The Social Construction of Culture

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Introduction

The concept of culture differs from the concept of social beliefs and practices in a minor way. In every society, for example, people have constructed mind sets of social reality and they have implemented these as social practices. From the perspective of each society, what they say and do are not part of a culture but part of the sociology of everyday life. It is only when one compares the social beliefs and practices of one group with another that it becomes evident that there are differences and that these differences are of a cultural nature.

The social construction of self provides one area of knowledge in which people differ in how they view their social selves. In this essay, the Japanese concept of the social self is contrasted with that of the American model. It is shown that these concepts differ culturally in terms of how they are organized as mental maps of social reality and how they are socially negotiated within the ontological realm of practical knowledge.

Another area in which social differences emerge as cultural disparities can be found in the area of psychiatry. For example, Jan Hendrik van den Berg (1956) has adopted a phenomenological approach to psychiatry which he calls metabletics. From his perspective on psychiatry, he demonstrates how concepts in this field is interpreted and practiced differently due to cultural traditions. The Germans, he notes, are culturally differently from the French and consequently they operate with a different model of psychiatric practice.

The concept of cultural differences influencing the different domains of social practice is not limited to psychiatry. In the area of business, for example, Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars (1993) have compared how business operates among seven different cultures. It is argued that even if these people were given the same model of business, they would change it to accommodate their cultural traditions.
Prior to discussing how social differences operate as cultural disparities, it is necessary to begin with the concept of the social construction of culture as evidenced in the writings of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966).

**The Social Construction of Reality**

The social construction of reality by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) characterizes a sociological concept that was slowly emerging among European scholars. However, it was Berger and Luckmann who not only articulated the new paradigm but coined the terms that are characteristically associated with this movement. One of the major premises of this new school of thought is that knowledge is socially constructed. They argued, for example, that what one considers to be real in one culture may not be so in another. What is real to an American businessman may not be seen as real, for example, to a Buddhist monk. Each of these individuals has constructed different social realities. They went on to demonstrate that these social values were constructed through several concomitant sociological processes (externalization, reification, and internalization).

They noted that ideas, thoughts, and feelings cannot be shared with others unless they are first externalized through language. A thought without a form is ineffable. Meanings must have a form or pattern of existence in order to be shared with others. Once ideas, thoughts, and feelings are encoded into a language, they become objectified or reified. They exist as objects or things outside of the speakers who produced them. It is interesting to note that most linguists only study this aspect of language, viz., dictionary meanings and grammatical rules. Finally, linguistic codes exist in a social context among members of a speech community and these coded forms influence them. Once this happens, the social and cultural language patterns are internalized.
Berger and Luckmann created this model of simultaneous processes because they noted that the leading linguistic models only focused on linguistic codes. What is important about their model is that it implies a resolution of the dischotomy between epistemology (knowledge structures) and ontology (world of things).
The dynamic interaction between the externalizing of feeling, ideas, and concepts and the internalization of ontological markers consists of socio-cultural practices. They constitute reality-loops. Something is socially constructed and is considered to be real. This term is associated with a structural philosophy of communication in which signs can only be understood if they have both content and form. Hence, there are two kinds of social and cultural signs. One is associated with the structure of meaning (epistemology) and the other can be found as the expression of ideas (ontology). The process of taking meanings and making them into tangible and visible forms (language, art, architecture, music, dance, and social behavior) is called *Structural Epistemology*. Once a form has been externalized, it exists as an ontological marker. It is objectified and is treated as an object. The reverse process of taking objects and assigning meaning to them is known as *structural hermeneutics*. These patterns of externalization and internalization form reality-loops. Together, they constitute the social construction of reality (St. Clair, 2006). There are a myriad of such reality-loops that make up the culture of the mind (epistemology) and the culture of material form (ontology). It is this dynamic interaction between the two realms (epistemology and ontology) that was the focus of activity theory (Leontiev, 1979). It was the connection of the ego pole of the self to the object pole of reality that was the focus of the phenomenology of Husserl (1980). Reality-loops affirm cognitive interaction with the human environment. They create ontological markers through the externalization of concepts and develop knowledge frameworks in the process of internalizing them. This activity creates a bond between the subjective realm of epistemology and the objective realm of ontology.

It is now time to consider how the concept of self form reality-loops across cultures.

**The Social Construction of self**

There are cultural differences in how people socially construct the concept of the social self. A good example of this can be found in how the Japanese concept of the social self differs from that of North Americans, especially those of the United States. First, consider the concept of the social self in Japan. During the Meiji Restoration Period (1868-1912), the city of Kyoto gave rise to modern Japanese academic philosophy (*tetsugaku*). One of the foremost contributors to the Kyoto School was Watsui Tetsurō (1889-1960). Like many of the members of his generation, the question of individualism dominated his intellectual life. At first he turned to the West for intellectual sustenance and wrote monographs on Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, but with the passage of time, he began to abandon his belief in individualism and
turned, instead, towards the study of ancient Japanese culture, in particular, Zen and Confucian models of the world. In that early work, Watsuji noted that Heidegger’s concept of being was characteristic of Western thought in that it was highly individualistic. In particular, Heidegger’s model lacked the concept of a social self. The self is only meaningful, Watsuji noted, when it includes both the individual and the social aspect of being in the world (Watsuji, 1988).

Person

Society

Fudo - the social space between self and others

Ningen - the real self that is located between a person and others, the empty-self
The term that he coined for this interconnectedness is *ningen*. It consists of two Kanji characters, the first for person (*hito*) and the second for between-ness (*aida*). This term refers to the betweenness among selves in the world. From his point of view, the concept of the individual in the West is not allocentric, but egocentric. In the West, for example, individuals tend to focus on the self as a concrete object. This do this by rejecting society and the social self. In the East, however, a person becomes a social self by rejecting his individuality.

The real self of Zen Buddhism, he noted, occurs between these two contradictions. It is the empty center that results from the double negation the individual and society. This results in an ethical harmony in which the individual ego emerges as a social sign that is integrated into a network of social relations. The space in which this occurs is called *fūdo*.

Watsuji (1961) wrote about this concept in a book that has been translated in the West as *Climate and Culture*.

**The Self as a Social Sign**

In Japan, the social self functions as a semiotic sign. It has no substance (the empty self) but it is defined by its relationship to other signs. This is why the self is defined as *ningen* (the in-between-ness among persons). The person (*hito*) does not fully reside in the individual. Nor does the person fully reside in society (*seken*). The real self (*ningen*) resides in a relationship (*aidagara*, betweenness among persons) with others. The real self is a sign that captures the relationship between two opposites, self and society. If one wants to stand out as an individual, he must negate his social self. If one wants to become a part of society, he must negate his ego. By means of this double-negation, one creates a self that is both social and individual. Watsuji calls this self by the name of *ningen*, a self that is between other selves, an empty self. Hence, this concept of self was socially
defined by the Japanese society. It was constructed as a social concept but in the context of the western concept of self, it becomes a cultural construct. In this case, cultural constructs identify others who differ from the host society.

**Goffman and the Egocentric Social Self**

Now that the Japanese concept of the social self has been introduced, it is only natural to question how it differ from the western model of self? Perhaps, the most obvious description of the the self in western society can be found in the works of Erving Goffman. He took the metaphor of the stage as the framework for his dramaturgical model of sociology. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959), he argued that people cast themselves into roles just as actors do on stage. People, he noted, are playwrights because they create their own social scripts in life. They are actors, because they act out these scripts. They are part of the audience because they watch themselves perform; and, they are critics because they are always judging their own behaviors. Goffman wanted to know how people manage their impressions to others. Goffman refers to this process as *impression management*. Roles are important because they stress the fact that people are not free to merely act the way that they want. Society is demanding of individuals because it only allows a person to play certain roles and not others. Hence, people must foster personal impressions that will be seen as normal by others. They must know how to present a social self and they must learn how to present different personas (*social masks*) in the proper contexts. Hence, for Goffman, the attainment of self is a social process. It is also part of an ongoing social drama. People must be performers. They must present a *front*. They must do these things within a prescribed (stage) setting. They must give credible appearances. They must also perform in accordance to the expectations of others. They must know when to take roles and when to release them. If they fail to do these things, they may fail because they are “out of character.” They may also fail because they are performing the wrong scripts. They may even fail because of not knowing their roles (*role failure*). American society has constructed a model of the self that is different from that of the Japanese. It is also socially constructed.

**Comparison and Contrast**

So how do social concepts differ from cultural ones? As noted earlier, the Japanese concept of self is a social construct and so is the American concept of self. It is only when one compares them that it becomes evident that they are different and this difference is a cultural one. The concepts that
embody the definition of self within a society constitute a social construct. Those that characterize the definition of self relating to outsiders constitute a cultural construct. Now, it is important to note how the cultural space of these two concepts operate. In the Japanese model, the self is defined by how an individual is positioned within a society. He defines himself in relationship to those above and below him (superiors and inferiors) and those who are on the same social level as he is (consociates). In the American model, the cultural space is egocentric. The individual is on state at the center of the presentation of self. His audience surrounds him. In this case, the individual is the center of attention. The social self is limited by those who interact within him in the audience. In Asian societies, the social self encompasses a larger social space. The self can be identified with a group, a city, a region, or even a nation. Losing one’s sense of place in these configurations means that one loses face. Such a concept is strange to those who hold an egocentric concept of self in which a person is self-make, the big man on campus, etc. One cultural framework is egocentric while the other is allocentric.

**Psychiatry across Cultures**

This inability to convey the nuances that he wants to express can be found in the writings of Jan Hendrik van den Berg (1956). He refers to his model of phenomenology as *metabletics*. According to van den Berg, a person and the world are one. There is no such thing as a subject apart from the world. One cannot be a person without being in the world. How did van den Berg arrive at these statements and what are its implications for the phenomenology of cultural space? When he was studying psychiatry in France he became aware of how it differed from German psychiatry. He was exposed to German psychiatry in Holland and he felt uncomfortable about French psychiatry because he was not really sure that he could fully understand what they psychiatrists were talking about. In order to better understand this disparity, he immersed himself in French literature, French history, and a study of Descartes. Later, he began to read Sartre and other French phenomenologists. He began to notice patterned differences between these two schools of psychiatric work.

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<tr>
<th>Approaches</th>
<th>German Psychiatrists</th>
<th>French Psychiatrists</th>
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<tr>
<td>Core symptom of psychosis</td>
<td>Delusion</td>
<td>Hallucination</td>
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<td>Emphasis</td>
<td>Germans emphasized the thought process</td>
<td>French emphasized perception</td>
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Van den Berg wanted to know why perception was so important in France. He came to realize that this journey of understanding would take him into French sensualism, the French spirit, French hedonism and French extroversion. The French, he would argue, could enjoy life much more than the Germans and much more subtly. That is why there is a French cuisine, but no real German cuisine. What did van den Berg learn from his sojourn in comparative psychiatry? It dawned on him that there was not (and could not be) just one psychiatry.

**Cultural Models of Capitalism**

Charkes Hampden-Turner and Fons Tromenaars (1993) investigated used a trait analysis approach to ascertain the underlying business attitudes and behaviors of business managers from seven countries: Britain, the United States, Germany, France, Japan, Sweden, and the Netherlands. They wanted to study how wealth is created in each of these nation-states. In many ways, the parameters that they used to discover cultural differences among capitalist nations is similar the study of cultural dimensions by Geert Hofstede (1996). Nevertheless, for Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, the seven cultures of capitalism are spaced between the following polar opposites. What traits are selected as polar opposites, however, are important and those that constitute the Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars model are questionable at times.

**Universalism vs. Particularism.**

Universalism has to do with finding broad and general rules to resolving problems. This is reminiscent to the intuitive versus sensate dichotomy that one finds in Jungian personality types (Keirsley and Bates, 1984).

Particularism is involved in looking for details rather than general rules. This is reminiscent of the consensus model of social organization where things are deemed to be coherent because they hold together as a system.

**Analyzing vs. Integrating**

Analyzing decomposes a system of objects in order to better understand the details. Sensation types look for details. However, what one finds here is another trait. It has to do with brain laterality and left hemispherical dominance.

Integrating brings things together to build a system of thought. Intuitive types are system builders, especially intuitive thinking types, and this temperament fits well into the study of Jungian personality types.
**Individualism vs. Communitarianism**

Individualism is about being egocentric in a social world. It is based on the myth of the self-made man. It is based on the rights of the individual. Each person stands alone and succeed or fail on their own.

Communitarianism is about the rights of the group or society. It seeks to put the family, group, company and country before the individual. It sees individualism as selfish and short-sighted.

**Inner-directed vs. Outer-directed**

Inner-directed has to do with personal judgements. An inner-directed person trusts his own reasoning and does not need to be supported by others.

Outer-directed has to do with seeking support from others in making decisions. Outer-directed people need the confirmation of others. They do not trust their own personal judgments.

**Time as sequence vs. Time as synchronisation**

Time as sequence sees events in linear time, as separate items in time. Events follow a time line and occur in sequence one after another.

Time as synchronisation sees events in parallel, synchronised together. It finds order in coordination of multiple efforts.

**Achieved status vs. Ascribed status**

Achieved status is about gaining status through performance. It assumes individuals and organisations earn and lose their status every day, and that other approaches are recipes for failure.

Ascribed status is about gaining status through other means, such as seniority. It assumes status is acquired by right rather than daily performance, which may be as much luck as judgement. It finds order and security in knowing where status is and stays.

**Equality vs. Hierarchy**

Equality is about all people having equal status. It assumes we all have equal rights, irrespective of birth or other gift.
Hierarchy is about people being superior to others. It assumes that order happens when few are in charges and others obey through the scalar chain of command.

As noted earlier, this approach to cultural differences does not deal with culture as a system. It seeks out cultural traits and compares them along a single dimension. This approach to culture can be misleading. For example, the dichotomy between individualism and communitarianism would place Japanese managers along one end of this polar opposition. That information in itself is not as important as the fact that Japan borrowed Confucian Principles from China and that this philosophy of relationships between people can be found in the Japanese concept of the social self. The latter insight gives one far more information on how to negotiate the structural hermeneutics of a situation than a mere notch along the Likert scale. The information is there but it is misleading and one-dimensional. A similar rating in another culture would provide an value along a scale of oppositions, but the cultural value of that information may be very different. For example, Germans are seen to be more communitarian than Americans but this may be due to social traditions that are rather different from those of the Japanese. Germany has a tradition of working guilds in which a sense of professionalism and technological expertise exists in a community of workers. Information about polar opposites exist, but the reasons for their existence is obscured by a sense of quantitative methodology.

What is interesting about the use of polar opposites, however, is that they are used to construct twelve metaphorical bridges. Various nation-states are positioned in a system of pairs of opposite cultural traits. The authors argue, for example, that countries differ in their metaphors of how organizations are structured (Morgan, 1986).
Some organizations see themselves as machines and others as organisms. For example, American managers see their organizations as powerful machines. The Japanese see their companies as families.
Managers conceive of their working lives and career paths in metaphorical terms. The inner-directed individualists in the US, for example, see their career paths in terms of a staircase. They are following a career ladder. The managers from Singapore, Japan, and Spain, on the other hand, are outer-directed and more group oriented. They see their careers in different metaphorical terms. They experiences both ups and downs and are subject to forces beyond their control. For them, management is a roller coaster. Managers in the Netherlands are outer-directed individualists who withstand external forces by stopping their flow of energy.
There are several metaphors that act as principles of social order. In the USA, UK, and Australia, the legal system is harnessed to create adversary proceedings in courts that enforce contractual agreements. It is not surprising that these countries are over populated with lawyers. The metaphor of harmony, on the other hand, guides social interactions and legitimates social order in Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. These relationships are often aided by rituals and ceremonies.
There are metaphors of how the game of capitalism is played. In countries where there is free competition, for example, nations compete on an equal footing with other nations. In Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, on the other hand, capitalism is designed by national elites to allow them to gain the advantage in world trade. Obviously, these two cultural paradigms are in contention with others.

The twelve metaphorical bridges has interesting implications. It provides a more complex arrangement of the polar opposition of cultural traits. It is a system that has implications for the study of management styles rather than cultural styles. Management styles can be the same within every culture but they differ in their propensity. This means that the problem of cultural differences are not really addressed by this model. A tendency for managers in a nation-state to move towards one end of the scale of performance
values provides quantitative information but it does not explain how and why such tendencies belong to a cultural system.

**Concluding Remarks**

Not only are societies socially constructed, but so are cultures. More importantly, cultures are socially constructed. Ideas, feelings, and information is externalized (structural epistemology) and are reified in the process (objectification). Similarly, Objects exist in the world as ontological markers. These are internalized (structural hermeneutics) and incorporated into a number of related epistemological systems. The bond that exists between the externalizing of knowledge forms and the internalization of social objects and practices constitutes the social construction of reality. These bonds are referred to as reality-loops.

Reality-loops are important because they explain how the realm of meanings (epistemology) are related to a world of objects (ontology). The functional relationship between these two realms can be readily accounted for by means of activity theory (Lontiev, 1979). What is different here is the fact that social bondings are created though repeated action patterns in which concepts are externalized, remain as ontological objects, and later internalized. This approach extends the embodied mind concept (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) by accounting for social practices and their interpretations.

**References**


