

# Critical reflections on some recent definitions of “culture”

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## Abstract

At the outset the historical background of attempts to define “culture” is briefly sketched. Then the definitions found in cross-cultural texts published between 2009 and 2011 are roughly divided into three categories according to where they locate “culture”, and whether they present single or multiple definitions. Each definition is critically examined, as are the relationships between them, and it is shown that several of the definitions are logically and substantively incompatible. It is concluded (with Alfred Lang) that there can be no generally agreed definition of culture, and an alternative proposal is put forward.

## Keywords

Cross-cultural psychology, definitions of “culture”, history, research styles, textbooks

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

Lewis Carroll: *Through the looking glass*.

## Some historical background

The term “culture” has been polysemous for a long time. Originally it stems from “cultivation” as in “agriculture”, although Cicero already used *cultura mentis* figuratively to refer to philosophy. For centuries it meant producing or developing

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something, such as “the culture of barley” or “the culture of the arts”, and is still employed in this sense as in “culture of bacteria”. It was only in 18th-century France that the single term *culture* began to be used and to acquire the sense of training or refinement of the mind or taste. It was rapidly extended to refer to the qualities of an educated person, and has retained that meaning until today. In English, in the latter part of the 19th century, the writer Matthew Arnold held a somewhat similar view, describing culture as “the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world, and thus with the history of the human spirit” (Arnold 1873). At around the same time, the anthropologist Edward Tylor famously began his definition with the words “Culture, or civilization . . . is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, [etc.] and any other capacities acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor [1871] 1958, p. 1). Let me just note in passing that the terms “culture” and “civilization” historically had somewhat different meanings in German and French.<sup>1</sup> Much of this story is well told in Kroeber & Kluckhohn’s (1952) classic monograph, which listed some 160 definitions and added their own. This had a pervasive influence on cross-cultural psychology and will therefore be cited in full:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; 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 conditioning elements of further action. (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181)

Kroeber and Kluckhohn also speculated about likely changes: “The main respects in which, we suspect, this formula will be modified and enlarged in the future are as regards (1) the interrelations of cultural forms: and (2) variability and the individual” (1952, p. 181). These forecasts were not really born out. They noted that we have many concepts but no proper *theory* of culture; it is questionable whether there could be any such theory, for reasons that will become apparent. During the subsequent half-century, a vast literature grew around the topic of culture, and the label “culture” spread from the social sciences into common parlance.

In psychology, cross-cultural studies began with the work of Rivers during the Cambridge Expedition to Torres Straits (Rivers, 1901), but that was followed by a fallow period of almost half a century. It re-started about the time of Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s (1952) monograph, and its early practitioners were too busy with their researches to agonize over the meaning of culture. The first two decades or so, cross-cultural psychologists worked as a rule directly with people in other cultures in face-to-face situations, and their studies were focused on topics like cognition, perception, and developmental and social issues. When texts of cross-cultural psychology started to appear, their authors felt obliged to explain what

culture was all about, and a couple of examples will be quoted which illustrate the divergent characterizations that were offered.

In his widely acclaimed book, Hofstede, first cited an earlier definition by Kluckhohn (1951) similar to, but not identical with, Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952) later one. Then he wrote: "... I treat culture as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another.' This is not a complete definition ... but *it covers what I have been able to measure*" (1984, p. 21, emphasis added). These words foreshadowed a new approach in cross-cultural psychology, which has become increasingly social, statistical, and indirect, in the sense that the only contact with participants is through the group administration of questionnaires and scales.

By the time Brislin (1990) edited a book on "Applied Cross-cultural Psychology", that process was well under way. However, it had not affected his definition of culture, which is an impoverished version of Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952). His introduction leads the reader very gently, almost as if she were a school student:

Consider people who have travelled to many parts of the world. They will have observed (a) recurring patterns of behavior that (b) differ from place to place but that (c) within those places are observable generation after generation. Indeed, (d) adults have the responsibility of ensuring that members of new generations adopt those recurring patterns of behavior that mark people as well-socialized individuals. The term that best summarizes the recurring pattern of behaviors is *culture*. (Brislin, 1990, p. 10)

Later in the same book, this is elaborated in somewhat more sophisticated language, but the essentials remain the same; for instance, there is no indication that culture could ever change.

These are of course only examples of several definitions current at that time, and since then they have become further diversified. In order to demonstrate this variety, and review some remarkably dissimilarities in ways in which culture has been conceptualised, four recent texts have been scrutinized. They are as follows:

- A. Wyer, Chiu, & Hong (2009) *Understanding culture*
- B. Keith (2011) *Cross-cultural psychology*
- C. Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam (2011) *Cross-cultural psychology*
- D. Matsumoto & van de Vijver (2011) *Cross-cultural research methods in psychology*

All are books with multiple authors, and with the exception of [C] are edited. In discussions of particular authors their names will be preceded by a letter denoting the book to which they contributed.

## The multiplicity of current views

The definitions will be ordered roughly and rather arbitrarily into three categories, namely (1) culture as external; (2) as internal, or internal *and* external; and (3) groups of several definitions. The comments provided will generally relate to logical coherence and considerations of content rather than take the form of judgements of “right” and “wrong”. This because there is not, and I think cannot be, an absolute criterion for evaluation.

### *Culture as external*

**Schwartz: Culture matters. National value cultures, sources, and consequences. [A, pp. 127–162].**

I view culture as a latent, hypothetical variable that we can measure only through its manifestations. The underlying normative value emphases that are central to culture influence and give a degree of coherence to these manifestations. In this view, culture is outside the individual. It is not located in the minds and actions of individual people. Rather, it refers to the press to which individuals are exposed by virtue of living in a particular social system. (Schwartz, 2009, p. 128)

The first sentence applies to practically all psychological variables and not just values, seen here as central to culture. The “normative value emphases” underlie what? It is not really clear what exactly these “manifestations” are. The measurements consist of questionnaires and scales that are clearly tapping the minds of individuals. Schwartz’s pronouncements partake of the same mystique as Durkheim’s “collective representations” that were also seen as independent of individuals. The question of the relationship between culture and the “social system” is not addressed, but it seems to be implied that they are two facets of the same phenomenon.

**Cole & Parker: Culture and cognition. [B, pp. 133–159].**

This is a more subtle and closely argued conception, originally put forward by Cole (1996), that has to be shown in greater detail.

[We] think of culture as a dynamically changing environment that is transformed by the artefacts created by prior generations...an artefact is an aspect of the material world that has been modified over the history of its incorporation into goal-directed human thought and action...an artefact is *simultaneously ideal (conceptual) and material*. It is material in that it is embodied in physical form, whether in the morphology<sup>2</sup> of a spoken, written, or signed word, a ritual, or an artistic creation, or as a solid object like a pencil. It is ideal in that this material form has been shaped by historical participation in (successful, adaptive) human activities...culture can be seen as the *medium* of human development which [prepares humans] for interaction with the world. (Cole & Parker, 2011, p. 135)

[There are also] secondary artefacts [which] play a central role in preserving and transmitting the kinds of social inheritance referred to as recipes, beliefs, norms, conventions, and the like. (Cole & Parker, 2011, p. 135)

The reason for classifying this definition as “external” is the clear statement that it describes culture as “a changing environment”. It is partly rooted in the Marxist socio-historical school of which Cole is a prominent expositor. What seems to me somewhat problematic in this unusual and ingenious approach is the postulated relationship between primary and secondary artefacts; the latter are said to be *representations* of primary ones. Take for instance a ritual: what is to be taken as its representation? Perhaps the distinction is not as clear-cut as is suggested. Incidentally, a majority of current definitions of culture put the stress on what are here called “secondary artefacts”.

**Bond & van de Vijver: Making scientific sense of cultural differences in psychological outcomes: Unpacking the Magnum Mysterium [D, pp. 75–100].**

This does not really contain a definition of culture, but is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of culture to a variable that can be made to vanish. The argument is quite elaborate and turns on the development of models that will allow prediction.

If we have completely unpackaged the cultural difference by using a construct to predict the outcome, then we have effectively “made culture disappear”. In this vein, Lam et al. (2005) made cultural differences in affective forecasting disappear by unpackaging them with a culturally equivalent measure of focal thinking. As the authors concluded from their analysis, “defocused Euro-Canadians and East Asians made equally moderate affective forecasts”. (Bond & van de Vijver, 2011, pp. 85–86)

This result is rather less impressive than might appear at first sight, as a hypothetical example will show. Suppose we have two cultures, X and Y. People in X are on average short and fat, and Y are tall and thin. Studies have established a cultural difference: Ys are better runners than Xs. We can eliminate culture by comparing people of equal bodily features in the two cultures—wonderful!

But that is not the whole story:

Even if we completely unpackage the cultural difference, there is no end to model elaboration, because there is always more outcome variance to predict – gender, education level, and other categorical factors may also relate to the outcome. (Bond & van de Vijver, 2011, p. 86)

This candid admission reveals that model-building is an activity capable of almost endless expansion, a veritable labour of Sisyphus! Anyway, this kind of view of culture as a variable is typical of the statistical approach, now in ascendance.

### *Culture as internal or internal and external*

#### **Hong: A dynamic constructivist approach to culture: Moving from describing culture to explaining culture [A, pp. 3–23].**

The ambitious objective here is to pin down the *causal mechanism* through which culture exerts its influence. Hong defines

... culture as *networks of knowledge* consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world ... it is ... shared ... , among a collection of interconnected individuals who are often demarcated by race, ethnicity, or nationality; (b) externalised by rich symbols, artefacts, social constructions, and social institutions (e.g. cultural icons, advertisements and news media); (c) used to form the common ground for communication among members; (d) transmitted from one generation to the next ... ; (e) undergoing continuous modifications ... (2009, p. 4)

A few comments on some of these items are in order: (a) they need not be interconnected in any direct sense; and the significance of “race, ethnicity, and nationality” needs further elaboration in this context, especially as it is also stated that these types of groups, while “carriers and agents” of culture, are not responsible for the *causal potential* of culture; (b) the concrete examples offered are rather odd; (c) is unusual, but no doubt correct in an important sense; (d) and (e) are frequently listed.

Moving from definition to supposed explanation, Hong writes that ... “The causal potential of culture resides in the *activation* and of the shared cultural knowledge, which brings about affective, cognitive, and behavioural consequences” (p. 4). Subsequently (pp. 7–9), this key concept of “activation” is more fully discussed, and turns out to be rather trivial. It seems to boil down to the fact that when people encounter particular situations, they will bring to bear their cultural knowledge (in so far as it is relevant) for arriving at their response.

This notion of “causal potential” requires more detailed scrutiny. It assumes that culture as such can be treated as a cause, which is questionable since there is so little agreement as to the precise nature of it. But supposing that culture can be a cause, then it must function as such nearly all the time. Given Hong’s exhaustive definition of culture as “networks of knowledge” together with associated affects, it seems to follow that most ordinary routines as well as exceptional situations are governed by culture. In sum, this approach fails to keep its promise of providing an *explanation* of culture.

#### **Oyserman & Sorensen: Understanding cultural syndrome effects on what and how we think [A, pp. 25–52].**

Oyserman & Sorensen begin by saying that the usual way of viewing culture is to regard it as a single unified whole “isomorphic [sic] with one’s country of origin” (2009, p. 25). As against that they put forward the notion of culture as multidimensional and

...propose that societies socialize for and individuals have access to a diverse set of overlapping and contradictory processes and procedures for making sense of the world and that the processes and procedures that are cued in the moment influence the values, relationality, self-concept, well-being, and cognition that are salient in the moment. (2009, p. 25)

This suggests that people have access to a range of “cultural syndromes”, a concept put forward by Triandis (about whom more below). The individual can pick out from this array “what is relevant at the moment”.

A critical issue is what Oyserman and Sorensen understand by a “cultural syndrome”, and this is what they say:

...we operationalize cultural syndromes as patterned beliefs, attitudes, and mindsets that go together in a loosely defined network: when one aspect of a syndrome is primed, other aspects of the syndrome are also likely to be active and available in working memory. (2009, p. 27)

Although the authors explicitly repudiate Hong’s (2009) approach, it seems to me that there is a certain similarity between this and Hong’s concept of “activation”.

The idea that culture is not monolithic and can contain incompatible elements, and that different cultures will have things in common, makes good sense. However, expressing this in terms of syndromes as formulated by Triandis is more questionable. In one important publication he defined a cultural syndrome as:

...a pattern of shared attitudes, beliefs, categorizations, self-definitions, norms, role definitions, and values that is organized around a theme that can be identified among those who speak a particular language, during a specific historical period, and in a definable geographic region. (Triandis, 1996, p. 408)

Examples of such themes are “tightness” (many rigid norms strictly enforced versus fewer norms that are more flexible and loosely enforced); or “Complexity” (number of cultural elements such as job types: fewer in traditional rural versus modern urban settings); another, most famous and pervasive in recent cross-cultural psychology, is individualism/collectivism. These themes are attributes of societies, and in order to relate them to individuals in a culture some linking is required. This can be done, Oyserman and Sorensen suggest, through “priming” designed to activate pre-existing tendencies of a cultural syndrome continuum. In one of their studies the task was to circle in a story either self-related terms such as I, me, myself, which are expected to trigger individualism, or plural pronouns like we, us, ourselves, that would enhance collectivist tendencies. Such methods were apparently quite successful.

Generally, it is difficult to reconcile the syndromes, which, according to Triandis, are features of cultures and/or social systems, with those of Oyserman and Sorensen said to pertain to individuals.

**Wan and Chiu: An intersubjective consensus approach to culture. The role of intersubjective norms versus cultural self in cultural processes [A, pp. 79–91].**

According to this view “culture consists of symbolic elements that members of a culture *generally believe* to be important to or characteristic of the culture” (Wan & Chiu, 2009, p. 80). Such beliefs may or may not be well grounded, but what matters is the consensus. In order to find out what these beliefs are, one simply asks members of a given culture what they think are salient personality features, important beliefs, practices, etc. in that culture. In so far as the respondents are in agreement on particular aspects, these can be accepted as central to the culture as seen by its members. Unlike the preceding formulation this one is seemingly straightforward, and the authors at one point issue a disclaimer, stating that inter-subjective consensus is not the only defining aspect of culture. They contrast it with what they call the *statistical* approach to culture, which defines it as the average or modal values, beliefs, personal attributes, and practices that are endorsed or displayed by an average member of the culture.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently the picture becomes more complex when the notion of a “cultural self” is introduced, which is constituted by that part of culture, which is internalised. This is distinguished from people’s consensual beliefs about their culture, which will overlap to varying extents with their cultural self. Furthermore,

... the statistical norms based on the statistical aggregates of cultural members’ self-reported values and beliefs often diverge from the inter-subjective assumptions cultural members hold about their in-group members’ values and beliefs.... Similarly, people’s perceptions of the personality traits prevalent in their culture have been found to be quite different from the actual self-rated personality traits that they themselves possess. (Wan & Chiu, 2009, p. 87)

So things now seem to become rather confused, with several competing aspects. There is the statistically determined aspect, the “cultural self”, and the consensually typical features of the culture. If one asks what most clearly characterises a culture, the answer is probably to be found in the following statement; “When people in a culture agree on what symbolic elements are important to the culture, *these elements become the core elements of the culture*” (Wan & Chiu, 2009, p. 80).

In thus giving priority, when defining culture, to people’s consensual perceptions of what is important in their culture, these authors are distinctly unusual.

### *Overviews of selected definitions*

In two of the texts, the authors surveyed a range of definitions, without specifically favouring any particular one.

**Keith: Introduction to cross-cultural psychology [B, pp. 3–19].**



Keith (2011) provides a concise outline of various definitions of culture, starting with Heine's (2008, p. 3) snappy 2-part definition:

- a. information (e.g. beliefs, habits, ideas) learned from others, that is capable of influencing behavior; and
- b. a group of people who share context and experience.

The only merit of this formula is brevity. As regards (a), most information is gleaned from other people and much of it is capable of affecting behaviour; so it fails to discriminate between information that is or is not cultural-specific; (b) similarly, this definition fits practically all groups that have some permanence, e.g. the family.

Next, the fuller definition by Matsumoto (2009) is cited:

A unique meaning and information system, shared by a group and transmitted across generations, that allows the group to meet basic needs of survival, by coordinating social behavior to achieve a viable existence, to transmit successful social behaviors, to pursue happiness and well-being, and to derive meaning from life. (p. 3)

Keith points out that this is similar to other definitions and that the common element is the notion of "a group with shared behaviors, values, and beliefs that are passed from generations to generations" (2011, p. 3). What he fails to mention is that this goes back to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), also incorporating recent evolutionary ideas about adaptations. Matsumoto further added some politically correct elements like "the pursuit of happiness". While that phrase was contained in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, it is not likely that it figures in evolutionary processes!

Another definition cited by Keith is that of Triandis, Kurowski, Tecktiel, & Chan (1993) who see culture

...in terms of objective and subjective characteristics that increase the odds of survival, provide satisfaction for people sharing an environmental context, and are shared via language. Objective elements of culture...are the tangible objects of culture (architecture, food, manufactured products), whereas subjective culture comprises such human elements as social, economic, political, and religious practices. It is of course the subjective human elements that are of most interest to psychologists. (cited in Keith, 2011, pp. 3-4)

First it must be said that this is Keith's version of Triandis et al., and the reference is to an article in which the definition of culture was only peripheral. Yet it is true that the simple objective/subjective dichotomy has been quite widely adopted, but the distinction is less clear-cut than is often assumed; e.g. why are "practices" here described as subjective?

Finally, Keith mentions Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen (2002) who, he says, call culture just “the shared way of life of a group of people.” But as the next section will show, that was followed later by a quite lengthy discussion of the issue.<sup>4</sup>

**Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam [C, pp. 224–229].**

In this edition, the brief definition mentioned above is on page 4, presumably to avoid confusing people at the outset. The section on “Conceptions of culture” begins with an historical overview, headed by Tylor (1871). Then the definitions by Linton (1936) and Herskovits (1948) are listed which are, respectively, “the total social heredity of mankind” and “the man-made part of the human environment”; it is stated that these are now widely used, but that is questionable.<sup>5</sup>

The categories of definitions put forward by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) in their famous monograph are listed, the headings being as follows: 1. Descriptive, 2. Historical, 3. Normative, 4. Psychological, 5. Structural, and 6. Genetic.

The ecocultural framework used in this text incorporates many features of these definitions. However, it is most closely related to the genetic definition. It adopts the view that culture is adaptive to both the natural habitat and to socio-political contexts (the first two origins) and that the third origin (creative processes) are represented as feedback from human accomplishments to other features of the framework. This dynamic view of how populations relate to their ecosystem treats culture not as a stable end-product, but as part of a constantly changing system, both adapting to, and impacting on, its habitat. (p. 225)

It seems rather odd that this key statement is relegated to a footnote! At any rate, the classic definition by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), already cited above, is then offered.

Berry et al. (2011) comment that culture is both external and internal, positions they label C1 and C2 respectively. They note that C2, or “culture in the mind” gained ground during the 1970s, was adopted by Cole (1996) and Shweder (1990) who identify it with “cultural psychology”. They are wrong as regards Cole, as will be evident from the discussion of Cole and Parker (2011) above. They also quote the following from Geertz (1973) on page 226: “culture [is] in the mind of the people”. Yet on page 27 they say: “...it is important to note that Geertz (1973) warned against the ‘cognitive fallacy’ that ‘culture consists of mental phenomena’” (Berry et al., 2011). There is no comment on this seemingly blatant contradiction; but it is based on a misunderstanding of what Geertz was writing about. The quotation on page 227 of Berry et al. (2011) is incomplete, and its meaning has been misread. Here is the relevant part:

The cognitivist fallacy – that culture consists...of “mental phenomena which can...be analysed by formal methods similar to those of mathematics and logic” – is as destructive of an effective use of the concept [of culture] as are the behaviorist...fallacies...(Geertz, 1973, p. 12)

The term “cognitivist” here applies to an anthropological theory that applies formalist methods, and is quite different from cognitivism in psychology. Geertz (1973) is *not* denying that culture consists of mental phenomena, as he stated on p. 89 when he described it as “patters of meaning”. Geertz was therefore not contradicting himself.

Next, more recent definitions (including some here discussed in A above) are briefly mentioned, including two by prominent psychological anthropologists who concur that both C1 and C2 together constitute culture. The rise of post-modern anthropology, which wants to dispense altogether with the concept of culture, is noted, and critics of that persuasion are cited. As might have been expected, Berry et al. say that “In this text we adopt the view that “culture” is still a useful notion, and accept that both views of culture (C1 and C2) are valid.” (2011, p. 228)

Finally, there is Kroeber’s (1917) notion of the *superorganic*, which holds that culture is a collective phenomenon over and above individuals. This position, generally long abandoned, is surprisingly resurrected by Berry at al. (2011) as

...an important one for cross-cultural psychology since it permits us to employ the group-individual distinction in attempting to link the two, and possibly to trace the influence of cultural factors on individual psychological development and behavioural expression. (p. 229)

This is an odd confusion, since Kroeber understood the “superorganic” in the sense of Durkheim’s “collective representations”, which is quite different from what cross-cultural psychologists usually regard as the “group level”; the latter is *derived* from individual-level data.

Altogether, readers of the lists of definitions offered in this section are apparently expected to make up their own minds as to what they prefer.

## Discussion

More than half a century after Kroeber and Kluckhohn, and a literature that could easily fill a sizeable library, the most striking feature of these definitions is their diversity. While some are based on classic formulations, others are newly invented. Moreover, many of them are logically incompatible with each other. Here are a couple of examples: 1. the supposed location of culture is variously said to be (a) only in the mind or (b) both in the mind and in the material world created by humans; (c) external only (without specifying where). 2. (a) culture is treated as a “variable” by tough-minded advocates of measurement, while (b) others maintain that such a position entails a misconception of what constitutes culture. Some writers explicitly state that their own definition is *the* correct one and others are wrong.<sup>6</sup>

It is also interesting that several authors present empirical studies (their own and/or researches by others) in order to demonstrate that their particular definition of culture is the right one. The fact that they succeed in doing so (at least in their own estimation) shows the extraordinary malleability of the construct “culture”.

It must be stressed that “culture” is not a thing, but a social construct vaguely referring to a vastly complex set of phenomena. From these one is able to select when building one’s own definition—though of course there are constraints.<sup>7</sup> Stated in this way it seems quite obvious, but several of the contributors to these texts write as though there were objective criteria whereby the correctness of a definition could be judged; and that is also implicit in the efforts to support one’s definition by empirical evidence.

One imagines that readers of these texts are liable to become rather confused, especially since “culture”, like some Freudian terms, has now become part of our everyday vocabulary. As Kuper (1999, p. 2) put it in his excellent study: “*Everyone is into culture now*”. In its popular sense “culture” is usually coupled with a range of adjectives to indicate some undefined properties of a category, such as “adolescent culture”, “consumer culture”, “literary culture”, “tabloid culture”, “visual culture”, and so on. Such ordinary usage is unproblematic, it being understood that “culture” in this sense usually points vaguely to some characteristic ways of behaviour of a category of people. By contrast, social scientists have agonized over this for almost a century, without coming much nearer to an agreed solution.

What is one to conclude? Simply abandoning the term “culture” is not an option. This is because over the centuries, writers have struggled to convey something akin to our “culture” by using other expressions. In the 16th century, Montaigne, in his famous essay “on cannibals”, referred to the “opinions and customs” of a nation; in the 18th Hume wrote about the “moral causes” of the differences between peoples; Montesquieu mentioned the “spirit of a nation”; and Millar compared the “character and political institutions” of nations (for details, cf. Jahoda, 1993).

In sum, the concept of “culture” is probably indispensable, yet there is no way of escaping Alfred Lang’s (1997, p. 389) conclusion “that attempts at defining culture in a definite way are futile”. So what, if anything, can be done? My answer would be that much of the time it is quite practicable and defensible simply to *use* the term without seeking to define it. However, if either for a theoretical or empirical reason clarification is essential, then the author should explain the specific manner in which she employs the term “culture” in that particular context. Similarly, students should not be presented with a rigid formula or a *smorgasbord* of definitions, but given some insight into the ways the concept is useful in spite of the impossibility of pinning it down.

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## Notes

1. The terms “culture”, “*civilisation*”, and “*Kultur*” in English, French, and German respectively, have had, and continue to have, different connotations. In a brilliant

- study, Elias (1977, p. 6) wrote that these concepts “grow and change with the group whose expressions they are. The situation and history of the group is mirrored in them.” Cf. also Krewer & Jahoda (1993) and Jahoda (1993).
2. It is not very clear what “morphology” means in this context.
  3. It looks as though they were thinking of Kardiner’s (1939) “basic personality” or DuBois’s (1961) “modal personality”. However, these are not the kinds of concepts employed in current statistical approaches to cross-cultural psychology.
  4. Keith refers to the second edition (2002) of this text, while I have used the most recent (2011) edition.
  5. These and other early definitions of culture were influenced by Clark Wissler, especially his book *Man and culture* (1923).
  6. For instance, Oyserman and Sorensen (2009, pp. 25–26) state that Hong (2009) is wrong to assume that each society has only one culture.
  7. For instance no one would define culture in terms of nationality. Paradoxically, however, in practice nations are often treated as cultures.

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