

Student teachers' understanding of the concept of culture

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Abstract

How do novice student teachers understand the concept of culture? To what extent do their understandings of the concept change after three years of teacher education? These questions are discussed based on insights about various scholarly concepts of culture, which have developed over more than a century. In addition, theories of localism and individualisation are used. We discuss findings from a longitudinal quantitative study, with data collected in 2014 and 2017 at a Norwegian teacher education institution. In addition to questions with predefined answering alternatives, the students were invited to answer the following open question: "Can you, in your own words, explain what you mean by culture?" In this paper, we analyse and compare the responses to this question in 2014, when the students began their studies, and in 2017, after three years of study. One interesting finding is that many students define culture in quite local and personalised terms, although more so in 2014 than in 2017. Another important finding is that static understandings of culture prevail in both 2014 and 2017, although less so in 2017 than in 2014.

Keywords: Culture, multicultural awareness, localism, individualisation

1. Introduction

Culture is a concept that is frequently used in education, in everyday life, and among scholars. In particular, the concept often turns up in debates about migration and ethnic majority-minority relations. Culture constitutes the basic term in compound concepts such as multicultural, intercultural, or transcultural. Still, such concepts seldom seem to be explained or defined in a thorough manner

among educators. Any clarification of the meanings of these concepts should start with the concept of culture itself. In the scholarly literature, there is a huge variety of understandings of the concept, particularly among anthropologists and sociologists, but less so among teacher educators. The student teachers of today will have to explain concepts such as culture, multicultural societies, and intercultural relations to new generations. It is thus relevant to ask how they understand the concept of culture, and how we may analyse these understandings.

The findings in this paper are outcomes of a study of multicultural awareness that we conducted among student teachers at a Norwegian Faculty of Education, in which both Kindergarten- and General Teacher Education students participated (Bugge & Løvteit, 2015; Løvteit & Bugge, 2015). The research is based on the students' responses to a structured questionnaire with mostly fixed answering alternatives. However, we also included a few open questions in the questionnaire, among them the following: Can you in your own words explain what you mean by culture? (Norwegian: «Kan du med egne ord forklare hva du mener med kultur?») A discussion of the responses to this question constitutes the basis of the article.

2. The Concept of Culture – A Literature Review

According to Raymond Williams, “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (2014, p. 101). Throughout the last century or so, scholars have presented hundreds of definitions of culture. Renato I. Rosaldo underlines that “there is not a single, eternal definition of culture, but rather provisional definitions that will be revised as debates unfold through time. In part, the problem for analysis is to clarify the issues that divide parties to the debate” (2006, p. 11). Despite these challenges, according to Thomas E. Wren, “Few multicultural education textbooks or scholarly works acknowledge the complexities and historical evolution of the various conceptions of culture that one finds in the social sciences, where culture has always been a vigorously contested issue” (2012, p. 5).

Any attempt to provide a basic overview of different scholarly definitions of culture would require far more space than what is available here. Still, it might be worthwhile to highlight a few quite well-known definitions in order to provide a certain sense of how approaches to the concept have changed over time. According to Edward Burnett Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (1871), culture is “... that

complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (quoted in Street, 2019), a definition which is still used by some today. Tylor was an evolutionist who regarded societies as more or less advanced, and as progressively developing "from a savage to a civilized state" (Street, 2019). Franz Boas, the German-born "father of American anthropology", distanced himself from Tylor's evolutionism and from the distinction between primitive and advanced cultures. Boas maintained that "Culture embraces all the manifestations of social habits of a community, the reactions of the individual as affected by the habits of the group in which he lives, and the products of human activities as determined by these habits" (quoted in Wren, 2012, p. 30). Boas and his adherents distanced themselves from the racist connotations of many contemporary understandings of culture. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown considered culture as "a mode or process of social integration" (quoted in Wren, 2012, p. 38). Wren points out that to Radcliffe-Brown,

Rules of morality, religious beliefs, rituals, and other so-called 'elements of culture' are important ... only because they transform individuals into members of groups, and groups into interlocking parts of a society. In his view, the way to understand culture is not to ask what it is but rather what it does (Wren, 2012, p. 38).

Clifford Geertz defined culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). According to a contemporary anthropologist, Thomas Hylland Eriksen (as quoted in Dahl, 2014), cultures are "... the ever-changing common meanings that are established and changed when people do something together." The above examples, even if few, should be enough to demonstrate how difficult it is to present a standard definition of the concept. Definitions of culture are and have long been a field of contestation and debates.

3. Methodology

It is not our intention to compare variations and tendencies in the scholarly definitions of culture with those of our student respondents. Neither, however, should we regard these two kinds of definitions as completely unconnected. At times definitions from the two areas overlap in some respects, and at other times they do not. In this paper, we have chosen to examine two questions that we

believe are significant for multicultural teacher education. First, who or what do the students focus or concentrate on as “proprietors” of culture or cultures? In other words, who or what has, practises or bears the stamp of culture/s, according to the students? Second, to what extent are the students’ interpretations of the concept of culture dynamic (indicating potential for cultural change) or not?

We believe that definitions that somehow include or are compatible with understandings of culture as a general human phenomenon related to or embedded in social systems are better and more in accordance with the aims of multicultural education than definitions with more personalised or locally focused features. Furthermore, we believe that definitions that not only underline culture as something inherited from earlier generations, but also as something that is evolving and changing in contemporary life, are more promising than those that do not. Still, it is an open question whether or to what extent personalised, locally focused or static understandings of culture block or impair development of fruitful intercultural relations or intercultural competence.

Methodically, we have opted for a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Responses to open questions should be analysed differently than responses to questions with fixed answering alternatives. We have on the one hand sorted the responses according to certain key words or combinations of words. On the other hand, we are aware that responses with similar key words may contain statements with different meanings. In the end, the meanings are more important than the key words as such. At the same time, the meanings of different statements are seldom completely unambiguous. It has thus been important to explore what possible meanings the students’ statements may contain. Compared to a purely quantitative method, we have in this context looked for and discussed some evident tendencies that we see in the student responses. We have deliberately chosen not to quantify them.

The question was answered by student teachers in their first and third year of teacher education, and the data were collected in 2014 and 2017. The questionnaire was distributed to the same group of students on both occasions. The response rates were high (N1=388, N2=268, response rates 90% and 82%). In 2014, the number of respondents who answered the above question about culture was 240 (62% of the 388 total). In 2017, the corresponding number was 207 (77% of the 268 total). The questionnaires were distributed during lecture time and collected immediately after completion to avoid non-response. At every occasion, one of the researchers administered the data collection.

4. “Proprietors” of culture

Here we will present findings concerning who or what the students consider “proprietors” of culture.

4.1 Results

Who or what do the students focus on as “proprietors” of culture or cultures? We should perhaps expect student teachers to state that culture is something that societies, countries, or perhaps groups of humans have, practise, or are influenced by. Still, only a limited group of the students mention those categories. In fact, the students’ responses are highly variegated. Some focus on “humans”, others on “people” or “peoples”. A few novice students in 2014 concentrated on “us” in various forms (i.e., “our traditions”, “our values”, or “our country”), while an even smaller group put their emphasis on otherness, i.e. “other countries”, “other people” etc. (All translations from Norwegian to English in this text are our own).

The most noteworthy tendency in our material, however, although not necessarily a majority tendency, is for the students to describe culture as something close to themselves. If permitted, we might call this tendency for “nearness-isation”. (The term is borrowed from Hotopf [2014], in which it has a different meaning). “Nearness-isation”, as it is used in this text, takes two forms – first a widespread use of personal pronouns (“you” and “we” in particular, but also “I” and “me”) or the general pronoun “one”, which may both refer to people in general and to an unnamed person (the corresponding pronouns in Norwegian being “man” and “en”). Thus, culture is something that you have, we have, I have, or one has, practises, or is influenced by. A very few respondents go as far as to maintain that culture is purely individual. The second variant of the “nearness-isation” tendency is to highlight the importance of individuals’ close environment, local community, and/or family/families. One example that combines both forms is this: “For me, culture is what I have inherited in my childhood, family, and community”. Another example: “Everyone is different; [they] may have grown up in different cultures with respect to where you live in the country. The culture of the hometown/place of origin or identity through language, for example”.

Thus, culture appears as something quite personal and tightly related to the respondents’ local community life or personal network/environment. Perhaps the above respondents, as well as other respondents, think that culture must mean

the same for everyone else as it does for them, and thus is a global phenomenon. However, that is not what they put in writing, so we cannot simply assume this to be the case. Their focus is on what is close to them. Of course, there are also responses that seek to combine what is personal or near with more abstract or general concepts like “society.” One example: “Culture is for me the traditions and experiences one gets through family and society.” Furthermore, as indicated above, there are also responses with no traits of “nearness-isation” whatsoever. For one student teacher, for example, culture is “attitudes, values, and traditions that put its imprint on a society”.

4.2 Discussion

How may “nearness-isation” be understood? At least four hypotheses are possible. 1) The respondents are young persons; many of them come from small towns and relatively tiny inhabited localities. For some, the new experience as student teachers may have brought them into contact with broader and more impersonal environments. In some cases, their responses may reflect a strong emotional attachment to the community of origin that they have left. 2) “Nearness-isation” may in addition or alternatively reflect a wider cultural trend, which is observable in mass media and in other contexts: News, politics, advertising, sports, popular music, education, and other parts of public life often make use of individual or personal stories and approaches or highlight the importance of individuals and individual choices. These may come at the cost of more general or impersonal trends or perspectives. Thus, a “you”, a “me” or a “one”-perspective on culture may appear as “natural” to many young people today. 3) “Nearness-isation” may also reflect students’ learning strategies. Culture is a very abstract and difficult concept. One way for students to construct a meaningful understanding of the concept may be to relate it to something concrete and familiar, something and someone to which the student teachers have first-hand relations. 4) A fourth possibility is that the responses reflect a lack of interest or understanding of the wider world.

A way of developing a theoretical framework that may help us understand the phenomenon that we so far have called “nearness-isation” is to regard it as a cultural expression of localism and individualisation. In this respect, Gabriele Pollini’s endeavour to develop a theory of place attachment and socio-territorial belonging (Pollini, 2005), as well as Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernstein’s work on individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernstein, 2002), can be helpful.

Pollini writes:

Some of the approaches dominant within first the modernization paradigm, and then the globalization paradigm ..., have often suggested the progressive loss of significance of particularist and diffused belonging to the local community ('delocalization') ... with the corresponding emergence of a single cosmopolitan attachment/belonging of a universalist and specific kind. (2005, p. 502-503)

However, Pollini points out that increased spatial and residential mobility over the last few decades have not resulted primarily in increasing any single cosmopolitan attachment. Rather, local attachments appear to have multiplied. He sees a "diffusion within the population of a multiplicity of socio-territorial belongings ... at the expense of belonging to one single territorial collectivity" (p. 512). He finds that "in the contemporary situation, localism may vary from intra-metropolitan 'neighborhoodism' through rural and urban municipalism, that of the area intermediate between commune and province – to 'provincialism (-regionalism)'" (p. 506).

So, instead of one specific 'traditional' and non-urban type of localism, which to some extent still exists, localism has taken new and more varied forms. Pollini found that besides "the more traditional form of 'belonging ascribed by birth and residence'", there are "non-traditional forms of 'belonging by birth alone'", as well as "'belonging acquired by residence' ... and 'elective belonging'" (p. 507). The last may refer to people's attachment to places where they neither were born nor reside, but where they, for example, spend or have spent a lot of time on activities of their liking. Thus, we should be careful not to consider all forms of localism as old-fashioned, outdated, or merely nostalgic. New forms of localism may very well be a significant social response to globalisation, urbanisation, and increased geographical mobility.

Another approach to the challenge posed by "nearness-isation" is provided by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's analysis of individualisation, of which we will only look at some basic features:

On the one hand, individualization means the disintegration of previously existing social forms – for example, the increasing fragility of such categories as class and social status, gender roles, family, neighbourhood etc. Or ... it means the collapse of state-sanctioned normal biographies, frames of reference, role

models. Wherever such tendencies towards disintegration show themselves the question also arises: which new modes of life are coming into being where the old ones, ordained by religion, tradition or the state, are breaking down? (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 2)

Here, the second aspect of individualization appears, as “in modern societies new demands, controls and constraints are being imposed on individuals” (p. 2). Individuals are increasingly forced or induced to develop individual strategies to succeed. “For modern social advantages [in education, the labour market, the welfare state, etc.] one has to do something, to make an active effort. One has to win, know how to assert oneself in the competition for limited resources – and not only once, but day after day” (p. 3). To succeed or to avoid downward social mobility, one cannot rely on traditional procedures or collective actions or support in the same way as earlier generations did. One must make decisions and take individual actions in an increasingly complex social environment. For example,

... another feature of the guidelines of modernity is that they act against, rather than for, family cohesion. Most of the rights and entitlements to support by the welfare state are designed for individuals rather than for families. In many cases they presuppose employment (or, in the case of the unemployed, willingness to work). Employment in turn implies education and both of these presuppose mobility or willingness to move. By all these requirements individuals are not so much compelled as peremptorily invited to constitute themselves as individuals: to plan, understand, design themselves and act as individuals (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 3)

At the same time, the authors point out that it differs “how far individualization processes – overt or covert – have advanced” (p. 5) in different groups, milieus, and regions. It is more fruitful to regard individualisation as a trend rather than as a something that describes the whole population. In any event, there is, according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, a tendency that not only the big questions of individuals’ life, such as to secure an income, but also their routinised activities are scrutinized and questioned to a much greater extent than before: “It is precisely this level of pre-conscious ‘collective habitualizations’, of matters taken for granted, that is breaking down into a cloud of possibilities to be thought about and negotiated” (p. 6).

It is reasonable to suppose that such individualisation processes are more pronounced among young adults than among older generations. If we follow Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, we can consider individualism to be, at least partly, a result of processes of individualisation. It follows that individualism or individual approaches to social phenomena in contemporary society may, to some extent, be a result of current social conditions, and not only a consequence of the spreading of individualism as an ideology. Thus, the personalised approaches to culture that we found in our study may largely reflect the structures of everyday life of young student teachers of today.

At the same time, we may ask: Are understandings of culture that focus on local and close networks or on individuals a hindrance for developing intercultural relations or intercultural competence? In a broad and thorough sense, this may be the case. Still, such understandings are not necessarily any hindrance for developing intercultural relationships with individuals of different backgrounds at a local level. They may perhaps even contribute to the inclusion of immigrants or immigrants' children into local networks or groups with special cultural traits or identities.

In any event, our study gives reason to believe that teacher education to some extent increases the student teachers' ability to regard culture as a general phenomenon. It was more common in 2017 than in 2014 to combine personal pronouns and "one" with general terms such as "society", "country", or "group of humans" when indicating who has, practises, or is influenced by culture. An example from 2017: "Culture is a set of rules, attitudes, and values that you acquire as a member of society, and they mark you as a person". It is also somewhat more common in 2017 than in 2014 to avoid personal pronouns or "one" altogether. For example: "Culture is what humans create around themselves. The culture consists of attitudes, values, ways of behaviour within a specific group of people". Furthermore, references to the students' close environments, local communities, or families are fewer in 2017 than in 2014. There is, nonetheless, considerable continuity from 2014 to 2017 when it comes to who or what the respondents consider to be "proprietors" of culture.

5. Dynamic or Static Concepts of Culture

Here we will present findings concerning the respondents' understandings of culture as dynamic or static.

5.1 Results

The second question raised in this paper regards the extent to which the students' interpretations of the concept of culture are dynamic (indicating potential for cultural change). There are at best some very few understandings of culture from 2014 that can be considered dynamic. One example: "Culture is for me a description of how a society works at any time. Not only old traditions, but how it actually is." Another example: "Culture is traditions, [that is] changing. May be positive and negative. Culture may be safety, belonging, Nature, Local community." A third example: Culture is "that which we bring along from earlier [times], as well as new things which we provide society with. That [may] be so much! The culture may form our values, and we may bring both positive and negative aspects along." A few other, but less clear, examples could be mentioned. Most of them may at best be regarded as dynamic in the sense that they to some extent describe or make it possible to regard culture as a current, everyday phenomenon. However, at the same time, they do not describe culture as something that basically is inherited from the past. Thus, when we take into consideration that there were 240 responses to the culture question in 2014, dynamic presentations of culture are hardly evident at all. Many of the definitions include heritage-oriented and static models of culture.

When we come to the responses from 2017, there are notably more presentations of culture that are dynamic, and they are also generally more sophisticated than the few examples from 2014 mentioned above. One example: "Culture is the sum of norms, values, ways of life, laws, and rules that society consists of. The culture (of today) is the result of both the history and of the current globalisation and the addition of new citizens from other cultures." Another example: Culture is "a set of values, norms, traditions that is continually changing. [There] are many different types of cultures as well as subcultures related to these." A third example: "Culture is learning and inheritance. Culture is carried on from generation to generation but is modified/changed as it is continued. Something is removed, something is added. [It is] changing continually."

These definitions from 2017 are not only more dynamic than the ones from 2014. They are in many ways also more explicit and advanced. However, the examples just mentioned constitute only a relatively small fraction of all the 2017 responses. Most presentations were still quite static or, at least, not very dynamic. Thus, the changes from 2014, even if notable, are quite limited in scope.

It is interesting to note that in our questionnaire the respondents were also asked (with two fixed answering alternatives) whether culture should be considered as largely stable or largely dynamic. In 2014, 56% of the respondents ticked off for “largely dynamic”. In 2017, 75% did the same. Thus, the difference is striking between the responses to the open question about culture and the closed question about culture. The responses to the open question about culture indicate that many of the responses on the fixed stable-dynamic question may not have been well embedded in the students’ understanding.

5.2 Discussion

How may the preference among many student teachers for understanding culture as a basically static phenomenon be understood? One possibility is that their responses to some extent reflect what they have learnt at school, in mass media, and perhaps even in teacher education courses. Definitions with many similarities to the static scholarly definitions of the late 19th and early 20th century are still in circulation in textbooks, mass media, and elsewhere. It is, furthermore, tempting to suggest, but difficult to substantiate, that static understandings of culture may be of psychological importance to some respondents. In a world where much seems to change rapidly – technology, the labour market, job routines, fashion, trends, and politics – culture may appear as a stable sphere, a fixed feature of social life where it is possible to sense a kind of stability and continuity. In addition, how individuals understand their cultures may be linked to their identities. Certainly, Alejandro Grimson points out that culture and identity should not be confused, as “culture alludes to our routine of strongly sedimented practices, beliefs and meanings”, while “identity refers to our feelings of belonging to a collective” (Grimson, 2010, p. 63).

However, even Grimson accepts that “in certain contexts, culture and identity can combine into a single practice, ritual or expression” (p. 63). Furthermore, static definitions may simply be easier to understand and remember than the dynamic ones, as the first in many cases simply include reference groups, for example societies or groups of humans, and a listing of certain elements or qualities (such as values, norms, knowledge, etc.) attached to those groups.

It is, moreover, interesting to note that Dahl, even when he promotes dynamic understandings of culture, does not completely reject the use of descriptive essentialist approaches to culture. He believes that they may be useful

- when we are searching for traits that are common to people with similar cultural backgrounds
- when we try to explain people's behaviour and acts in terms of their culture
- when we want to compare cultures
- when describing cultural differences (Dahl, 2014)

Essentialist or static approaches to culture are certainly difficult to avoid under all circumstances. If we should apply essentialist approaches in the way Dahl proposes, however, we ought to be extremely careful. The possible pitfalls of essentialist approaches are many. We might end up placing individuals in predetermined cultural categories and then compare them with other individuals placed in other predetermined categories. This could easily be understood as an invitation to regard individuals as belonging to either "us" or "them". That is exactly what intercultural or multicultural education should avoid and counteract.

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