Is Culture Something We Have or Something We Do?

From Descriptive Essentialist to Dynamic Intercultural Constructivist Communication

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Abstract

The descriptive understanding of culture is essentialist. One assumes that a group of people share values, codes and norms. Culture is according to this understanding something people have. People belong to this or that culture, and once one has learned the cultural codes one may predict how people behave. In the global world this understanding of culture has become more problematic. Cultures are mixed and more or less shared across the globe. Cultures have become hybrids where some elements are shared, others are not. The dynamic understanding of culture is constructivist. Culture is not something people have, but something they construct in specific human encounters where mutual relations and power are part of the context. Meanings are shared, interpreted and created when people do something together i.e. when they communicate.

Keywords: *Intercultural communication, descriptive, essentialist, dynamic, constructivist*

Introduction

When the Tibetan religious leader, the Dalai Lama was received by King Carl Gustaf of Sweden at the royal palace in the early nineties, he greeted the king by putting together both palms of his hands while bowing slightly forward, thus paying respect to the Swedish king, just as is customary in Tibet (and in a manner that is similar to the Indian "namaste" or Thai "wai"). The king held out his hand to shake that of his visitor. The situation created by this lack of coordination was both confusing and comical, and only ceased when the king withdrew his hand.

Why did the Dalai Lama make this gesture? He did not try to reciprocate the king's attempt to shake hands and he put the latter in an embarrassing and unfamiliar position. An old saying is "When in Rome, do as the Romans do". The Dalai Lama has travelled in many Western countries; he knows the Western custom of shaking hands and would probably have assumed beforehand that the king would hold out his hand for a greeting. Why did he insist on his own way of greeting? He did not do what the Swedes do.

Surface culture and deep culture

I have travelled in many countries. When I enter a classroom in India and the teacher greets me with her namaste, I do not insist on shaking hands. I conform to the local custom and try to copy the namaste as well as I can. I have learned that this can be done in different ways. You may put your hands together in front of your stomach, but the higher up you perform this gesture, the more respect you show. In the case just described, the Dalai Lama held his thumbs just under his nose, and the slight bow forward was an added sign of deep respect.

The challenge of intercultural communication can be illustrated by two circles showing an onion-like figure. The outer circle is what I call surface culture. It encompasses what is visible. We see the Dalai Lama, dressed in his reddish monk's gown, the king with his suit and tie, and these two persons greeting each other in different ways. The inner circle is what I call deep culture. This core is the invisible culture.

Here are some elements of the invisible core:

- The person we know as His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the religious leader of Tibetan Buddhism. His real name is Tenzin Gyatso (b. 1935). He is the 14:th Dalai Lama, the incarnation of an earlier Dalai Lama. "The Dalai Lama" is thus a title. China occupied Tibet in 1950, and in March 1959 the 24 year old Dalai Lama fled his country and has since lived in exile in the mountain village, Dharamsala, in India. Since 1970 he has taken on the role of spokesman for world peace and Buddhist humanism, emphasizing the individual's right to a decent life. For this he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.
- You should never touch a Buddhist monk. Since the namaste (or wai) is a way of paying respect to someone which does not involve physical contact, it is an acceptable way to greet such a person.

All this and much more is hidden in the inner circle of deep culture, which also encompasses many invisible things: values, norms and behaviour, the Buddhist religion, greeting customs, rules of purity, untouchability, etc. Didn't the Swedish king know this? Ought not his protocol officer to have briefed him in advance that this was the Dalai Lama's sign of respect? In order to make his guest feel at home, the king could have greeted the Dalai Lama with the same gesture.

Many researchers have described intercultural communication as "uncertainty reduction" (Gudykunst 2003). In the above paragraphs, I have mentioned some aspects of the Dalai Lama's culture. It is useful to know something about the culture of a person when you interact for the first time. The more you know about other people and their cultures, the more able you will be to show them respect by meeting them on their terms.

Culture is something we have

The above incident shows that culture is something we have. We all carry with us baggage containing things we have learned about how to behave, which values, rules and norms to respect etc. With an essentialist definition of culture in mind, one may assume that every culture expresses homogeneity and uniqueness. Each contains its own essence: core values that determine how to behave, how to think, and how to act - things that are essential for that particular culture. Hofstede's definition of culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another" is in this tradition (Hofstede 1980:21).

According to this view, culture is something people have. People belong to this or that culture, and knowledge of cultural codes enables one to predict how people will behave. People in a cultural group have a common essence and in the essentialist tradition it makes sense to talk about cultural differences and even cultural collisions. Some researchers have made tables illustrating contrasting cultures, listing for instance assumptions and values in North-American and Filipino cultures (Prosser 1985: 188).

The essentialist approach to culture is challenged

We have just described the Dalai Lama's culture as one that forbids physical contact. We would assume that he would act the same way in Oslo as he did in Stockholm. But when the Dalai Lama had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 His Holiness met the Norwegian King Olav with a warm mutual handshake accompanied by mutual eye contact. Why did he not stick to his own greeting rules in this case?

What is wrong with our description of the culture of His Holiness? Obviously there must be something in this situation that is different from the audience in Stockholm. King Olav congratulates the Dalai Lama. It is not a greeting. Touching cannot be a taboo. Does culture change according to situation? Why are the minds "programmed" in a different way in this situation? Or is this behaviour a result of a different relationship between the Norwegian king and the Dalai Lama compared to that with the Swedish king? Did they know each other personally?

The situation above illustrates that in the global world the descriptive understanding of culture has become more problematic. People do not conform to the rules of a particular culture as if they were robots. Behaviour depends on position, status, situation, purpose and mutual relationship. One cannot predict exactly how people will act solely on the basis of knowledge of some of their cultural values, rules and norms. People are inventive and adapt their behaviour according to situation and the purpose of the interaction.

Descriptive essentialist understanding of culture

The Norwegian social anthropologist Arne Martin Klausen presents what he calls a descriptive concept of culture:

> *…ideas, values, rules, norms, codes, and symbols that a person receives from the previous generation, and which one seeks to transmit – usually slightly transformed – to the next generation (Klausen 1992: 27)*

In the same tradition professor Thomas Hylland Eriksen defines culture as:

> *…abilities, notions, and forms of behaviour persons have acquired as members of society (2001: 3).*

A descriptive cultural approach emphasizes that culture is historically anchored, that tradition is an essential part of culture, and that we learn culture in a society. Everything we learn settles in our consciousness functioning as cognitive reference frames – "cultural codes in the back of our mind" – frames of interpretation that contribute to what we do (Dahl 2001: 57). These codes are unconsciously taken-for-granted, we act automatically without reflecting on what reference frames we utilize. It is appropriate to use the plural form "codes" here because we may have several cultural codes in our minds at the same time, and we may adjust these codes in the light of specific challenges.

A descriptive cultural understanding is not necessarily normative. It describes what exists without making any judgment. "Culture must be understood on its own premises", was the slogan of cultural relativists, who considered that all cultures or patterns of culture were of equal value.

Between the two world wars anthropologists developed a functionalist understanding of society. In their view, everything that people did had a function that contributed to the upholding of a particular culture and that this could be described. Culture was seen as a more or less homogenous entity. Everyone in the same group belonged to the same culture even if they had different roles and rights related to different functions in the society. Rituals contributed to maintenance of these functions. The acts of people were determined by their culture. Their actions could be explained and predicted once one knew the culture.

The descriptive cultural approach is essentialist:

> *An essentialist culture has an essence, a core that expresses homogeneity and particularity in a certain culture, for example, skills, behaviours, and conceptions that are seen as characteristic for this particular culture (Dahl 2013: 38).*

Much of the literature relating to functionalism tends towards essentialist descriptions of culture. Culture is something people have, one belongs to this culture. People in Norway belong to Norwegian culture since we live in Norway, share our common history, speak the same national language, celebrate the national independence day on the 17:th of May, cheer the same national football-team and pay taxes to Norwegian authorities. In our hearts we share the same core – an essence.

However, this understanding of culture is not without problems. Norway has become a multicultural society. Within the Norwegian borders there are people whose cultural backgrounds, languages, and religions are different. Every human being can be said to represent a particular culture in the sense of belonging to smaller or larger communities. Cultural differences can be measured in the way that Hofstede does in his research (Hofstede 1980).

Norway is also part of a European or, indeed, global culture. Global developments in technical, economic, political, and cultural exchange have made Norwegian citizens part of a global network. These global processes are transnational and supraterritorial (Scholte 2005). What happens in one part of the world has consequences locally. We are all globally connected to a greater extent than at any time in history.

Dynamic constructivist understanding of culture

The descriptive and essentialist understanding of culture has become increasingly problematic due to globalization. Many anthropologists criticize the descriptive approach for two reasons:

Firstly, cultures are never "pure" limited homogeneous units. Professor Hylland Eriksen contends that the most common cultural phenomenon in today's world is that of creolization: a mixing of cultures. In his paper "The lost cultural archipelago" he says:

> *Culture or, if one prefers, cultures are not indivisible packages of etiquette that one either has or does not have. People are cultural hybrids (Eriksen 1994: 14).*

Secondly, anthropologists and communication researchers have become increasingly critical of the notion that any coherent concept of culture can adequately describe modern, complex societies. The Norwegian anthropologist, Fredrik Barth, talks about the need to "re-conceptualize" culture (1994: 120). His view is that culture is spread within a population; each element is the common property of some of its members, but not of others. For this reason, it should be of interest to study how different cultural elements are distributed among individuals who share a particular cultural background. Such actors are always and necessarily positioned". "Positioned" means that individuals are in particular contexts, participate in particular communication processes and are involved in particular cultural interactions. According to Barth, no account of "the native's point of view" can have a general validity. Different "positions" lead people to "interpret and share their experiences and get grip on their own and other's life" (Barth 1994: 120).

The Danish researcher Iben Jensen introduces a "post-cultural" perspective on intercultural communication. She defines culture as multiple practices that are performed and negotiated in different social relations. Communication is one of many different practices and can be analyzed as practice. Actions and sayings, routines, body movements, materials and technology are practices intersected by power axes such as economy, gender, age, position, relationship, etc. (Jensen 2011: 48).

This modern approach opens for a much more dynamic understanding of culture than the descriptive understanding described above. According to this constructivist approach culture is not something people "have" but something people "do" in encounters with other people, in specific situations.

British professor Adrian Holliday contends that essentialism is a form of reductionism (Holliday 2010: 1). When a certain behaviour is described as typical for one culture – understood as a homogeneous essence – the opportunities for interactions are reduced. People negotiate and create culture in human encounters.

What we have described as cultures, may float, change, and mix with others and interact with one another, independent of national or other borders which cannot themselves be precisely determined.

> *A Norwegian student may sit on the tram in Oslo chatting with his Australian friend in Sydney or a Brazilian friend in Rio de Janeiro. They have developed their own chat language and their own jargon. They like the same hip-hop music, watch the same (American) movies, drink the same Coca-Cola, and eat the same burger at McDonald's wherever they go in the world. To which culture do these youngsters belong?*
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> *The same day the Australian may surf the waves of Cronulla beach, the Norwegian may go skiing in Nordmarka or visit his grandmother who does not know the slightest thing about cell phones. Do the grandmother and the student share a culture? Or is it the student and his friend in Sydney that share one? What do cultural borders mean in this case? Can one "belong to" different "cultures" at the same time? Or is culture the meaning one attaches to certain events in certain situations? (Dahl 2013: 40)*

If we understand culture the way Barth does, these students share some elements of culture; while family members share other elements, friends share yet different ones, etc. Situation and context are decisive.

The anthropologist James Clifford says that culture is not "a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted". Professor Hylland Eriksen contends that, in the real world, cultures cannot be delimited without contact points to each other.

> *Cultures are "…the ever changing common meanings that are established and changed when people do something together." (Eriksen 1998: 25).*

Obviously, skills, behaviours, and perceptions do not change every time that people do something together, but this statement represents a shift in perception of culture as something that has objectively identifiable existence to one of culture as something that is subjectively constructed in human encounters.

Phenomenological approach

The Danish communication researcher, Marita Svane goes still further when she states that culture has to be understood and interpreted as something the individual is and does (2004: 380). She builds on phenomenology. A phenomenon is what appears for a person, what is perceived by the senses. In phenomenological investigations the attention is directed towards the world as it is perceived by the observer.

In a phenomenological approach, culture becomes a frame of interpretation that is linked to each individual. The individual creates his or her interpretations based on this frame of interpretation or reference. Several individuals may share this frame of reference by creating intersubjective agreements – they belong to the same community of interpretation, one which will promote common understanding in day-to-day affairs. We can define the dynamic understanding of culture like this:

> *In a dynamic cultural understanding, culture is not something people have, but something individuals in particular situations make relevant in social games that involve other people (Dahl 2013:42).*

A lot of complex factors come into play: personal experience, others' experience, situation, own and others' goals, interaction, social relationships, constellations of power, etc. Such understanding of culture is necessarily dynamic. We need to observe the actual situation and then evaluate different interpretations, meanings, attitudes, and values in the interaction. When young people listen to each others' music and discuss what they like and what they do not like, when they load special hits, and share these with each

other, they contribute to the definition of what is supposed to be the music culture among young people. This does not only apply to the culture of music, but to fashions, trends, and to verbal and physical behaviour. In this sense, culture is always under "negotiation" between people who are interacting with each other. "The last word is never said" (Dahl 2013: 87). We participate in an "unending dialogue", as the Russian researcher of culture Mikhail Bakhtin might have said (Bakhtin 1981).

Culture as a verb

This should not be interpreted as meaning that a person can be a culture "in himself or herself". People share different cultural elements with each other and, depending on situation and status, choose which elements to bring into play in a particular encounter or event. We all carry with us cultural repertoires and activate different parts of these during different encounters or events. In this way we may contend that people are "carriers of culture" (Båtnes 2012). The German sociolinguist Ingrid Piller draws similar conclusions from B. Street's exhortation to treat culture as a verb – something we do. (Piller 2011: 84). If culture is understood as a verb, the concept changes from a delimited object to a process. The essentialist approach treats culture as something people have and belong to. The dynamic or process-related approach is constructivist – it treats culture as something people do, perform, or construct, most often in interaction with others. Instead of focusing on constraints of interaction, the process of interaction becomes the centre of interest.

With a constructivist understanding of culture it is probably more correct to use the plural form "cultures". Intercultural communication is cultures in interaction. However, cultures do not communicate: people do. People carry with them sets of cultural values and clues to understanding, which are mobilized when people interact. Relations between the participants, their respective power relations and the context surrounding the actual situation will determine which elements of our cultural repertoire are relevant. International youth culture illustrates the difficulty of putting people into cultural boxes.

Different labels – dynamic approach

These different labels may be rather confusing. I use the expression "dynamic cultural understanding" as a unifying concept for process-oriented and constructivist cultural approaches.

Researchers who use the dynamic constructivist cultural approach agree more or less on the following principles:

- People have different points of departure and different traditions. Historical differences may give rise to divergent and opposing interests.
- Culture is complex and always changing. Cultures cannot be regarded as fixed entities, but rather as several joint activities that one shares with some people, but not with others.
- Perceptions and rules may be contradictive, mixed and ambiguous. Rules must be interpreted (as indeed they will be interpreted) from different vantage points.
- People have different positions of power. Norms and rules that apply for one group in the center or an elite group, may not apply for others on the periphery.
- Culture is not something one has, but something one does. Cultures are arenas where competing concepts meet and interact with one another. New solutions may be negotiated and may gain ground.
- Actions and behaviours of individual people cannot be predicted accurately. However one may investigate which cultural elements people find relevant in a given situation.

To simplify, one may contend that dynamic cultural understanding pays attention to how we interpret the situations we constantly face, and how we choose to act. My own options are frequently influenced by

how others in my environment interpret a situation (Jensen 2013). We may agree that everyone who carries a Norwegian passport is Norwegian, but there are many ways of acting as a Norwegian.

Summing up different understandings of culture

A parallel to this discussion about culture is the realm of language. We all have individual ways of expressing ourselves. However, we meet on common ground and contribute to a common understanding of sounds and body language. Nevertheless, linguistic codes and pronunciation are constantly changing.

The following simplified table is an attempt to sum up different approaches to culture:

Descriptive essentialist culture	**Dynamic constructivist culture**
Culture is something one has	Culture is something one does
Culture is fixed and can be delimited	Culture is created in open interaction
Common values for everyone in the group	Different values for different members
People are governed by culture	People negotiate culture
Culture (values, rules, norms, etc.) can explain why people act as they do	Other factors (status, context, power, etc.) can explain why people act as they do
People's actions can be predicted	People's actions cannot be predicted

We may ask what these different approaches to culture mean in practice. If a teacher whose students are from a minority background applies a descriptive cultural approach, he or she will often generalize on the basis of earlier experience of students from the same ethnic group. The teacher will assume that parents share values with other parents from the same ethnic background and therefore expect newcomers to behave in similar ways. Religion, food, and dress habits are ascribed meaning according to earlier experience. The teacher will explain the behaviour of the parents by reference to general characteristics of their culture (descriptive). If they arrive late to a meeting, the teacher may assume that this is not due to their bus being late or that they did not catch it, but that it has to do with their cultural understanding of time: they will always be late.

If the descriptive essentialist cultural approach is the framework of understanding it means:

- that one seeks common traits between persons of the same cultural background
- that one primarily tries to explain the behaviour of the persons in terms of their culture

If the teacher applies a dynamic constructivist cultural approach, the teacher's experience with parents from a different ethnic background may be the same, but the experience will be utilized differently. Rather than generalizing, he may try to find out why the parents act as they do in this particular context. What bearing do domestic circumstances have on the situation? How do available means of transport, age, gender, number of siblings, education, employment, and living conditions affect the behaviour of the parents? Have encounters with other minorities and with Norwegian society at large altered the parents' behaviour.

If the dynamic constructivist cultural approach is the framework of understanding it means:

- that culture is created (intersubjectively) when people interact with each other.

- that culture does not mean that members of a cultural group are identical.
- that gender, age, education and the situation itself may influence behaviour more than culture

Conclusion - Consequences for the study of intercultural communication

Communication researcher Øystein Lund-Johannessen has pointed out that "the dynamic and process oriented concept of culture depends on an essentialist point of departure […] The timely criticism of essentialism does not imply that we have a new and more effective tool for analysis." (Haus 2003: 32, 34). The social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad states that it is impossible to avoid essentialist generalizations and stereotypes, even when the purpose is to show how problematic such stereotypes may be. (2002: 53, 134). Probably we need both: a descriptive essentialist as well as a dynamic constructivist cultural approach.

We need descriptive essentialist approaches to culture:

- when we are searching for traits that are common to people with similar cultural backgrounds
- when we try to explain people's behaviour and acts in terms of their culture
- when we want to compare cultures
- when describing cultural differences
- We need dynamic constructivist approaches to culture
- when we want to observe how culture is created in the course of interaction
- when we observe individual actors communicating with each other
- when factors such as sex, age, education, power and the situation itself may be important.
- when we want to understand how people behave
- when crossing cultural borders

In the situation outlined at the beginning of this paper, His Holiness the Dalai Lama acted according to expected cultural norms when he met King Carl Gustaf of Sweden, but he did not perform according to these norms when he met King Olav of Norway. Humans do not act automatically, as robots do. We need both descriptive essentialist and dynamic constructivist approaches to explain what happens when humans interact.

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