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Subjective Culture

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Abstract

The definition of subjective culture is followed by a listing of the elements of subjective culture and an examination of the content of each element and the methodological problems in studying that element.

INTRODUCTION

A broad definition of culture is that it is the human-made part of the environment. It can be split into material and subjective culture. Material culture consists of such elements as dress, food, houses, highways, tools, and machines. Subjective culture is a society's "characteristic way of perceiving its social environment" (Triandis, 1972, p. viii, 3). It consists of ideas about what has worked in the past and thus is worth transmitting to future generations. Language and economic, educational, political, legal, philosophical and religious systems are important elements of culture. Ideas about aesthetics, and how should people live with others are also important elements. Most important are unstated assumptions, standard operating procedures, and habits of sampling information from the environment.

Another way to think about culture is that culture is to society what memory is to individuals (Kluckhohn, 1954). The subjective part includes ideas about how to make the elements of material culture (e.g., how do we build a house), how to live properly, how to behave in relation to objects and people.

Much of our behavior is automatic, reflecting the way we have incorporated our culture. For instance, when you start driving you do not ask yourself "Should I drive to the right or to the left?" Unless you are aware that you are in a new country you start driving on the side you drove the previous day. In the USA and most of the European continent you drive on the right, without thinking about it. It is the way things are done. This can be called a "practice." Culture includes many practices.

One of the most important ways to study culture is to study the language that people use. But there are many other ways. We can look at what people do, ask people why they do it, ask people about their politics, philosophy, religion, education, or legal system. We can ask people whether they approve or disapprove of particular behaviors in various situations. We can present questionnaires, tests, inventories of different kinds and examine the responses that people make.

When we do such studies we need to keep in mind that culture is a shared pattern 0f beliefs, attitudes, norms, role perceptions, and values. For example, if we find that a particular person likes a particular painting that is not culture. But if we find that many members of a society respect a particular set of colors and shapes (say, a flag) that is culture. Thus, the first thing to pay attention to when we study culture is whether or not ideas are shared. The next thing to pay attention to is whether shared responses correspond to a language, a time period and a geographic region. Usually people who share a language dialect at a particular time and place are members of the same culture. For instance, people who speak one dialect of French may have a distinct culture from people who speak a different dialect of French, though they share many elements of French culture. People from one historical period, such the USA 1900, have to some extent a different culture from people in another historic period, say USA 2000. People in one geographic region may have a different culture from people in another geographic region, even though they speak the same language and are sampled at the same time.

For example, Canadians and Australians have much in common, but they also have distinct cultures.

Subcultures emerge because people share other elements, such as gender, physical type, neighborhood, occupation, standard of living, resources, climates, and so on. For example, lawyers all over world share some elements of subjective culture. Japanese lawyers have a subculture that differs from other lawyers as well as general Japanese culture. A nation consists of thousands of cultures, but many of these cultures have common elements.

It is obvious from what was just said that there are very many different ways to study culture. Just because there are so many ways to do it we need a strategy to do the job most economically. Focusing on some of the elements of subjective culture is one of the ways to proceed economically.

Elements of Subject Culture

Categories

We can learn much about a culture by analyzing the categories that people use. Indigenous psychologists study the meaning of specific words, such as the Japanese meaning of "amae," or the Greek meaning of "philotimos." Such words do not have a corresponding meaning in other languages, so they tell us much about a particular culture. "Amae" means something like expecting another person to indulge you. It is the kind of feeling one can find between a child and a mother. "Pilotimos" literally means friend of honor, and is a common adjective used by traditional Greeks to describe themselves (Triandis, 1972). It can be translated into "a person who does very frequently what family and friends expect done." Research has shown that Greeks in cities do not use this word to describe themselves as often as Greeks in rural districts and islands. In other words, this way we learn not only what the word means, but also who uses it and how frequently.

We can identify a category by noting that people give the same response to discriminably different stimuli. Our eye, for instance, is capable of discriminating 7,500,000 different color stimuli. But we do not have millions of words that refer to color. In fact, most of us get along well with a few dozen color words. One green is as good as any other green; one red is just like all other reds. In short, green and red are categories.

When we study categories we discover that some cultures have many words for a particular domain, and others have few words. For instance, the Eskimo have many words for snow; we have a lot of words for cars (Ford, VW, Dodge, Toyota, truck, vehicle, etc). That tells us at once that the Eskimo deal with snow a lot, and we deal with cars a lot. Categories can also tell us about the way people behave. For instance, the Pawnee of Oklahoma use the same word for "mother's brother's wife", "ego's wife" and "sisters of ego's wife." We note that unacculturated Pawnees have sexual relations with all of these women (Kluckhohn, 1954).

Categories have associations

Categories are associated with other categories. Extensive work by Osgood, May and Miron (1957) has shown that all over the world people associate categories with evaluation (good, beautiful, moral), potency (strong, heavy, large), and activity (fast, alive, noisy). Since these associations occur universally they are called etic. The term etic refers to a quality that is universal. But there are also emic, i.e., culture specific, associations. When we compare cultures we need to use etic constructs, but when we describe cultures we need to use emic constructs. A metaphor may help: If we compare apples and oranges we can use etic elements like weight, size, thickness of skin, price and the like. But obviously one does not learn much about such fruit with this kind of information. One needs to learn about apple flavor and orange flavor, apple texture and orange texture and the like. These are emic qualities. So, when we compare fruit we can do it with the etic qualities, e.g., say that "apples are more expensive than oranges today," but when we want to do a good job of describing the fruit we need to also use the emic qualities.

We can learn a good deal about a culture by examining its emic associations. For instance, some work has indicated that in South Korea "democracy" and "socialism" are strongly associated, but that is not the case in the USA. That tells us something about the political culture of South Korea.

An association of great interest is a stereotype. It links a category of people to some attributes. For example, "Americans are hardworking" is a stereotype. Stereotypes have a valid core, but are largely invalid. Are all the Americans you know hardworking? How about the homeless, those who spend most of their time in the park, those who spend a lot of time playing games?

Beliefs

Categories are linked to each other in other ways as well. For instance, "if a relative asks for help you must give it" is a strong belief in some cultures, but in other cultures it is not. People in the latter cultures consider more complicated ideas, such Is the asking legitimate? Do I like this relative?

Attitudes

Attitudes are ideas charged with affect (emotion) predisposing action. Any category can be the core of an attitude. For instance, the category "my family" has a cognitive component (who is included in this category?) an emotional component (how much do I like my family?) and a predisposition to action component (what kinds of behaviors are appropriate, expected toward my family?) When we study these components in different cultures we find important cultural differences. For example, there are many kinds of family structure, such as one man married to one or many women, one woman married to one or many men; family includes a large network of uncles, aunts, and first, second and third cousins, or is much more limited. Likes and disliked might extend to all these people or there might be a more complex pattern, where the father's relatives receive more respect

and liking than the mother's kin or vice versa. A bilateral family is one where both parental families have influence. Children raised in a bilateral family are exposed to two sets of ideas about the ideal way to live. Actions toward the attitude object can also be very different. For example, in some cultures if you open a bank account it is expected that all members of your family will have access to the money.

Norms

Norms are ideas about behavior expected of members of a group. In some cultures, called *tight*, people are expected to behave exactly as specified by norms. In other cultures, called *loose*, one can deviate from norms. In tight cultures one gets punished if one does not behave according to the norms. In loose cultures a person is less likely to be punished. Punishment in some cases is very severe, while in other cases quite lenient. For example, lower class Turkish culture in France is often very tight. In one case, reported in the press, a Turkish girl was executed by her family because she had a French boyfriend!

When a culture is homogeneous, people are very interdependent, and can be supervised closely, the culture is usually tight. When a culture is under the influence of many other cultures, or when people are not too interdependent or supervision is difficult (for instance, people live far from each other), it is more likely that the culture will be loose. Cultures are tight or loose in different domains. For instance American culture is very tight about passing bad checks, but rather loose about who you decide to have as your roommate. Nevertheless, across domains cultures tend toward tightness or looseness. Thai culture is loose, American culture is in-between, Japanese culture is rather tight, and theocracies like the Taliban culture in Afghanistan are very tight.

Roles

Roles are a special category of norms. Roles are ideas about the correct behavior of people who hold a position in a social group. For example, foreman, father, aunt, or sister are roles. Roles include both prescriptive elements (e.g., fathers should advise, protect their daughters) and proscriptive elements (e.g., fathers should not hit their daughters).

Tasks

A sequence of behaviors can be defined as a task. For example, passing a law can include a series of actions. In different cultures different sequences of actions will correspond to such a task.

Values

Values are conceptions of the desirable state of affairs. Schwartz (1992), who has studied them extensively in about 50 countries, defined them as beliefs that pertain to desirable states or behaviors, that transcend specific situations, and guide the selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and that are ordered by relative importance. When

collecting data he uses a concept, such as "freedom" and asks people to rate its importance as "a guiding principle in my life." His research found that there are 10 sets of values in most of the cultures that he has studied. They are:

1. Self-direction: creativity, freedom, choosing own goals, curious
2. Stimulation: a varied life, an exciting life, daring
3. Hedonism: pleasure, enjoying life.
4. Achievement: ambitious, successful, capable
5. Power: authority, wealth, social recognition
6. Security: social order, clean, health, sense of belonging
7. Conformity: obedient, self-disciplined, politeness
8. Tradition: respect for tradition, humble, devout
9. Benevolence: helpful, loyal, forgiving
10. Universalism: broadminded, social justice, world of beauty

Value Orientation

A broader, more abstract set of values was proposed by Clyde Kluckhohn and operationalized by his wife Florence (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck,1961; see chapter in these Readings by Michael Hills). They include:
1. Innate human nature-which can be evil, neutral, a mixture of good and bad, or good; mutable or immutable.
2. Man-nature-can involve subjugation to, harmony with or mastery over nature.
3. Modality of human activities---with emphasis on being (cherishing the experience), being-in-becoming (changing, growing, self-actualization) or doing (activity is good for its own sake).
4. Relationship of humans to other humans---this can be lineal (e.g., doing what the elders want), collateral (e.g., doing what the group wants), or individualist (doing what the person thinks is best).
5. Time focus, on the past, present or future.

Methodological Issues

There are some general methodological problems when studying the elements of subjective culture, and some problems that are faced when we study a particular element of subjective culture.

General Issues

A general issue is that we want to study both the etic and emic aspects of each element of subjective culture. It will simply not do to take a test, attitude scale, or personality inventory developed in one culture, translate it and use it in other cultures. When this is done one

assumes that one has an etic concept, but there is no evidence that it is etic. In fact this has been called a "pseudoetic" or an "imposed etic."

Greenfield (1997) has discussed the limitations of using Western made instruments in other cultures. She pointed out that when testees do not share basic assumptions about values (e.g., does the response have the same merit in every culture?), knowledge (e.g., are people in the various cultures equally likely to know something?), and communication (e.g., does the context of the test item have the same meaning in all the cultures?), it is not defensible to take a test to other cultures.

Ideally, when we study different constructs in different cultures we want to do a construct validation of the measurements. For example, suppose we measured intelligence. We have several theories about the factors that make a person more intelligent. Stimulation, exposure to different environments, experience with a variety of tasks, problems, and the like are among the "antecedents" of intelligence. We also have theories about what the consequences of intelligence ought to be. For example, good grades, success on the job, high ratings from supervisors, being able to earn more than enough money and the like. A construct validation of our measure of intelligence requires that the correlations between the antecedents and the construct itself on the one hand, and the construct and its consequences on the other hand be high in each and everyone of the cultures in which we studied intelligence.

It is possible to develop scales that use both emic and etic items. For example, in studies of social distance a number of different behaviors were considered. Some behaviors are etic (marry, kill) because they have approximately the same meaning in all cultures. Marriage is an intimate behavior implying little social distance in most cultures, while to kill is obviously a behavior that implies maximum social distance. In-between there are a myriad of behaviors that imply different degrees of social distance. Some of these behaviors are emic. For example, "let that person touch my earthenware" is a very Indian emic behavior, because in that culture there is the concept of ritual pollution. If the "wrong" person touches you, you loose status. Allowing someone to touch your earthenware implies great intimacy. In the West the same behavior does not have such meaning, because people in the West may allow a servant to touch their earthenware, but they may also feel considerable social distance from the servant.

It is possible to have all the items that imply social distance scaled separately in each of the cultures (Triandis, 1992). This results in scales where the items have a culture-specific value. It is possible for the translation equivalent item to have the same or a different value. For example, in a study that compared Greece and the USA "I would accept this person as a close kin by marriage" had scale values of 28 and 21 in Greece and the USA respectively. But "I would accept this person as a family friend" had values of 24 and 41 respectively, suggesting that family friend is a more intimate stimulus in Greece than in the USA.

Next we need to consider that every method we use is in some way defective. There are no perfect methods. One solution is to use more than one method and look for ways that the findings converge across different methods. Such multi-method strategies increase our confidence in the findings.

One of the most difficult issues is how to sample people, stimuli, and responses. The techniques we use to sample people in developed cultures can often not be used in less developed cultures. For instance, area sampling is a technique that is widely used in developed countries. One divides the country into geographical segments, and then takes a random sample of segments. One can continue this types of sampling, by sampling the counties within each segment. One can divide each county into neighborhoods, and take a sample of neighborhoods. One can divide each neighborhood by households, and take a random sample of households. Finally, in each household one can list all those who live in it and sample those who fit some criterion, such as "old enough to vote." Statistical theory allows us to estimate the error of measurement each time we sample. Then our results can be stated as a range of numbers, and we know that the answer is correct within that range, say, 999 out of 1000 times. Clearly, to do this one must have good maps, at different geographic levels. But such maps may not exist in the particular country. Also, the technique is very expensive. One way to approximate it is to study different kinds of samples, such as men and women, different age groups, different occupations, and the like and look at the extent one gets the same answers, no matter what the split. More elaborate techniques are also available, which can simultaneously estimate the degree of variation of a construct between countries and within countries.

In sampling stimuli there is a similar problem. For example, to obtain a sample of roles and behaviors Triandis, Vassiliou and Nassiakou (1968) did content analyses of samples of novels from the relevant cultures, so that both etic and emic roles and behaviors could be identified for study. In addition, pretest samples in Greece and USA were presented with a sample of 100 roles (e.g., sales person-customer) and asked to provide behaviors that are likely to occur in each role relationship (e.g., give change). Next a method was used to obtain a maximally heterogeneous sample of roles and behaviors. Then another sample of people from Greece and the USA rated each behavior within each role according to whether it was "an appropriate behavior" in that role. For example, in a male-female role relationship, Is it appropriate for the male to let the female go first through a door? A nine-point scale from "would do this" to "would not do this" was used. Correlations of each behavior with every other behavior were computed with 100 observations per behavior. A factor analysis indicated which behaviors "go together." Some factors were etic, because they emerged in both cultures. Other factors were emic, because they emerged only in one culture. For example, *superordination* (command, advise versus apologize to, ask for help) was an etic factor. *Tutoring* (teach, approve of versus ask for advice of) occurred in Greece, but not in the USA. *Ingroup concern for consensus* (is saddened by attitude of, desires good attitude of, adores the same God), was obtained in the USA but not in Greece. One can then compare role perceptions on the etic factors, and describe the cultures by using both the etic and emic factors. A very rich set of findings was obtained. For instance, there was more subordination in the Son-Mother role in Greece than in the USA. There was more intimacy (kiss, cuddle, be captivated by charm) in most role perceptions in Greece than in the USA. This kind of information can then be used to make generalizations, such as, for instance, that Greece

at the time the data were collected (1960s) was a collectivist culture and the USA was an individualist culture (Triandis, 1995).

Another general problem is that there are rival hypotheses to the hypothesis that the obtained results are due to a cultural difference. For example, when comparing the intelligence of members of two cultures differences may be due to:

1. Different definitions of intelligence in the two cultures (e.g., in many cultures intelligence is doing what the elders want you to do),
2. The instructions may not be understood the same way. In some cultures people are trained to answer all questions in a test even if they are not sure of the answer, and in other cultures they are commonly told to answer the question only if they are sure of the answer.
3. The level of motivation may be different (in some cultures people get very motivated if they are told that a test measures their intelligence and in others they are not especially aroused).
4. Learning to whom one's scores will be compared to, implicitly or explicitly, can affect the behavior (for example, African-Americans score higher when they are told that their responses will be compared to those of other African-Americans than when told that they will be compared to those of European-Americans).
5. Reactions to the experimenter can be different.
6. The meaning of the testing situation can be different (for example, who asked for the testing, a colonial administration or an indigenous government, can result in different results).
7. Some people become anxious, and freeze, when told that their intelligence is to be tested while others see the task as routine.
8. Response sets can be different. There are many kinds of response sets, such as always agreeing no matter what the question, using the edges of scales or the middle of scales, trying to give the most socially desirable response, and so on.
9. Sampling of people, stimuli, and response continua may not have been equivalent across the cultures. For instance familiarity with different stimuli can vary by culture.
10. The ethical acceptability, or perceived legitimacy, of the test might not be the same in the various cultures.

There are ways to take care of some of these problems (Triandis, 1992), but they require many more studies than the simple comparison of two samples.

Problems Faced when Studying Specific Elements of Subjective Culture

Studies of each of the elements of subjective culture have, in addition to the general problems just outlined, other requirements. To study categories, for instance, one presents specific elements that might belong to a category and asks if it does or does not belong to the category. For example, suppose one wants to find out what people mean by "democracy." One can present a sample of countries and ask the participants to indicate if

each of the countries is or is not a democracy. To study associations one may ask participants to tell "what comes to your mind" when you hear the word "democracy." Detailed analysis of the associations will find both similarities and differences across cultures. To study beliefs one could develop a sample of beliefs and ask participants if they agree with each of them. Similarly, to study attitudes one could obtain a sample of attitude objects. Osgood et al (1957) obtained evaluation, potency and activity judgments concerning 600 concepts, which represented a broad set of attitudes. Norms and roles can be studied as described above in our discussion of how to sample stimuli and responses. Values may be studied by the procedure described above (Schwartz, 1992).

Concluding Statement

The study of subjective culture allows researchers to compare cultures on some factors and also describe cultures using both culture common and culture specific factors. It is one of the many ways we have to study culture.

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Questions for Discussion

1. Describe or define a culture's "subjective culture" and explain how it differs from "objective culture".
2. Can elements of objective culture give clues to elements of subjective culture? Explain.
3. Describe what you think are some of the more important aspects of the subjective culture in your own society. Do you think people from other cultures or societies would agree with your list?
4. Explain how two or more cultures may have extremely similar subjective cultures. Give examples.
5. Examine, through reports in the literature, how subjective culture has been measured and report to your class or group what you found.
6. How would you go about measuring your own culture's subjective culture concerning such concepts as morality, politeness, health, differences between generations, and other concepts that you may want to select.