

1 What Is Culture?

The term “culture” has been difficult to define because it pertains to an array of different types of things: mental, normative, behavioral, functional, historical, and symbolic. For this reason, an alternative approach would be to identify various dimensions. This section identifies a number of these dimensions: between culture in the abstract and concrete cultures; between a culture as a whole and its parts; between two coexisting cultures; between that which persists and that which changes; between the collective and the individual; between what lies in front of consciousness and what lies behind; between culture as an interior phenomenon and culture as an exterior phenomenon; and between descriptive and normative claims. Despite the experience of culture as a coherent whole, no culture is a monolith. Instead, each culture is subject to elaborations, accretions, syncretisms, and reinterpretations.

1.1 Introduction

Leadership always takes place within a context. Scholars have accounted for the importance of the context for more than a hundred years (see e.g. Bryman, Stephens, & Campo, 1996; Fiedler, 1972, citing Terman, 1904; McCusker, Foti, & Abraham, 2019, pp. 10–18; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002; Wren & Swatez, 1995). Context is also known as the environment, situation, circumstances, or setting for such things as leadership. As political scientist Archie Brown (2014) wrote, “Leadership is highly contextual and what is appropriate or possible in one situation may be inappropriate or unattainable in another” (p. 25).¹

That context includes culture. A thorough understanding of leadership therefore requires an understanding of the relationship between leadership and culture. A study of leadership without factoring culture is inherently limited (Colvin, 1996, p. 42, citing Sergiovanni, 1992). What follows is intended for students of leadership, so that they might account successfully for the relevant culture. The salient nexus between leadership and culture will be seen to be the topic of *shared values*.

This Element exists for students of leadership to examine that relationship. But it will not be easy. For one thing, experts have never settled on definitions for either term. Students of leadership already know about these struggles (e.g. Rost, 1993). In a similar fashion, students of culture frequently complain that the term “culture” is vague, fuzzy, even broad to the point of being useless (e.g. Alvesson, 1993; Archer, 1996; Eagleton, 2000). That possibility should not

¹ Robert Colvin (1996) cited Lewin (1951) for the proposition that $B = F(P, E)$, where Behavior (B) is a Function (F) of Person (P) and Environment (E) (p. 33).

deter scholars and practitioners, however, inasmuch as something called culture plainly influences leadership. What then can we say that culture is? Here is where we shall begin.

1.2 Attempts at a Theoretical Definition for the Term “Culture”

Aristotle taught that after affirming that something exists, such as culture, the next logical question pertains to its definition (McKeon, 1947, *Posterior Analytics* 2.1). An answer to that question usually requires considerable analysis. Often, readers are satisfied initially with a *stipulative definition*, as a way of accessing what the writer is trying to say – “By X, I shall mean Y.” Nevertheless, one should not want to accept anybody’s bare stipulation and leave it at that. As students of leadership, we are more interested in what is known as a *theoretical definition* (see Copi, 1978, pp. 135–141).

The term “culture” appears in many academic disciplines already. To begin, one might start by consulting the standard reference works, such as an encyclopedia or dictionary. *The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary and Thesaurus* (2021) for example refers to:

the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time [and more particularly in the social sciences to] the way of life of a particular people, esp. as shown in their ordinary behavior and habits, their attitudes toward each other, and their moral and religious beliefs.

One could trace the etymology of the word to find its origins or roots pertaining to the attentive care to one’s farmland, as in cultivation of a field, or one’s worship, as suggested by the term “cult.” By gathering such materials, one acquires a *lexical definition* – that is, how the term is commonly used. In our case, though, we would be especially interested in the usage among experts in our field of study (Gardner with Laskin, 1995). Presumably, they would have been working toward that elusive theoretical definition.

Toward that end, we would be advised to begin with an understanding of the pioneering literature. In leadership studies, that would begin back in 1980, when Geert Hofstede published *Culture’s Consequences*. In 1985, Edgar Schein wrote the first edition of *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. Not long after, in 1991, Robert House conceived the worldwide study of leadership under different cultures, adopting the acronym for Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE), a project that launched a multitude of publications by many authors, such that House alone does not get all of the credit. Nevertheless, these authors in particular (Hofstede, Schein, and House) influence all subsequent work regarding the topic of leadership and culture. Then, in

1994, Gilbert Fairholm published *Leadership and the Culture of Trust*. More recently, Mats Alvesson used a Critical Theory approach. These are all formative influences on the field of leadership studies.

Needless to say, these formative influences do not always agree with one another. Furthermore, some of them focus more on organizational culture, whereas others focus on what we might call national or societal culture. Delving into this literature, one finds empirical research, advice, and critical perspectives. Yet, these voices were anticipated years beforehand in fields such as philosophy, sociology, and anthropology – parent disciplines out of which leadership studies has emerged. For the sake of thoroughness, therefore, perhaps we need to consult these seminal sources first, works that can be said to lay behind leadership studies. Let us briefly undertake an archaeology of the term – a strategy that will omit many works in the literature of leadership studies that presume to address the topic.

Academic attempts to define culture begin with Edward Burnett Tylor's tentative effort from 1871, when he suggested that culture can be defined 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” (p. 1). A couple of pages later, he referred to “the condition of knowledge, religion, art, custom, and the like” (p. 5). From this perspective, culture is seen to be a collection or array – not only a collection of many things, but of many different *kinds* of things.

In 1952, Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1963) published a critical review of subsequent definitions, giving pride of place to Tylor, of course, but then tracing a development in the literature of the social sciences – and most importantly, of anthropology. They catalogued attempts to define the term, grouping them into types and demonstrating not only the variety (a conceptual array) but also the history (a chronological array). Rather than close around a consensus choice, they found that the definitions just keep proliferating (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963; see Goldstein, 1957, pp. 1075–1077).

In light of a plurality of definitions, Meagan Clough (2002) has proposed a taxonomy of types of definitions (p. 102; see also Hecht, Baldwin, & Faulkner, 2006, p. 54; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, p. 318; Schein, 2004, p. 12f), pointing out that some definitions emphasize:

- what individual members think, believe, or feel, consciously or unconsciously (*mental/ideological*);
- what members think that they ought to do or value (*normative*);
- what members and groups actually do (*behavioral/customary*);
- how members and groups cope (*functional*);

- what previous members did (*historical/lore*); and
- what things are supposed to mean (*symbolic*, including language and the arts).

To be thorough, anything we mean by the term “culture” should probably be regarded as an integration of all of these, which frankly leaves us with a vast, unwieldy content.

In 2006, John Baldwin, Sandra Faulkner, Michael Hecht, and Sheryl Lindsley edited an update on the Kroeber and Kluckhohn critical review. After validating some of what had been established back in 1952, they challenge other aspects. Even so, no matter how you define the term, say Baldwin, Faulkner and Hecht, you run the risk of omitting or overlooking some aspect that seems to fall outside the frame of what you were trying to study (2006, p. 17). It would be easy (or at least understandable) in certain contexts to miss what they call the interstices and the marginal. That is to say that even in the presence of multiple, inconsistent definitions in the academic literature, there will be aspects of culture that go unaccounted for.

Given the complex, limited, and evolving array of possible definitions, perhaps “culture” is what philosophers call an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie, 1956; see Rosaldo, 2006, p. x), forever out of reach. Maybe it was not meant to be defined once-and-for-all. One writer suggested that culture has no essence (Cassirer, 1942/2000, p. 72).

Here then is one strategy for moving forward. Perhaps it helps to say what culture is not. For instance, culture is not the same thing as nature. If anything, it exists in contraposition to the natural world (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 32; cf. Ortega y Gasset, 1933/1961, pp. 41–45). As such, it is distinctly human – achieved by humans for the benefit of humans (Brunner, 1949, p. 127; Niebuhr, 1951, p. 33; see generally Baldwin, Faulkner, & Hecht, 2006; Fairholm, 1994, p. 39; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, pp. 37 & 165; Moody-Adams, 1997, p. 227 n. 7). We might say that nature in the form of life shapes man so that he participates in culture, which in turn shapes both him and nature (Ortega y Gasset, 1957, p. 31; cf. Geertz, 1973, pp. 46–49). Culture mediates between the individual human being and the natural world as a kind of second reality (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 6; Ortega y Gasset, 1957, p. 175). It has even become so enveloping that most folks today consider their culture to be natural and think no more about it (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 11; Ortega y Gasset, 1932, p. 65). Consequently, since it is not (like nature) passed down genetically, culture must be transmitted from one generation to the next in some other fashion, such as education (Brunner, 1949, p. 135; Clough, 2002, p. 87 f.; see Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 4 f.).

Culture is not the same as nature. Neither is culture individual, since nobody can claim his or her own idiosyncratic culture (Baldwin, Faulkner, & Hecht, 2006, p. 48, citing Seymour-Smith, 1986; see also Moody-Adams, 1997, pp. 19 f & 46). That is to say that we suppose culture to be social (Geertz, 1973, pp. 76 f. & 83; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 6; Niebuhr, 1951, p. 32 f.). Nevertheless, it is only part of that which is social. Margaret Archer has consistently differentiated culture from social structures, such as religion and the state. In fact, she called it the *Fallacy of Conflation* to regard them all as the same thing (1996, p. xv; see Geertz, 1973, pp. 331 & 337). They are not. Culture is not the same thing as the social structures. The problem is that saying what culture is not, however, is inadvisable in a definition (Copi, 1978, p. 157 f.).

If we cannot get to what the term means by saying what it is not, here is a second strategy. Because the term is so broad and vague, we are often reduced to describing culture by means of simile and metaphor (Alvesson, 2002, ch. 2). Culture is all around us, for example, and yet inside of us. It is – like water to a fish – a habitation that we do not always even notice. William Donaldson refers to culture as a force field, an emergent property of social systems (2017, p. 100). Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) resort to the imagery of surface and depth (p. 7). Examples of metaphor can be multiplied. The problem is that a definition must not be so expressed (Copi, 1978, p. 156 f.). By this point, we seem no closer to our goal. Fortunately, there is another approach, a third strategy that deserves a closer look.

1.3 Dimensions to Culture

A different tactic for orienting oneself in unfamiliar territory is to use a number of dimensions based on available dichotomies, like consulting the cardinal compass points (see Baldwin, Faulkner, & Hecht, 2006, p. 24; Geertz, 1973, p. 354; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, p. 331). The following portion of this Section looks at the following seven dichotomies:

- *concrete* cultures that one experiences versus culture in the *abstract* that one conceptualizes;
- culture as a *whole* versus subcultures as *parts* of the whole;
- that which *changes* versus that which *persists*;
- *collective* level versus *individual* level;
- *conscious* elements versus *nonconscious* elements;
- understood from the *exterior* versus understood from the *interior*; and
- *descriptive* versus *prescriptive*.

1.3.1 Concrete versus Abstract

Part of the problem with defining a term such as “culture” is that nobody experiences culture in the abstract; we always experience a particular culture (Eagleton, 2000, p. 13; Niebuhr, 1951, p. 31). Pointing at concrete examples of culture as a way of defining the term *ostensively* will not work in this case. Pointing toward what exactly? If I ask, “What does the word mean?” – one cannot simply offer examples and expect me to understand.

In actual practice, culture itself is an *abstraction* from the *concrete* cultures one might attribute to different communities, such as different national cultures or organizational cultures. H. Richard Niebuhr stated it succinctly that “culture as we are concerned with it is not a particular phenomenon but the general one, though the general thing appears only in particular forms” (1951, p. 31). We can speak of Culture itself as a social fact, as a “general” thing, even though in actual experience it would be more accurate to speak in terms of cultures in the plural. An individual human being experiences discrete cultures (*living* in a culture, *observing* a culture, *pledging allegiance* to a culture) and also, from one step removed, ascribes to them as a class the single label of Culture (see Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, p. 367). You can treat culture as something concrete, to be *experienced*, as well as an abstraction, to be *conceived*, just as you can speak in terms of individual leaders (as concrete exemplars) and the phenomenon of leadership (as an abstract process). Donald Fiske put it plainly when he wrote that “all levels above the bottom one are abstractions” (1986, p. 64). To this extent, culture (as we shall intend the term) is both concrete and abstract.

1.3.2 Whole versus Parts of the Whole

Even within concrete cultures, there will be subcultures – some of which emerge in opposition to or as an alternative to the dominant culture, while others simply cluster around particular lifestyles, such as thug life, biker gangs, religious sects, and ethnic enclaves (see e.g. Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). One can speak of the culture of a religion, the culture within a socioeconomic status, the culture of a geographical region, the culture in an organization or an occupation, and so forth (Cohen, 2009, p. 195; Hofstede, 1993/1995, p. 269; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, p. 309; Schein, 2004, p. 20 f.). One can even describe a hierarchy of “nesting” cultures, one within the other (see Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, p. 367). Here, we encounter a contrast of some importance – in this instance, a contrast between a culture of the *whole* and a culture of the *part*. And there remains a multitude of ways of subdividing that whole, like slicing a watermelon from any one of several angles.

Of particular interest to students of leadership is the emergence of counter-cultures, challenging the status quo (see generally, Roberts, 1978). In the Soviet Union, for instance, the authorities were not sure how to manage the folk traditions of comedy, carnival, and satire, because these were perceived to be countercultural and contrary to good order, inversions of authority devoted to mocking the powers-that-be, despite the fact that what was actually new to the people was the insertion of Soviet values (Lachmann, Eshelman, & Davis, 1988).

1.3.3 Change versus Persistence

Culture is not a static thing. Every concrete culture changes over time, so that one is always dealing with a moving target (Baldwin, Faulkner, & Hecht, 2006, p. 17). The study of this phenomenon has been named “cultural dynamics” (Hatch, 1993). For instance, the United States of the 1920s (with the golden age of jazz, flappers, and Prohibition) is noticeably different from the United States of the 1960s (with Woodstock, the Vietnam War, and NASA’s Apollo project). Nevertheless, culture persists over time as well, exhibiting a history (Tylor, 1871, p. 7; see generally Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, p. 312), inasmuch as one of the central features of culture is that it must be “transmitted” from one generation to the next (Cohen, 2009, p. 195; see Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, p. 164 f.). Edgar Schein said of culture that it is deep and stable (2004, p. 14). Yet, it is also true that one can observe elements of culture changing (Tylor, 1871, p. 15), as for example the evolution of personal computing in the twenty-first century. Certain features “survive,” while other features from the past might “revive” (Tylor, 1871, p. 17). An integral part of developing any science of culture would be trying to understand these processes – that is, the antecedents and the consequences across time (see Durkheim, 1895/1938, p. 143). What in fact *changes*, and what *persists*?

The Spaniard José Ortega y Gasset noted the inherent tension between stability, on the one hand, and vitality, on the other. He wrote that “uncultured life is barbarism, devitalized culture is byzantinism” (1933/1961, p. 46). Part of what it means to be cultured is to discern the difference between durable innovations, on the one hand, and fashions and fads, on the other (Ortega y Gasset, 1932, p. 116; see de Tarde, 1895/1903).

1.3.4 Collective versus Individual Level

Not everyone walks around with an equal share in the dominant culture. Some are connoisseurs of wine or scrimshaw or ballet. Others we might characterize as lowbrow or uncultured, as though there would be degrees of enculturation.

We speak in ordinary usage of cultivating one's judgment or taste, which is a way of talking about learning how to appreciate the finer things in life. Lévi-Strauss called this "enlightened enrichment" (1988/1991, p. 164). Nevertheless, one can detect patterns throughout a body of people and across time. Thus, a culture has to be sufficiently widespread to serve as a kind of generalization, as something shared (Tylor, 1871, p. 10 f.). Culture belongs to that which is "extra-organic" or "super-organic" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, p. 13). In the study of culture, one must reconcile what one observes at the level of the *collective* (or macro) with what happens at the *individual* (or micro) level. In other words, these are two methods of inquiry for the same phenomenon, from above (so to speak) and from below (Tylor, 1871, p. 13).

1.3.5 Conscious versus Nonconscious Elements

What follows is yet another distinction. Participants are often quite aware of specific elements of culture, such as festivals and exhibitions. They take great pride in them or devote resources to promoting them. They make jokes, let us say, or create classroom lessons out of these elements or circle holidays in red on their calendar. An entire nation can shut down for a few hours in order to follow the fortunes of its football team. Yet, at the same time, participants are not always conscious of other elements; these elements, such as language, are often taken for granted or assimilated so completely as to be transparent (Lévi-Strauss, 1988/1991, p. 39; see generally Polanyi, 2009). Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963) insisted that the "analysis of a culture must encompass both the explicit and the implicit" (p. 121). The implicit, they wrote, "consists in those cultural themes of which there is characteristically no sustained and systematic awareness on the part of most members of a group" (p. 335). One might say that parts of culture are in front of the threshold of consciousness, whereas other parts lie behind.

1.3.6 Exterior versus Interior

One of the disciplines to investigate culture is psychology – and more specifically something known as cultural psychology (Cohen, 2009). Here, the focus is not exclusively on "what is inside the mind of people" (as one might suppose of a psychological approach) but also the social world (Cohen, 2009, p. 195 n. 1). We might say that there is an *interior* aspect of culture and an *exterior* aspect of culture (see generally Wilber, 1998). My tendency to identify with and conform to what I understand to be "my people" or "my community" is something different from the artifacts and practices that are out there, existing over against any lone individual social actor. I carry with me an identity that reflects who

I think that I am (e.g. many Lutherans offer a prayer of thanksgiving over meals); also, however, there exist paintings and statues and architecture and laws and markets and the very language in which I participate, even though I never created any of them or chose them. They are there, as part of my environment, surrounding me. The way that Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963) put it, both the inward and the outward would be relevant to any study of culture, so long as one does not confuse the two (p. 222 f; Baldwin, Faulkner, & Hecht, 2006, p. 11).

What we are calling the “outward” has been subdivided conceptually between the objective culture of artifacts and activities that can be sensed, on the one hand, and the subjective culture of thoughts, beliefs, and values that must be felt or thought (Baldwin, Faulkner, & Hecht, 2006, p. 12). This second or subjective culture is different from the “inward” in that the subjective is still out there in the group or society, existing not in the mind or imagination of the individual human being, but instead in his or her environment, often preexisting the individual human being and serving as an ideal or imperative.

One example of subjective culture that might not be shared inwardly is patriotism; the positive meaning attached to an anthem or a flag is not universal. It must be taught, if only vicariously, and there will almost always be members of the group who reject patriotism (or the excesses of patriotism, or the implications of patriotism). One must keep these two separate, especially in leadership studies, where so much of what a leader does occurs at the tangent: What is subjective is sometimes exterior to the individual social actor (Searle, 2006).

1.3.7 *Descriptive versus Prescriptive*

As for another important dichotomy, making these distinctions in a *descriptive* fashion between one side and another is not the same thing as passing judgment on whether one culture (or one cultural practice or artifact) is somehow better than another. That kind of evaluative or *prescriptive* comparison of better and worse is a separate undertaking . . . and for scientists often objectionable.

Anyone can pile up reasons why coming to a definition of such a term as “culture” with so many distinctions and dichotomies would be difficult. We have found boundaries between culture in the abstract and concrete cultures; between a culture as a whole and its part; between two coexisting cultures; between that which persists and that which changes; between the collective and the individual; between what lies in front of consciousness and what lies behind; between culture as an interior phenomenon and culture as an exterior phenomenon; between descriptive and normative claims. In fairness, the boundaries

between these various sides of each dichotomy are rarely hard and fast. We can use these dichotomies for our conceptual purposes, even though in actual experience they often bleed into one another (see Lévi-Strauss, 1988/1991, p. 152).

1.4 On the Purported Coherence of a Culture

Whereas culture is indeed an array of different kinds of things, nonetheless it possesses a relatively coherent structure such that we can refer to it loosely as one thing – it is both a totality and an enumeration (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, pp. 85, 120, 169, & 311; see also Faulkner et al., 2006, pp. 31–37). Ruth Benedict, writing in 1934, explained in some detail that culture can be said to constellate, integrating so many disparate elements into a more-or-less coherent whole, which she called its “configuration” (1934/2005, pp. 22, 37 f, 45–56, & 223–229; see Alvesson, 1993, p. 75; Cassirer, 1942/2000, p. 123; Geertz, 1973, p. 17). Kroeber and Kluckhohn wrote:

Every culture is a structure – not just a haphazard collection of all the different physically possible and functionally effective patterns of belief and action but an interdependent *system* with its forms segregated and arranged in a manner which is *felt* as appropriate. (1963, p. 337 f.)

Ortega y Gasset adopted the metaphor of clothing that should fit the body so that nothing chafes. Given the contours of the body and its usual range of motion, you hardly notice what you are wearing (1940/1946, pp. 11–47). Culture is a lot like that. One might call it a suitable *ensemble*. Briefly, then, according to a static model, culture can be imagined as a field with some degree of order.

Whatever we might mean by the term, Margaret Archer (1996) insisted that culture is no monolith; it is not one broad, undifferentiated web or seamless garment (see generally ch. 1; also pp. xvii & 27). Instead, upon closer inspection, it is rife with conflict, inconsistencies, and underdeveloped aspects. Empirically, there is more than one culture in the world, and they are not identical. More importantly, within a given culture, she distinguished (a) the *cultural system* as an entity or thing from (b) the *sociocultural interactions* that constitute daily life. These do not work in lockstep, even if they are interdependent – that is, they are not tightly integrated with one another. Even within each category (cultural system and sociocultural interactions, respectively), they are still not wholly integrated either. Otherwise, there would be no potential for change. Anthropologists and sociologists operated for some time on the assumption that all of this was fully integrated and constituted a complete whole, as though comprised of “strong and coherent patterning” (1996, p. 2).