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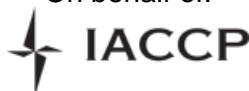
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Rethinking the Concept and Measurement of Societal Culture in Light of Empirical Findings

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Abstract

Fischer and Schwartz demonstrated that values vary much more within countries than between countries. This challenges the prevailing conception of culture as shared meaning systems, with high consensus, in which values play a central role. This article offers a concept of culture that does not assume shared individual values. It views societal culture as the hypothetical, latent, normative value system that underlies and justifies the functioning of societal institutions. As such, culture is external to individuals. But if culture is not in the minds of individuals, can it be measured by aggregating individuals' values? This article explicates the links between the latent culture and individual values, mediated through societal institutions that partially shape the beliefs, values, behaviors, and styles of thinking of societal members. It discusses the reasons for low value consensus among individuals and the justification for inferring cultural value emphases from aggregated individual values.

Keywords

culture, values, consensus, measuring culture

A recent study by Fischer and Schwartz (2011) has shaken the confidence of psychology researchers in the prevailing conception of societal culture and of its measurement. The authors found that value ratings vary much more between individuals than between countries. The within-country variance in values was substantially greater than the between-country variance in three data sets (from 67, 19, and 62 countries) that measured a wide variety of values using three different instruments. This poses a serious challenge to theories that view cultures as shared meaning systems in which values play a central role (e.g., Hofstede, 2000; Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004; Rohner, 1984). Such theories imply that there should be high consensus regarding the importance of core values within each cultural unit and considerable variation in values across cultural units. Fischer and Schwartz studied countries as their unit of analysis. This finding therefore poses an especially difficult challenge to theories that propose to compare countries on cultural value dimensions (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Triandis, 1996).

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The notion of “sharedness” is critical in the definitions of culture by most cultural and cross-cultural psychologists. For example, central to culture according to Hofstede (2000) is “the value system (the mental software) shared by major groups in the population” (p. 11). He defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p. 9). *Collective* mental programming of a group that is *distinct* from that of other groups implies substantial within-group agreement and between-group difference. Studies of the values of cultural groups should therefore reveal that the members of each group ascribe similar importance to their collectively programmed core values and that they differ from the members of other groups on these shared core values. This, however, is most definitely not the case (Fischer & Schwartz, 2011).

To compare the cultural values of countries,¹ the most popular approaches compute culture scores by aggregating the self-reports of individual societal members regarding their own values or attitudes or their perceptions of cultural values (e.g., Fischer, 2006; Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 1999). Theorists and researchers typically use the mean responses of the individuals to characterize the culture of the society. Thus, they assume that one can discern the culture of a society by probing the minds of its individual members. This psychological approach—questioning individuals to discover the shared societal culture—would be justified if each societal member held a similar set of core values. But now that we know there is little value consensus across individuals within societies, must we abandon this approach?²

Below, I argue that there is no need to abandon the empirical side of this approach. Averaging the values of individual societal members can provide a good window into the prevailing societal culture. This claim depends, however, on adopting a concept of culture that differs from the view widely held among cultural and cross-cultural psychologists.

Most theorists agree that the core aspect of societal culture is “values” or “normative systems,” though they also recognize other aspects such as beliefs and practices. Values or norms are the central construct that they consider worthy of study and measurement (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 1999; Weber, 1958; Williams, 1968). Conceptions of culture based on this construct conflict with the empirical data, if they posit shared values. But it is not necessary to posit shared values. I view societal culture as the latent, normative value system, external to the individual, which underlies and justifies the functioning of societal institutions (Schwartz, 2009a, 2009b, 2011). Three components of this conception differ from what psychologists usually think of as culture:

1. Societal culture is a latent, hypothetical construct. It cannot be observed directly but can be inferred from its manifestations. The rich complex of meanings, beliefs, practices, symbols, norms, and values prevalent among people in a society are among the manifestations of the underlying culture. They are not the culture itself.
2. Societal culture is external to the individual. It is not a psychological variable. The normative value system that is the core of societal culture influences the minds of individuals but it is not located in their minds. It is an aspect of the context in which people live. To rephrase Hofstede’s metaphor, culture is the “programmer” of the mind, not its programming. Other aspects of culture are also external to individuals, located not in the mind of any individual but in the context in which people live. For example, cultural tightness–looseness (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2011) and degree of cultural consensus (e.g., Schwartz & Sagie, 2000; Wan, Torelli, & Chiu, 2010) also refer to constructs external to individuals, although they are measured using individuals’ responses.
3. Societal culture underlies and is expressed in the functioning of societal institutions, in their organization, practices, and policies. As elaborated below, these institutions mediate the effects of culture on individuals.

How can we move from this conception of culture to measuring it by averaging the values of individuals? First, we must understand the paths through which the latent, normative value system (i.e., the value emphases) in a society influences individuals. Individuals experience the normative value emphases of their society's culture as a press to which they are exposed. The press of culture takes many forms.

In psychological terms, the press refers to the stimuli (primes) and reward contingencies that individuals encounter in their daily life. The daily stimuli encountered in each society focus attention consciously or unconsciously on particular implicit goals, understandings, and preferences. The stimuli may draw attention more to individuals or to groups as the most significant unit, for example, or more to material concerns or to spiritual concerns. The contingencies of reward or punishment people encounter convey information about the actions, attitudes, and beliefs that are approved or disapproved. The cultural press can also take the form of the language patterns that surround and inform our daily lives. Kashima and Kashima (1998), for example, noted that the pronoun usage in a language often reflects the centrality of self versus other.

The cultural press also takes the form of expectations encountered when enacting roles in societal institutions. Do the expectations of teachers and fellow students encountered in schools call more for memorizing or for questioning? Do the expectations of judges and lawyers encountered in the legal system encourage seeking the truth or winning the case regardless of the "truth?" Do the expectations of employers, subordinates, and coworkers encountered at work reinforce maximizing harmony or maximizing productivity?

The way social institutions are organized, their policies and everyday practices, explicitly or implicitly communicate expectations that express underlying cultural value emphases. Competitive economic systems, confrontational legal systems, and achievement-oriented child rearing, for example, express a cultural value emphasis on success and ambition. The institutional policies and practices that the underlying societal culture promotes, inhibits, or justifies also influence the opportunities available to enact various behaviors and the payoffs for enacting them. The culture affects opportunities to express dissent, to cooperate with strangers, to innovate, and to amass wealth, for example.

The psychological view of culture refers to the beliefs, values, behaviors, and styles of thinking that the individual members of a society or other cultural group share to a substantial degree (e.g., Bond, 2004). I see these as significant psychological *consequences* of the latent culture. The latent normative value emphases in the society shape the content and distribution of these psychological consequences of culture. They do so because people are exposed to stimuli, expectations, opportunities, and practices that express the underlying normative value emphases that are at the heart of the societal culture. But no two individuals are exposed to the cultural press in the same way. This leads to substantial individual differences within societies on these psychological consequences of the latent culture.

Figure 1 portrays the relationship between latent societal culture, institutions, and individual values that I have outlined. At the top is the latent societal value culture, consisting of cultural value orientations³ that the culture of each society emphasizes to a greater or lesser extent. The figure shows two of the cultural value orientations in my theory, egalitarianism, and mastery. The theory specifies three bipolar cultural value dimensions consisting of opposing orientations: egalitarianism versus hierarchy, autonomy versus embeddedness, and mastery versus harmony. I derived these dimensions from considering the fundamental existential problems that confront every society. An emphasis on one or the other pole of these cultural value dimensions indicates the preferred mode of dealing with one of these existential problems.

At the top left, the exogenous variables of ecology (e.g., climate, natural resources, topography) and history (e.g., political, economic, military, immigration) are shown. These characteristics of each society directly affect all of its latent cultural values and all of its institutions, and through them the values of individuals. Lighter arrows indicate weaker reciprocal effects from

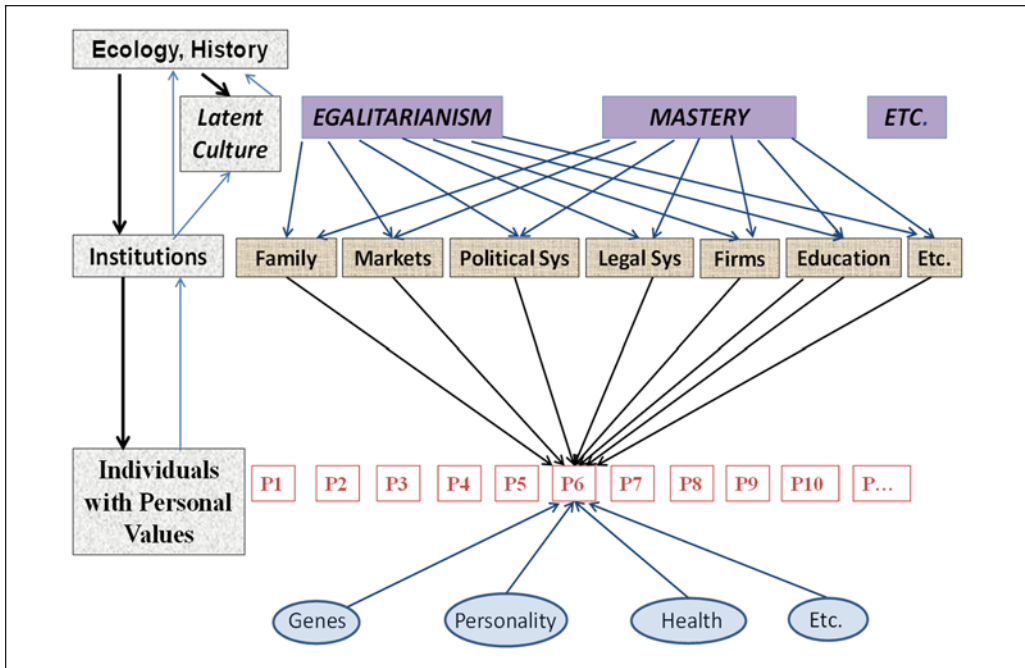


Figure 1. A schematic representation of the relations between latent societal cultural value emphases, institutions, and the values of individuals.

individual values to institutions to latent culture, ecology, and history. To simplify, the arrows on the left show paths only between the general categories, whereas those on the right depict paths to specific institutions and individual people.

Paths run from each latent cultural value to each institution. This indicates that the cultural value emphases in a society express themselves in, guide, and are drawn upon to justify the ways each institution functions. Institutions in a society that emphasizes mastery more than harmony, for example, tend to foster more assertiveness, progress, technological control, and change. The expression of the latent value culture in the functioning of institutions suggests that we might be able to infer the culture from the characteristics or products of its institutions (e.g., children's books, constitutions, lyrics of popular music). However, each institution emphasizes a modified version of the overall latent culture because it has different functions. These modified versions derive from the interaction between the overall societal value emphases, each institution's functional requirements, and the types of individuals it recruits. For example, hierarchy values are especially important in armies, autonomy values in universities, embeddedness values in families, and egalitarianism values in legal systems. The latent culture of a society that can be inferred from the products and characteristics of any single or subset of institutions would therefore be somewhat distorted.

Paths run from each institution to each individual person (shown only for person 6). Each individual has a unique location in the social system that determines a unique set of direct or indirect contacts with the various institutions. Moreover, there are usually many variants of each institution (e.g., different types of families, schools, firms, etc.) to which an individual may be exposed. Persons raised in small families and educated in "progressive" schools, for example, are likely to have been exposed to more egalitarian social relationships and expectations than those raised in large families and educated in parochial schools. Adding to these sources of individual differences in values are unique characteristics of each person such as genes, temperament,

personality, and health. These characteristics interact with the social experiences to generate the substantial variance in value priorities across individuals observed in each society. They serve as filters that transform the same social experience into different subjective experiences for each individual.

Now, consider how aggregated individual responses can reflect the latent cultural value orientations in a society. No individual carries the culture. The culture influences every individual in a unique way. The values of all individuals reflect the influence of the latent culture channeled through their particular exposure to societal institutions. Their values also reflect unique personal characteristics. When aggregating the values of a representative sample, the influences of unique personal characteristics and particular exposures on individuals largely neutralize one another because these characteristics and exposures differ across individuals. The major component that emerges in the mean sample scores is what has influenced all individuals, the latent cultural values to which all have been exposed. The observed differences between societies on these mean scores reflect the differences between the latent value cultures in the societies. The means themselves are not the cultural values, but they are observable consequences from which we infer cultural values. That is why I speak of the culture as “latent” and “hypothetical.”

The following analogy may be useful to clarify further how we can use aggregated individual responses to infer cultural values. Inferring the cultural values in a society from averaging the value responses of a representative set of (sample) people is like estimating a person’s (latent) aptitudes by averaging responses to a set of items in an aptitude test. Think of the individual people in a society (or other cultural unit) as analogous to the items in a test. Each person is equivalent to a different item. Let us look more closely at how this process works.

In an aptitude test, each item captures some “true score” variance—the variance in a person’s responses that is influenced by his or her latent aptitude. This is what we want to measure. In an aptitude test, each item may not be a very good indicator of the latent aptitude. That is, the latent aptitude may account for only a very small part of the variance in the answers to each item. Analogously, in a society, each person’s values capture some “true score” variance—the variance in the person’s values that is due to the influence of the prevailing value culture to which that person is exposed. In the case of people in a society, each individual person is typically a poor indicator of the latent culture. That is, the latent societal value culture accounts for only a very small part of the variance in each person’s self-reported values.

Part of the variance in answers to each aptitude test item reflects the influence of factors other than the latent aptitude of interest. For example, the location of an item near the beginning or the end of a test may influence answers in ways that have no relation to that aptitude. From the perspective of measuring the latent aptitude, this is error variance or noise. Similarly, factors other than the latent value culture in the society influence part of the variance in each person’s values. For example, a person’s age, number of siblings, and occupation may influence his or her values in ways that are minimally, if at all, related to the prevailing societal value culture. Such individual differences in social experiences and demographic characteristics lead to low consensus across individuals in their personal values. From the perspective of measuring the societal value culture, this variation in personal values within a society is noise.

Some of the sources of variance in answers to aptitude test items may be common to some subsets of items but not to others. For example, a subset of items that uses a true/false answer format may influence responses one way whereas items that use a multiple choice or open-ended answer format may influence responses another way. These differences tell us about the influence of these answer formats, but from the perspective of measuring the aptitude of interest, they are noise. Similarly, some of the sources of variance in people’s values may be shared by some subsets of people but not by others. Indeed, this is very much the reality in societies. For example, the values of parents, carpenters, or females reflect influences of family status, occupation, or gender that are not shared by childless individuals, lawyers, or males. The values of different

subsets of people tell us about the influence of group membership on values. From the perspective of measuring societal value culture, however, differences due to membership in a particular category or group are noise.

Finally, some sources of error variance in answers to aptitude test items may be unique to each item. For example, words such as “foreign” or “mother” in an item, may set off distracting associations that are not elicited by other items. These unique influences on responses to different items are also a source of noise from the perspective of measuring the aptitude of interest. Similarly, unique factors such as genetic heritage, accidents, personal successes, or failures may influence each person’s values. These effects cause individual differences in values, so they are noise from the perspective of measuring societal culture.

To estimate a person’s aptitude, we average the scores on all of the items (or sum them or compute a latent factor score). The key to measuring the aptitude is to obtain responses to large numbers of items. Ideally, the items should represent all aspects of the aptitude. When averaging responses to a large numbers of items, the noise largely drops out. This is because different sources of noise influence responses to different items in different directions. As a result, these influences tend to cancel out each other’s effects. What is left in the average, therefore, largely reflects that which influences all of the items in the same direction—the aptitude of interest.

Similarly, to estimate the prevailing (latent) value culture, we average the values of a representative sample of the people in the society. The key to measuring the prevailing latent culture in a society is to obtain responses from a large number of people. Ideally, these people should be a representative sample of societal (or group) members. When averaging the values of all of the people, the noise due to their unique characteristics and experiences largely drops out. This is because different sources of noise influence each person in different directions. As a result, these influences tend to cancel out each other’s effects. What is left in the average, therefore, largely reflects that which influences the values of all the people in the same direction—the societal culture.

This view of cultural values as latent variables inferred from sample means has an important implication for comparing societal cultures. It is inappropriate to use analysis of variance for this purpose. Consider, first, why it is inappropriate to use ANOVA to compare the aptitude of two people based on their aptitude test scores. The variance of items within each person’s test refers to the heterogeneity of the items. What is needed for an ANOVA to compare the aptitudes of two people is the variance in aptitude between a number of people who took the same test. Researchers use population norms—means and standard deviations of aptitude scores in a comparison group of many people—to evaluate individual aptitude scores or to compare different people.

Similarly, the variance of people’s values within a society refers to the heterogeneity of people’s personal values, the values in their minds. This variance tells us about the consensus in each society regarding personal value priorities. What is needed for an ANOVA to compare the latent cultural values of two societies is the variance in culture between a number of societies whose latent culture has been inferred. Researchers can use country norms—means and standard deviations of cultural value scores based on numerous countries—to evaluate single society scores or to compare different societies.

With data from many countries, for example, each cultural value (e.g., autonomy) has a mean and standard deviation across countries. In my data from 80 countries, for example, the mean score for cultural egalitarianism is 4.69 and the standard deviation across countries is .27. The egalitarianism score is 4.68 for the United States of America and 5.23 for Spain. Based on the international norms, the United States is trivially below the international mean and Spain is a full two standard deviations above the mean and the United States in cultural egalitarianism. In contrast, the United States is more than one standard deviation higher in cultural egalitarianism than Indonesia (4.32), Japan (4.36), and Russia (4.38). Such comparisons do not depend upon the

within-country variance on people's personal values because the latent cultural values are characteristics of societies not of individual people.

We should not understand the mean aggregated scores that represent the value culture of a society as precise points along the value dimensions compared. It is convenient to think of a culture as located at specific points on various dimensions, but it is more accurate to view the scores as indicating the central tendencies of the normative system. A range of more and less prescribed or proscribed value emphases extends around these central tendencies. The width of these "confidence intervals" is one expression of the tightness–looseness of the societal culture. The ranges around the cultural value scores for two countries may overlap, but it is still meaningful to view their cultures as different if the size of the difference between their central tendencies is consequential. Effect sizes for the comparison of cultural egalitarianism between Spain and the United States and between the United States and Russia are both greater than 1.00. Individuals living in these three countries are likely to experience a quite different cultural press relevant to egalitarianism.

The concept of cultural values proposed here has guided my work at the country level (e.g., Schwartz, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2009a, 2011). The lack of substantial within-country consensus regarding the importance of most personal values found by Fischer and Schwartz (2011) poses no challenge to this concept of cultural values as a set of hypothetical, latent variables. Nor, as I have argued, does it challenge the method of inferring such cultural values from aggregated individual values. The concept of culture proposed here neither requires nor anticipates a high degree of "sharedness" within countries.

The approach advocated here postulates that national differences in cultural value emphases refer to a construct that is different from individual differences in value priorities. This approach implies that cultural values can explain nation-level differences in attitudes and behaviors even after controlling the effects of the individual values that were aggregated on these attitudes and behaviors. Multilevel analyses of generalized trust (Gheorghiu, Vignoles, & Smith, 2009), opposition to immigration, political activism, and membership in voluntary organizations (Schwartz, 2007) have demonstrated that this is the case.

Before concluding, it is necessary to address one more issue. Thus far, I have spoken of inferring the latent cultural values from the personal values of samples that are representative of a country or other cultural unit. Only representative samples can ensure that the cultural press that affects participants in our studies through their exposure to the institutions of the society accurately captures the impact of the prevailing, latent cultural values. The responses of other types of samples necessarily reflect exposure to a biased selection of institutions.

As noted, every institution emphasizes a modified version of the overall latent culture because it has different functions. Samples of particular occupational or other groups can therefore not provide an accurate picture of the latent cultural values that underlie the institutions of a country. Samples of schoolteachers may yield underestimates of the importance of mastery in a society, for example, and IBM workers may yield overestimates. College student samples may yield overestimates of intellectual autonomy and underestimates of embeddedness and hierarchy.

Nonetheless, such samples can be useful for comparing national cultures if they are well matched across countries. When using such samples, researchers must assume that teachers (or students, or IBM workers) in each country that is compared have similar experiences and similar exposure to societal institutions. If so, then the inferred latent cultural values should differ in a similar way in each country from the values that would be inferred from representative samples. For example, teacher samples should understate the importance of mastery to a similar degree in each country. Although the assumption of similar experiences and exposure is never 100% true, it may often be reasonable. Consequently, comparing well-matched samples can reveal country differences.

The Fischer and Schwartz (2011) findings raised critical problems for the prevailing conception of societal culture and of its measurement. These problems can be resolved. But doing so requires that we rethink the concept of societal culture. This article suggests a way to proceed with this task.

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Notes

1. The discussion and examples refer to countries. However, similar reasoning applies to the culture of any group.
2. The degree to which individual members of cultural groups share *perceptions* of the importance of core values in their culture has not been studied systematically. It may be no greater than for own values (cf. Wan et al., 2007, Study 1). This is not necessarily a problem for the intersubjective consensus approach to culture (Wan & Chiu, 2009), however. Most of the arguments I present below to justify aggregation of individuals' own values apply equally to aggregating individuals' perceived cultural values.
3. For a full elaboration of the theory, see Schwartz (2006, 2011).

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