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Culture as Unfolding Process: Integrating Perspectives in Building a Theory

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Current theory and research in culture and psychology produced multiple definitions and conceptualizations of culture. This paper reviews several approaches to understanding culture and introduces an integrative model of Culture as Unfolding Process (CUP) as a way of integrating insights from several perspectives. The model highlights mechanisms of cultural change and stability, and provides a versatile framework for understanding culture on multiple levels.

CULTURE AS UNFOLDING PROCESS: INTEGRATING PERSPECTIVES IN BUILDING THEORY

Multiplicity of approaches and the lack of integration

There are many approaches to theorizing about, defining, and studying culture. For example, cross-cultural, cultural, and indigenous psychologies differ in their focus, methods and assumptions (Greenfield, 2000; Jahoda, 2002; Kim, 2000; Triandis, 2000; Shweder, 2000). The complexity of culture leads to the multiplicity of definitions, theories and methodologies, and to "division of labor" in sub-areas of cultural studies (Lonner & Adamopoulos, 1997; J. Miller, 1997; Triandis, 2000).

However, the "division of labor" is only useful if there is product exchange. The pressing need to integrate multiple perspectives in order to gain a comprehensive understanding is often noted (e.g., Berry, 2000; Cooper & Denner, 1998; Fiske, Kitayama, Markus & Nisbett 1998, Kashima, 2002; Kitayama, 2002; Lueke & Svyantek, 2000; Miller, 1997; Van De Vijver & Leung, 2000). Unfortunately, representatives of various approaches have not engaged in the adequate dialogue, and integration is lacking (Lonner & Adamopoulos, 1997; Van De Vijver & Leung, 2000). This may stem in part from the absence of competing comprehensive theoretical frameworks (Lonner & Adamopoulos, 1997). Moreover, terminological differences between approaches may present an additional obstacle to integrative dialogue and development.

The goal of this paper is to propose one such integrative, comprehensive framework. The proposed model of culture as unfolding process (CUP) seeks to uncover common underlying themes and ideas, currently hidden behind the differences of approaches, applications and terminology. It is also a step toward accomplishing an

agenda for the coming decades of culture investigation proposed by Fiske, Kitayama, Markus & Nisbett (1998) because it elaborates on how mutual constitution of psyche and culture is involved into perpetuation and change of cultural systems.

The proposed CUP model is rooted in the number of traditions and approaches to studying and describing culture. Therefore, the following section presents an integrative review of current conceptualizations of culture, with specific focus on culture as stable vs. dynamic and on culture as located inside vs. outside of individuals. Next, insights of these different approaches will be integrated in a model of underlying culture processes. Finally, the importance of individual level psychological mechanisms to cultural stability and dynamics will be outlined, and some implications of the model will be suggested.

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF CULTURE: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

According to Lonner (1994), there are over 200 definitions of culture, none of which have been embraced by a substantial number of scientists. Jahoda (2002) provides an in-depth analysis of psychology's struggles with elusiveness and "slipperiness" of the concept of culture. This presentation will concentrate on two of the aspects in which conceptualizations of culture may differ (Triandis, 2000). These aspects are: (1) culture as static or dynamic; and (2) culture as located inside or outside of the person.

Static and dynamic aspects of culture

According to Triandis (2000), cross-cultural psychology tends to deal with static aspects of culture, while cultural and indigenous psychology approaches are more interested in culture dynamics. For a long time, the static approach dominated research and resulted in rich work on cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Triandis, 1995). However, despite the popularity of static approach, there is a growing dissatisfaction with its limitations, such as circular and insufficient explanations of many important cultural phenomena and inability to deal with cultural heterogeneity. Psychologists increasingly tend to see culture as a dynamic process rather then an "index" or an "entity: (Greenfield, 1997; Kashima, 2001, 2002; Kitayama 2002).

Presented in this paper Culture as Unfolding Process model explicitly integrates stability and dynamics of cultures. This idea fits well with the trend to increasingly view culture as both stable and changeable, and as operating at multiple levels of analysis (Berry, 2000; Cooper & Denner, 1998; Klein, Danserau & Hall, 1994; J. Miller, 1999; Kashima, 2000, 2002, 2004; Kitayama, 2002). In part, the model achieves this integration by also addressing another difficult question, that of the location of culture inside or outside the individual.

Culture location: Inside or outside the person

Another important dimension on which various approaches to culture differ is whether culture is conceived as residing inside the person, e.g., linked to psychological processes, or outside the person (Triandis, 2000). Perhaps one of the most exemplary definitions of culture focusing on the individual is proposed by Earley and Randel (1997), who "advocate that culture is best thought of as psychological experience of individuals and not a collective phenomenon, group characteristic, or the like" (p.64). While this view contributes some unique insights for understanding culture elements, it is not as widely endorsed as the view of culture as a collective or contextual phenomena (Erez & Earley, 1993).

Definitions of culture that fall within the "culture on the collective level" paradigm are many and they are varied (Ott, 1989). Some definitions refer to contextual properties of the group culture and include such elements as ecological, economical, sociopolitical factors or structural properties. Other definitions concentrate on perceptual attributes of shared collective culture (values, beliefs, etc). Moreover, many list all of these diverse elements together. The classical definition by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952; as cited in Jahoda, 2002) included behavior and ideas, as well as artefacts. Much later, Sergiovanny & Corbally (1984) similarly defined culture as "system of values, symbols and shared meanings of a group including the embodiment of these values, symbols, and meanings into material objects and ritualized practices". Even more recently, one of the most interesting to date frameworks of culture in general (Kitayama & Markus, 1994, as reproduced in Fiske et al., 1998), listed both cultural ideas and ecological, economic, and sociopolitical factors as elements of collective reality.

There also is a tradition of separating perceptual (subjective) elements of culture form material (objective) elements (Osgood 1964; Triandis, 1972). On the organizational level, James and Jones (1974) also recommended to differentiate stimuli, such as organizational attributes, situation, or environment, from perceptually-based, psychologically-processed descriptions of these, and from intervening psychological processes. Such differentiation of objective, structural characteristics of cultural entities (nations, subgroups, organizations, etc.) from perceptually-based characteristics provides meaningful definitions of two important elements of the culture process. However, these are not completely separate, because they constantly interact and influence each other in the culture process. Such interaction was noted in a number of theoretical frameworks, the most well-known of which is the ecocultural framework (e.g. Berry et al.,1992). This work was in turn preceded by the Lewin's (1935) topological psychology and Barker's (1968) ecological psychology (Lonner & Adamopoulos, 1997). Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems model, traditionally used by developmental psychologists, also has similar elements. Thus, there is a long tradition of interest in interrelations of environmental contexts and their representations in the human mind. While different theories may refer to such contexts as ecosystems, political structures or organizational attributes, the general underlying reference is to objective, extraindividual elements of cultural systems. This more unifying terminology will be used in the CUP model.

Perceptually-based culture could be further separated into two interacting elements: (a) individual level psychological processes (i.e., intraindividual, in the terminology of Strauss & Quinn, 1997) and (b) collective, or shared, agreed upon, or interindividual

cultural forms.   Current literature suggests that collective cognition is socially constructed, differs from individual cognition and can not be captured by solely focusing on the individual (Kashima, 2004; Lord & Emrich, 2000). Moreover, group-level and individual-level perceptions play unique roles in the culture process.

In sum, the most interesting insights of various approaches to understanding cultural phenomena can be complementary rather then contradictory. Both stability and dynamics are inherent properties of culture, and interaction of contextual reality (extraindividual), group-level cognition (interindividual) and individual-level psychological mechanisms (intraindividual) is likely to be a key to understanding the logic of culture process. One approach to combining these elements in a model is presented next.

MODEL OF CULTURE AS UNFOLDING PROCESS (CUP)

The previously considered literature provides necessary elements for an integrative model of culture as a ***process*** unfolding in the interaction of objective reality, individual-level psychological mechanisms, and collective forms of cultural adaptation. This unfolding process has inherent mechanisms facilitating both dynamics and stability of cultural systems (see Figure 1).

In Figure 1 inner links refer to mechanisms facilitating stability and outer links to mechanisms facilitating dynamics of culture. The model illustrates how counterbalancing forces of change and stability of culture process may facilitate an existence of lasting, apparently stable, yet dynamically adaptive cultural systems. In other words, what appears to be a relatively stabile system is created by constant workings of an underlying process and thus, in a way, the process both ***facilitates*** the system and ***is*** this system. Overall, as depicted in the model and based on the literature considered above,

> ***Proposition 1.*** *Culture process involves extraindividual, structural properties of the environment, as well as perceptual properties, which include (a) intraindividual psychological processes and (b) interindividual, shared and agreed upon psychologically-processed representations. All of these elements are causally interactive, which facilitates both dynamics and stability of culture.*

While all elements of the culture system are equally important, space constraints of this paper allow to only briefly illustrate the right hand side of the model. It reflects interaction of intraindividual with interindividual culture perceptions and is considered next.
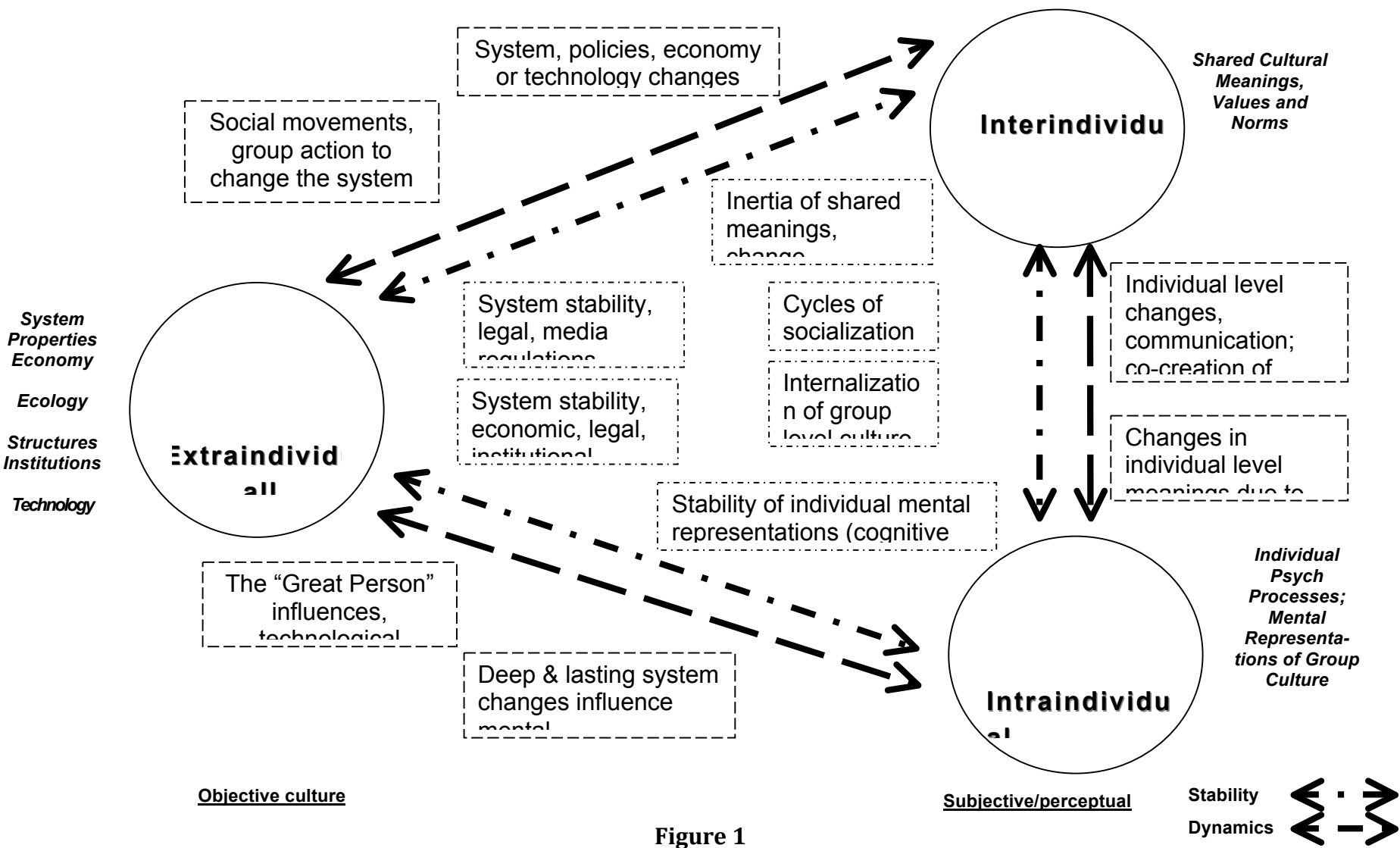
Figure 1

THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS IN CULTURE PROCESS

Where is culture in the individual?

To answer this question, it is useful to refer to one of the most versatile current models of individual information processing. This model, proposed by Lord & Harvey (2002), suggests that there are three important modes (architectures) relevant to the functioning of human mind. Table 1 summarizes properties of these architectures and research linking all of these to human functioning in culture (see Table 1).

In sum, all modes of human information processing seem to be relevant to cultural functioning. The following sections elaborate on how understanding of human psyche is relevant to understanding of cultural stability and dynamics.

Table 1
Examples of Culture-Relevant Processes Predominately Relying on Specific Human Architectures

Architecture	Culture-relevant processes	Selected references
Symbolic – conscious, purposeful information processing; learn quickly; operate slowly in serial fashion.	Explicit learning of cultural norms and values through purposeful education and socialization; controlled culture-relevant behavior.	Studies of cultural values predominately on conscious level, e.g., Hofstede, (1980); Rokeach, (1979); Schwartz (1999).
Connectionist – often operate outside of awareness; learn slowly by extracting statistical regularities; operate quickly in distributed fashion.	Implicit learning of culture through observation and extracting statistical regularities; inferring cultural assumptions; habitual cultural behavior; matching of cultural knowledge to relevant contexts.	Karmiloff-Smith, (1999); Plunkett et al., (1997) (Developmental/child); Hanges et al., (2000); Kashima, (2000; 2004); Strauss & Quinn, (1997) (Adulthood).
Emotional – neural systems richly connected to hormonal, expressive and motivational systems; operate very quickly.	Affective reactions to culture-relevant stimuli, including physiological responses, appraisal, cognition and emotion-driven behavior; cultural influences on motivation.	Ashforth & Saks, (2001); Cohen et al., (1997); Eid & Diener, (2001); Nisbett & Cohen, (1996); Mendoza-Denton et al., (1997); Mesquita, (2001); Oishi, (2000).

Note: Presenting various culture-relevant processes and mental representations as involving one or the other mental architecture is an oversimplification. Many processes, while predominately relying on one architecture, may also involve the other ones. For example, values, traditionally researched on symbolic level, can be also relevant to connectionist level processes (see Lord & Brown, 2001).

INTERACTION OF GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL: STABILITY MECHANISMS

From Group to Individual: Stability

The inner link on the right hand side of the model pointing from interindividual toward intraindividual refers to cultural influences directed toward individuals which facilitate cultural stability. Culture provides a framework for perceiving what is

meaningful, relevant, and salient. We think, feel, behave, and interact with reality through culture, therefore it is difficult to recognize our own cultural knowledge. In other words, our cultural knowledge is internalized, and people perceive ways of their own culture as the ways *they* think, feel and behave (Kim, 2000; Ott, 1989; Schein, 1985; Shweder, 1991). For example, behavioral norms and standards, learned through socialization and perceived as intuitively "right" or "wrong", are also likely to be linked to affective evaluations and to dictate what is perceived as "good" and "bad". Through this mechanism, culture may influence an individual's motivation and goals (Oishi, 2000). Appraising culturally learned norms as "good" also makes following them "feel good" and thus is very compelling (Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

From Individual to Group: Stability

The inner arrow on the right hand side of the model pointing from intraindividual toward interindividual reflects possible influences of individual-level processes on the group-level cultural stability. Internalization of culture is likely to create very stable mental representations which may last a lifetime and are also likely to be passed down to the next generation. Such intergenerational transmission is an often noted property of culture in various cultural groups (e.g. Berry et al., 1992; Greenfield, 1997; Fiske et al., 1998; Kitayama, 2004; Ott, 1989; Schein, 1985), and it contributes to stability of the group-level culture. In sum:

> *Proposition 2.* *Stability of culture is likely to be facilitated in part by interactive processes between individual and group-level perceptions. Group level culture is a) internalized by an individual through the process of socialization, largely via mechanisms that learn implicitly and are resistant to change and, b) in turn, internalized cultural knowledge is passed on through the next cycle of socialization, thus contributing to stability of the group-level culture.*

Furthermore, individual-level psychological mechanisms interact with group-level perceptions to facilitate not only stability, but also dynamics of culture. These processes are depicted in the Figure 1 by the outer right hand link.

INTERACTION OF GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL: DYNAMICS MECHANISMS

From Group to Individual: Dynamics

Both theory and research support an idea that the group level culture influences individual level dynamics. Empirical evidence suggests that the process of cultural learning of culture does not stop after childhood. For example, studies on acculturation demonstrate that over time, exposure to a different culture may lead to changes in beliefs, values, behaviors (see Berry & Sam, 1997, for review), and even in personality (McCrae, Yik, Trapnel, Bond & Paulhus, 1998). Specifically, Study 3 of McCrae et al. (1998) suggested that exposure to Canadian culture over time might have influenced personality profiles of individuals of Chinese origin. Moreover, people of Chinese origin who lived in Canada longer had personality profiles more similar to those of

white, Canada-born Canadians than people who lived there for a shorter periods of time. These empirical results are consistent with the model of slow, or connectionist (Lord & Harvey, 2002) learning and suggest that intraindividual psychological characteristics slowly adjust to changes in cultural environment.

Interestingly, symbolic-level learning of culture does not seem to be quite sufficient for effective functioning and adjustment. Even after cross-cultural training, expatriate adults are likely to feel that the knowledge of symbolically learned rules about other culture is far less helpful then intuitive understanding which comes from extensive experience (e.g., L. Miller, 1999; Osland & Bird, 2000; Ptak, Cooper & Brislin, 1995). Explicit knowledge about cultures may not prevent misunderstandings in intercultural relationships, because many problems are due to unconscious expectations (L. Miller, 1999). This again illustrates how deeply encultured individuals are. As depicted by the presented CUP framework, such deep enculturation is necessary for effective functioning of cultural systems.

From Individual to Group: Dynamics

Environmental changes do not need to be as dramatic as moving to another country. For example, economic and political evolution of nations also leads to changes in environment and thus, over time, to updating individual-level meanings and perceptions. In such case, changes on the individual level in groups of people sharing similar experiences may reach a psychological "critical mass", and will result in changes in the group culture (e.g., growth of the individualism in newly affluent oriental countries, Sinha & Kao, 1988; Triandis, 2001; see also Greenfield, 1997). As another example, recent rapid changes in former Soviet Republics resulted in noticeable changes in cultural values (Niit et al., 2004).

Furthermore, history suggests that in addition to subtle, evolutionary of change, individuals may influence the group level cultural dynamics in more direct, revolutionary ways. In such instances, individuals or small groups intentionally work to change the public opinion, as well as legislation and other overt practices, (e.g., the Civil Rights movement in the USA). Unlike the less dramatic evolutionary change, such symbolic level change is often accompanied by the period of open struggle, counteraction and unrest. To be truly effective, such deliberate change needs to influence all elements of the cultural system. Overall, general observations on the dynamics of culture can be summarized as:

> ***Proposition 3.*** *Dynamics of culture are facilitated in part by interactive processes between individual and group level perceptions. Constant update of the individual-level meaning system (often through connectionist learning) leads to changes in it over time. Moreover, when similar experiences are shared by the group, changes in cultural meanings are likely to be transferred to the group-level culture through communication and co-creation of meanings.*

In sum, it was illustrated that research, theory and historical observations support an idea that psychological mechanisms, linking individual and group level perceptual elements of culture process, facilitate both dynamics and stability of cultural systems. More in-depth consideration of these and other links and mechanisms outlined in the model are presented elsewhere (Praslova, 2001; 2004).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Integration of insights from multiple views on culture, demonstrated here in the CUP model, provides an opportunity to uncover deep processes underlying cultural phenomena. CUP can be used as a versatile framework for many academic and applied considerations. One of the strengths of this approach is its relevance to more than one level of culture. Cosmopolitan, national, subgroup and organizational cultures can all be better understood by applying general understanding of cultural processes. Attention to the individual level and explicit separation of individual from group and contextual properties of culture fits with the current thinking about multiple individual cultural identities, made salient by corresponding cultural context (i.e., Belay, 1996; Hong et al, 2000; Mischel & Shoda, 1998; Praslova, 2004; Strauss & Quinn, 1997). In applied work, understanding of both stable and dynamic properties of culture should be of use in organizational change, which is often seen as a culture change (Ott, 1989; Schein, 1985, 1996).

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