**Defining Culture: Why are belief systems important?**

Vinita Vader

PRELIM PROPOSAL

Background:

The question of how culture is defined has been the subject matter of study across disciplines ranging from Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, and Political Science. The answer to the question “What is the meaning of culture?” remains unresolved. One could argue that there is a lack of consensus about what culture means across these disciplines or that they choose to focus on one part of the culture as compared to others. There is perhaps an argument contending in favor of all those aspects being important to the understanding of culture in varying capacities. There are parts of culture that one could say are more relevant to the cross-cultural understanding of people and also those that lend themselves to scalable models that can be applied to policy issues requiring an understanding of how certain communities function. In order to find these aspects, it is necessary to first understand how ‘culture’ as a term has evolved in its conceptualization over time.

This study will gather all the definitions starting from the compendium by Kroeber and Kluckhohn in 1952 until 2022. The obtained compendium will be analyzed for themes and patterns that emerge in the data (see Analysis plan). Several definitions of culture have been proposed, including those based on a priori theoretical assumptions and those emerging through the empirical analysis of data varying in their characteristic nature (for e.g., rituals, clothing, tool making techniques, worldviews, attitudes, etc.). Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) compiled definitions of culture from the 18th century onwards when the concept was initially accepted as a meaningful term standing for explanations for everything from the behaviors and thinking of a certain class of people in society to the peculiarities of a specific tribe in Tasmania. The term “culture” is invoked for providing explanations about how people behave, sanctions set in society, what is desirable, what is unacceptable, pottery techniques typically associated with a certain community, folk story versions specific to a community, and many other aspects of our everyday living. Several common themes have emerged as purported by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) and later by Baldwin et al (2006) (for example, culture as a genetic or problem-solving mode of explanation or culture as a meaningful symbolic system).

Several changes have taken place in the conception of culture. Movements in the form of migration and globalization due to several political, historical, and opportunistic reasons have posed greater challenges to the conventional understanding of culture, closely associated with one’s geographical proximity (for e.g., use of terms such as “Australian culture”). This conception supports the ideas of homogeneity in the characteristic ways of thinking, feeling and behaving in a group of people that could potentially lead to harmful effects such as stereotypical thinking and in extreme cases violence. Meanings proposed through generations of scientific study have led researchers to rely on certain aspects of culture as more salient than others.

If geographical proximities are not the most appropriate proxies for culture the question is what are the elements of culture that are essential for the study of this phenomena. The current study intends to build an understanding of the term culture based on all the definitions proposed so far and explores why the cognitive component consisting of values, beliefs, and world-views are the most critical means to explore the expanding nature of culture in a more globalized world. Although we cannot carry the territorial and geographical terrains where the culture originally belonged, what we can carry are the mindsets and associated with the original cultural context.

The meaning extraction method, used for analyzing the definitions, will try to understand the patterns in how culture as a concept has been conceived. The paper will further discuss which of the factors that emerge from the text analysis are crucial for operationalizing the definition of culture in the context of growing diversity and pluralism across the Western world.

References

Baldwin, J. R., Faulkner, S. L., Hecht, M. L., & Lindsley, S. L. (Eds.). (2006). *Redefining culture: Perspectives across the disciplines.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Berry, J. W., & Triandis, H. C. (2006). Culture. In K. Pawlik & G. d'Ydewalle (Eds.), *Psychological concepts: An international historical perspective* (pp. 47–62). Psychology Press/Taylor & Francis (UK).

Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1952). Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions. *Papers. Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, Harvard University*

Nunn N. Culture and the Historical Process. Economic History of Developing Regions. 2012; 27 (S1) : 108-126.

Saucier, G. (2022). Culture, personality, and the psychology of religion. In *Culture, Personality, and the Psychology of Religion*(pp. 1-92). Brill.

Major Preliminary Examination Proposal

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| --- | --- |
| Name: Vinita Vijay Vader | Has met with his/her Major Preliminary Examination Committee and together they propose the following: |

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| --- |
| Topic of student’s Preliminary Examination: Understanding the main components defining culture |
| Student’s main area of study: Culture |

The student’s preliminary reading list has been approved by the Committee:

\_\_X\_\_ Yes (***Please attach copy of reading list.****)*

Format of Exam: \_\_\_\_\_ Written Exam

\_\_X\_\_ Review Paper and Presentation

\_\_\_\_\_ Grant Proposal and Presentation

This proposal fulfills the goal of the major preliminary examination to demonstrate the student’s scholastic competence in a relatively broad area of psychology (for details, see Doctoral Student Handbook).

**Prelim Committee Members**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Print Faculty Names | Faculty Signatures | Date |
| Chair, Gerard Saucier |  |  |
| Sanjay Srivastava |  |  |
| Ryan Light |  |  |
| Dave Markowitz |  |  |

GEC Approval \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_