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## Bridging sociology with anthropology and cognitive science perspectives to assess shared cultural knowledge

### *Culture and cognition*

Culture is an important force to consider in social sciences. Cultural agents shape the organization of social groups (e. g. via kinship ties, marriage and residence patterns, cultural institutions, religious beliefs, encultured sense of moral obligation etc.), guide individuals' valuation of things and experiences, and can affect human condition, both directly and indirectly (through emotions and other mental states, physiological and mental health, stress levels, etc.). Culture can be found in how we interpret the social world around us, what we know about it and how we understand our place in it. Its role in cognitive processes has been broadly recognized and long since systematically documented by social scientists [Bennardo & de Munck, 2014; Blount, 2011; Caulkins, 2004; Chiu et al., 2010; D'Andrade, 1995, 2008; Kashima, 2016; Oude Groeniger et al., 2019; Polavieja, 2015; Quinn, 2011; Quinn & Holland, 1987; Wang, 2016]. Even cultural intuitions of researchers themselves are heeded. Currently, the acknowledgment of the significance of culture-and-cognition juncture does not raise any eyebrows, and it is arduously researched within various domains of sociological discipline, most notably within cultural sociology [Charles, 2008; DiMaggio, 1997; Hunzaker & Valentino, 2019; Vaisey, 2009, 2010, 2014; Zerubavel, 1999].

Yet, despite the amount of theorizing done by the students of culture within sociological discipline, the potential of cultural research in cognitively oriented sociology remains rather limited and facing challenges due to the lacking measurements of cultural influences in sociocultural phenomena [Caulkins, 2004; Polavieja, 2015; Vaisey & Lizardo, 2010]. The practical difficulties associated with studying human culture are considerable — so much so that the concept of

culture *per se* has been referred to as an "amorphous mist" [Ghaziani, 2009]. There are multiple challenges of methodological and theoretical nature that prevent the culture-and-cognition agenda within sociology from proceeding with ease. First of all, due to the inexactitudes of conceptualization of culture in sociological accounts, the currently prevalent theories of culture in the domain of culture-and-cognition fail to recognize and focus on the measurable features that lend themselves to empirical examination, and therefore bring to empirically oriented sociologists of culture and cognition a liberal amount of frustration in the process [Cerulo, 2014; Hunzaker & Valentino, 2019; Lizardo, 2017]. The situation described above has resulted in the generation of a very complex suite of concepts and theories that need to be reconciled, but in their alignment they do not help to understand how we can address the measurement of cultural things or to substantiate our findings. Second, by virtue of the intellectual interest the sociologists have in macro-level regularities and society-level processes, very scarce data has been collected to explore the culture-and-cognition juncture at the individual level, while it is most suitable and can be deemed methodologically optimal for the task. Third, so far sociology has been very economical with interdisciplinary collaborations in its studies of culture and cognition, and has not incorporated the findings from the relevant studies from cognitive science, anthropology and psychology, as well as biology and genetics, for fear of reification [Cerulo, 2014; Hunzaker & Valentino, 2019]. It limits the reach of sociological inquiries into various subjects deemed important for the sociological discipline, such as that of developmental aspects of cognition and decision-making; cultural factors in welfare state's efficacy in diminishing health disparities; and childhood adversity and its adult outcomes, among many others.

It should be acknowledged at this point, that the difficulty with culture and cognition sociologists are concerned with is, in part, historical. As it is often the case with compound abstract constructs, part of the problem stems from the multitude of conceptualizations of culture that have been proposed in different social sciences, as well as liberal arts and humanities, throughout the decades. Definitions of culture vary substantially across different disciplines and even across theoretical approaches within one discipline, thereby making culture more complex and difficult to capture conceptually and thus making it more challenging to measure (cf. [DiMaggio, 1997; Polavieja, 2015]). This is the reason why one of the points I am making in the present publication is that the conceptual problems with defining culture take precedence over the methodological issues with measuring culture.

## *Cognitive theory of cultural meaning*

In its survey of the social world and particularly in its studies of human culture, sociological discipline has often turned to the insights offered by the cognitive approach. The cognitive focus in the theorizing about culture allows concentrating on such features of culture as similarity of mental landscapes of the individuals who are members of the same cultural group. It is presumed that individuals enculturated within the same culture share the same algorithm of meaning construction, thus leading to the emergence of shared normative collective reality [Chiu et al., 2010; Wan et al., 2007; Wan et al., 2010] and a substantial overlap in individual

knowledge, which, in turn, would have detectable (and empirically measurable) signatures[1] [D'Andrade, 1995, 2002; Handwerker, 2002; Maltseva & D'Andrade, 2011; Matsumoto & van de Vijver, 2011; Polavieja, 2015; Ross, 2004; Weller, 2007; Zou et al., 2009]. This way culture can be presented as a measurable variable which reflects the amount of sharing that exists among the individuals within a group due to their common culture [Chiu et al., 2010]. It therefore can be operationalized as the degree of measurable consensus (or shared variation) in beliefs or patterned relative homogeneity in behavior [Romney et al., 1986].

It should be briefly mentioned here that until recently culture was often conceived of — especially by psychologists — as a unitary entity characterized by an assumed intra-group homogeneity. Such overstatement of cultural consensus in cultural attributes, although aptly emphasizing sharing and merging similarity as an important feature of culture, overestimated its reach. Conceptualized thus, culture presented itself to the researcher as an assemblage of individual carriers of identical information which altogether oversimplified the picture and also led to the reductionism to the collective (national) level of cultural variation and, potentially, to essentializing of cultural communities.

Cognitively oriented psychologists and anthropologists presently tend to espouse the view that culture is an evolved constellation of loosely organized ideas and practices which are shared (albeit imperfectly) among a collection of interdependent individuals and transmitted across generations for the purpose of coordinating individual goal pursuits in collective living [Chiu et al., 2011]. Cultural ideas and practices are imagined as operating at multiple levels [Chiu & Hong, 2006]. Perhaps, the distinction between the collective and individual levels of cultural information is the most frequently discussed aspect in published sources.

Culture and cultural sharing have been the focus of research attention in anthropology and sociology, as well as cross-cultural psychology, within several theoretical traditions. In cognitive anthropology and psychology, unlike sociology, conclusions regarding the regularities in cultural knowledge (or modal behavior reflecting this knowledge) come from the micro-level research and tend to be data-driven. Despite their differences in their specific working assumptions, cognitive anthropologists and (cross-)cultural psychologists concur that culture is a non-genetically transmitted pool of knowledge which is distributed non-uniformly across individuals[2] [Bou Malham & Saucier, 2015]. Individuals from different social/professional/age groups within a culture vary in terms of what they know, both in terms of the amount and content of knowledge [D'Andrade, 1995, 2008; Maltseva, 2018]. In this sense, one source of the existing intra-cultural variation in knowledge is simply the extent to which one is knowledgeable about the specific domain (termed "cultural expertise" or "cultural competence"). Yet, individuals differ not only in the amount of their knowledge (how much they know about the domain in question) but also in its content (what they know). As mentioned above, social markers such as class leave their traces on individual

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[1]  One of the most prominent features of the cognitive theory of culture is rendering it suitable for formalized quantitative analysis.

[2]  Both psychological and anthropological positions avoid separating public/external and personal/internal cultures as such distinctions do not help understand the functioning of enculturated minds [Quinn, 2018].

knowledge and format individual competence both in terms of what and how much one knows about the subject (be it healthy foods, the value of sleep and exercise, the manner of approaching administrative workers to recruit their assistance, etc.) (cf. [Lamont, 1992, 2000, 2009; Lareau, 2015]). Individuals constituting the group hold different subsets of knowledge owing to their life histories and backgrounds. This unequal inter- and intrapersonal distribution of knowledge leads to some heterogeneity within a cultural system which is, *per se,* conceptualized as built around consensual centers [Bou Malham & Saucier, 2015]. High consensus is a marker of cultural sharing, yet it is not a perfect overlap of the individual and collective levels as we sometimes tend to think or expect to find in data analysis. Cultural knowledge is not perfectly homogenous but relying on a number of variants circulating within a group.

The challenges of empirically studying and measuring culture — as residing in the individual minds and at the level of collectivity alike — are not due to the methodological shortcomings failing to recognize the important regularities and/or distinctions but are rather engendered by the conceptualization in-exactitudes and imprecise operationalizations that preclude us from developing effective research instruments which yield informative results in ethnographic settings. Below I discuss two approaches that can serve as guidance in construct-ing instruments for quantitative assessment of cultural regularities in empirical material (for ethnographically collected data) taking these challenges into ac-count. One of them deals with conceptualizing and analyzing culture as an emer-gent intersubjective reality resulting from the allowances of our mind [Dunbar & Barrett, 2007; Tomasello, 2001] and enabled by joint meaning construction abil-ity — best captured by writings of Margaret Gilbert and John Searle [Gilbert, 1996; Searle, 1995]. The other approach is Antone Kimball Romney's computa-tional model known within cognitive anthropology as culture consensus model, which is based on the premise of conceptual sharing of cultural knowledge within a group, suitable for formalization in empirical assessment and measurement [Romney, 1999; Romney et al., 1986].

### *Intersubjective approach to culture*

Cultural knowledge involves publically shared meanings about the world, which implies not merely knowing something (as an epistemological status) but also knowing something to be widely known by the other group members (for clar-ifying examples see [Patterson, 2014]). This nuance of the cognitive theory of cul-tural meaning elucidates the intersubjectivity as a necessary condition for cultural understanding (and thus for cultural reality) to emerge. An intersubjective reality arises when there is social consensus within the culture that a certain set of values and beliefs is widely shared [Zou et al., 2009]. For instance, a value becomes intersubjectively important when it is perceived as a widely shared standard within the group. Moreover, members of the group typically agree on the assumed sharedness of the value item's importance in the group (value's perceived collective salience) — in the sense that the group members' perceptions of intersubjective re-ality match [Chiu et al., 2010; Zou et al., 2009]. Hence, a researcher can ask group members to rate the extent to which most group members or an average group member would endorse a certain value item, and this way gauge that value's

intersubjective importance as viewed by the informants. In mathematical terms, intersubjectively important values are those that have high mean scores coupled with modest standard deviations [Wan et al., 2007; Weller, 2007].

As discussed in Chiu et al. [2010], the intersubjective approach is predicated on three premises: (a) individuals assess the intersubjective reality bound to their sociocultural context, and these perceptions are distinct from personal values and beliefs which emerge in their corresponding unique life course trajectory due to circumstances experienced by them personally; (b) individuals act on behalf of their perceptions of the intersubjective reality — perceived correctly or erroneously as normative — so that their personally held values and beliefs are not the sole guide to their behavior; and (c) individuals inadvertently reinforce and sustain the intersubjective reality through their perceptions and actions (however valid or invalid, as in the case of pluralistic ignorance) [Chiu et al., 2010: p. 483].

Intersubjective perceptions can influence behaviors because these perceptions serve important epistemic functions for the individual and social coordination functions for the collective [Chiu et al., 2010; Wan et al., 2010], which is an important feature to the social scientists wishing to study human behavior and its social determinants. It is important to notice, however, that this approach can be best employed to measure intersubjective perceptions of different cultural contents and in different cultural communities, presupposing the condition of cultural sharing (see next section) [Romney et al., 1986; Weller, 2007].

### Measurement of shared collective knowledge:
### Culture consensus model

Distribution, partitioning and maintenance of cultural knowledge within human groups have been extensively theorized in psychology and cognitive anthropology during the last several decades [Boster & Johnson, 1989; Goodenough, 1971; Quinn, 1996, 2005, 2011]. One of the most prominent principles invoked in the prevalent quantitative models of culture nowadays is in line with the "distributive" model of culture that treats culture as an information pool available to cultural insiders/enculturated members of the group [Schwartz, 1978]. According to a distributive model of culture, the latter is a complex pool of knowledge distributed variably within individual mindsets, with some elements shared more and others less widely [Bou Malham & Saucier, 2015; Rodseth, 1998; Saucier et al., 2015]. The distributive model of culture implies that there is a core of cultural knowledge (consensual center) which is particularly widely shared within a cultural group and contains culturally salient information [Bou Malham & Saucier, 2015]. The degree and especially contents of what is shared depend on various individual characteristics such as social markers (the most notable example is social class [Lamont, 1992, 2000, 2009; Lareau, 2015; Strauss, 2000]) or other group divisions such as divisions by age cohorts or role specialization.

Furthermore, due to more or less extensive exposure, some individuals are better representatives of the central tendency than others in their cultural group (i. e. if the collective knowledge represents the integral sum of knowledge about a chosen domain, in the data these individuals would approximate the aggregate value more than the rest of the group). In this context cognitive anthropologists speak of cultural experts (i. e. individuals whose knowledge approximates the

group's collective average) and novices (i. e. culturally naive individuals whose information deviates from the group's average) in the group. Both statuses can be estimated drawing upon culture consensus principles that are discussed further in this section.

Social scientists typically depend on their collected data to draw conclusions. For anthropologists interviews with the informants constitute the main source of primary data and the information that is obtained from the data in the course of the analytic procedures administered to it. In this vein, the culture consensus approach to culture seeks to capture and explain the variation that is stored in the individual minds of the members of the surveyed cultural community, to ascertain the reliability of the data and also to answer the epistemological question [Romney et al., 1986: p. 314].

Based on the works by philosophers of science, mathematicians and cognitive anthropologists published in the 1960–1980s, the central idea[1] in Kimball Romney's culture consensus theory is "the use of the pattern of agreement or consensus among the informants to make inferences about their differential competence in knowledge of the shared information pool constituting culture" [Romney et al., 1986: p. 316]. The model operates on three assumptions: (1) there is a culturally correct answer to the stimulus (common truth assumption); (2) the informants answer questions independently of each other (local independence assumption); (3) one cultural domain is surveyed at a time (homogeneity of items assumption) [Romney, 1999: p. 107]. Working from this set of logical premises, over the years the computational model embedded in culture consensus theory has been developed to allow estimations of the degree of sharing in the sample, the content of consensual centers[2] and the degree of salience of each particular item by means of a number of multivariate techniques. Culture consensus principle is incorporated in the reasoning behind cultural consonance model [Dressler, 2005] and other similar models that seek to evaluate the effects of shared cognitive structures on social life and human condition.

Culture consensus model has several appreciable practical benefits, including reliance on moderate sample sizes to yield reliable results [Weller, 2007] and providing a formalized quantitative model to assess the reliability of responses obtained from each informant in the sample [Romney, 1999; Romney et al., 1986]. There are, however, some limitations to applying this model to the data. Namely, culture consensus principles can only be applied to the social contexts that are premised on common knowledge which can be expected to be culturally shared (i. e. to be similar due to exposure to similar cultural experiences). Meanwhile, it is not useful, for example, for making election prognoses or divining individual dietary preferences (such as favorite ice-cream flavors).

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[1]   The exposition of the specific procedures involved in the computation of consensus is not the goal of the present publication. The quantitative options available to the researchers planning to estimate the levels of inter-informant consensus will be discussed in a separate publication. Some forms of multivariate analysis that can be useful in assessing the inter-informant agreement in the field have been discussed in Maltseva [2016].

[2]   Typically consensus analysis assumes one consensual center per domain.

## *Bridging sociology with cognitive anthropology and psychology*

Cognitive direction in sociology's research agenda has gained a considerable academic prominence and continues to raise complex and exacting methodological issues. Having presented my argument above, I should agree with Karen Cerulo's point that sociology would benefit from a more powerful cognitive turn [Cerulo, 2014: p. 1012]. Indeed, it is disconcerting that sociological discipline should remain the only social science which has failed to join the interdisciplinary discussion of human thought and collective culture [Cerulo, 2014; Clark, 2013; DiMaggio, 1997; Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Turner, 2001]. There is so much to glean from an interdisciplinary alliance for the sociologists studying health, inequality, organizations, hierarchies, family and many other forms of social activity or human condition in general. Furthermore, injecting more ethnographic, micro-level form of data collection into the research process would enrich the empirical dimension of the sociological research that helps develop and evaluate policies. Bridging sociology with other social sciences sharing the same cognitively oriented perspective and empirical concerns would yield important insights into complex sociocultural processes and enhance those research agendas that seek to better understand individuals' prioritizing, choices and decision-making components of human action — in such prominent lines of work as research on poverty, childhood scarcity, resource allocation, health, immunity and disease, morality, religion, etc. [Lamont et al., 2017].

Cultural ideas, mental habits and practices operate jointly at multiple levels rather than in isolation, and therefore should be studied as such (cf. [Matsumoto & van de Vijver, 2011]). At the collective level, culture exists in the form of observable public representations that are accessible to all members of the cultural community and embodied in social institutions. This is termed "culture outside the head" by Morling and Lamoreaux [2008]. The effects of this level of culture on human mental life and its behavioral manifestations are typically captured by sociologists, social epidemiologists and economists seeking to elucidate the global aspects of social phenomena. Correspondingly, such studies employ methodological approaches aimed at researching population-level parameters and suited specifically for national-level surveys. In contrast, the individual level of culture ("culture inside the head") mostly concerns psychologists and psychologically minded anthropologists, who conceptualize culture in the form of internalized individual-level characteristics [Chiu et al., 2010]. In their turn, such studies are guided by research designs that aim to measure interactions of these elements of internal culture with psychological variables to account for cultural influences in various cognitive domains, motivation, group perception, social cognition and mental health. Although these levels of analysis are prevalent in empirical work and generate a lot of useful data, when taken separately they tend to omit from the analysis the intermediate level of culture bridging these influences to explain their mechanisms [Chiu et al., 2010; Maltseva, 2018].

Finding sociocultural differences in cognitive phenomena is not the only task of cultural psychology or sociology, and the merit of a study cannot be measured merely in proportion to the amount of cross-cultural differences in cognition it has brought to light. By the same token, considering the main purpose of cross-cultural research in any social science confirming the generalizability of

theories would also be rather limiting [Wang, 2016]. Valuable and informative conclusions cannot be reached by divorcing the universal from culture-specific and thus marginalizing one in favor of another or making essentializing attributions (cf. [Lamont et al., 2017]). It is most beneficial when instead of finding culture-bound similarities or differences in social processes the results of a project should ask questions about the mechanisms that generate and direct these similarities and differences in social or cognitive-psychological variables across cultures. These new things that require blended competencies are therefore most useful and interesting to the students of culture and human mental life.

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## KATERYNA MALTSEVA

## Bridging sociology with anthropology and cognitive science perspectives to assess shared cultural knowledge

*Following the cognitive revolution of the 1960s, cultural variation in behavior and knowledge has been a long-standing subject in social sciences. The "cognitive turn" in sociology brought to light many interesting issues and complex questions. The present publication addresses both theoretical and — to some extent — methodological challenges faced by the sociologists engaged in researching shared cultural variation within the culture-and-cognition research agenda, and compares it with the status quo in cousin social sciences that share the same cognitive perspective on culture. I specifically focus on the conceptual junctures that follow from the assumptions of shared cultural knowledge and intersubjectively shared cultural worldviews to highlight the important features of culture which can be effectively used for quantitative assessment of complex cultural processes. While I discuss various aspects of the findings and failings attributable to the culture-and-cognition research direction, my principal concern centers on encouraging more enhanced and sensitized interdisciplinary communication, as well as maximized intersections between cognitively oriented studies of culture in different social sciences, to bring the sociological studies of culture and cognition to full fruition.*

***Keywords:*** *culture, intersubjectivity, culture consensus model, Antone Kimball Romney, ethnographic methods, research design*