

## ISSUES OF CONCERN

# Comments on "Culture" in Communication Inquiry

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■ The concept, culture, has become extremely popular in empirical communication research over the past several years. One hears it used on various levels to refer to national cultures, regional cultures, state cultures, neighborhood and community cultures, occupational cultures, family cultures, relational cultures, and yes, even personal cultures. If the concept is to retain its integrity as a technical term for communication researchers, then some constraints on its use must be introduced into our field's discussion.

My purpose here is to begin such a discussion by suggesting some fundamental qualities of communication phenomena deemed cultural, and introducing four aspects in cultural studies of communication. My goal is not to impose a rigid template, but to suggest some points of common reference, to be used heuristically, tested in practice, and treated as some bases for discussion. Without such discussion and deliberate use, our empirical studies lack precision they could have otherwise, reducing an important conceptual apparatus into an unreflective metaphor.

First, the qualities. It seems best to reserve the concept, culture, for those resources (patterns of symbolic action and meaning) that are a) deeply felt, b) commonly intelligible, and c) widely accessible. By deeply felt, the pattern of concern must enact, invoke, or create, an ethos that is *felt intensely* by the "natives" (Scruton, 1979). The pattern must be sensed collectively as an instance of, or as yet one more living experience of, a complex moral order. So, for example, the fact that "the boss" drinks coffee every morning while dunking two chocolate doughnuts is of little interest to the cultural analyst, unless the drinking/dunking activity is expressed and felt to hold deep symbolic significance, as perhaps an index of lazy management, excessive or frivolous spending, or as demonstrating one group's self-indulgence in the face of another's frugality. In Geertz's phrase, the event is cultural if it speaks of the group broadly, if it "says something about something"; that is, if it evokes a complex pattern of feeling that goes beyond itself. That there is a pattern--of turns taken, pausing, interactional moves, and the like--is important to the cultural analyst but so is evidence that the pattern is deeply felt: does it hold penetrating significance?

A second quality of cultural communicative phenomena is a sense of *common intelligibility*. Do members of this human group find the patterns of concern meaningful? That is, does the pattern articulate with native

actions and meanings? Such a quality does not however mean there is *agreement* of opinion, only that the phenomenon is intelligible to the common folk. Further, such a quality does not necessitate a direct *replication* of the common sense, but invokes a sense that resonates with the folk's ways (see Geertz 1973; Katriel and Philipsen, 1981). Thus, it is not the replication of agreements that characterizes the cultural in communication, but *renderings that resonate* closely with the communal mind (cf. McKee, 1956). It is the emics of life, experience-near interpretation of symbolic patterns, that receives priority over the more etic, experience-far readings (Geertz, 1976).

A third quality captured by the concept, culture, is that it be *widely accessible*. Persons must hold ready access to the communicative pattern of action and meaning of empirical concern. This does not imply necessarily that all persons use the pattern, only that it is available to them, contacted by them, coordinatable with them. So for example, that one must act incompetently in order to be considered competent is a widely recognized cultural pattern for the Burundi (Albert, 1972), although practiced by only one class of citizen (cf. Keenan, 1974).

Thus, an exploration and interpretation of communication, in terms of its cultural patterning, would benefit by asking: a) is the pattern deeply felt?; b) is it commonly intelligible?; and c) is it widely accessible? If so, the pattern may aptly be called a cultural one.

What aspects need included in empirical studies of cultural patterns? There seem centrally to be four. First, empirical research of cultural patterns should be conducted *in situ*. The patterns of actional sequences and semantic domains must be discovered and described in the context of their use if their qualities as cultural patterns are to be understood. Where recall data, reconstructed acts and events, and surveys are useful methods of data collection, they cannot substitute for data gathered *in situ*. Such data enables claims to be made about symbol use in context, interactional meanings, and forms of action. Once such patterns are identified, an elaboration of them through structured recall, reconstructions, and surveys may be invaluable. But asking of communication conduct, what are the patterns and how are they used, is different than asking, what patterns have you used, describe and evaluate them. Different and related orders of data are involved, each supporting distinctive empirical claims. To first identify cultural patterns, *in situ* data collection is essential.

A second aspect of cultural analysis is its *theoretical base*. What one observes and senses in a context can most often be elaborated in terms of some extant theoretical framework. For example, one might focus on cultural patterns by using extant theories of silence (e.g. Basso, 1970; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985), theories of speech acts (e.g. Searle, 1976; Rosaldo, 1982), theories of role enactment (e.g. Hannerz, 1969; Philipsen, 1975), theories of personhood and speaking (e.g. Schweder & Bourne, 1985; Carbaugh, 1988), rule theories (e.g. Hymes, 1962; Pearce & Cronen,

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