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# The Cultural Triangle: A Conceptual Model

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## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to construct a graphic model of cultural processes that take place in a culture. Based on existing research it is established that the irreducible basic elements in cultural processes are values, behaviour, material elements, and language. Material elements can be artefacts and cultural perishables. How these four variables are connected and how they interact is without a doubt extremely complex but research does indicate that the four variables are connected and interact. Generalized anecdotes illustrate examples of cultural processes. Utilizing an abductive approach a conceptual model of cultural processes is developed. The model, here termed the Cultural Triangle, encompasses the four key variables and illustrates the relationship between them. This graphic model can be used to demonstrate that culture is dynamic and that there are many different interactive cultural processes.*

**Key Words** *Cultural theory, values, behaviour, artefacts, material elements, abduction*

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## Introduction

Culture is a subject that also has prominence as a teaching subject outside of anthropology and sociology. For instance, anthropologist Edward T. Hall was a pioneer in forging anthropology and communication (Rogers et al., 2002) that led to new disciplines, such as cross-cultural communication and intercultural competence, which have become part of curricula in hospitality and tourism studies. Regardless of the disciplines involved, national culture is the operative word, a word that has been considered notoriously complex since the founding of anthropology as an academic discipline (Tylor, 1924, p. 1). One can argue that what make culture particularly complex is not the individual elements of culture but how they interact, that is, the cultural dynamic or the cultural processes. A cultural process can be interactive and evolving, sometimes, but not necessarily, both at the same time, revealing that cultural processes can be dynamic and indicating that many different, complex cultural processes take place at the same time.

Several academics have introduced theories and models of culture that have become popular also within hospitality and tourism contexts, for instance, the cultural iceberg model by Hall (1959), the onion model by Hofstede (1959), the dimension concept by Hofstede (1997), the 7 dimensions of culture by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1979), the cross-cultural model of communication by Lewis (2005), and the GLOBE model (House et al., 2004). While each of these models are relevant also today, they also have their limitations. One

limitation is that culture may be understood only as something deep-rooted and static, when in fact culture can also be ‘pop’, ‘fast’, and dynamic.

While it can always be explained that culture is dynamic, it seems that that a graphic model that can explain the dynamic nature of culture is lacking. Based on this gap, this paper will utilize an abductive approach to develop a dynamic model of culture. The abductive approach is often utilized when the aim is to create a theory, construct, framework, or model. Abductive reasoning is a form of inference that has the following methodical flow: anecdotes → theory. In abduction, anecdotes or casual observations can lead to formulation of theory without the formulation of hypotheses and without empirical testing. It is the very complex nature of the subject matter that makes abductive reasoning an appealing first step in exploring the complexities of culture theoretically. From the theoretical understanding generated by the abductive approach other studies can be undertaken to validate or falsify the theory by way of deduction or induction.

## **Defining Culture**

Culture is notoriously difficult to define (Condon and LaBrack, 2015). In 1952, Kroeber and Kluckhohn concluded that at that time there were over 160 academic definitions of culture (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1985). Some academics have argued that it is not only difficult to define culture but that it is almost impossible (Edelstein et al., 1989). However, some agreement does exist on what culture is: It is what has been created by human beings (Moore and Lewis, 1952); thus it is not nature. Humans have created culture and humans are the key actors, as individuals and as groups, in the culture they have created (Herskovits, 1948, p. 17; Hofstede, 1980, p. 26). There appear to be two different perspectives on culture: 1. Culture encompasses values and behaviour only (Rokeach, 1973). 2. Culture is values and behaviour and material elements; material elements being what people eat, what they wear, and what they use (Assael, 1992; Mowen, 1993). The different definitions by different scholars reflect these different perspectives. In the very first definition of culture, from 1871, culture was defined by Tylor as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’ (Tylor, 1924, p. 1). In the mid-20th century Kroeber and Kluckhohn defined culture in this way:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952, p.181).

Another definition, by Samovar and Porter, refers to culture as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, social hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving (Samovar and Porter 2000, p. 7). One of the most recent definitions of culture, by Liebmann, is, ‘Culture is that which is socially acquired.’ (Condon and LaBrack, 2015). Liebmann notes of his short, simple definition that it is ‘appealing because it accounts for all forms of culture—artefacts, utterances, behaviours, laws, morals, and everything else in that laundry list [that was part of “classic definitions [...]”].’ (Condon and LaBrack, 2015).

All of the above definitions include artefacts (material elements). This paper concurs with the notion that culture also compasses material elements, besides values and behaviour. Therefore, a preliminary assumption is that any given culture consists of three overall cultural variables: cultural values, cultural behaviour, and material elements. As was pointed out above, material elements can be food, clothing and tools which is also reflected in anthropological vocabulary, sometimes with a distinction made between artefacts and food or natural objects. Food is here termed cultural perishables. In the same vein, a botanical garden or a landscaped park consists of natural objects, but they are natural objects that have been transformed by humans, representing a certain aesthetic value. Such transformations of nature are human behaviour. Plants are not artefacts because they are perishable, and by definition artefacts are not perishable. A garden is here also termed a cultural perishable.

However, if we are to understand culture as a cultural process, that is, how cultural values, cultural behaviour and material elements are connected, and how they interact, we need a fourth variable, language. We need language to express our values, but also to organize life, and to create artefacts, and talk about them and write about them. Language is not just spoken and written words; language is also non-verbal language. The latter includes but is not limited to body language, gestures, facial expressions, eye movements, eye contact, proxemics, touching, odours (Hall, 1959; Hall, 1966). Objects, colours, and images (for instance, pictograms) can also communicate (Katz and Katz, 1983).

The status of language is different from values, behaviour, and artefacts because language is both a condition for the cultural process to take place and a part of the cultural process. In the cultural process, language is a conditioning and instrumental variable (cf. Kroeber and Kluckhohn's definition above). It can metaphorically be viewed as the glue that connects cultural variables. For a process to be a cultural process in the present context, language in one way or another must be involved.

We now have four different variables that can constitute a cultural process: values, behaviour, material elements, and language. How these four variables are connected and how they interact is without a doubt extremely complex. Understanding and explaining this process in all likelihood involve knowledge from psychology, social-psychology, and sociology, art history, and maybe even disciplines within the natural sciences, and, of course, anthropology.

### **Cultural Theory Review**

With the identification of the four cultural variables, the questions arise, how the four variables are connected. Previous research does indicate that indeed the four variables are connected and interact, that is, there are cultural processes. The following review of research illustrates the many complex ways the four variables interact: Kluckhohn (1944) stated that there is a relationship between culture and language, that is, values, behaviour, and material elements are connected to language. Hall (1959) stated that culture is a communication system, that is, there is a communication process involving the three variables. According to Samovar et al. (1981, p. 14) language 'transmits values, beliefs, perceptions, norms'. Norms are behaviour (Jary and Jary, 2000). Thus language conveys both values and behaviour; the latter typically non-verbally (Hall, 1959).

Symbols help communicate (Geertz, 1973) and allow for interaction between people (Foster, 1962). Culture is about perceptions (Samovar et al., 1981; Triandis, 1972). Culture is about cognitive knowledge, classification, and categories existing in the minds of people (Goodenough, 1964; Merrill, 1965; Schmidt, 1939). Artefacts can communicate which is known as object communication or objectics which is a part of nonverbal communication (Katz and Katz, 1983) Objectics have been defined as "all intentional and nonintentional display of material things, such as implements, machines, art objects, architectural structures, [...] the human body, and [...] clothes [...]" (Ruesch and Kees, 1956, p. 189). Humans utilize objects to send content messages (Katz and Katz, 1983, p. 163). According to lifestyle theory objects can be coded, so to speak. "We [...] use coded language on the status of certain artists, objects, brands, and art forms (like music) [...]. Coded language is about creating taste hierarchies that can vary enormously from one lifestyle group [...] to the next." (Vejlgaard, 2013, p. 157). Codes can, for instance, be words such as "trendy" and "mainstream". The coding is the result of thoughts and feelings, that is, values. Non-verbal communication is part of culture (Argyle, 1978), that is, behaviour can communicate, and behaviour is communication.

It seems that values, behaviour, and material elements in themselves can communicate and at the same time facilitate communication between the three variables.

In literature some definitions of culture explicitly or implicitly relate a relationship between values, behaviour and material elements. Kroeber and Kluckhohn state that people's values determine their actions (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). Lustig and Koester are in line with this: 'Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which affect the behaviours of a relatively large group of people.' (Lustig and Koester, 2006, p. 25). Kroeber and Kluckhohn's definition and Samovar et al.'s (1981) definition also relate that artefacts are acquired as a result of human behaviour.

Thoughts and feelings are cultural values (Harris, 1988; Nisbitt, 1970; Radcliffe-Brown, 1957). It can be argued that material elements can also affect thoughts and feelings after they have been created: We may think

that material elements are valuable, desirable, and beautiful, or the opposite. They may also create feelings inwardly (joy; awe) and outwardly (smiling; crying). In other words, material elements can affect cultural values. In one of his studies of culture, Hall (1975) studied the impact architecture can have on behaviour.

Values are a variable and a category of other variables, for instance, thoughts, feelings, and knowledge. Values may thus be about likes and dislikes based on different religious, ideological, and/or aesthetic input. Likewise, behaviour is a variable and a category of other variables, for instance, norms, rules, habits, customs. It has already been pointed out that material elements are a bundle of different variables. Language is a condition for a cultural process to take place; without language there is no such process. But this is not the case with respect to values, behaviour, and material elements. Only two of these elements are required for a cultural process to take place (cf. perspective no. 1 above).

### **Generalized Anecdotes**

In the abductive analysis presented here the actors in the cultural process, that is, human beings, come into full view, so to speak. Here some observations are presented, not as anecdotal evidence of cultural processes, but as generalized anecdotes of cultural processes. The first example relates to an artist who has an idea, maybe based on aesthetics (value); based on this idea he paints a painting (behaviour); the output is a painting (artefact). The painting brings joy to the artist which is a feeling (value). This is a process that can take place with or without language. It is not a cultural process in itself. It is a creative process that is psychological in nature, in that it only involves one individual. However, the output of this creative process is culture and the painting may become part of a cultural process.

For a cultural process to take place it must involve more than one human being, for example, in the following way: The painting (artefact) is bought by a museum curator (behaviour). The new painting is written about (behaviour) in a newspaper by an art critic who calls it beautiful (coded language). With (aesthetic) language an aesthetic value is attached to the artefact: the object can then communicate to people who understand this aesthetic language. It may be the colours, the motifs, or some other element that are the language. The artist and the art critic have now created a new aesthetic value which art lovers start talking about (language); this will make art lovers go and view the painting (behaviour); they talk (language) about the painting (artefact), and create their own coded language, depending upon their (normative) values. They return from the museum with a new aesthetic value which they talk about and communicate (language) to their friends (behaviour). The friends now go and see the painting (behaviour). This is a cultural process, with language at the centre that connects the three variables in a circular, clock-wise way.

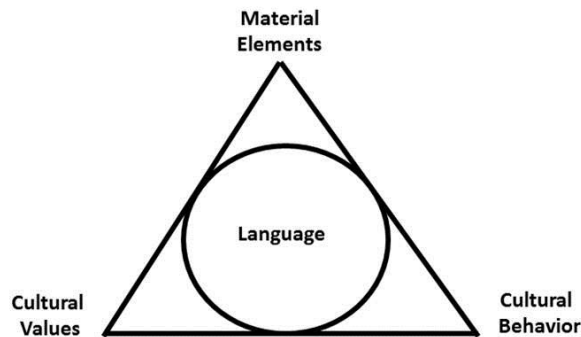
The cultural process can also go counter-clockwise: In the museum there is a sign (artefact) with words (language) that says "Scan the QR-code to learn more" which the museum's guest acts on (behaviour) and waves to her companions (language) and tells them (language) that she has learned something new (value); she adjusts her vocabulary (coded language) and now she dislikes some old art (artefact). (If alone the museum guest is not involved in a cultural process but is having an emotional experience which is a psychological process.)

With language both a clockwise and a counter-clockwise circular cultural process appear. The examples have shown that cultural processes involve at least two individuals to be called a cultural process. With this, a definition can also be presented: A cultural process is when values, behaviour and the perception of or physical or other state of material elements interact, change, and evolve, among individuals and groups, with the use of language.

### **A Cultural Triangle**

The aim of this paper is to construct a graphic model of cultural processes that take place in a culture. It does seem possible to illustrate the cultural processes analysed here, graphically, as a triangle with the four key overall variables. Language is placed inside the triangle in a circle. Figure 1 shows a graphic illustration of such a triangle, here termed the Cultural Triangle.

**Figure 1. The Cultural Triangle**



In the Cultural Triangle the material elements are placed at the top, representing the most visible part of a culture. Cultural values and cultural behaviour are placed at the bottom, as a symbolic foundation of culture (not unlike Schein's model of organizational culture (Schein, 2010)). Theoretically, it seems that values are often considered the variable that often instigates behaviour. If one is influenced by the Latin alphabet, it then makes sense to place the cultural values to the left and cultural behaviour to right, Language, the fourth category, is placed inside the Cultural Triangle in a circle that touches all sides of the triangle to illustrate the conditioning and connecting role language plays in the cultural process.

The Cultural Triangle model can be said to have simplified a phenomenon, and the model also appears simple. However, this should not cloud the fact that what is simplified is indeed extremely complex. But it would appear that the model can demonstrate the interactive relationship between the four cultural elements; that culture is dynamic; and that there are many different cultural processes that take place at the same time. Thus, this graphic model may bring insights that other graphic cultural models do not.

### **Implications for tourism and hospitality**

In tourism and hospitality, culture is not just about 'anthropological culture' or deep-rooted culture, it may also be about 'fast culture'. Intercultural competence in today's world is thus also about understanding that cultures may change at different paces and that the four cultural elements do not always change at the same pace even within the same culture. Cultures may be fast-changing; slow-changing, or somewhere in between these two poles. In slow-changing cultures, some aspects of culture may change at a fast pace. Japan could be an example of such a culture: Dress, which is an artefact, appears to have changed markedly since the Second World War, whereas values and behaviour seem to have changed less. In other cultures, that are conservative with respect to dress, values could become less conservative which can affect behaviour (or, as it appears with the Cultural Triangle, it can be the other way around) while the conservative dress codes are still upheld.

The Cultural Triangle can also help pinpoint some important nuances with respect to pop culture (media objects, entertainment and leisure, fashion, and linguistic conventions, among other things (Kidd, 2017)) and the consumption associated with pop culture. The Cultural Triangle can explain, for instance, that material consumption may change at a different pace than deep-rooted values and behavior, which may result in tourists dressing in the same way when they are visiting a country, but in fact they may have very different values which again affect their behavior, for instance, with respect to complaints about service quality.

One can argue, that one aim of teaching intercultural competence is making the students in hospitality and tourism education capable of understanding all the cultural nuances that can play a part in the guest-host encounter. The Cultural Triangle can help to achieve this aim.

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