

Conceptualising Culture

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Abstract

Many human resource management and cross-cultural researchers have identified and discussed the importance of culture and its impact on human resource practice. Yet, despite this, a common understanding and agreement on the definition of culture (including variations of culture) has not yet been reached.

This research note critically reviews the way culture has been conceptualised by different writers in different discipline areas and analyses and compares some of the key researchers' definitions including the different levels and forms of culture. It shows that there are clearly similarities in the different approaches and terms used to identify and define culture. This might be a starting point for creating a framework or basis for a more generally understood set of meanings in the terms used to explain culture. This would help communication across academic disciplines and between academics and practitioners, and could be of great importance to the development of practical approaches to the management of people in a cross-cultural context.

Keywords: culture, human resource management, cross-cultural management

Introduction

Due to increased mobility in the global labour market and the internationalisation of business, many organisations are confronted with the challenge of managing an increasingly culturally diverse workforce. This means managing human beings with different work values, attitudes, and behaviour. It is also important to recognise that managers within organisations hold particular sets of assumptions, ideas, and beliefs about how to manage their human resources which are strongly influenced by their cultural background. Many human resource management and cross-cultural researchers (Hofstede, 1984; Laurent, 1986; Schneider, 1997) have identified and discussed the importance of culture and its impact on human resource practice:

human resource management practices are likely to be most sensitive to cultural diversity as they are designed by culture bearers in order to handle other culture bearers (Laurent, 1986: 96).

Over the last 10-15 years the management literature has burgeoned with texts which seek to explain cross-cultural differences and to guide managers through the cultural maze. Yet, despite the fact that academics and practitioners have increasingly acknowledged the importance of culture (and in particular national culture) for organisations, a common understanding and agreement on the definition of culture (including variations of culture) has not yet been reached.

This research note discusses some of the key issues which arise when attempting to conceptualise culture. The aim is to identify common threads among researchers and their approaches to defining culture. The authors critically review the way culture has been conceptualised by different writers in different discipline areas and analyse and compare some of the key researchers' definitions including the different levels and forms of culture. Similarities within the different approaches and concepts could serve as a basis or framework for a more generally understood set of meanings in the terms used to explain culture.

Discussion

Literature in the field often quotes Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952) identification of 164 different definitions of culture, or Ajiferuke and Boddewyn's (1970: 154) suggestion that 'culture is one of those items that defy a single all purpose definition and there are almost

as many meanings of culture as people using the term'. Tayeb (1994: 431) argues that 'culture is too fundamental to be solved through tighter definition'. And Hofstede (1983: 77) states that 'there is no commonly accepted language to describe a complex thing such as a culture... In the case of culture such a scientific language does not exist'.

The term culture is used in a wide range of social sciences (e.g. anthropology, sociology, psychology), and it has therefore different meanings in the different fields. However, after reviewing and comparing concepts of culture suggested within different disciplines, the authors came to the conclusion that many, more recently developed definitions of culture, are mainly based on two early definitions, namely Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) value orientations, and Inkeles and Levison's (1969) predictions of common human problems (see also Schneider, 1997: 31). The former research couple, two anthropologists, recognised the problem of scale and argued that the formulation and application of cultural concepts had been 'too particularised to single cultures to permit systematic comparisons between cultures and, at the same time, too grossly generalised to allow for the variations within cultures' (1961: 3). They felt that most of the earlier cultural definitions were limited inasmuch as they did not consider the cultural variations within and among cultures. In their view culture consists of several elements which they see as value

orientations. In this context they defined values as 'central core of meanings' (1961: 2). Inkeles and Levison (1969: 447) concentrated on a limited number of psychological issues to describe model personalities and national-character, which firstly,

should be found in adults universally, as a function both of maturational potentials common to man and of sociocultural characteristics common to human societies. [and secondly] they should have functional significance for the individual personality as well as for the social system, in that their patterning in the individual will affect his readiness to establish, accept, maintain, or change a given sociocultural pattern.

Both definitions aimed to identify common human problems which are shared by all human groups, but which are mastered in different ways. Many subsequent authors adapted this approach. The following example shows how similar the definitions of Kluckhohn/Strodtbeck and Inkeles/Levison are to more recent ones of Schein (1985) and Hofstede (1984). The latter have been chosen for comparison as both are well known and highly respected in their fields of organisational culture and cross-cultural management.

As can be seen from Table 1 Schein's (1985) five dimensions relate closely to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) value orientations although the latter view culture from an anthropologists perspective whereas

Table 1:
Comparison of Kluckhohn/Strodtbeck's (1961: 12) value orientations and Schein's basic assumptions (1985: 14)

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961)	Schein (1985)
What is the character of human nature?	
What is the relation between man to nature?	Relation to environment?
Nature of reality, time, space?	What is the temporal focus of human life?
What is the modality of activity?	Nature of human activity?
What is the relationship of men to other men?	Nature of human relationship?

Table 2:
Comparison of Inkeles and Levison's (1969) description of national character and Hofstede's (1984) four dimensions of culture

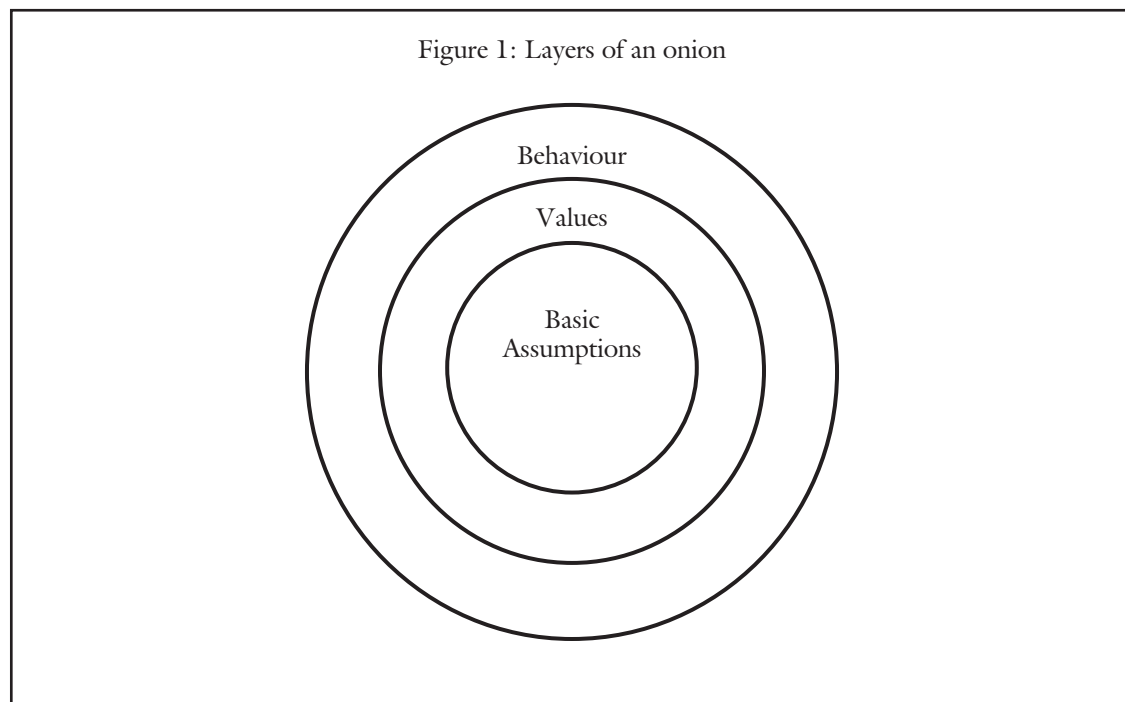
Inkeles and Levison (1969)	Hofstede (1984)
Relation to authority	Power Distance
Conception of self, in particular a) relation between individual and society	Individualism vs Collectivism
b) the individual concept of masculinity and femininity	Masculinity vs Femininity
Ways of dealing with conflicts, including the control of aggression and the expression of feelings	Uncertainty Avoidance

Schein concentrates on organisational culture. In Table 2 the similarities between Hofstede's four dimensions and Inkeles and Levison's predictions of common human problems are also clearly recognisable.

The review reveals that most authors agree that culture is a very complex term and difficult to define in words. Culture consists of several elements of which some are implicit and others are explicit. Most often these elements are explained by terms such as behaviour, values, norms, and basic assumptions.

To simplify these classifications of manifestations of culture many authors use the layers of an onion as a metaphor:

Furthermore, he distinguishes between desired and desirable values - 'what people actually desire versus what they think ought to be desired' (1984: 19). In this way Hofstede distinguishes between statistical norms as standards to assess desired values, that is to say 'values actually held by the majority' (1984: 19), and absolute norms, that is to say ideological beliefs, to express desirable values. Trompenaars (1993: 23) argues that norms 'give us a feeling of 'this is how I normally should behave'', whereas values is a feeling of 'this is how I aspire or desire to behave'. Trompenaars' definition of norms seems to be very similar to Hofstede's desired values whereas Trompenaars' view of values corre-



The shallow, first layer is behaviour and represents the explicit culture. The implicit culture includes a second and deeper layer namely values. The core of culture is formed by basic assumptions.

Similar to culture, values and norms are terms used in all social sciences and have therefore different, though not unrelated meanings. Hofstede (1984) for example, sees values as unconscious and conscious feelings, which manifest themselves in human behaviour. Values differ by intensity and direction. Hofstede (1984: 19) explains this as follows:

If we "hold" a value, this means that the issue involved has a certain relevance for us (intensity) and that we identify certain outcomes as "good" and others as "bad" (direction).

sponds to Hofstede's definition of desirable values.

The lack of clarity between researchers on the different meanings of the terms used to describe cultural elements supports the fact that so far it has not been possible to find a common language to define such a complex idea as culture. One reason for this might be that researchers come from different fields in which terms have different meanings. Furthermore, the cultural background of the researcher might influence the view on terms such as culture, values, norms, and so on:

The English term 'culture', whatever we take it to mean in the Anglo-phone English environment, does not necessarily find unproblematic equivalents in other languages and cultures - and this insight applies not only

to the term culture, but to the entirety of language, including all those words and concepts which a cross-cultural analyst might choose to regard as analytical (Tayeb, 1994: 431).

Another distinction between the re-viewed studies on culture reveals that early researchers take a more philosophical approach to their definition of culture. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) value orientations include universal issues that are faced by every human being. The models of recent writers seem more simplified ("layers of onion"). This might be due to the audience the different writers want to address and again the discipline area they are coming from: In the 50s and 60s cultural issues might have been relevant mainly to academics and social scientists whereas through organisational changes (internationalisation and globalisation) and population shifts (e.g. migrations) in the 80s and 90s, academics in business schools and practitioners have become more aware of the impact culture has on management practices and organisations.

Once the different elements of culture have been identified, many researchers combine culture with another term to define its boundaries. Pizam (1993) for example, argues that culture exists at various levels of society. Accordingly, he created a "hierarchy of cultures." The national culture is a geographical distinction, based on the physical boundaries of the nation state, whereas industry cultures, occupational cultures, corporate cultures, and organisational structure and managerial practices form distinctive patterns of behaviour of a social unit. Many other authors use similar approaches and define the boundaries of culture through layers of culture (Hofstede, 1994), or through different subcultures (Schein, 1985). Again, similarities are clearly recognisable between the approaches by different authors to define culture's boundaries.

So far, a majority of cross-cultural researchers have focused their research on national cultures (Hofstede, 1984; Tayeb, 1988; Laurent, 1983). However, there are limitations when defining culture by equating it with nations. First, researchers have to agree on how to define nation. Only few authors do so. For example, Hofstede (1994: 12) argues that nations are political units 'into which the entire world is divided and to one of which every human being is supposed to belong - as manifested by her or his passport'. Passport nationality however, might only be a superfi-

cial definition. In today's world people have much more opportunity to live and work within cultures different to their own than in the past. This might lead them to adopt, at least to some degree, some of the cultural values and basic assumptions shared by the host culture. Furthermore, it is questionable whether a country, or nation-state, can be used as a surrogate definition for culture. Most authors agree that nations may contain different cultures or subcultures within the national borders. National boundaries are often artificially created and do not necessarily represent culturally homogeneous populations. Tayeb (1994) quotes Chapman (1992: 432) who argues that

the nation state is essentially a western- and northern-European invention; elsewhere the nationstate is a novelty, and corresponds even less to any sense of cultural homogeneity or identity. Throughout history, national political boundaries have been arbitrarily drawn, cutting across cultural/linguistic groupings. They are internally riven by divisions of class, region, and ethnicity. They also change over time. Their internal divisions are commonly such that cultural frontiers are far from being reflected by political frontiers.

This is particularly obvious in ex-colonial nations where the borders 'still reflect the colonial legacy [and] where national borders correspond more to the logic of the colonial powers than to the cultural dividing lines of the local populations' (Hofstede, 1994: 12).

Many studies have compared national culture with other types of culture - in particular with organisational cultures (Morden, 1995; Clark and Mueller, 1996; Smith, 1992). The term organisational culture has, according to Hofstede et al (1990), its roots in the US academic literature and started to gain popularity in the late 70s and is thus a relatively recent addition. The opinions differ when it comes to a conclusion or decision about the degree of influence which national culture exerts on organisational cultures or the other way round. Early writers, such as Evan (1975: 110) argue that 'the impact of culture on organisational systems will decline', whereas more recent writers' (Laurent, 1983: 95) research findings provide 'an illustration of nationally bounded collective mental maps about organisations that seem to resist convergence effects from increased professionalisation of management and intensity of international business'. Other authors who investigated the relationship between national and organisational cultures came to similar

conclusions and emphasise the 'salient role to national characteristics in the explanation and prescription of events inside and surrounding organisations' (Clark and Mueller, 1996: 125).

Few studies have focused on comparisons between the influence of national cultures and other levels of culture. Pizam et al (1997: 127) compared nationality and industry cultures and their impact on managerial behaviour in the hospitality industry and concluded that 'nationality cultures have a stronger effect on managerial behaviour than the culture of the hotel industry'. The fact that there are only few studies of comparisons between national and other levels of culture might be due to the thin and unclear borderlines between the different layers of culture. Furthermore, some of these layers of culture interrelate and it might be possible that the characteristics of one subculture contradict with the characteristics of another subculture. Hofstede (1994: 10) for example, argues that 'in modern society they are often partly conflicting: for example, religious values may conflict with generation values; gender values with organisational practices'.

Conclusion

This research note has shown that culture is a very complex term and very difficult to define. Many researchers have made attempts to conceptualise culture and to define its boundaries. At first glance it seems that definitions and concepts in the different discipline areas differ. However, at a closer look there are clearly similarities in the different approaches and terms used to identify and define culture. This might be a starting point for creating a framework or basis for a more universalistic and interdisciplinary approach to conceptualise culture and its different levels and boundaries.

It is the contention of the authors that a starting point of shared understanding about the terms relating to culture is increasingly important in today's world. 'Culture' is a concept used both by academic researchers and management practitioners. It underpins approaches to research methodology in different areas of the social sciences and it informs human resource policies and practices. Greater clarity in our use of words relating to culture, and in our conceptualisation of what culture is, will help communication across academic disciplines and between academics and practitioners. This will help all of us, both in our understanding of the world and in the devel-

opment of practical approaches to the management of people.

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