Culture: Defining an Old Concept in a New Way

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Abstract

Despite 140 years of studying culture, anthropologists and sociologists still have no established definition of culture. This brief article synthesises 140 years of definitions and proposes a comprehensive, conceptually-clear definition for scholars and practitioners alike.

Keywords: cultural change, role of religion, cultural determinism, Giddens, Hofstede

Anthropologists and sociologists have a problem. Despite 140 years of studying culture, there is still no established definition of culture. Moreover, when definitions are used, they tend to be incomplete and difficult to use. A comprehensive, conceptually-clear definition is needed.

Historically, anthropologists and sociologists consistently recognise two aspects of culture: an external (or material) aspect and an internal (or non-material) aspect. However, anthropologists and sociologists, in their working definitions of culture, have consistently overlooked two elements of culture: its bi-directional nature and its epistemological source. While compiling a comprehensive list of definitions is beyond the scope of this brief paper, it will summarise the most cited definitions of culture from the past 140 years, review their consistent features, and propose a synthesis—a new conceptual definition of culture.

In the past 140 years, few working definitions of culture have explicitly recognised the bi-directional nature of culture—namely, that culture is not simply deterministic but dynamically changes as the internal and external aspects interact. With the exception of Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) and Bunkowske (2002), all other definitions say that culture is 'learned', 'acquired', 'transmit[ted] fairly unchanged from generation to generation' (or simply omit this dimension altogether). However, since the rise of structuration theory in the 1980s, most sociologists would affirm a duality of structure in society, that neither structures (e.g. cultural norms) nor agency (e.g. the reflective individual) is fully deterministic. However, this insight has not yet fully penetrated the literature on culture.

Second, few working definitions of culture have explicitly recognised that all these beliefs, values and behaviours arise from an epistemological source—a mentor, the internalised source of one's beliefs which one trusts. Harrison (2006) says culture is 'shaped…chiefly through child rearing practices, religious practice, the education system, the media, and peer relationships' (6). Wolf (2012) has earlier described the importance of cultural mentors and includes worldvoice as the 'the person who is looked-to as one's life standard…the voice the culture listens to' (15). However, the proposed definition broadens this concept to include any source of epistemological trust (whether conscious or subconscious) which may include a philosopher, a social leader, or even one's own experience. The point is this: beliefs and values do not come from nowhere; they arise from a source—a mentor. To overlook the mentor would be overlook, perhaps, the most significant element of any culture.

Finally, with 140 years of definitions summarised, the author would like to propose a new conceptual definition of culture. Although all conceptual models are necessarily flawed (as representations of reality), they are helpful to show relationships between elements. Previously, Hofstede (1991) put forward an 'Onion Model' of culture, and this one builds upon his work. For this work, culture may be defined as the sum of internal beliefs and values reflected in external behaviours and symbols, which mutually influence one another – and arise from an epistemological source. Depicted conceptually, culture is like an onion with the epistemological mentor at the center and visible symbols at the outer layer.

Figure 1: A conceptual model of culture

EXTERNAL CULTURE
- **Symbols**: artefacts, icons, heroes, architecture, signs, literature, songs
- **Behaviours**: customs, folkways and mores

INTERNAL CULTURE
- **Values**: the internal esteem for an ideal
- **Beliefs**: the assumptions & persuasions about what is real, true, or good
- **Mentor**: the internalised source of beliefs, that one trusts. E.g. parents, media, religion, philosopher, social leader, peers
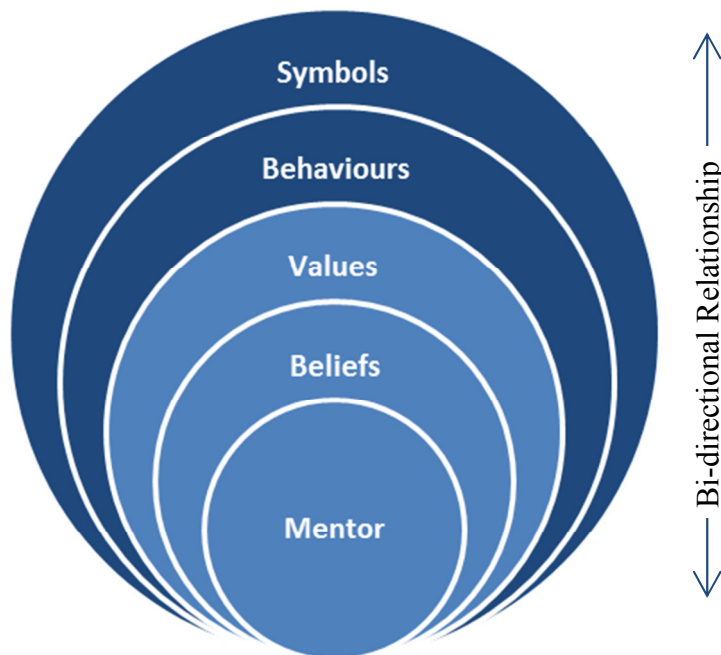

Figure 2: Historical review of aspects of culture emphasised

	BELIEFS	VALUES	BEHAVIORS	SYMBOLS	MENTOR	LEARNED OR BI-DIRECTIONAL?
E.B. Tylor (1871)	✓	✓	✓	✓		Learned
Franz Boas (1911)	✓	✓	✓			--
Ruth Benedict (1934)	✓	✓				--
Margaret Mead (1937)				✓		Learned
Robert Redfield (1941)	✓		✓	✓		Learned
Bronislaw Malinowski (1944)			✓	✓		--
A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952)	✓	✓	✓	✓		Bi-Directional
Clifford Geertz (1973)				✓		Learned
Fred Plog and Daniel Bates (1990)	✓	✓	✓	✓		Learned
Geert Hofstede (1991)		✓	✓	✓		--
Anthony Giddens (2001)	✓	✓	✓	✓		--
UNESCO (2002)	✓	✓	✓	✓		--
E.W. Bunkowske (2002)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Bi-Directional
Emily Schultz and Robert Lavenda (2005)	✓	✓	✓			Learned
David Inglis (2005)	✓	✓	✓	✓		Learned
Luigi Guiso et al (2006)	✓	✓				Learned
Lawrence Harrison (2006)	✓	✓			✓	Learned
Pramod Nayar (2008)	✓		✓	✓		--
Robin Alexander (2009)	✓	✓	✓			Learned
Thom Wolf (2012)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	--
Kevin Brinkmann (2017)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Bi-Directional

Figure 3: Complete definitions

AUTHOR	DEFINITION
E.B. Tylor (1871)	'Culture…is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.'
Franz Boas (1911)	'Culture may be defined as the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behaviour of individuals composing a social group collectively and individually'(149).
Ruth Benedict (1934)	'The ideas and the standards they have in common' (16).
Margaret Mead (1937)	'Culture means the whole complex of traditional behaviour which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation' (17).
Robert Redfield (1941)	'Culture is an organised body of conventional understanding manifest in art and artefact, which, persisting through tradition, characterises a human group' (133).
Bronislaw Malinowki (1944)	'Culture is the handiwork of man and the medium through which he achieves his ends' (37).
A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952)	'Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as condition as conditioning elements of further action' (357).
Clifford Geertz (1973)	A 'historically trasmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitutes towards life' (89).
Fred Plog and Daniel Bates (1990)	'The system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning' (7).
Geert Hofstede (1991)	Values, rituals, heroes, symbols.
Anthony Giddens (2001)	'Culture refers to the ways of life of the members of a society, or of groups within a society…[that] comprises both intangible aspects—the beliefs, ideas and values which form the content of the culture—and tangible aspects-the objects, symbols or technology which represent that content' (22).
UNESCO (2002)	'The set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.'
E.W. Bunkowske (2002)	'The culture model in each person has…seven physical, mental and spiritual layers [that are] holistic and integrated as they operate back and forth and forth and back from the core to the outside of the [cultural] onion: artefacts, behaviour, feelings, values, beliefs, worldview, and ultimate allegiance.'
Emily Schultz and Robert Lavenda (2005)	'Sets of learned behaviour and ideas that human beings acquire as members of society' (4).
David Inglis (2005)	'Culture comprises the patterns of ideas, values and beliefs common to a particular group of people, their "characteristic" ways of thinking and feeling' which are 'motivating people to act in certain ways', 'embodied in symbols and artefacts', 'learned', and 'arbitrary' (7-10).
Luigi Guiso et al (2006)	'Those customary beliefs and values that ethnic, religious and social groups transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation' (23).
Lawrence Harrison (2006)	'The body of values, beliefs, and attitudes that members of a society share; values, beliefs, and attitudes shaped chiefly by environment, religion, and the vagaries of history that are passed on from generation to generation chiefly through child rearing practices, religious practice, the education system, the media, and peer relationships' (6).
Pramod Nayar (2008)	'Popular culture is the set of practices, artefacts and beliefs shared by the masses, and is constituted by the everyday life of the masses: the food habits, fasion, forms of transport, the music, the reading habits, the sapces they occupty and traverse' (6).
Robin Alexander (2009)	'The collective ideas, values, customs and relationships which inform and shape a society's view of itself, of the world and of education' (2009).
Thom Wolf (2012)	'System dynamics…[including] worldvoice, worldview, and worldvenue' (13).
Kevin Brinkmann (2017)	'Culture is the sum of internal beliefs and values reflected in external behaviours and symbols, which mutually influence one another – and arise from an epistemological source.'

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