

DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

By Alan S. Gutterman¹

A basic threshold issue for understanding cross-cultural studies and deriving value from the research conducted in this area is developing a workable definition of the term “culture”. Edward Tylor, a British anthropologist considered to be one of the founding members of the discipline that came to be known as social anthropology, was one of the first to propose a modern technical definition of culture that viewed the concept as patterns of thought and behavior within a human society: “[c]ulture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, 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.”² Tylor, like many others after him, crafted a definition that actually included an open-ended list of categories of cultural traits which could then be used as guides for research on particular topics. For example, in 1872 a committee of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, with the assistance of Tylor, listed 76 cultural topics in an anthropological field manual. Over 60 years later, in 1938, an “Outline of Cultural Materials” was published with 79 major divisions and 637 subdivisions.³ In 1952 Kroeber and Kluckhohn constructed and published a list of 160 definitions of culture which Bodley summarized into the following categories⁴:

- Topical: Culture consists of everything on a list of topics, or categories, such as social organization, religion, or economy
- Historical: Culture is social heritage, or tradition, that is passed on to future generations
- Behavioral: Culture is shared, learned human behavior, a way of life
- Normative: Culture is ideals, values, or rules for living
- Functional: Culture is the way humans solve problems of adapting to the environment or living together
- Mental: Culture is a complex of ideas, or learned habits that inhibit impulses and distinguish people from animals
- Structural: Culture consists of patterned and interrelated ideas, symbols, or behaviors
- Symbolic: Culture is based on arbitrarily assigned meanings that are shared by a society

¹ The material in this report will appear in *Organizational Management and Administration: A Guide for Managers and Professionals* by Dr. Alan S. Gutterman and is presented with permission of Thomson Reuters/West. Copyright 2010 Thomson Reuters/West. For more information or to order call 1-800-762-5272. Dr. Gutterman is the Director of the Center for Comparative Management Studies [www.comparativemanagementstudies.org].

² E. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, (New York, NY: J.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1871), 1.

³ J.H. Bodley, *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 1994).

⁴ Id. The entire list appeared in A. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, *Culture* (New York, NY: Meridian Books, 1952).

In another work Kluckhohn suggested a number of meanings of the word culture including “the total way of life of a people,” “the social legacy the individual acquires from his group,” “a way of thinking, feeling and believing,” “a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave,” “learned behavior,” “a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior,” “set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men,” and “a precipitate of history”.⁵ More recently, the National Center for Cultural Competence (“NCCC”) of Georgetown University provides a comprehensive and informative definition of culture as “[a]n integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations”.⁶ Northouse has defined culture as “the learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols, customs and traditions that are common to a group of people” and has emphasized that the elements of culture are transmitted knowingly and unknowingly within the group as members go about their day-to-day lives and essentially become their script for acting and interpreting the things they see in their environment.⁷

In the field of comparative management studies, the following definition of culture offered by Gaert Hofstede, who emerged in the 1970s to become a central figure in the development of cross-cultural studies and a driving force behind what has become known as the “dimension-based” approach to classifying and describing cultures, has been widely used: “. . . the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another . . . [and] the interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influences a human group’s response to its environment.”⁸ Hofstede noted that when speaking of the culture of a geographic region, a national minority or a nation, culture refers to the collective mental programming that those people have in common and which is different from that of other regions, minorities or nations. Hofstede emphasized that culture, as he defined it, is often difficult to change and when change does it occur it takes place slowly over an extended period of time due in large part to the fact that cultural elements become so crystallized in various

⁵ See C. Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man: The Relationship of Anthropology to Modern Life* (New York, NY: Whittlesey House, 1949).

⁶ National Center for Cultural Competence, “Glossary,” Curricula Enhancement Module Series, <http://www.nccc-curricula.info/glossary.html> [accessed October 19, 2010]

⁷ P. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (4th Ed) (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 302.

⁸ G. Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work Related Values* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980), 25. Hofstede used a similar definition of culture in a different work when he explained that the term as: “. . . the collective mental programming of the people in an environment . . . that these people have in common; the programming that is different from that of other groups, tribes, regions, minorities or majorities, or nations.” See G. Hofstede, “Motivation, Leadership and Organization: Do American Theories Apply Abroad,” *Organization Dynamics*, 9:1980, 42-63.

institutions that have been created and supported by members of the cultural group including family structures, educational structures, religious organizations, associations, governmental forms, work organizations, law, literature, settlement patterns, buildings and scientific theories.⁹

When social scientists used the term “culture” they are generally referring to a set of parameters of “collectives” (e.g., a society or an organization) that differentiate them from each other in meaningful ways. These parameters are a set of cultural indicators or attributes that are shared among the members of the collective. For example, the researchers in the GLOBE project used a set of psychological attributes when they defined culture for purposes of their studies as shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across age generations. Societal culture develops, flourishes and survives based on things such as commonly experienced language, ideological belief systems (including religion and political belief systems), ethnic heritage and history and members of societal cultures are exposed to the shared attributes through the practices of entities within the societies such as families, schools, work organizations, economic and legal systems, and political institutions. Therefore, in studying societal culture it is important to assess both “values” and actual behaviors or practices as was done in the GLOBE project.¹⁰

The diversity of opinion regarding the definition of culture is obviously striking and, of course, is extremely important in reviewing and weighing research evidence with respect to culture since, as Bodley points out when specifically discussing anthropological research, “[t]he specific culture concept that particular anthropologists work with is an important matter because it may influence the research problems they investigate, their methods and interpretations, and the positions they take on public policy issues.”¹¹ It should also be noted at this point that most of the definitions and topics associated with “culture” that have been used in research activities are grounded in Western scientific and philosophical traditions and that the elements of cultural systems in non-Western societies may interact quite differently and, in fact, a good deal of the recent research

⁹ Id. at 43.

¹⁰ R. House, P. Hanges, S. Ruiz-Quintanilla, P. Dorfman, M. Javidan and M. Dickson, “Cultural Influences on Leadership and Organizations,” *Advances in Global Leadership*, Volume I (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, Inc., 1999), 171-233. During the GLOBE project the “values” of the respondents were measured through questions seeking their views on “what should be” while the questions regarding “how things really are” were intended to assess actual practices as evidenced by common behaviors and institutional practices. While the psychological/behavioral tradition assumes that shared values are enacted in behaviors, policies, and practices the results of the GLOBE survey uncovered what were often glaring and substantial variations between what people thought the world should be like and the way it actually was.

¹¹ J.H. Bodley, *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 1994).

activities in cross-cultural studies and related disciplines has focused on transitioning away from the extreme Western focus that has dominated those fields in the past.

Notwithstanding the apparent ongoing controversy regarding the definition of culture it is reasonable to suggest some common threads that have emerged in the literature. Bodley has suggested that there are at least three fundamental components to culture: what people think (i.e., mental processes, beliefs, knowledge and values), what people do (i.e., behavior) and the material products that people produce as a result of what they do.¹² Admittedly, while there might be general agreement regarding these components the weight given to each of them still varies substantially in the anthropological community and researchers may, for example, focus entirely on the mental processes, values and rules that appear to guide behavior. Another issue, of course, is that there is no universal agreement on the “correct” set of values or behaviors and, in fact, many of the interesting results from recent research on cross-cultural differences in preferred leadership traits involve sometimes startling contrasts on how particular traits and behaviors are viewed in various national cultures.

Further review of the myriad attempts to define culture leads to the conclusion that culture has several key properties—it is shared, learned, symbolic, transmitted cross-generationally, adaptive and integrated.¹³ Simply put, culture is a social phenomenon that is learned by newcomers, not biologically inherited (i.e., while babies are born with a physiological desire for food they are not born knowing that a particular color means purity in the society in which they are living—they learn that from future interactions with their parents and other members of that society), and involves arbitrarily assigned, symbolic meanings for a wide array of objects, behaviors and conditions. The importance of understanding that culture is learned has been regularly emphasized—as noted above, one of Kluckhohn’s definitions of the term was simply “learned behavior”—and, in fact, it has been said that the learning factor is culture’s essential feature and that “[c]ulture, as a body of learned behaviors common to a given human society, acts rather like a template (i.e., it has predictable form and content), shaping behavior and consciousness within a human society from generation to generation.”¹⁴ This so-called “cultural template” can be further broken down into several key elements of cultural systems including systems of meaning, of which language is a primary component; ways of organizing society, from kinship groups to geographically-defined political units (i.e., states) to corporations; and the distinctive integrated techniques and patterns of behavior of a group and their characteristic products.

The emphasis on learned, shared beliefs that is so much a part of the above-described definitions of culture suggests several important issues and processes to keep in mind

¹² Id.

¹³ The information and quotations in this paragraph are derived from E. Miraglia et al., “A Baseline Definition of Culture,” *What Is Culture*, http://www.wsu.edu/gened/learn-modules/top_culture/culture-definition.html [accessed October 19, 2010]

¹⁴ Id.

when using the concept of culture in any research and analysis context.¹⁵ First of all, if culture must be learned then it is important for the society to pay attention to the process of teaching and clearly and accurately reproducing the symbols and products that are essential elements of the culture. Second, it should be recognized and acknowledged that the teaching-learning process, regardless of how well it is managed, will not guarantee transfer of the same complete body of information from generation to generation. Some of the “curriculum” will be lost during the teaching process and, quite frankly, some new elements will need to be added in order to account for changes in the external environment in which the society or group is operating. The efficacy of systems of meaning and organizational methods is constantly tested by members of the society and their experiences inevitably lead to new observations and meanings that will need to be incorporated into an evolving cultural system. Third, while there may be some “absolutes” within the systems of meaning there will also be a good deal of negotiation among the members of the society before agreement can be reached on the significant and meaning of various words, behaviors and symbols. As Williams said, “[t]he making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land.”¹⁶ Since there are real, and sometimes extreme, differences between societies with respect to their teaching-learning processes and external environments and negotiations among humans inevitably lead to different results it is not surprising to find wide diversity among cultural systems.

The bottom line is that cross-cultural studies are often difficult and controversial because researchers are unable to agree on the definition of the very focal point of their activities (i.e., culture). The NCCC definition provided above does integrate several elements that consistently recur whenever culture is studied—the search for integrated patterns of human behavior; the lengthy list of the ways in which the building blocks of culture are formalized and used (e.g., beliefs and values, rituals, communications, practices and “expected behaviors”); the association between culture and “groups,” which themselves can be defined in various ways (e.g., racial, ethnic, religious, social, national, professional or organizational); and the emphasis on the process of transmitting culturally-driven beliefs and culturally-accepted behaviors to newcomers. However, each scholarly discipline is constantly grappling with its own specific definition of culture for use in its particular line of research and analysis. For example, anthropologists, who were among the first to grapple with the issue of culture and who have provided a good deal of the scholarly literature on defining culture as noted above, have traditionally spoken of the culture of social groups (e.g., tribes or ethnic groups)¹⁷; national culture is relevant in the

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ R. Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” in A. Gray and J. McGuigan (Eds.), *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1993), 5-14.

¹⁷ In fact, anthropology can be broadly defined as the “study of humans”—both past and present—and represents the most focused effort within the social sciences to understand culture. Anthropology is generally broken out into four main subdivisions—physical anthropology, cultural anthropology, archaeology and linguistic anthropology. Cultural anthropologists work in a number of different areas including cultural aspects of language

fields of political science, management and sociology¹⁸; and sociologists and management theorists study the unique cultural dynamics that arise and exist within specific organizations (e.g., multinational corporations or emerging companies).¹⁹ Other researchers have begun to identify and study cultural attributes of other “groups” such as occupations (e.g., engineers, accountants, physicians and attorneys), genders, generations and social classes.

As if the definition and study of culture wasn’t complicated enough another challenge for researchers is that people may be subject to cultural influences at a number of different levels other than just from a geographic-based environment including their familial, social, group, regional and professional environments. In his initial research Hofstede did not attempt to analyze and understand each of these levels and instead focused primarily on what he referred to as the influence of the national environment (i.e., the country). Hofstede believed that most of the inhabitants of a country share a national character that represents the cultural mental programming that nationals generally tend to have in common. He noted that while this programming may be quite discernable to foreigners the nationals themselves may not have a conscious recognition of the ways in which they act out their cultural beliefs.²⁰ Subsequent studies have generally focused on understanding and comparing national groups (i.e., countries); however, some researchers have isolated groups within countries based on factors such as their specific historical experiences and exposure to cultural influences (e.g., French-speaking Canada).

and communication, subsistence and other economic patterns, kinship, sex and marriage, socialization, social control, political organization, class, ethnicity, gender, religion and culture change.

¹⁸ It is common practice within the cross-cultural studies literature to compare and contrast the “cultures” of nations or countries; however, there is a clear trend toward recognizing that geopolitical borders may not be the best way to establish the boundaries for membership of cultural groups that are going to be compared. For example, as discussed elsewhere in this publication, researchers studying cultural differences in leadership styles and management practices have recognized distinctions between groups in a single country (i.e., English- and French-speaking Canadians) based on their principle language and ancestral tradition. The utility of national culture to political scientists is illustrated by their interest in “political culture,” which has been defined to include the attitudes, beliefs and values that underlie a society’s political system and which are depicted in a variety ways such as national anthems, memorials honoring soldiers, accepted and celebrated societal beliefs regarding ideas such equality or freedom of speech and historical myths about nations. C. Calhoun, “Dictionary definition: political culture,” *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ For detailed discussion of cultural attributes and dynamics within specific organizations, such as corporations formed and operated to pursue business and financial goals and objectives, see *Organizational Culture* (Ch 7).

²⁰ G. Hofstede, “Motivation, Leadership and Organization: Do American Theories Apply Abroad?,” *Organization Dynamics*, 9:1980, 42-63, 43.

As with many other things in the area of cross-cultural studies there is also controversy regarding the relationship between national and organizational cultures and the degree to which they impact one another and thus muddy the waters when interpreting data collected from managers and employees working for multinational corporations in different countries (e.g., Hofstede's IBM study described below). Studies, as well as anecdotal evidence, indicate that national culture does have a strong influence on organizational cultures; however, other factors such as the personality and preferences of the founders and/or the influence of charismatic leaders have also been shown to have an impact on the organizational culture of specific firms, particularly in strongly individualistic countries such as the US. Adler has argued that the available evidence seems to refute the notion that organizational culture erases or at least diminishes national culture and specifically refers to the findings of André Laurent that cultural differences were "significantly greater among managers working within the same multinational corporation than they were among managers working for companies in their own native country. When working for multinational companies, Germans seemingly became more German, Americans more American, Swedes more Swedish, and so on."²¹

Finally, the concept of culture becomes even more challenging as one introduces multicultural diversity into the mix as people from different societal cultures settle in with one another in a specific geographic area or within a single organization. The decades since the initial research studies of Hofstede were completed have been marked by extraordinary levels of migratory activities that have substantially increased cultural diversity in many areas of the US and in a number of other countries around the world. For example, in 1970 estimates of the non-White Hispanic population of the US as a percentage of the total population stood at around 5%.²² By 2008, however, the Hispanic percentage of the entire US population had risen to 15% and was projected to grow to 30% by 2050.²³ Still another complicating factor is the existence of multiple subcultures

²¹ Based on L. Katz, "Organizational versus National Culture," Leadership Crossroads, http://leadershipcrossroads.com/arti_onc.htm [accessed October 26, 2010]. See also N. Adler, *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior* (5th Edition) (Mason, OH: South-Western, 2008). As discussed below, the researchers in the GLOBE project collected and analyzed data on culture at both the national and organizational levels and Hofstede has suggested his own dimensions of organizational culture. For further discussion of organizational culture, see *Organizational Culture* (Ch 7).

²² C. Gibson and K. Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States: Working Paper Series No. 56* (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau—Population Division, September 2002), <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/twps0056.html> [accessed October 27, 2010]

²³ US Census Press Release <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html> [accessed October 27, 2010]

defined by race, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, level of wealth and occupational background.²⁴

²⁴ For example, within the non-Hispanic White population of the US, which represented 66% of the total US population as of 2008, there are several large self-reported ancestry groups such as German Americans, Irish Americans and Italian Americans and each of these groups have their own unique subculture based on language, history, religion and other factors that is passed on to some extent through learning processes. 2008 Population Estimates. U.S. Census Bureau. http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTTable?_bm=y&-state=dt&-context=dt&-ds_name=PEP_2008_EST&-CONTEXT=dt&-mt_name=PEP_2008_EST_G2008_T004_2008&-tree_id=809&-redoLog=false&-currentselections=PEP_2006_EST_G2006_T004_2006&-geo_id=01000US&-geo_id=02000US1&-geo_id=02000US2&-geo_id=02000US3&-geo_id=02000US4&-search_results=01000US&-format=&-lang=en. [accessed October 27, 2010]