

Commentary

‘culture’ and ‘community’ (and, indeed, ‘cultural identity’) are *not* concepts which exist independently,

‘multiculturalism’ used by ‘ethnic minority politicians’ as well as ‘xenophobia activists’.

reinforce the ‘ethnic reductionism’: trivialise other cultures, rendering them entertaining but superficial and periphery.

This reduction of ethnic minorities becomes firmly part of the national mentality,

‘soft multiculturalism’: ‘interculturalists’, trainers and consultants try to ‘teach sensitivity toward cultural diversity’, but are ‘somewhat inclined toward stereotyping, occasionally given to exaggerating cultural differences..’

‘community’.

‘symbolic’ community Cohen (1985:98): ‘The community as experienced by its members is symbolic, rather than a structural construct.’

‘communities of practice’ Potter and Wetherell (1987), in which members tend to ‘communicate with each other in the same terms’;

‘CULTURE’: DEFINITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

UNIT B0.2

In Unit B0.2 we focus on the term ‘culture’



Task B0.2.1

- Which, if any, of the descriptions do you feel successfully captures the *complete* or a *partial* meaning of ‘culture’?

TEXT B0.2.1
B. Fay

Fay, B. (1996) *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science: A Multicultural Approach*, Oxford: Blackwell pp. 55–60 (extracts)

According to a standard view, a culture is a complex set of shared beliefs, values, and concepts which enables a group to make sense of its life and which provides it with directions for how to live. This set might be called a basic belief system (note that such a belief system can include items which are fully explicit and others which are not, and can include matters

of feeling and deportment as well as discursive claims about the world). In perhaps the most influential variant of this standard view, culture is pictured as a text the vocabulary and grammar of which its members learn. Indeed, in this view, becoming a member of a particular culture is a process of enculturation conceived as learning to read the culture's basic text and making it one's own.

DECONSTRUCTION: culture= set of beliefs= basic belief system
Culture is like a book= you need to learn how to 'read' it and how to 'make it your own'

This standard view asserts the further claim that in becoming the carriers of a specific cultural tradition individuals become the people they are. That is, by internalizing a particular belief system and its attendant forms of feeling and interaction a person acquires the basics of his or her identity. A culture penetrates its individual members mentally (so that they possess a certain mind-set), physically (so that they possess certain basic bodily dispositions), and socially (so that they relate to one another in certain characteristic ways). This penetration produces in them their distinctive capacities and characteristics. In this holistic way identity is a function of enculturation . . .

DECONSTRUCTION:
Culture is pervasive= highly influential (mental, physical, social)

So far I have been speaking as if culture consisted of a coherent set of beliefs (a 'text'). But this is a mistake. Any culture complex enough to warrant the name will consist of conflicting beliefs and rules which offer mixed, contested, and ambiguous messages to its followers. The reason for this derives in part from what I have already said about cultural rules and agency: rules require interpretation, and interpretation requires reflexive analysis and judgment on the part of agents. Besides, cultural beliefs and ideals apply to people in differential positions of power. The meaning of a rule for a powerful member of an elite often will not be the same for, nor will it have the same outcome on, a member of a group who is on the periphery. Moreover, cultural norms and ideals result from histories of struggle in which significant voices are silenced. As a result, various members in a cultural group will have heterogeneous histories, divergent interests, and antagonistic interpretations. Far from being coherent unities uniformly distributed throughout a society, cultures are rather tense loci of difference and opposition . . .

DECONSTRUCTION: 'culture= text' essentialist interpretation of reality.

It does not take into consideration differences and divergence.

Another important fact about cultures is that they are essentially open. Cultures are ideational entities; as such they are permeable, susceptible to influence from other cultures. Wherever exchange among humans occurs, the possibility exists of the influence of one culture by another. (Even when such influence does not occur it is because those in one culture consciously reject the foreign or strange culture: but this rejection is itself another way the alien culture interjects itself into the home culture.) Human history is in part the story of the ways different cultural groups have rearranged cultural boundaries by expanding contacts, tolerating outsiders, and fashioning interactive arrangements. Even the creation of stricter boundaries involves mutual impact. The human world is not composed of a motley of independent, encapsulated, free-floating cultures; rather, it is one of constant interplay and exchange . . .

Deconstruction: cultures are connected-

. . . consider the deeper cultural rhythms by which you live. Your conceptions of time, of space, of power, of beauty, of agency, of sociality, of knowledge have all been deeply affected by importing, responding to, transforming, and borrowing the cultural meanings and values of others different from you.

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cultures are connected-

Task B0.2.2



➤ How do you think 'the cultural meanings and values of others different from you' that Fay refers to have affected your own conceptions of:

- time
- space
- beauty
- knowledge?

Roberts, C. and Sarangi, S. (1993) "Culture" Revisited in Intercultural Communication', in Boswood, T., Hoffman, R. and P. Tung (eds), *Perspectives on English for International Communication*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong City Polytechnic pp. 97-

102 (extracts)

(Note: AL is an abbreviation for Applied Linguistics; ICC is an abbreviation for Intercultural Communication)

C. Roberts and
S. Sarangi

Within AL and ICC, many researchers regard culture as a preference for certain patterns of communicative behaviour, though such patterns can only be interpreted at a higher level of abstraction. In the functionalist tradition, 'culture' is seen as background and resource, where the human subject is only seen in his/her role of executor of functions. 'Culture' thus comes to be viewed too simply as either behaviour (e.g. x people don't smile in public), or as fixed values and beliefs, separated from social interaction and socio-political realities (e.g. x culture values the elderly).

DECONSTRUCTION: each branch of linguistics analyses culture in one perspective. (functionalists analyse people for their role/function in a culture)

Such reductionism is characteristic of AL and ICC studies where ethnicities and cultural identities have been reduced according to Hewitt (1989, pp. 6–9), to 'a list of strange linguistic and interactional elements arranged in academic display, dislocated from the sources of their generation, from human agency, intelligence, politics and from the possibility of change'.

DECONSTRUCTION: reductionism does not admit human agency, individual actions= change.

There is no sense of culture as symbolically ordered in its own right or constitutive to any degree. Nor is there any sense of the human subject as an agency constituted through culture. It is not surprising therefore that in analytic terms, culture has thus become the 'residual realm left over after all forms of observable human behaviour have been removed' (Wuthnow et al., 1984). Especially in the context of interactional studies, this has amounted to explaining behaviour away. Such characterisations of culture as social behaviour and/or shared values leave the notion of 'culture' itself intact as an impressionistic explanation for understanding differences and difficulties in communication in multi-ethnic societies.

DECONSTRUCTION: reductionist views study 'culture' but not 'humans'!

Hinnenkamp (1987:176) quite rightly observes:

Culture as adapted in most linguistic sub-disciplines has unfortunately become a passe-partout notion; whenever there is a need for a global explanation of differences between members of different speech communities the culture card is played – the more ‘distant’ in geographic and linguistic origin, the more ‘cultural difference’!

Deconstruction: in many cases ‘culture’= geography and language differences.

This leads us to highlight the problem both in theoretical studies of AL and ICC and in applications such as education and training programmes. There are three major difficulties here: firstly that the nature of these studies and programmes means that the focus is on problems and difficulties and so ‘culture’ or what we might call the ‘cultural principle’ is used in a ‘celebration of miscommunication’. Secondly, ‘culture’ is conceived of in a limited way to refer to resources, behaviour patterns and fixed values. And finally, ‘culture’ in the limited way described above becomes the necessary and sufficient explanation of intercultural encounters. Within ICC studies, it is generally assumed that things go wrong because two cultural groups behave differently, which makes communication between them problematic. This means that within such a view, ‘culture’ is seen as creating and maintaining an unfavourable climate for ICC. So ‘culture’ becomes a negative term rather than a positive term . . .

DECONSTRUCTION:

For some studies, 1. ‘culture’= misunderstanding 2. Culture= fixed patterns

1. culture= negative

DECONSTRUCTION: each branch of linguistics analyses culture in one perspective. (functionalists analyse people for their role/function in a culture)

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2. culture= negative



Task B0.2.3

➤ Think of your own experiences studying foreign or second languages,

history or the social sciences. Have the ways you have been encouraged to view other cultural groups in such studies been characterised by the kind of 'ethnic reductionism' highlighted by Roberts and Sarangi?

TEXT B0.2.3
A. R. Holliday

Holliday, A. R. (1999) 'Small Cultures', *Applied Linguistics*, 20:2 pp. 237–264 (extracts)

Two cultures

On asking both academics and non-academics what they mean by 'culture', one will invariably find that they first refer to 'large' entities such as British, Indonesian, Western or European cultures. However, at other times one may also hear people referring to 'small' entities such as hospital, research, family, office or organisation cultures. When asked how these two types of culture relate to each other, some people say that the 'large' usage is the correct one and that the 'small' usage is metaphorical. Others say that the small cultures are 'sub-cultures'. Casual observation thus gives the impression that when asked, people will state 'large' culture, but will often use 'small' culture as an unmarked form . . .

DECONSTRUCTION: 'big culture (national culture) VS small culture (community culture) people refer to big culture more than small culture (sub.culture)

Two paradigms

The notion of small culture does not . . . relate simply to something smaller in size than large ethnic, national or international cultures, but presents a different paradigm through which to look at social groupings. The small culture paradigm, set against the large culture paradigm is summarised in [Table 5]. The idea of small cultures (central column) is non-essentialist in that it does not relate to the essences of ethnic,¹ national or international entities. Instead it relates to any cohesive social grouping with no necessary subordination to large cultures.

DECONSTRUCTIONS:

Small cultures are analysed as independent

Large cultures see and analyse culture following 'onion style' = everything is part of the bigger, large culture.

[Table 5] also distinguishes a research orientation for each paradigm. 'Research' is used here in the broadest sense, as any academic or non-academic process of learning about culture. Non-academic cultural research is naturally carried out by anyone 'approaching' an unfamiliar social grouping in the sense of Schutz' 'stranger', 'who has to place in question nearly everything that seems unquestionable to the members of

the approached group' (1962:96). In cultural research, small cultures are thus a heuristic means in the process of interpreting group behaviour. The idea of large cultures (right-hand column), in contrast, is essentialist in that it relates to the essential differences between ethnic, national and international entities. Because the large culture paradigm begins with a prescriptive desire to seek out and detail differences which are considered the norm, and because it aims to explain behaviour in these terms, it tends to be culturist . . .

Research in large cultures analyse everything in a culturalist, essentialist way, following cultural determinism.

Small culture looks at concrete actions.

Table 5 Two paradigms

	<i>Small cultures</i>	<i>Large cultures</i>
Character	Non-essentialist, non-culturist. Relating to cohesive behaviour in activities within any social grouping.	Essentialist, culturist. 'Culture' as essential features of ethnic, national or international group.
Relations	No necessary subordination to or containment within large cultures, therefore no onion-skin.	Small (sub)cultures are contained within and subordinate to large cultures through onion-skin relationship.
Research orientation	Interpretive, process. Interpreting emergent behaviour within any social grouping. Heuristic model to aid the process of researching the cohesive process of any social grouping.	Normative Beginning with the idea that specific ethnic, national and international groups have different 'cultures' and then searching for the details (e.g. what is polite in Japanese culture).

R. Holliday

1 'Ethnic' is as troublesome as 'culture'. It can be argued that it is a product of the same essentialist discourse as large culture (e.g. Baumann (1996), Sarangi (1994, 1995)).

'Small' is therefore not just a matter of size, but of the degree of imposition on reality. Whereas the large culture notion imposes a picture of the social world which is divided into 'hard', essentially different ethnic, national or international cultures, the small culture notion leaves the picture open, finding 'softer' 'cultures' in all types of social grouping, which may or may not have significant ethnic, national or international qualities. In this sense, the focus of a large culture approach is what makes cultures, which everyone acknowledges as existing, essentially different to each other. In contrast, a small culture approach is more concerned with social processes as they emerge . . .

Large culture approach looks at differences between national/international identities
Small culture- is more detailed. It analyses social processes

Small cultures: 'A process of making and remaking'

Within the small culture paradigm, 'culture' refers to the composite of cohesive behaviour within any social grouping, and not to the differentiating features of prescribed ethnic, national and international entities. Distant from the large culture approach, which takes ethnic, national and international groupings as the default [Table 5], small cultures can be any social grouping from a neighbourhood to a work group (Beales et al 1967:8). . . .

Large culture studies ethnic, national and international groups

Small culture studies any group

Small culture is thus a dynamic, ongoing group process which operates in changing circumstances to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances. When a researcher looks at an unfamiliar social grouping, it can be said to have a small culture when there is a discernible set of behaviours and understandings connected with group cohesion. The dynamic aspect of small culture is central to its nature, having the capacity to exist, form and change as required. According to Beales et al., 'the outstanding characteristic of a cultural system is that it is in process; it moves' (1967:5). Small culture is thus 'the sum total of all the processes, happenings, or activities in which a given set or several, sets of people habitually engage' (ibid.:9). Thus, small culture constitutes a social 'tool-kit' which emerges to 'solve problems' when required (Crane 1994:11). Moreover, it involves an underlying competence in which 'people are not passive "cultural dopes"; they are active, often skilled users' (ibid.:11).

Small culture is dynamic= changes= people active

Large culture- almost totally dominated by patterns (stereotypes)

DECONSTRUCTION: 'big culture (national culture) VS small culture (community culture) people refer to big culture more than small culture (sub.culture)

Small cultures are analysed as independent

Large cultures see and analyse culture following 'onion style'= everything is part of the bigger, large culture.

Research in large cultures analyse everything in a culturalist, essentialist way, following cultural determinism.

Small culture looks at concrete actions.

Large culture approach looks at differences between national/international identities
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Small culture studies any group

Small culture is dynamic= changes= people active

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Task .2.4

- ▶ In text B0.2.3 Holliday writes that 'small cultures can be any social grouping from a neighbourhood to a work group'. What 'small cultures' can you identify?