

A Complement or a Panacea

—On Culture and the Efficacy of Cultural Interpretation

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Abstract

What is culture and how well does it work in explaining our social phenomena? This paper is an attempt to answer these two questions. The vagueness or uncertainty around the concept of culture has somewhat undermined its effectiveness as a convincing tool for interpretation in social science. Following an analysis of the core elements of culture, this paper then discusses the merits and the challenges the cultural interpretation has confronted. In this paper, I argue that mainly due to its vagueness, culture without clear specifications should not be treated as a panacea, but a complement to other means of interpretation, a way to enrich our means of understanding our multi-faceted world. Cultural interpretation should not be a tautological conversation stopper for further inquiry, but be a more precise tool for critical inquiries.

Keywords

Culture, Cultural Interpretation, Vagueness, Efficacy, Panacea, Complement

1. Introduction

For the past half a century, culture has possibly become one of the most omnipresent concepts in our time. Part of the appeal of the concept of culture stems from the fact that everyone seems to intuitively know what culture is and how people do things around here. However, for about 150 years of studying culture, the academia still has not reached an established definition of culture. A prominent culture theorist laments that “the term culture, unfortunately, has no precise, settled meaning in the social sciences (Eckstein, 1988).” Nonetheless, in most definitions of culture, one will find a common core referring to a shared frame of reference, including, among other elements, beliefs, values, and norms, expressed in symbols and artifacts through which organizational members make sense of their world and by which their action is guided. A distinguished anth-

ropologist (Geertz, 1973) once defined culture as “a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.” Modern sociologist Giddens (2001) defines culture as the ways of life that consist of both intangible aspects (the beliefs, ideas and values which form the content of the culture) and tangible aspects (the objects, symbols or technology which represent that content).

However, the description about “culture” does not mean that we have got what it is all about. Obviously, culture, as a concept frequently discussed and cited in social sciences arena, is still one of the most perplexing concepts, which have stirred up much controversy in contemporary academia. Until today, there have been dozens of concepts about culture given by many scholars and thinkers. However, there is not even one adopted unanimously by academia. This uncertainty or vagueness of its definition may have caused chaos at times, and to some degree, even stop the fascinating competing arguments like “cutting diamond with diamond” from appearing. However, some maintain a different stance, claiming that it is this uncertainty of its definition, i.e. heuristic openness that enables researchers to employ different specific meanings in order to explain various specific dependent variables (Kaplan, 1964). Consequently, the inclusiveness of “culture” makes this area of study more fruitful and vigorous.

Meanwhile, cultural interpretation factors in cultural ingredients like values, beliefs, and feelings, etc. in observing and explaining our complex social world. Cultural interpretation often focuses on how a particular social phenomenon is related to matters of languages, mentalities, feelings, predispositions, social class, gender, ethnicity, and nationality, etc. Cultural interpretation general shares a common set of presuppositions about the causes of a certain social action, emphasizing the role of collectively held and socially constructed meanings.

Owing much to its ubiquity, culture as an interpretive tool has enjoyed a long history and occupied a unique place throughout human history, just as some scholar points out that social analysts have long adopted culture as an interpretive tool at least since Plato and Aristotle (Almond, 1989). Prominent thinkers of the modern period like Machiavelli and Tocqueville also turned to cultural interpretation. In modern history, three prominent intellectual traditions have also led to cultural interpretation: the sociological tradition of Weber, the social psychological tradition of Wall as and the psycho-anthropological tradition of Freud.

In the past half a century, large volumes of work employing culture as an interpretive tool have also been produced to reinforce the very importance of culture in the explanation of social behavior. For instance, Hofheinz and Calder (1982) argue that what has driven the extraordinary rate of economic growth of the East Asian Confucian countries in contrast with other Asian Islamic and Hindui nations is the importance of Confucian culture loyalty, education, mu-

tuality, and respect for authority) in the shaping of economic and political behavior. Cultural interpretation can, in some way, explain our political society better than rational choice individualism, liberalism, and rational choice theory (Almond, 1989). Like Almond, Ross (2000) draws the conclusion that political culture theory holds much promise for helping scholars to explain our complex social life in a way which is consistent with the demands of empirical social science.

For more than half a century, cultural interpretation has been adopted, criticized and revised by generations of scholars who have been trying to understand and interpret our world. Some notable works have won the attention of academia and have convinced many to join in the team to interpret our world. What are some overlapping consensus regarding the concept of culture and what attitude should we adopt toward the cultural interpretation? Questions like these deserve our attention and discussion.

2. Literature Review

Anthropologist Mead is also a pioneer in employing culture as an interpretative tool in social science. She defines culture mainly as a whole complex of traditional behavior transmitted between generations. Her work *Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples* (Mead, 1937) has been regarded as the first attempt to analyze complex social phenomena and social structure from a cultural perspective. To Mead, cultural interpretation is an ideal and novel tool to interpret something that used to be inexplicable.

In contemporary social science, Almond can be seen as the fountainhead of a vibrant culture-based, social-science initiative that includes some of the most prominent political scientists of the time (Crothers & Lockhart, 2000). Based on their investigations of six different nations (the United States, Britain, West Germany, Italy, and Mexico), Almond and Verba tried to identify the political culture that is most conducive to a liberal democracy. Almond and Verba investigated and compared three distinct types of political cultures (parochial, subject, and participant) with different conclusions. Regardless of its pitfalls, Almond and Verba's work laid the foundation for generations of scholars who have carried cultural interpretation further ahead. Almond and Verba (1963) therefore contend that culture interpretation explains especially well in the arena of political science.

Ellis and Thompson (1997) explore the role of culture has played in the arena of political science. The essays within the book examine some concepts which are closely correlated to culture: rational choice, institutions, theories of change, political risk, and the environment, etc. Regardless of its weakness in not having a core thesis, the book is comprehensive and eye-opening in understanding how some key elements of culture interplay with each other.

Ellis (1996), in his seminal book *American Political Culture*, attempts to view America in a cultural perspective. By drawing on the seminal work by Mary

Douglas, Ellis interprets the history of America as a contest between five distinct political cultures: competitive individualism, egalitarian community, hierarchical collectivism, atomized fatalism, and autonomous hermitude. This is a major departure from what the traditional liberalists have viewed America. Ellis' interpretation of American history deserves much merit for its novel perspective, though the mainstream liberal capitalism ideology can hardly be swayed.

3. The Overlapping Consensus on Culture

Culture is a totality. The word “culture,” originally appears in German, originally focused on culture as a *comprehensive totality*. For example, in 1871, a scholar wrote: “Culture,... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor, 1871). Noticing that Tyler is not the only one who characterized culture as a totality. Quite a few scholars held same view as his. Frank Boaz (1911) argues that culture maybe defined as “the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relations to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to himself” (Boaz, 1911). Malinowski (1944) identified culture as “the integral whole consisting of implements and consumers’ goods, of constitutional charters for the various social groupings, of human ideas and crafts, beliefs and customs.”

Culture is social heredity. Culture’s main characteristics, to other scholars, lie in its being “social” rather than “biological.” Since culture emerges from certain social circumstances, there would be no cultural phenomena confined to an individual. Furthermore, culture is a heredity from the older to the younger, from the past to the present. Without this heredity, culture can never take shape. It is mainly for this reason that some scholars argue that culture “consists in those patterns relative to behavior and the products of human action which may be inherited, that is, passed on from generation to generation independently of the biological genes” (Parsons & Shils, 1951). It is in this sense as well that Mead (1937) argues that culture “means the whole complex of traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation.” Although it is almost a common sense that culture is not biologically determined, there are scholars who associate culture with race just as some scholars put it: the culture of a group is the sum total and organization of the social heritages which have acquired a social meaning because of racial temperament and of the historical life of the group (Park & Burgess, 1921).

Culture is a learned thing. This means that culture does not come along with genes. Culture is a learned influence, enforced upon from generation to generation. Black people in America have different cultures from those in Africa though biologically they are almost identical. Different cultures do make people think and behave differently. This claim is powerful because it refutes fallacies

like “we are culturally superior because of our better genomes.” Young’s cultural concept seems to be easy to understand with this pre-knowledge: Culture consists of the whole mass of *learned behavior* or patterns of any group or generation and as they are added to by this group, and then passed on to other groups or to the next generation (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). With no difficulty, another influential scholar could be referred to here in support of this argument. Benedict (1934), who claims that “culture is the sociological term for *learned behavior*, behavior which in man is not given at birth, which is not determined by his germ cells as is the behavior of wasps or the social ants, but must be learned anew from grown people by each new generation.” Murdock (1934) summarizes it well by claiming “culture is not instinctive, or innate, or transmitted biologically, but is composed of habits, i.e., learned tendencies to react, acquired by each individual through his own life experience after birth. This assumption, of course, is shared by all anthropologists outside of the totalitarian states, but it has a corollary which is not always so clearly recognized. If culture is learned, it must obey the law of learning... hence, we should expect all cultures, being learned, to reveal certain uniformities reflecting this universal common factor.”

4. The Efficacy of Cultural Interpretation

No matter how inclusive of the concept culture is, questions about the validity of cultural interpretation never fade away. Cultural interpretation has been criticized by many scholars of different schools. For example, some scholars argue that since culture is widely perceived as static and stable, it is hard to explain a multitude of new things in a constantly changing world. Eckstein (1988) emphasizes that cultural interpretation could only be given selective attention. In the eyes of Lichbach and Zuckerman (1997), cultural interpretation is possibly the least influential one among three influential theoretical approaches. Political culture theory has been attacked from some four different perspectives. Barry (1979) and Pateman (1980) strongly maintain that it is institution that determines culture rather than the opposite. More importantly, culture is not a concept which most political scientists are comfortable with. For many, cultural interpretation makes issues of evidence more complicated, and transforms rigorous analysis into “just so” accounts that fail to meet notions of scientific explanation. Cultural interpretation also raises serious problems of unit of analysis for which there are no easy answers (Ross, 2000).

However, it would be crude and rash for those who reject the cultural interpretation. As some pointed out, there are no perfect tools and culture provides a powerful perspective to help understand our society. Ellis and Thompson (1997) argues that it is time to see culture’s complementary role: “extricating social science from that self-inflicted dead end, you could say, is what Cultural Theory is all about.”

To adamant cultural advocates like Almond, culture is an ideal tool for ex-

plaining our society. To him, people in different societies behave differently basically because they have different cultures, that is, mental orientations or predispositions. He goes to further to support his theory later through an empirical, historical survey. Almond (1989) shows us that it has been more than a thousand years from today for thinkers like Plato and Aristotle to employ culture as an effective tool for their argument; and it is not rare either for modern political, sociological thinkers to continue doing that. Starting from the prehistory, Enlightenment to modern political culture research, scholars did not feel hesitant to use it for their explanatory purposes. Regardless of criticisms of cultural analysis, contemporary scholarship still persist in adopting this unique tool of interpretation, especially in political culture circle, to which he himself best belongs. Almond's argument seems to be reasonably convincing. Geertz (1973) reaffirms the power of culture as an interpretative tool, and he argues that the analysis of culture should not be an experimental science in search of law but should be an interpretative way to find meaning in certain social phenomena because "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," and culture is just those webs. Limerick recalls the unique value of culture through Wallace's and Basso's examples by claiming that "the idea of culture connected the dots, revealing the underpinnings that tied practices to meaning, that made mystery understandable and anomaly explicable" (Limerick, 1997).

Nevertheless, "culture matters" is not the whole story. As argued above, the vagueness and other deficiencies of the concept of culture itself do entail criticisms and thus making culture at times a "tautological conversation stopper" and "one of the most injurious powers of the culture-monster is its talent for erasing very basic questions about power and economic dominance" (Limerick, 1997). We could know well about this when we always hear someone asking and responding, "Why are these two so different?" "Well, just because of different cultures." Just as some scholar points out that "theories that give culture a central explanatory role must specify how the effects attributed to culture come about" (Ross, 2000). It is not good enough to simply say, "They did it because they're Germans or they're Japanese." At times, we can never be too reluctant to pick up "culture" out of indolence for further inquiries. Resultantly, culture has become "a freestanding, self-determining force of its own while the human agency disappears, and automatons march around following culture's inflexible orders" (Limerick, 1997). This is more so when culture is incompletely or wrongly understood. Ellis and Thompson (1997) put it extremely well: "certainly it is true that culture has too often been conceptualized in terms of the unique configuration of values, beliefs, and practices that make the Russians different from the Chinese as long as culture is defined solely in terms of national, religious, ethnic, racial, or corporate distinctiveness, common measures are impossible and culture must remain a fancy name for what we do not understand."

Limerick's critique about cultural interpretation is sharp and to the point. To Limerick, the vagueness of culture and reification of its concept makes culture

“Jack of all trades and master of none.” Cultural interpretation goes to its opposite for once culture was reified, its surfaces became opaque, more effective at absorbing light than at directing it. Instead of being usefully employed as an explanation or as a causal factor, culture used in imprecise ways to serve more to disrupt than to sustain careful analysis, developed a startling ability to bring inquiry to a full stop. As a result, the concept of culture conceals the truth and the concept of culture has evolved “into a powerful piece of earthmoving equipment, digging away at what might have been common ground.” She further argues that culture has served a tool of vagueness and can prevent critical inquiry from taking place (Limerick, 1997).

5. Conclusion

So, what is role culture should play in explaining our social phenomena? Here, I stand with Elkins and Simeon in arguing that the concept of culture is not an absolute connotation but should be put into a certain context when being used as a tool for interpretative purposes. Sometimes, the vagueness of culture and its being all-encompassing have undermined the objectivity of cultural interpretation in understanding certain social phenomena. For instance, culture alone cannot explain well the causal relationship between a social structure and its culture. (South Korea, with highly similar culture with North Korea, has been a totally different country today due to external influences.)

Certain restrictions should also be imposed on the concept of culture and cultural interpretation when we adopt culture as a meaningful perspective. In addition, to make cultural interpretation more effective, certain circumstances should be given: one, in a comparative way; two, it is rarely direct and should be integrated with other factors for analysis, cultural methodology should also be regarded as a complement rather than competing variables, their joint functions are most preferred than separate for inquiries (Elkins & Simeon, 2000).

In conclusion, cultural interpretation should best serve as a complement to explain our complex and changing society from a uniquely enriching perspective. As a matter of fact, cultural interpretation has been enriching our conceptualization in areas like political economy, social movements and political institutions and complementing the insights derived from interest and institutional interpretations.

As said above, the concept of culture, as a complement, instead of a panacea, continues to deserve our attention, and there are things to do to make this concept more refined to deserve more space in social science. As Ross pointed out, to make cultural interpretation work, the definition of culture cannot be defined so broadly as to include all behaviors, values, and institutions (Ross, 2000). In addition, cultural interpretation should not be unwittingly used to “veil intellectual emptiness” but to help expand our intellectual horizons of understanding our world. To get beyond using culture as a tautological conversation stopper, or as the theory-busting anthropologist’s veto, just as some (Ellis & Thompson,

1997) point out that a valid theory of culture must be able to find common, generalizable cultural dimensions and types.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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