

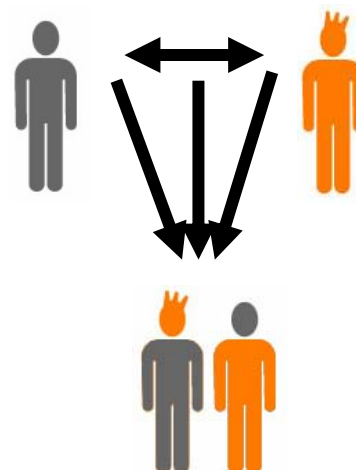
The Explanatory Power of the Concept of Culture

Discussion Forum

November 25, 2005

By Linh Lan Phan and Victoria Visser

Continuing our tradition of an “argumentative” group, in this issue we organized a student conference with our UvA colleagues on a piping hot topic: the concept of culture and its power in explaining human psychological functions. The discussion was spiced up by the presence of an expert in the field: Dianne van Hemert from the University of Amsterdam (UvA). To open the discussion, Linh presented a brief recap of the concept of culture.



Linh: So far, there have been many definitions of culture, so complex to the extent of almost incomprehensible, such as “living scripts”, “life design”, or simple and exclusive as “behaviors”, the “Nation’s character”. Is culture simply a human sphere? Rohner (1984) defines culture as a totality of learned meanings that is tied to a segment of population, and transmitted through generations. In this sense, culture is confounded in all variables (personal, situational factors and behaviors). To some other researchers, *culture* is just a set of conditions that molds our psychological reactions, including socio-economics, language, ecology, institutions, values, belief, norms, etcetera (Segall 1986). The most incorporative definition but also very behaviorist is given by Shiraev & Levy (2004): *culture* is a set of attitudes, behaviors and symbols shared by a large group of people, and communicated through generations.

Accumulative cultural research often describes cultural differences in terms of various unrelated dimensions, yet most of which involves interpersonal relationships, such as individualism-collectivism and power distance (Triandis and Gelfand, 1998), or in styles of specific versus abstract self expression (Markus and Kitayama, 1998). Some dimensions are considered as dichotomous continuums, while some others as dual processes, yet eventually we have not found out how many dimensions there are, and what they are.

The findings on cross-cultural difference so far are so complicated and controversial that even the question of whether culture exists is still in dispute. A researcher with an absolutist standpoint would deny the necessity of cultural research, because she considers all cultures being cast in one same mould of human psyche, and the same designs can be applied to any culture. For this reason absolutists are also called ethnocentric. On the other hand, the relativist claims that each culture is such a unique and incomparable system that an outsider cannot even understand, let alone compare one to another. Standing in the same line are indigenous psychologists and anthropologists. Finally, the universalists are trying to resolve this conflict by combining descriptive research in specific cultures with universal cross-cultural studies, in order to define which features are unique and exclusive in some cultures, and which features are universal.

To further explore the field of cross-cultural psychology, and the concept of culture, the topical questions I propose in this discussion are: Does culture exist? What are the basic building blocks of culture? Where is the boundary between two cultures? And most important of all, **does culture determine behavior?**

I would like to invite an expert of the field, Dr. Dianne van Hemert to present her point of view as the initiation of the discussion.

Dianne van Hemert: So far I have conducted four cross-cultural meta-analyses, combining studies that compared cultures –of (some) countries- on some psychological variables. I tried to estimate how large the cultural difference was in general on various dependent variables. These variables were very broad; emotion, social psychology, depression, and personality. Of course, establishing the size of a cultural difference in itself is not really relevant. Saying that the USA is very different from China in terms of, let's say, extraversion, does not give you information on how to interpret this finding. Therefore, I tried to explain the variance of cultural differences.

My main perspective is that the concept of culture itself exists in the minds of people. For me, culture is a set of conditions. Poortinga and colleagues (1987) compare explaining cross-cultural differences is like peeling an onion. Every time you try to explain some of the cross-cultural difference with any psychological variable, you take some the variance away. You keep on doing this until there is nothing left. Culture is just the sum of all these explanatory variables. This is a very pragmatic way.

My idea is that culture is a very vague concept. I usually use the definition like “it is all artifacts that are prepared by mankind”. Culture is everything that is manufactured by people, either subjective such as values, meanings; things that we cannot touch, or objective things such as economic systems, political systems, buildings, or institution. I think the best way to conceptualize culture is to be very concrete about it, and explore how much difference is explained by each independent variable we have in our hands.

One of the issues that we might want to discuss is what the difference is between cultures and countries. I take a universalist approach, in the sense that Linh just explained. That is the only way you can do cross-cultural research. Most cross-cultural psychology studies compare countries, but claim to compare cultures. It is easy to comment that there can be many cultures in one country. Of course that is true, but in general (using samples from different countries) is the easiest way to compare cultures. Also, many countries may share the same legal, economic, political system, and the same language. All of those are explanatory variables that we find very important when we try to understand cross-cultural differences in psychology.

Kaska: I think dimensions of cultural difference such as collectivism-individualism are pragmatic tools to differentiate groups of people. In one culture, a person can be more collectivistic or more individualistic on different dimensions and depending on the context. For example, people in Poland seem to become more individualistic after the communism collapsed. I wonder if cultural differences are stable through life.

Hans: Probably to an extent it is stable. Oyserman said that to a certain extent there are certain variables that are primed throughout your life and certain behavior are more acceptable in your culture. But of course a situation might bend it more one way or another way. For example, people in Hong Kong are more individualist when they speak English and more collectivists when they speak Chinese. So, yes it is situationally dependent, but also certain (factors) are always present and influence the way you behave.

Dianne: I agree. And at the same time I think it is important to distinguish different levels of analysis: cultural dimensions and individual characteristics. There is a big difference

between culture and an individual. For example, the Netherlands in general might be an individualist culture, but 40% of all inhabitants would be rather characterized as collectivists. At the cultural level of analysis this just means that the behaviors of most Dutch people are more in line with individualism. In that sense you have to distinguish between culture and individuals.

Kaska: I understand, but how relevant are these labels for cultures if you can always argue that individuals are distinguishable and different within that culture?

Dianne: Making the same point again; there is a difference between culture and what individuals in that culture do. Of course you can influence individuals in a certain situation. It is all about boundaries. Boundaries provide the extent to which people can move or vary from one side to another. It is not only the mean of a culture that is important; it is also the variance or deviation.

Linh: Oyserman wrote that in one culture you can have both individualism and collectivism.

Dianne: You can! The two dimensions are not independent, but they are not as dependent as you would think.

Wilco: Then why don't we look just at the individual level? Why would we bother with culture at all?

Dianne: Apparently these dimensions explain something. People observe cultural differences, for example, on the individualism-collectivism dimension.

Linh: Are there really cultural differences? Does culture exist? Categorical perception is just our nature. Maybe cultures are just categories that we made up to easily recognize and remember people.

Wilco: So culture is just a bunch of stereotypes?

Hans: I think that culture is a set of individuals that come together to create for example institutions, or laws, or education. I think eventually you will look at the individual, but that's exactly like peeling the onion.

Dianne: What has been found repeatedly in cross-cultural studies is that when you compare countries the main explanatory variable would be wealth; how rich a country is. When you take the variance out, there is nothing left that could be explained by the individualism-collectivism difference. The question is: what do you want it to be? Do you want it to be something like wealth, which is very objective, but at the same time very broad; or do you want it to be collectivism-individualism, which is also very broad, and vague.

Linh: I think we need to have a distinction between culture and social system. Ecology, economy, or political variables are social factors. They are part of culture, but do not form the culture. I think you still carry something of your culture with you when you move to another society.

Kaska: How would you distinguish between all these variables? For example, religion and culture. I don't think it is possible. What is culture then?

Dianne: Could it be different levels? For example, in one type of environment you have the need to hunt, go out to get your food, and be individualistic. While in another type of setting you have to work together on the field, need harmony, and might not insult people, thus be more collective. Developing from these different needs, you have certain types of institutions and political systems to accommodate the environment and ways of working together. Following from that, you get distinct values, beliefs, and conventions.

Kaska: Yes, that is what I mean. Because if you separate all these variables, I don't know what culture would mean.

Suzanne: Is culture not more a temporal thing that can be defined as the behavior most people of a group express at a certain moment?

Dianne: Yes, but the funny thing is that is quite stable. Culture is not dependent on one or two individuals. Everyone has some part in it, but independent of specific individuals. However, cultures do change. For instance in the eastern European countries you can see that there has been a change in what people value. Even in The Netherlands values have changed since the seventies. During the industrialization people were focused on getting money, food and money and a stable life. Nowadays there is enough money, and values have changed to happiness, and self-expression. But it is a quite slow process.

Suzanne: When thinking about the murder of Theo van Gogh, I think a culture can change in one day. For example, people changed from voicing what they really wanted to say, to being really scared and avoiding.

Linh: Was that really a change in one day, or was there potential before, and the murder was only a trigger to make it more expressive?

Hans: Maybe the "change" itself was even temporal, because I think (the attitude of fear and avoidance) is much less now again.

Suzanne: Well, does that mean it changed and then it recessed?

Silvia: Probably, the culture did not change, but just a part of how you show your culture. How you communicate or express your culture could have been changed and not the culture itself.

Dianne: There is a difference between situation and culture. People's behavior, like expressive behavior, is formed by culture and personality, but also situation. In that sense it might be that the situation varies.

Hans: On the other hand, I do think though that it is possible that a culture can change rapidly. As you said, it also depends on the situation. For example, the attacks on 9-11 in the United States really rapidly changed a culture. People in the United States started to think certain type of things were necessary to survive. If the need to survive

became prominent, culture might rapidly changes accordingly. People became more collectivistic and less individualistic.

Silvia: I think it was probably just a way to make people feel better, and not that a culture change. Probably it was just a change of perception for one part of the values that touched the religion.

Kaska: I am wondering whether actions of a country are caused by culture or politics. For example, just the one person in the government makes important decisions for all people.

Dianne: It is a difficult question if the government represents the whole population. The government was elected, so it cannot represent the culture better than it does. It represents the mean score of all people's political ideas in society.

Linh: One person can represent better the population if he or she is the prototype of the group and expresses the most common opinion for the group. On the other hand, this person also has more influence, and if he or she imposes an opinion, by pulling all other members together, he or she can make the whole group more cohesive or more collectivist. What I mean to say is that different cultures allow different degrees of social influence.

Wilco: What is the difference between culture and group? When I think of culture I think of very large groups, with shared knowledge. But even in the same village two groups can compete with each other. Are that different cultures then? Can I have a culture with two persons, when we share a lot of things?

Linh: That is exactly my second question: If we keep on dividing a population into culture and sub-cultures, when should we stop and say: this is the smallest and indivisible unit of culture?

Dianne: In fact I am not primarily interested in that, because I think that is the concern of researchers on group processes and intergroup relations. Of course, we all tend to overestimate the differences between people. For instance, there are stereotypes about people from the north and the south in every country, but they are not really true. I wouldn't call this culture, because there is not enough discrepancy, or between-group variance. That's my pragmatic choice. I want to explain culture in terms of overall dimensions and also institutional indicators or social indicators. Of course, it is ambiguous, because in a way every other person has another culture. But then aren't we talking about factors such as situation, personality and similar things? There has to be a boundary somewhere. My pragmatic approach is to keep it to country (boundaries).

Wilco: My suggestion is to abandon the whole concept of culture and all call it groups.

Dianne: From the many analyses I have done, I could conclude that culture is definitely overestimated. Individual differences are much larger than cross-cultural differences. I wouldn't say, as you suggested, (that we should) abandon the whole field, that would be quite... reckless (*lots of laughing*). But indeed culture explains at most only 20% of the variance found in research, and in general it is really overrated. Furthermore,

almost all researchers studying cross-cultural psychology compare two countries, in hope to find some differences. Of course you will find differences when you compare countries as far apart as the U. S. and Japan. They differ in so many aspects which are confounding that it is impossible to identify the cause of the difference. In that sense I am critical about cross-cultural psychology. Very often when people compare countries, they select countries far apart from each other. When they find differences, they claim that the cultures differ; when the cultures show similar scores, they blame the design or measurement.

Silvia: What is the goal of cross-cultural psychology? If cross-cultural psychology looks for similarities or differences, in the end –like peeling the onion- they will find nothing more than that we are all humans with feelings and cognition.

Dianne: At the core we are all the same, but sometimes the expression might be different. You could argue that it is just conventions. But there is a difference I think between the ‘peeling the onion’ idea and universalism. Saying that there is nothing left in the end -after explaining all the differences- does not mean that there are no differences between cultures. In the ‘peeling the onion idea’ we observe patterns with the assumption that all humans are the same. So how are we going to try to explain those patterns? By looking at context and circumstances; and context at the level of countries makes the differences cross-cultural.

Linh: I think there is also a problem with the model of how we explain behavior related to culture. If culture has a direct influence on behavior, the question is whether there are –and how many are there– mediating variables in between culture and behaviors that we did not put into in our design, or do not know of.

Dianne: We don’t know that much, but what we have seen until now is that most studies in cross-cultural psychology compare two countries on one or a few dependent variables, and that’s it. We need to proceed now to analyses where you try to find mediators of the effect of culture on whatever independent variable you take on behavior (behavior is the ultimate dependent variable), and see how relationships differ between cultures. But the field is just moving towards this idea, and until now it was just comparing two cultures without much theory behind it. So, I totally agree with you.

Linh: When comparing culture and behavior, of course you find differences. Because people in different places, behave differently. But if culture is a system with meanings or belief, probably the difference is much smaller. The distance between beliefs and behaviors is huge and mostly undefined, and therefore many psychologists suggest that culture doesn’t exist, but only beliefs, and meanings.

Wilco: And does the concept of culture explain our behavior? In discussion about the conflicts of the Dutch people with Turks and Moroccans, a lot of people say that they have to give up their culture. However, when their culture explains only 20% of their behavior, then why should they give up their culture?

Dianne: My idea is that you are much more similar to a university member in Casablanca than you are to a Dutch farmer, who has not much high education. You may share more culture with a faraway colleague than your country fellows.

Linh: In this sense, culture still determines a part of your behaviors, and at the same time geographical closeness might not be as important in shaping up our culture as education or some other social factors.

Victoria: What exactly is your definition of culture?

Dianne: I don't really have a clear-cut definition but I like the short one: All things that mankind manufactured, either concrete or not so concrete. And I operationalize this definition in terms of context variables. Those might be either objective (like social systems) or subjective (like values or beliefs). But I don't have one true definition; maybe I should work on that...

Linh: Using context variables is in a way an approach very close to social psychology... However, Because of limited time, I have to call for the conclusion of this conference. I hope the discussion has given you some ideas about the field of cross-cultural psychology, the concept of culture and its operationalization. Thank you very much for a lively and exciting discussion. I look forward to meeting all of you again in the coming conference.

Organizer: Linh Lan Phan

Expert: Dianne van Hemert (UvA)

Participants (in random order): Victoria Visser, Sylvia Barriga, Suzanne van Gils, Kaska Kubacka, Hans Ijzerman, Wilco van Dijk, Arno van Voorst, Carmen Lee, Linh Lan Phan, Ana Santana (UvA).

Note on the Expert: Dianne van Hemert completed her PhD at Tilburg University in the department of cross-cultural psychology. Cross-cultural psychology is her main expertise. So far all her studies involve culture somehow or another. At the moment she teaches Cross-Cultural Psychology at the University of Amsterdam.

References

- Markus, H. R. & Kitayama, S. (1999). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. In Baumeister, R. F. (Ed). *The self in social psychology. Key readings in social psychology*. New York, NY, US: Psychology Press.
- Rohner, R. P. (1984). Toward a conception of culture for cross-cultural psychology. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 15, 111-138.
- Segall, M. H. (1986). Culture and behavior: Psychology in global perspective *Annual Review of Psychology*, 37, 523-564.
- Shiraev, E. & Levy, D. (2004). *Cross-Cultural Psychology*. Needham Heights, NJ: Allyn and Bacon.
- Triandis, H. C. & Gelfand, M. J. (1998). Converging measurement of horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 118-128.