

Exploration of New Understanding of 'Culture'

Yogi Chaitanya Prakash, Osaka University, Japan

The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Culture is a term which has various definitions with many contradictions. A general apprehension about culture limits it to a broad or narrow sense of homogeneity and in the need of certain exclusion. The present understanding of culture is inevitably responsible for conflict between two cultures. The solicitation to particular belief or value system usually makes society dogmatic in the long run. Our cultures in the human world invariably claim to have an authority on righteousness. They usually claim their superiority over other cultures despite the theoretical covering of mutual respect to each other. This paper is intended to critically analyze the present or established understanding of culture and also to explore the prospective understanding of culture which can be relevant to the new changing world.

Can we create an understanding of culture which can be largely acceptable and applicable to the whole universe cutting across physical frontiers of globe and treading beyond the dogmas of superiority and authority of righteousness? Can heterogeneity and inclusion be considered and appreciated as the values in the new understanding of culture? Can the universality of human being along with the equal cooperation of other living and non-living, visible-invisible entities a vast plank of understanding this prospective culture?

This paper explores a fresh understanding of culture in the light of above questions.

Keywords: Culture, Exploration, New Understanding

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Culture as a term or concept or an understanding have been widely discussed in the entire world especially in the western world but the following quote represents the voice of confession to the fact that understanding of culture which has been discussed till now is not to be considered as sufficient or enough or next to complete, but paradoxically it has created more confusion as puzzle or problem before the human being:

‘Culture is something that Western societies have not clearly understood, so that the challenges they have to face in an increasingly multicultural world are particularly difficult to manage. Understanding culture is certainly not only a Western problem, but a universal problem as well. (Montovani, 2000, p. 1)¹⁾

The philosophers and Thinkers have tried to define or understand the culture as the representative term of multitudinous-ness and they had defined it as the bunch of many odds and evens:

“Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted 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; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.”²⁾

They had discussed culture as the complex phenomenon and accepted its intra-contradictoriness without finding correlation or concordance among them:

“The complexity of the concept of "culture" is remarkable. It became a noun of "inner" process, specialized to its presumed agencies in "intellectual life" and "the arts." It became also a noun of general process, specialized to its presumed configurations in "whole ways of life." It played a crucial role in definitions of "the arts" and "the humanities," from the first sense. It played an equally crucial role in definitions of the "human sciences" and the "social sciences," in the second sense.”³⁾

The very term culture has also been discussed in the context of its relevance to the outward sense of life which is more civilizational than cultural:

"Every culture is designed to perpetuate the group and its solidarity, to meet the demands for an orderly way of life and for satisfaction of biological needs"⁴⁾

And in the same direction it has also been observed or viewed as its expressive or visible part which is more related to the behavioral diversity of human society e.g.:

Kroeber and Kluckhohn divide definitions into six groups, as follows:

1. Enumeratively descriptive (a list of the content of culture)
2. Historical (emphasis on social heritage, tradition)
3. Normative (focus on ideals or ideals plus behavior)
4. Psychological (learning, habit, adjustment, problem-solving device)
5. Structural (focus on the pattern or organization of culture)
6. Genetic (symbols, ideas, artifacts)

The outer expressions and their dimensions had become the prominent parameters to understand culture as a sense, like:

Edward B. Tylor (1871) saw culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"

Sometimes it has been discussed as the inner sense rather than the outer expressions like,

For Ruth Benedict (1934/1959) culture denoted "a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action" tied to the "emotional and intellectual mainsprings of that society" (p. 46).

Defining culture had emerged as an exhaustive process to bind the unlimited in to limited, like

The Dictionary of the Social Sciences (Reading, 1976) focuses on repeated patterns, learned behaviors, and "a way of life" (p. 55). Within anthropology specifically, the Dictionary of Concepts in Cultural Anthropology (Winthrop, 1991) lists a variety of pre-World War II concepts, such as "distinctive patterns of thought, action, and value" (p. 50). The almost entire discourse of culture is based on the human history, and its evolution and then the behavioral aspects as time to time changes and differences among group of people or societies:

“Michael Prosser (1978) echoed Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), although in slightly different terms, as he summarized Kaplan and Manners' (1972) approach. This approach includes cultural evolutionism (collective experiences), cultural history (the current historical context of a group), cultural functionalism (culture as a working system to meet needs), and cultural ecology (the patterns of culture, especially symbols, following Geertz, 1973)”.

The contention of the present discourse seems to be focused on structural components of the systems of human behavior or practices. But sometimes on the journey to discuss it structurally, the discourse inherently expresses the capacity of encroachment from externalities to inner sense of being as the holistic approach which marks or acknowledges the interrelatedness at the plank of ‘being’:

“Talcott Parsons et al. (1961) critiqued strict "pattern" definitions of culture, suggesting that we must also see the "structural component of cultural systems" (p. 964, emphasis added). The structural component goes beyond a simple listing of elements to consider the holistic nature of elements and their interrelatedness”

The general understanding of culture identifies it as the system of symbols and is also focused on the process of decoding these symbols to get meanings from them. In the same way culture is considered as the uniqueness of human communication, furthermore it observes culture as the certain sense of community making and community surviving. As per the general understanding communities and culture are not only interdependent but sometimes they apprehend themselves as synonyms to each other.

This general understanding cognizes culture again more externally than internally:

Some authors see culture as a system of symbols (i.e., subjective culture). Leslie White and Beth Dillingham (1973) refer culture as "symboling that is, the system of

symbols and meanings, our symbolic capacity that makes us uniquely human. This focus on language as a symbolic system resonates with E. T. Hall's (1959) well-known aphorism is: "Culture is communication"

George Barnett and Meihua Lee (2002) synthesized Geertz, Durkheim, Kluckhohn and Kelly, and Goodenough to define culture as a property of a group. It is a group's shared collective meaning system through which the group's collective values, attitudes, beliefs, customs, and thoughts are understood. It is an emergent property of the member's social interaction and a determinant of how group members communicate Culture may be taken to be a consensus about the meanings of symbols, verbal and nonverbal, held by members of a community. (p. 277)⁵⁾

The established understanding of culture is supposed to be broadly based on the following four characteristics:

1. Identity: Generally culture is to be based on a sense of identity of a specific group, community, belief or a particular pattern of thinking or its practices or with a particular way of life.
2. Authority – A claim of an authority on one thought or philosophy or ideology is a basic construct of idea of culture as the established understanding of culture.
3. Homogeneity- An ethnic, racial, religious, or geographical homogeneity is also a basic component of culture as per established understanding.
4. Superiority- A self- proclaimed righteousness which creates superiority among members of that particular community or cultural group or society is also a basic construct of culture as per established understanding.

The author of this paper is taking an opportunity to explore and propose a new understanding of culture in which the four basic characteristics can be considered as the basic parameters to identify the sense of culture as following:

1. Affinity and assimilation- The prospective culture is to be based on the natural sense of affinity and assimilation among living and non-living entities.
2. Interdependence and Inclusion- The above said sense is to make entity capable of realizing the facticity of interdependence and consequently to embrace inclusion rather than expecting exclusion or be burdened by any imposition of otherness.
3. Acceptance and Understanding- The prospective culture is to evoke the sense of accepting every entity as in its natural form or in its being. This new culture is to have an understanding to get other's view or behavior or thought or philosophy or idea as the integral part of the truth or completeness.
4. Creativity and Communication- The prospective culture is to explore and witness the capacity of creativity and communication (i.e. also includes silence and solitude) within and without.

References

1. Redefining Culture: Perspectives: Across the Disciplines (Routledge Communication Series) (p.3). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.
2. Culture, a critical review of concepts and definitions, Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952), (p.181)
3. Williams, R. (1977), Marxism and literature. Oxford: OUP (p.17)
4. Kluckhohn, 1949, (p.24–25).
5. Redefining Culture: Perspectives Across the Disciplines (Routledge Communication Series) (p.13), Taylor and Francis, Kindle Edition.

Bibliography

1. Redefining Culture: perspective across the Disciplines, Edited by John R. Baldwin, Sandra L. Faulkner, Michel L. Hecht, Sheryl L. Lindsley, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publications, New Jersey, 2006.
2. Culture: A critical Review of Concepts and Definitions by A.L. Kroeber, and Clyde Kluckhohn, Vintage Books, New York, 1963.
3. Culture,1922 : The Emergence of a concept, Marc Manganaro, Princeton University Press, Princeton New jersey, 2002.
4. Concepts of Culture, Edited by Hans Adler and Jost Hermand, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, New York, 1999.
5. History, evolution and the concept of culture Edited by Sidney W. Mintz, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, USA, 1985.
6. Understanding Cultures: Perspectives in Anthropology and Social Theory by Robert C. Ulin, University of Texas Press, Austin, USA, 1984.
7. Notes towards the Definition of culture by T.S. Eliot, Faber And Faber Limited, London, 1962.
8. In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture by George Steiner, Faber and Faber, London, 1971.
9. Beyond Culture, Edward T. Hall, Anchor books, Doubleday, New York, 1976.