

# THE IMPORTANCE OF NATIONS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF CULTURES

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## *Abstract*

Europe is on the move. The fusion and fission movement brings out the political reunion of nations and creation of new nations in Europe. This changing movement leads us to rethink a classical issue for intercultural research: What is the dominant criterion for a definite culture? Up to now, the nation criterion has been widely used and well recognized in many intercultural studies. However, the change of political units and the creation of new nations a drastic action, while the change of cultures is a long and slow process. Nation borders are changed, but not cultures. The classical concept of national cultures seems no longer well applied in everywhere, especially for the new nations. New criteria of cultures need to be found, discussed and applied for the intercultural research. This research paper deals with problems above and it introduces a discussion about possible criteria for the definition of cultures. The definition covers several aspects as languages, economy, population, political powers and their importance for the existence of a culture.

## **Introduction**

The definitions of culture have always been considered as a vital topic for the cross-cultural research debate. Many aspects are introduced into the culture definitions, since cross-cultural study has used many school disciplines and their theoretical thought to establish her own theory. There is no agreement for a common definition of a culture, but rather agreement for the multiplicity for definitions of a culture.

The development of cross-cultural reseach includes the theories of anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science, organization, and geography. Hence, the definitions of a culture are many, also including the above dimensions. On the other hand, the outcomes and findings of cross-cultural research are to a large extent implemented on overseas business operations where national borders are considered as culture units.

The definitions of a culture are therefore mostly favorable for the national approaches, *i.e.* a nation is considered as a culture unit since it labels largely workforce and legislation for the business operations (Ronen, 1986, p.45). There are also evidences showing that cross-cultural research primarily using national culture as the analysis unit (Adler, 1983a; Ronen, 1986, p.157).

Nevertheless, the survival of a nation is not always as long as the survival of a culture, since nation is primarily a political or legislative unit and a culture is basically created by people. The drastic situations in Europe for the last five years noticed the problem above. The process of independence and reunion for many nations brings the consequences to many, not only to the political balance, legislation, economy, business, and employment, but also to the traditional definitions of a culture.

The nation based definitions of a culture has to confront to the new situation. For instance, what is the German culture? If we compare German culture with other national

cultures, do we have to include the part of former East Germany? Where should we place the former East German culture? These are the questions a cross-cultural researcher ought to ask in order to meet the new situation. The purpose of this paper is to open the discussion about such topics. The coming discussion includes the following sections: An overview of definitions of a culture; Which criterion is essential for the definitions of a culture? The powers of political and economic position; Culture-free is not free for cultures; The balance of different aspects.

### **An Overview Of Definitions Of A Culture**

Originally, the first study of a culture was only limited within the anthropology school discipline (Smircich, 1983). That was the cultural study, more or less, without nation units. So came other school disciplines and thought. In the later years, the concept of culture is frequently introduced and used for many business management studies and organization theories. Partly because culture is an important term for organization development, partly because overseas business needs culture to open foreign market. It appears the organization approach to the definitions of a culture and nation units are also used for the definitions. However, only one approach seems too narrow to cover the whole scenario of definitions of a culture. An overview is needed to illustrate the development. A selection of definitions to a culture by different school disciplines are listed as the follows:

#### *Anthropological aspect:*

Culture is the knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, customs and other capabilities of one group distinguishing it from other groups (Ronen, 1986, p. 21).

Culture is an implicit sense of anthology or tradition, social customs and attitudes, values, religion, language or a combination of any of these elements (Nowotny, 1964).

#### *Sociological aspect:*

Culture is the integration of three basic elements, as attitudes, beliefs, and values of a society (Fayweather, 1959).

Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting - acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols - constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts. The essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961).

Culture is the whole complex of distinctive features characteristic of a particular stage of advancement in a given society (Whitehill, 1964).

#### *Organizational aspect:*

Culture is a system of shared meaning generates certain value orientations which are expressed in the actor's relationship with his/her fellow-men, time, and nature (Trompenaars, 1986).

Culture is, something that is shared by all or almost all members of same social group, something that the older members of the group try to pass on to the younger members, and something (as in the case of morals, laws, or customs) that shapes behavior or structures one's perception of the world (Adler & Doktor, 1989).

*Political aspect:*

Culture can be defined as the sum of environmental factors, as education, religion, language, politics, legal and technology, which are transmitted from one generation to the next in a given society (Owens & Martin, 1986).

Culture is a part of the environment and is seen as a determining or imprinting force of a given society (Smircich, 1983).

*Geographical aspect:*

Cultures may be defined as patterns of thought and manners which are widely shared. The boundaries of the social collectivism within which this sharing takes place are problematic so that it may make as much as sense to refer to a class or regional culture as to a national culture (Child & Kieser, 1977). This is a definition giving by the geographical aspect.

*Psychological aspect:*

Culture is the integrated sum of the total of learned behavioral traits that are manifest and shared by members of a society. It may be considered as the man-made part of our environment (Hutcheson, 1980).

Culture includes systems of values, and values are among the building blocks of culture. Culture is to a human collectivism what personality is to an individual, thus, culture belongs to group collectivism (Hofstede, 1980, p. 19).

Culture refers to the way that human beings understand the world. In the broadcast sense, culture defines and expresses both attitudes and behaviors (Ronen, 1986, p. 23).

A definition by too many means no definition. A quotation (Ajiferuke & Boddewyn, 1970) shows how wide the definitions of a culture are able to be extended: Culture is one of those terms that defy a single all-purpose definition, and there are almost as many meanings of "culture" as people using the term.

The different school disciplines use their own terms, jargons and phrases to define a culture. Even the context of a culture is the same, there seems to be difference among the analysis units. For instance, anthropologists usually consider people as an analysis unit, psychologists rather see group behavior, while sociologists prefer to use societies. An organization theorist may use a division or department to define a culture unit, while a geographer may use an area or district as the research unit. A politician may prefer to define a nation or a region as a culture unit.

Few interesting questions may be asked here: Which aspect is used as the basic research unit for a cross-cultural study? How do we measure a culture? By what references?

### **Which Criterion Is Essential For The Definitions Of A Culture?**

As previously mentioned, nations are usually used as the analysis unit for many cross-cultural research and studies. The possible explanations are: (1) Traditionally, a nation has been a common and well-recognized unit to distinguish people. (2) For an outsider or observer, a nation is presumably the label for the identity of her people. Hence, the nation identity may help us to distinguish people and know where they come from.

In that sense, it is the nationality difference to distinguish between an American and a German, this difference tells also where they come from. However, such national distinction may not always be able to identify people's total backgrounds and their cultures. Think about differences between Americans and Canadians, white Americans and black Americans, Quebec Canadians and British Canadians. They are all different from each other, but in their own ways. The nationality differences have dominated the first mentioned, while ethnic colors distinguish the second, and within the same nationality and same ethnic color, the differences between Quebec and British Canadian are far more complicated than one or two dimensions, but differences are obviously.

Empirically, there were also evidences showing that the national identity was the simple way to distinguish people and their cultures. Among the most prestige cross-cultural studies, nation has frequently been identified or used as the analysis unit, though some studies also indicated other factors than nationality (Reitz 1975, Whitely & England, 1977, see also table).

*Table 1. Summary of early cross-cultural studies (Ronen 1986, p.157)*

Author & Data	Samples	Respondents	Purpose	Study Findings
Bass & Burger (1979)	13 countries	3083 managers	Life-goal ranking Rate of advancement	Maslow's ranking significant by countries
Griffeth, Hom, DeNishi & Kirchner (1980)	15 countries	1768 managers	Compares organizational attitudes and satisfaction	Country significance, clusters: Anglo, Nordic, Southern I & II
Haire, Ghiselli & Porter (1966)	14 countries	3641 managers	Compares differences in attitudes and motivation	Country accounts 30 % of variance
Hofstede (1980)	40 countries	60000 managers	Differences in goals and attitudes, related to cultures	Four dimensions were found by countries and clusters
Kanungo & wright (1980)	4 countries	449 managers	Compares reward expectations and job satisfaction	Significant country differences
Kraut & Ronen (1975)	5 countries	8707 managers	Examines job satisfaction, performance ratings	Country is best predictor of performance ratings
Reitz (1975)	8 countries	3527 managers	Importance of need levels and its relationship to education	Significant by education level Need similar for all countries
Sirota & Greenwood (1971)	25 countries	13000 employees	Examines differences and similarities in work goals	Similarity of work goals by countries, not by clusters
Whitely & England (1977)	5 countries	2090 managers	Value system to the level of industrialization and cultures	Values are resulted by both culture and industrialization

It is to some extent reasonable to use nation as the analysis unit for cross-cultural study since the nationality is probably the most approachable label for common people in a global sense. Nation seems to be a good indicator for the pure theoretical research study. When only talking about comparative cross-cultural study between two groups, or among three, or more groups of people, the sizes of groups seem not to be a big point for the entire study.

However, one should also consider the practical outcomes and consequences of such approach. How large cultural differences between Norway and Denmark will be in practice? How much an outsider or observer (non-Scandinavian) would understand such differences? What outcomes will such differences bring to us? How much such differences compare with cultural differences between Hindu and Sikh, both of India? What kind of consequences will be affecting to the overseas business in India if one has treated Hindu and Sikh as one national culture group - Indian culture? How important for us to distinguish cultural differences between Norway and Denmark versus cultural differences between Hindu and Sikh, both of India?

## The Powers Of Political And Economic Position

One of important principles of cross-cultural research is establishing a culture-free standard. It means every culture standing at the same level and no one will dominate others. On the other hand, our previous discussions have mentioned about the multiplicity of culture definitions. It seems hard to choose a definite aspect for culture definitions, whether anthropological, psychological, organizational, or sociological aspect. Nevertheless, there is one thing for sure, that nation is not the only definite aspect for culture definitions. It is necessary to look for other relevant aspects. Further comparisons by other criteria need to be done.

Since nation still is the most common identity for grouping of people in a global sense, it is practical to use national criterion as a basic data entry for further comparisons. The secondary data is powerful data resources for such comparison and such data usually indicates the problems or critical issues in a wider aspect.

*Table 2. Comparative national statistics (Encyclopædia Britannica 1988 Year Book)*

Nation	GNP Total (US\$ bill.)	GNP (US\$) pr. capita	Import (US\$ mill.)	Export (US\$ mill.)	Population (mill.)	Ethnic groups (over 5%)	Official Languages	Religions (over 1%)
Albania	2.8	950	374	351	3.08	1	1	3 + n
Canada	347.4	13700	86675	92688	25.90	3	2	4 + n
Denmark	57.3	11210	26042	24171	5.13	1	1	1 + n
India	194.8	260	13147	8967	783.00	6 (linguistic)	2	4
Japan	1366.0	11310	146733	240278	122.00	1	1	2
Norway	57.6	13930	22396	19977	4.18	1	1	1 + n
Tanzania	5.8	270	171	82	23.20	6	2	4
UK	474.2	8380	139428	118274	56.90	1	1	6 + n
USA	4235.0	17600	387082	206376	244.00	2 + others	1	4 + n

The comparative results are very illustrative in a sense of understanding the importance of other criteria for culture definitions. If the only analysis unit for cross-cultural research was defined as nation, than the outcomes of a comparative culture study will have difficulty to explain the multiplicity of ethnic groups, religions and even official languages from countries like Canada, India, and Tanzania.

On the other hand, the economical performance as well as import and export activities may well represent a nation's position in the international arena. For instance, countries like Denmark and Norway have ten times total GNP as Tanzania, even compared with India, their total GNP is still one third of total Indian. In both cases, the economical performance accounts a far more important role than their pure cultural identities, since both countries (Denmark and Norway) only have approximately twenty percent of Tanzanian population and half percent of Indian size.

During the peace time, a nation's the economical performance and GNP global ranking may well represent her political power. Such power position is important for the existence of a nation and her cultures, not only in a global political debate as meetings in United Nations, but also for other implications such as cross-cultural research. One may

ask why a small country like Denmark or Norway has definite and distinctive cultures while a large country like India or Tanzania usually has poor data on cultures though the later has multi-culture backgrounds. The answer probably lays on the economical performance and the nation's GNP.

### **Culture-free Is Not Free For Cultures**

The above analysis shows a latent trend of cross-cultural research, which may not necessarily move towards the positive direction. Principally, the cross-cultural research ought to be conducted through culture-free standards, and this means every criterion or aspect should be covered in the definitions of culture. This principle was however not fully committed as long the analysis unit of a culture was dominated only by national or economical criterion.

Hence, culture-free is actually not free for any cultures. The cross-cultural research work is performed by human beings, whom are also strongly culture oriented and affected. Whatever a cross-cultural researcher attempts to use a neutral or objective standard for the study. It will label the colors of cultures.

For example, the basic study instrument as a survey questionnaire is typically European or North American oriented: No matter how close each question was designed to culture-free standards, the ways of data collecting already indicated strong characters of Occidental cultures (by using scales and number to quantify the respondents' opinions). In many cases, most of questions were also designed on basis of western circumstances, though some theorists try to make new approaches (Hofstede, 1987).

A comparative study of early research work indicates also that cross-cultural study was mainly dominated by American researchers (80 % of total publications) and most of research methods were invented, used or strongly influenced by American approaches or thought (Adler, 1983b). Thus, the developing of multiplicity on cross-cultural research, both in methodology and in theories is indeed in need.

### **The Balance Of Different Aspects**

After World War II, the global power positions have been switched from military based to economy based performance. This power development will consequently result the existence of a nation, which is based more on her economical performance than other elements, so does her cultural identity. Moreover, the increasing role of economy has also created an economical culture which is naturally a part of general culture. For instance, in many European and North American countries, business and financial news is listed as a core program for TV, radio or major newspapers. Listening or reading business news becomes certainly a part of culture in these countries. However, such culture is rarely seen in a developing country where many people are still illiterate.

According to anthropological, sociological, and psychological aspects, a culture is a group people with common knowledge, beliefs, morals, attitudes, values, learned behavioral traits and law. So far non of classical aspects has directly mentioned the role

of economical performance for a culture. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that the economical performance of a nation is only a part of culture, possibly a very small part of a culture. It is certainly not the only criterion to define or determine the existence of a culture by theoretical point of view. Nevertheless, it has a powerful position for a culture and her identity in practice.

It seems to be a huge difference between theoretical thought and practical implementing on definitions of a culture. It is also hard to meet the requirements of culture-free principle in practice. The current criteria of definitions of a culture are much concentrated on the economical performance or similar aspects though only few researchers admitted the fact. There is apparently a need to balance the different aspects, or emphasize the roles of other cultural elements than economical performance. More discussions and research work need to be done in this topic.

Few questions may be helpful to conduct the discussion of culture criteria: What will be the most important criteria for definitions of a culture? Is nation the best and only unit for cross-cultural analysis and research? Where and who should be benefited by the outcomes of cross-cultural research work?

From the theoretical point of view, the balance of each aspects is essential for definitions of a culture. There is hence no criterion which is absolutely important than all others, according to culture-free principle. However, the early analysis (see table 1) shows that nation is practically considered as the major criterion. Hence, there is definitely a need for obtaining the panorama views over every other criterion as well. It should consciously use other criteria more than only nation to balance every aspect.

As the result, a comparative cross-cultural study should not only operate within one level as nation, but also possibly in different levels. For example, a comparative study of Norwegian culture against Sikh culture, though the former refers to a nation while the latter refers to a region of a nation. The nation is therefore not the only unit for cross-cultural analysis and research. Other regional border may well be good criteria for defining a culture.

Since there is a huge gap between theoretical principles and practical approaches for definitions of a culture. It suggests that cross-cultural research ought to move to or emphasize the implementing process for its outcomes when determining definitions or criteria. The result from a comparative study of two cultures is primarily used for mutual business or other exchange purposes between two cultures, and they are not necessarily belonging to their national cultures. They probably have own regional, organizational or even group cultures which may far different from their national cultures. In that sense, a stereotype perception of national culture may possibly blind the possibility of mutual understanding.

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