Symposium proposal for EASP Stockholm 2011

Rediscovering the social nature of culture: Beyond individual internalisation
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The construct of culture has gained much prominence in social psychology over the past few decades. Yet, there is little consensus in the literature about what culture is, or how it should be measured. One of the most common approaches is to measure culture in terms of individuals’ endorsement of beliefs, values or self-construals that are expected to vary among members of different nations. However, this approach carries a risk of psychological reductionism—implying that culture only affects individuals to the extent that they personally internalise the beliefs, values or self-construals that are prevalent in their cultural environment. In various ways, the papers in this symposium question the value of an individualistic approach to culture, and remind us that culture is, first and foremost, a social phenomenon. Owe et al. show that key facets of cultural individualism-collectivism form a coherent cluster at the national level of analysis, but not at the individual level. Vignoles et al. show that bases of self-esteem vary with nation-level variance in value priorities, but not with individuals’ personal values. Wan and Chiu emphasise the value of considering people’s perceptions of normative beliefs and attitudes when examining cultural influences on social judgments. Finally, Fischer and Vauclair argue for an approach to culture that focuses on the role of moral concerns—understood as social expectations—in predicting social behaviour.
1. Individualism-collectivism as a dimension of contextual, not individual, differences

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Cultural individualism-collectivism (I-C) is increasingly popular as an explanation of social behaviour, however it remains a diffuse and ill-defined construct. Frequently, I-C is operationalised in terms of individuals’ self-reported values and self-construals, but this approach often provides inconsistent or disappointing results. We argue that this approach misses the distinction between individual and ecological (or contextual) levels of analysis, emphasised by Hofstede (1980): contextual processes and dimensions should not be assumed to apply to individuals, and vice versa. Hence, we compared the structure of I-C at individual ($N = 5241$) and national ($N = 19$) levels of analysis. Participants completed measures of three proposed facets of I-C: independent (vs. interdependent) self-construals, autonomy (vs. embeddedness) values, and a new measure of decontextualised (vs. contextualised) beliefs about personhood. At the national level, these beliefs, values and self-construals covaried strongly, suggesting that they form a common cultural syndrome. In contrast, at the individual level the three measures were largely unrelated, indicating that they need to be considered as separate constructs. These results serve to remind us, as Hofstede (1980) warned, that culture cannot be reduced to beliefs and values in the heads of individuals. We conclude that, in order to study cultural influences more accurately, a contextual level of analysis is required.

Short abstract:
Analyses of data from 19 nations suggest that individualism and collectivism form a coherent cultural syndrome at the national level but not at the individual level, highlighting the need for context-level analyses in the study of culture.

Keywords:
Culture, individualism-collectivism, levels of analysis, beliefs, values.
2. Cultural bases of self-esteem: Seeing oneself positively in different cultural contexts

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Several theories propose that self-esteem (or positive self-regard) results from living up to personal values internalized from one’s surrounding culture. Using an implicit technique to avoid cultural response biases, we measured four bases of self-esteem (autonomy, duty, benefit to others, social status) relevant to two cultural value dimensions (individualism-collectivism; toughness-tenderness) among >4000 adolescents in 19 nations. As predicted, members of more individualistic nations derived self-esteem more from identity aspects that provided greater feelings of autonomy, whereas members of more collectivistic nations derived self-esteem more from identity aspects related to doing one’s duty. Members of ‘tougher’ nations derived self-esteem more from identity aspects that provided greater social status, whereas members of more ‘tender’ nations derived self-esteem more from identity aspects that they perceived as benefiting others (as well as those related to duty). Thus, participants generally derived self-esteem especially from those parts of their identities that were most consistent with the value priorities of their surrounding culture. Corresponding effects of individuals’ own value priorities were negligible in size and showed no consistent pattern. This suggests that bases of self-esteem are constructed collectively, reflecting what is valued normatively within a cultural group, rather than being defined individually based on one’s personal, internalized values.

Short abstract:
Participants in 19 nations derived self-esteem from identity aspects most consistent with values of their surrounding culture, irrespective of individual values. This suggests that bases of self-esteem are constructed collectively, not individually.

Keywords:
Culture, self-esteem, identity, values, levels of analysis
3. The Social Function of Intersubjective Consensus

Ching Wan (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)
Chi-yue Chiu (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)

The intersubjective consensus approach understands culture from the perspective of cultural members’ shared representations about a culture and people in the culture. The shared representations of a culture’s defining characteristics, called intersubjective representations, serve to define the shared social reality that individuals encounter in the culture. As such, one potential function of intersubjective representations is to provide directions for judgments and behaviors in social situations. The current research explores the social function of intersubjective representations in the setting of consumer judgment. The intersubjective representations that we examine are people’s knowledge of other consumers’ consensual beliefs and attitudes. In this research, participants were presented with objective information and intersubjective information of consumer products. The results supported the prediction that objective and intersubjective information would serve different functions in judgments about consumer products. Specifically, the results showed that intersubjective information played a more important role when judgments were social in nature. Implications of this research for understanding the role of intersubjective representations in individuals’ social lives will be discussed.

Short abstract:
This research explores the role of intersubjective representations in consumer judgments when the judgments are social in nature. Results have implications for understanding the social function of intersubjective representations.

Keywords:
Culture, intersubjectivity, consumer decisions, social goals
4. Beyond self-reports and social norms: Societal expectations, morality and culture

Ronald Fischer (Victoria University of Wellington, NZ)
Christin-Melanie Vauclair (University of Kent, UK)

We will outline a new approach to studying culture, focusing on the domain of morality as a way of understanding cultural differences. A secondary aim is to critically review current measurements of culture. Previous research has focused on subjective and normative approaches to culture. Subjective dimensions of culture explain much variability at the societal level, but typically little variance at the individual level. Intersubjective norms show some promise in explaining additional variance beyond subjective culture, but we demonstrate that they face similar conceptual problems. We outline a different approach, arguing that moral concerns drive much of the variability in interpersonal and social behaviour. We propose a conceptual framework that differentiates between individual and societal level processes, with special emphasis given to social expectations in the value domain. Using data from eight different cultural groups (N= 1,456), we demonstrate that social expectations in the value domain show a different profile and explain additional variance over and above previous dimensions of culture. One of the advantages of our approach is that it does not share some of the conceptual limitations of previous subjective and normative approaches and can be easily applied to various areas of social behaviour.

Short abstract:
We review past approaches in studying culture focusing on the values concept. We present empirical evidence from eight different cultures on a promising new approach that measures cultural values by taking into account moral concerns.

Keywords:
Cultural differences, Measurement, Morality, Values
5. Round table discussion

Vivian L. Vignoles (chair), with Ellinor Owe, Ching Wan and Ronald Fischer

The four papers provide different and potentially complementary ways of viewing culture as context, treating culture as a contextual level of analysis, as well as focusing on individuals’ perceptions of their cultural context. The purpose of the roundtable is to explore the potential links among these various perspectives, as well the differences between them. This will provide the opportunity for a more integrative and forward-looking discussion, with the benefit of audience participation, that goes beyond the question-and-answer sections at the end of each talk.

Short description:

The papers provide different ways of viewing culture as context. The roundtable discussion will explore the potential links among these perspectives, and their differences, and consider the potential for future integration.