

## Questioning the Geography of Culture

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Culture is a product of the human mind. The elements which create it are shared by all humans. Individuals' differing experiences of the world result in a unique permutation of cultural patterns in each individual's mind. And yet specialists and non-specialists alike speak and write as though culture is geographically bounded, most often with boundaries that are contiguous with those of modern nation states. This Research Note seeks to put into question the usefulness of a conception of culture which links it to countries and other, larger or smaller, geographical areas.

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The notion that the people of a nation share a culture which makes them more similar to each other than to members of other nations is a trope which is so common-place in both the popular (Buhayer, 2006; Hollander, 2003; Kolanad, 2009) and the academic (Doulis, 2011; King, 2015; Sen, 2006) literature as to be largely unquestioned. Guidebook writers and professors of Intercultural Communication alike speak of "Japanese culture" (Donahue, 1998; Ramsey, 1998), "European culture" (Bondebjerg & Madsen, 2008; Gill, Dickinson, and Scharl, 2008) and even "Western culture" (Smith and Lochner, 2007) as objects of interest, study and, at times, wild excitement. Newly independent countries seek to establish their legitimacy by evoking their people's shared culture and what makes it different from the culture of surrounding, neighbouring or previously colonizing peoples (Smith and Law, 1998)<sup>1</sup>.

Politicians of every stripe have recourse to rhetoric about makes Britain great (Thatcher, 1998), Japan unique (Doak, 2012), France the best place in the world to live (Godin and Chafer, 2006) and the United States the most blessed by God (Stecker, 2011). Academics seek and receive funding for projects deigned to uncover common European values (Halman and Luijckx, 2005), differences in ways of thinking of Westerners and Asians (Nisbett, 2004),

how to do business with the Chinese (Blasek, 2014) and the norms of consumer behavior in country X or region Y.

We can, if we wish, trace the roots of this idea to the early 19th century interest in the folklore of a particular people and its entwinement with later nineteenth century conceptions of nationalism and what it means to be "one people, one nation" (Baycroft and Hopkin, 2012). The notion of a "national culture" has maintained its coherence through all the transformations our conception of culture has gone through in the last two hundred years (Leersse, 2006), as it morphed from referring mainly to tangible manifestations of a nation's inimitable spirit (national dress, national literature, national music) to aspect of behavior associated with a particular people (Polynesian marriage practices, Japanese co-sleeping habits, British politeness rituals and even the bathing habits of the Nacirema Miner, 1956) to deeper, practically intangible thought-patterns, values and communication styles and values (Russian fatalism, Dutch informality, French egalitarianism, Japanese collectivism).

At times these wider, deeper traits claim areas of the world larger than the nation state (the ways of thinking of Asian peoples - Nakamura, 1964, Western individualism - Buss, 2000, the

<sup>1</sup> The author once witnessed a demonstration of folk dancing from a newly independent Slovenia which was preceded by an explanation of the four small but important ways in which Slovenian folk dancing differs from that of neighbouring Austria.

hospitality of the Arab world – Almaney, 1981) but the geographical rootedness of cultural patterns, however defined, seems to be assured. While at times one feels that the conflation of the thoughts and practices of citizens of nation states into these supra-national geographical expressions is a matter of convenience, laziness or a lack of research funds to go and investigate more than a few of the peoples covered by the umbrella terms, at others it appears to be a kind of academic political correctness, as with the recent trend in Intercultural Communication literature to speak of “individualists” and “collectivists” as a euphemism for Western and Asian people, an attempt perhaps to gloss over the fact that most of the research into “individualists” and “collectivists” has involved holders of U.S. and Japanese passports (Ryan, 1998).

Hand in hand with the insistence on the nation state as the preferred unit of explanation and analysis) for cultural matters, there has also been an awareness that the people of a nation state often differ quite widely in their cultural practices (however defined). Just about every commentator on Italy, whether academic or popular, notes the vast differences in ways of thinking, speaking and behaving between people who identify with the North of the country and those who identify with the South (Doyle, 2002). Yet still we speak of “Italian culture”, fund research projects seek to compare the value of Italians with those of other European nations and publish books on etiquette for doing business with “Italians.” Japan’s national broadcaster, NHK, a great promoter of “Japanese culture” is equally eager to publicise unique local customs and foodways. The fact that cultural variation does not stop at the national level and that there are regional, local, micro- and even idio-cultures is often papered over by the assertion that there are far greater differences between nations than within them.

In this Research Note, examples of this phenomenon have deliberately been drawn from both popular literature and more specialized academic literature as the naïve view of national culture present in popular publications has, to a large extent, been shared by some of the pioneer academic explorers of cultural differences. Hall, although he began his work with Native Americans (Hall, 1992), makes free use in his writings of “the Germans”, “the French” and “the Japanese” (Hall & Hall, 1990a, 1990b) as coherent cultural entities. Gudykunst, based on his seminal encounter with Japan, courtesy of the U.S. Navy, repeatedly uses the shorthand of

nationality groups to refer to people with different cultures (Gudykunst, 1994). Hofstede, in his oft-quoted study of 53 nations and regions (Hofstede, 2003), begins his analysis with the assumption that the question “Do IBM workers from different nations reveal different values when asked about their work-related preferences?” is worth asking.

This kind of approach leads inexorably to a search for national essences. It is standard practice for intercultural researchers to clean their data before analyzing it by removing extraneous cases. A questionnaire study of the values of Japanese, Korean and Chinese students for example, will begin by removing from the sample all responses from students who are not from Japan, Korea or China (Ryan, 2000). This is a natural consequence of assuming that the natural unit of analysis for culture is the nation state. But where is the culling of data to end? What about Korean students who were raised in China? What about Japanese students who have studied abroad in China? What about Chinese students who have once visited Japan? Wherever the researcher draws the line on cross-cultural contamination of samples, it is a compromise between the insistence on national cultural essence and the messiness of reality which rarely confronts us with individuals whose experience if the world comes from only one national source.

Yet, if it is so unrealistic to identify a national essence, the search for cultural patterns at a national level is a dead-end. If the researcher cannot identify bearers of the essence of a nation’s culture, either it does not exist or other research methods must be found. Before investigating whether this is good news or bad, it is necessary to investigate the theoretical underpinnings of the assumption that the nation state is a natural unit of analysis for cultural difference.

Putting aside nineteenth century notions of the “spirit of a nation” as a preternatural force which manifests itself in each successive generation born to the nation (Miller, 1982), the search for a rationale to support the concept of national culture necessarily leads to an examination of what is shared in a modern nation state. If the difference between national cultures is indeed bigger than the differences within them, there must be something within each nation state which makes the inculcation of cultural patterns possible.

Child-rearing practices do indeed vary from one

country to another (Selin, 2013), as do the beliefs of parents about how best to raise their children (Harkness and Super, 1995). These beliefs, and the childrearing practices to which they give rise, however, must come from somewhere. Childrearing practices are clearly a means of transmission but are not an adequate explanation for the origin or formation of national cultures.

Education systems also vary from country to country (Alexiadou and Brock, 2013) and are usually controlled by central government precisely because they are perceived to inculcate the values of the next generation of citizens. Even a cursory acquaintance with the concepts of nation building (Snodderly, 2013) whether in modern-day Africa or the Middle East, or in nineteenth century France or Japan, is enough to convince that control of what is taught in classrooms is a key element in convincing people that they are citizens of one nation with enough in common to make the nation worthy of collective defence against those who do not share in this commonality.

A parallel with “national languages” may be instructive here. Dialectologists have long contended (Fromkin and Rodman, 1983: p. 5 – 6) that up until about 100 years ago the dialects of any two contiguous villages in Europe were mutually intelligible. This meant that one could walk northern Norway to Southern Spain or from Eastern France to Moscow, learn the dialect of each village one passed through and be understood in the next village. Whilst there was no universal European language there was also no clear-cut distinction between what we now call French, German, Spanish, Polish, Czech, etc. What has changed all this in the last hundred years is the arrival of centralized national education systems run by people with the conviction that there is one people who should speak one language usually the dialect of the capital) and that the education system is the appropriate vehicle for correcting the incorrect speech habits of the citizens. One could add that the advent of mass communication media, coinciding as it did with the growth of the nation state, further strengthened the move towards standardization first of written language, through print media, and then the spoken language, through broadcast media. Repression of dialects

As always though when parallels between language and culture are drawn there are reasons for caution. Language may be the most deeply studied and readily understood manifestation of culture,

but it is not necessarily an archetype for all other aspects of culture. It can certainly be argued that national education systems and mass media have had a strong influence on the homogenization of national culture. Such an effort has had at its disposal the whole gamut of resources which brought about the standardization of national languages: from overt assertion (“we do these things because we are French”) to implicit assumption (“this is an attack on our Chinese national values”), from intellectual analysis (“let us study what it is that makes us Japanese”) to emotional appeal (“now is the time to defend our Canadian way of life!”) from opportunities for contrast (“other people behave as they do because they are not like us”) to brooding introspection (“I realized that the problem lies with my own Britishness”). These messages surround the modern individual every day, whether in school or in wider society. They may well have had the same homogenizing effect that led to the largely successful development of national languages.

Yet there are strong countervailing forces, too. People do not necessarily take on board the messages of school (Allwright, 1984) and mass media (Philo, 1999). The existence of the very idea of counter-culture is indicative of the fact that some people reject instruction, overt or covert, on how to think and act coming from a nation-building entity. The recognition of sub-cultures whether based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or faith, shows that over two hundred years of educational and mass media messaging have not yet been as successful in inculcating national cultures as they apparently have with language.

Furthermore, the availability of international travel and access to modern electronic means of communication are mitigating the influence of national education systems and nationally based mass media (Ryan, 2000). The Erasmus programme in Europe and increasing opportunities around the world to Study Abroad mean that more and more people are receiving their education from two three or even four national education systems. Others study online, where MOOCs and other kinds of online courses expose people around the world to the same educational input and, crucially, to each other. They not only access course materials but also discuss them in online chatrooms and for a with people whose life experiences and worldview are radically different from their own. News sources, for those who are online, have become similarly diversified and subject to commentary (the chatrooms

again) by an extremely diverse group of people.

One is tempted to conclude that the forces for homogenization of cultural at the national level even if they ever were dominant are now facing strong competition from the diversity that is asserting itself through international travel and online interactions. However, the reality is less straightforward. There is a strong possibility (Bartlett, Reffin, Rumball, and Williamson, 2014) that the increased ease with which individuals are able to contact others from diverse backgrounds is having the effect of driving people back to national stereotypes (“Of course he would react that way – he’s French”, “Typical Russian intellectualism”, “That’s why Italians lost the war”, etc.). We know from both the annals of history (Voyer, 2013) and controlled academic studies (Allort, 1958) that encounters with a cultural “other” can lead to conflict just as easily as they can be a learning experience.

Moreover there is evidence of a higher level of homogenization. Since the advent of satellite communication, audiences around the world have been able to share the same experiences: a boxing match, an international soccer game, a movie award ceremony, live coverage of a terrorist atrocity or even, in the case of viral videos, a cat playing the piano. Exposure to similar experiences will not always provoke similar reactions people cheer for different teams, see terrorists in different lights love or hate cats the fact that the experience is the same is surely an element of global, not national homogenization.

This contention leads, at last, to a discussion of what people mean when they talk about culture. Much of this Research Note has been devoted to exposing the folly of the facile notion that people from the same country share perforce the same culture. If culture, though, is not the common patterns of living and thinking which result from bearing a certain nationality (it cannot be) how then is it to be viewed? This is a notoriously difficult question to address and far more substantial works than the current one have tried (Murdock, Ford, and Hudson, 1971) and failed to resolve the issue.

What seems to make sense, both an intuitive level and in terms of research and theory on human cognition (Shaules, 2015), is that the way an individual interprets and deals with the world is a result of the totality of that individual’s experiences

so far. To the extent that an individual’s theory of the world and how to deal with it is similar to that of another individual, they can be said to share a common culture. It follows then that similarity of experience can lead to similarity of culture. Thus, it makes sense to say that two people watching the same international soccer game will, as a result, have an element of shared culture, even if their reaction to the game differs greatly, as a result of other non-shared aspects of their previous experience eg. learning to root for one team or the other.

To what extent then does it make sense to talk in terms of a national culture? Precisely to the extent that experiences of people in that nation are shared. They may all have been reared in the same way, though usually they are not; they may all have received the same education from a centralized education system, though usually local circumstances and lesson delivery will differ; they may all have grown up in a similar climatic or geographic region (Montaigne, 1595), though many nations encompass several; they may have watched the same TV shows from a national broadcaster, although this is becoming increasingly less likely; they may all subscribe to the same view of their nation’s history, though local and family history will almost certainly differ.

To a similar extent, it may make sense to talk of a professional culture (all accountants receive a generally similar training and spend their professional lives doing generally similar things), a company culture (all Mitsubishi employees go through a similar indoctrination to the company’s working practices and values), a gender culture (all women share some of experiences both of being a woman and having their womanhood constructed by others), a youth culture (access to similar music, gossip and fashions has brought a level of homogenization to young people’s lives around the world). Each of these cultures is deserving of both popular and academic attention, just as are national cultures, yet the spotlight seems to turn overwhelmingly to national cultures.

If academic enquiry into national cultures is to continue with a similar intensity, at the very least it needs to be re-focused. The search for national essences to compare is a dead-end. A (culturally) pure Korean subject can never be found to contrast with an equally elusive culturally pure Spanish subject. Even if they could be found, the contrast would reveal nothing at all about the kind

of culturally mixed individuals to be encountered in daily life.

A much more interesting area of research is to be found on the cultural margins (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). To what extent does proximity to a national border dilute national cultural influence from the centre? How do children from counter-cultural homes cope with the gap between the experiences they have at home and those assumed by the national school system they study under? To what extent does live coverage and discussion of a terrorist atrocity tend to homogenise the reactions of the people around the world? How does participation in international discussion fora strengthen or weaken national stereotypes? How can educators work to prepare students for contact with cultural others in ways that will make the experience positive? These are likely to be far more productive areas for research and theorizing than the comparison of national cultures and the patterns found in them. This will be especially true when these questions are pursued with respect to inter-gender, inter-professional, inter-generational, etc. encounters with the same energy and resources that have been devoted to cross-national studies.

Culture is not the exclusive property of a nation state. Nobody would seriously contend that it is, but continuing to speak and behave as though it is does a disservice to the whole world of cultural diversity, to the challenges of enhanced connectivity between individuals around the world, to the possibilities for deeper comprehension of human encounters and to the chances for global understanding. It may be some time before popular writers, journalists and politicians begin to see this. In the meantime, scholars of Intercultural Communication really have no excuse for not leading the way.

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