uncertainty was met with anxiety and clear rules of conduct were preferred. Of these dimensions, individualism and collectivism became the focal point of empirical research in psychology. His characterizations of individualist and collectivist cultures echoed the well-known concepts such as Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, or Émile Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity, which these founding fathers of social science developed to describe social and cultural changes from the traditional lifestyle to the modern society in Western Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In 1989, Harry Triandis theorized a critical link between the macrolevel cultural difference in individualism and collectivism and the microlevel psychological process of the self and social behavior. According to him, culture influences the prevalence of different types of self-concepts, which then affect the likelihood that different self-concepts are learned and activated in people's minds. Social behavior is then influenced by culture through the activation of different types of self-concepts. Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, in 1991, specified psychological implications of culturally shaped self-concepts. They suggested that there are two types of self-concepts: independent and interdependent self-construal. People with an independent self-construal regard the self as bounded and separate from others. The independent self is a unitary and stable entity, which is characterized by its private and inner attributes (e.g., honesty, kindness). For independent people, it is important to express their unique self, promote their own personal goals, and assert what is on their mind. In contrast, people with an interdependent self-construal regard the self as connected to significant others (e.g., daughter, husband) and ingroups (e.g., a citizen of a country, a member of a political party). For interdependent people, it is important to belong and fit in, occupy their proper place, engage in appropriate action, promote others' goals, and "read other people's minds."

In 2001, Richard Nisbett and his colleagues argued that cultures differ in the prevalence of different types of cognitive styles as well. When an object is perceived and thought about, it is always placed against its background. People's perceptual experience includes both the figure and its ground. However, people with different cognitive styles have a sharper or a broader focus on the object. People with an analytical style focus their attention and thought sharply on the object while largely

ignoring its background. In contrast, people with a holistic style have a broader focus of attention and thought, so that both the object and its context are included in their construal of the object. People with independent self-construals are more likely to direct their attention to the individual person while disregarding his or her social context. By contrast, those who have interdependent self-construals learn to direct their attention to the person as embedded in his or her social context, including his or her significant others and important groups. As a result, people develop ontology (i.e., metaphysical theories about the world) and epistemology (i.e., theories about knowing and the nature of knowledge) that are consistent with these cognitive styles. They also develop styles of conflict resolution that are consistent with their cognitive styles. So, people with an analytical style prefer to resolve social conflict by rules and argumentation, whereas people with a holistic style prefer compromises and negotiation. Through these cultural and social tendencies, the cognitive styles become general tendencies to perceive and cognize any objects, whether they be social objects such as people and groups or nonsocial objects such as atoms and physical things in the world.

Thus, by combining theories of self-concept and cognitive style, the standard theory of cross-cultural differences emerged, around which national cultural differences have been investigated. Of these, the most prominent have been comparisons between North America and East Asia beginning in the 1990s. Consistent with the strong theorizing about cross-cultural differences in self-concept, there is evidence for individualist or independent North America and collectivist or interdependent East Asia. A comparison of self-concepts among people in the United States, Australia, Hawai'i, Japan, and Korea found that Americans and Australians had more individualist and less collectivist self-concepts than Japanese and Koreans. When European Americans, Asian Americans, and Koreans described themselves in their own words, European Americans' self-descriptions contained the highest proportion of personality trait terms and Koreans, the lowest, with Asian Americans in the middle, again suggesting the American tendency to characterize the self with individual-centered descriptors.

There is consistent evidence to suggest cultural differences in cognition—in particular, what is known as the *fundamental attribution error*, that is, people's tendencies to attribute the cause of an individual's behavior to his or her dispositional characteristics rather than the context in which the behavior occurred. Social psychological research in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly conducted in North America, showed that people in the experiments have a strong tendency to explain someone else's behavior (e.g., writing an essay about a political issue) in terms of the person's disposition (e.g., political opinion) while underestimating the importance of the context of the behavior (e.g., someone with a legitimate power told him to write an essay taking a certain political stance). Although this tendency was said to reflect a limitation of the human cognitive system, it turned out to be an error often observed in North America, but not necessarily elsewhere. Cross-cultural comparisons between the United States and India as well as comparisons between the United States and Hong Kong showed that the error was not so fundamental after all, and that Indians and Chinese do not exhibit this tendency as strongly as their American counterparts.

A cultural difference between North America and Asia was found not only in cognitive processes but in emotions as well. A large-scale cross-cultural project comparing people's happiness—often called *subjective well-being*—showed a large difference between North America and East Asia. North Americans tended to say they are much happier than East Asians. Paralleling these findings, cross-cultural comparisons in self-esteem—people's evaluations of their worth—typically showed a strong tendency for North Americans to have higher self-esteem than Japanese. A related finding involves the

optimism bias—a belief that in the future, one is more likely to experience positive events, but less likely to experience negative events, than the average person. Although this bias is strong in North America and Western Europe, it is much weaker in East Asia, especially in Japan, although a recent study suggests that there is a universal tendency toward unconscious positive self-regard. All in all, these findings show a clear cultural difference in how people express their feelings about their lives and themselves. They are typically interpreted as stemming from differences in self-concept—individualists optimistically pursue their happiness, whereas collectivists' pursuit of happiness is tempered by their sense of obligations for others.

Thus, a body of theoretical and empirical work has given a coherent picture of cultural differences in psychological process. Different types of self-concepts are more or less prevalent in different parts of the world; people enculturated in different societies are likely to acquire different types of self-concepts; culture influences social behavior through the activation of a type of self-concepts; and through the acquisition of different attentional processes and cultural meaning systems, different cognitive styles became more prevalent. In total, culture, self, and basic psychology of perception, thought, and emotion are all intricately linked in human experience and action. In today's globalizing world, many people are bicultural or multicultural with different types of cultural information in their minds. These bicultural individuals can switch their cultural mind-sets easily and seamlessly. Nonetheless, there is evidence for broad cultural differences postulated by the standard theory. Culture does not influence only higher-order cognition but has a deeper implication for human psychology as a whole.

Scholars of cultural comparisons tend to look for global and stable cultural differences in psychological profile such as individualism and collectivism. In contrast, there is a class of theories and research that may be called a *neodiffusionist approach* that provides a perspective on cultural dynamics, namely, how individuals' specific behaviors give rise to global cultural profiles and contribute to the formation, maintenance, and transformation of culture over time. In the early 20th century, there was a popular culture theory called *diffusionism*, according to which culture is a collection of human inventions that were created somewhere and diffused through human population by migration, adoption, or colonization and conquest. Although this early theorizing went out of favor, various theories that combine this basic idea with Darwinian evolutionism began to appear in the 1970s and 1980s. One of the early proponents was Donald Campbell, who argued that human culture evolves through the process of random variation and selective retention of cultural information. Subsequently, a number of theories appeared that regard cultural evolution as analogous to biological evolution (e.g., Richard Dawkins, Luca Cavalli-Sforza and Marcus Feldman, Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson). In contrast to these theories, Dan Sperber regards cultural evolution to be marked by a non-Darwinian process. Nonetheless, common across these theorists of culture is their commitment to the notion that culture is socially transmitted information. These approaches are now beginning to provide some insights into the basic process underlying the formation and change of human culture.

Conclusion

In the context of contemporary human history, the culture concept surfaced as a darling of the academic and popular discourse. In academic discourse, there was an opposition between civilization and culture; culture used to be something that uncivilized people have. In popular discourse, there used to be a connotation of the word *culture* as something exclusive as seen in the words like *well cultured*, or *high culture*. However, these connotations seem obsolete. Culture is now seen as something that everyone has. That is, not just those in remote parts of the world “untouched by the civilization,” or in

an upper echelon of society, but all humans have their cultures. Culture has become a hallmark of humanity, critically distinguishing *Homo sapiens* from other animal species believed to be without culture (notwithstanding the recent research that suggests the existence of some form of culture among nonhuman species such as primates). Much of the conceptual opposition between the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment seems dated. Nonetheless, one element of this paradigm persists in the discourse of culture. The culture concept continues to act as a counterpoint to universality. Different groups of humans have different cultures. With the 2001 tragedy of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center (which many have interpreted in terms of clashes of cultures), arguably a symbol of globalization, the ideas of cultures and particularities of human social groups have now been throttled with a sense of urgency onto the center stage of the contemporary academic and popular discourse.

See also

Acculturation, Collectivism/Individualism, Culture, Ethnicity, and Race, Culture Shock, Dimensions of Cultural Variability, Ethical and Cultural Relativism, Etic/Emic, Globalization, Multiculturalism, Self-Concept

Further Readings

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