Contextualizing Culture in Practice:
Between Cultural Relativism and Hermeneutic Understanding

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Abstract

This paper aims to contextualize culture in practice by initially problematizing the concept of culture with the question, "What does culture as given or culture as constructed mean?" It further delves into the issue by asking, "Why is this a problem?" and ultimately seeks to answer, "How can we resolve this problem?", which entails the practical contextualization of culture. The focus of the paper is to challenge the notion of culture as either predetermined or constructed, employing the contrasting perspectives of Peter Winch and Martin Heidegger. Additionally, it examines the differences between cultural relativism and hermeneutics, featuring debates between Peter Winch and Clifford Geertz on cultural relativism, and Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein on hermeneutics. Finally, the paper discusses methodologies for contextualizing culture, whether perceived as given or constructed, in practical terms.

The insights provided by this paper are significant for several reasons. Firstly, it helps clarify the theoretical underpinnings of cultural analysis, offering a nuanced understanding of how culture can be perceived and interpreted. Secondly, it bridges the gap between theoretical debates and practical applications, providing scholars and practitioners with the tools to better navigate cultural contexts in their work. Lastly, the paper encourages a reflective and critical approach to cultural studies, promoting deeper engagement with the dynamic and constructed nature of culture.

Keywords: Culture, Contextualize, Problematize, Hermeneutic, Practice

Introduction

The word *'culture'* is an ambiguous one; it is used in many senses and there is substantial disagreement on what, exactly, the term refers to:

The classic definition of 'culture' is generally held to be that provided by the anthropologist, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, at the beginning of his *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.

But, since Tylor's time, the term 'culture' has come to be understood in a variety of ways. Today, for example, we speak of a 'culture of science' or a 'culture of health', which seems roughly equivalent to 'ideology'. And so 'culture' can be said to be: "A more or less consistent pattern of thought and action", "the product of learned behaviour", "ideas in the mind," "a system of ideas, signs, associations, and modes of behaviour and communication" – or even accused of being "a logical construct" or "a statistical fiction" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, pp. 149-163). In their *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1952), Kroeber and Kluckhohn provide some 164 different senses of the term.

At times, 'culture' has been taken to mean what sociologists have called 'high culture,' and the existence of cultural diversity has been considered to be of little value. T.S. Eliot's study, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), is a well-known example of this. Eliot

writes that 'culture' is, "first of all what the anthropologists mean: the way of life of a particular people living together in one place" (pp. 120), but adds that a culture "can never be wholly conscious – there is always more to it than we are conscious of" (pp. 94) - and that an elite is necessary to "bring about a further development of the culture in organic complexity: culture at a more conscious level, but still the same culture". (pp. 37) Thus, culture is "the *whole way of life* of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night" , (pp. 31) but is adequately appreciated and developed only by a few. This view reflects a sociological conception of culture as high culture, in which only a few are deemed capable of fully appreciating and developing the cultural heritage of a society.

Still, in the past quarter century, much of the research and discussion in the social sciences and humanities has rejected this model; the tendency has been to return to something close to Tylor's definition, though without insisting that *'culture'* have the characteristic of being a *'complex whole'* and without focusing on its attribution to persons as members of "society".

It seems fair to say, then, that today we can take the term *'culture'* in a very broad sense as *'a collection of representations or ideas shared by and pervasive through a group of individuals'* – as a set of what the idealist philosopher Bosanquet (1999) called 'dominant ideas.' Such a description provides a heuristic norm or a regulative idea for a study of culture, pluralism, and philosophy, without being a complete definition – or even claiming that 'culture' can be defined. It should be sufficient to allow us to reflect on the kinds of issues and concerns that are both expressed above.

As can be seen, there is chaos in search of the meaning of "culture". The author raises questions of whether culture is something that has been given or is created. In this article the author tries to review how culture can be produced. What does culture as 'given' or culture as 'constructed' mean? Why do we think of culture as given, or of culture as constructed in practice? And what is meant by culture as given or culture as constructed by context? To carry the argument, the author takes three steps of conceptualization. Firstly, to problematize culture by asking the question, *'What does culture as given or culture as constructed mean?*

Secondly, to further ask the question, *'Why is that a problem?'* Lastly, to try to answer, *'How does one get out of the problem?'* regarding how to contextualize culture in practice—which is not only the concluding step, but also the central focus of this article, as highlighted in its title.

Problematizing culture as given, or culture as constructed

In this part, the author attempts to discuss philosophers and thinkers and the cultural context between culture as given and culture as constructed. How are the meanings and cultural context constructed and in what way? Two thinkers are dealt with. Winch, (1970) discussed culture as given. He talked about meaning existing by itself or as already given. For Heidegger (2002), the cultural context of construction is not constructed out of nowhere, but the cultural context is constructed out of lifeworld or different forms of life.

Firstly, Peter Winch, who uses Wittgenstein's ideas to raise several questions not only about the possibilities of social science but also about the possibility of understanding cultures other than our own as well as the issue of relativism. (Benton & Craib, 2001) Winch suggests another way for social science to study social relations called 'Cultural Determinism', which is interested in the culture of the individual. (Winch, 1970) This means that each culture has its own rules to determine the actions or behavior of the members. Each culture is different. We can call this 'Cultural Relativism'. To understand human behavior, we have to start with an understanding of culture, while it does not behold manifestly because culture is an idea.

For natural science, social understanding can be achieved by observing regularities in the human behavior of its participants and expressing this in the form of generalizations. However, for Winch, understanding of social relations has to be done by observing human relations where the relations have been determined by rule-governances that are different from general rules. Rule-governance means values that all members in the society share. Winch thinks different societies have their own rule-governances and it is pointed out that we cannot explain every society or human behavior by one general rule. Rule-governance is the value where there is something behind action, as the context of rules of a given form of social life. To

some extent, this idea is the essence for analysis because *'social relations between men exist only in and through their ideas, then the relations between ideas are internal relations'* (Winch, 1970). This point shows that Winch disagrees with the explanation that human actions and social life are the phenomena of nature. Human action is meaningful in a way that events in the natural world are not. In this context Winch, *'is ipso facto rule-governed'* (Giddens, 1993). It is implied that every society sets some rules for its members and we can call this culture. It specifies how members of the same culture perform in any situation, how to think and interact with other people. Every action has a meaning, different cultures have different meanings, thus Winch suggests that when people do something, they do it according to a model of rules in their society. On the other hand, society or culture sets rules for members. If we want to understand people, we must understand culture first. This means we cannot interpret human beings as individuals because they have shared the meaning of behavior within the culture's, social rules. We can call this concept *'cultural determinism'*. Winch proposed an appropriate explanation of human behavior or social study should be done by observation, statistics and interpretation, coming from the word *"Verstehen"* of Weber (Winch 1970). In the book *'Understanding a Primitive Society'* Winch shows the force of this point. He analyzes the Azande ritual of crop-rites and criticizes E. E. Evan Pritchard who studied the Azande. Many Anthropologists explain this ritual as attempting to produce good harvest conditions by assuaging the gods. But Winch claims this interpretation of the Azande crop-rites is in error. He maintains that western anthropologists have mistakenly equated intelligibility with being instrumentally rational. In this aspect, the crop-rite is an Azandean way of dealing with their dependence on the harvest, different from the technological ways of trying to ensure that the harvest is successful (Fay, 1998; Benton & Craib, 2001; Giddens, 1993). From Winch's perspective, to understand another culture we should grasp all the social systems within that culture as they are the rules that govern their members.

However, in MacIntyre's Damascus: In the Province of Philosophy of Social Science (Turner, 2003), MacIntyre's first major strictly philosophical publication, "Determinism" in Mind (1957), vigorously upheld the claim that,

"to show that behavior is rational is enough to show that it is not causally determined in the sense of being the effect of a set of sufficient conditions operating independently of the agent's deliberation or possibility of deliberation. So, the discoveries of the physiologist and psychologist may indefinitely increase our knowledge of why men behave irrationally but they could never show that rational behavior in this sense was causally determined" (1957).

MacIntyre's new approach appears in his 1967 paper *"The idea of a social science"* and in *"Rationality and the Explanation of Action",* which he included in Against the Self-Images of the Age (1971). Each of these were in large part a commentary on Winch. MacIntyre argued that the reasons and cause's distinction was overdrawn, and that his previous view of the significance of some of the key arguments in the reasons and causes literature was mistaken: "We shall be in conceptual error if we look in the direction of the causes of the physical movements involved in the performance of the actions. It does not follow that there is no direction in which it might be fruitful to search for antecedent events that might function as causes" (1978).

For Heidegger, culture as constructed. Heidegger's 'Being-in' argues for recognizing that the way in which Dasein inhabits its world reflects and determines the nature of the world. Dasein dwells together with others, just like it in itself is a social world. Heidegger claims that the existential constitutes of Dasein's Being-in has two elements, state-of-mind and understanding, both of which constitute limits or conditions of distinctively human existence. Heidegger's emphasis is upon Dasein as Being-in-the-world. 'Frame of mind' is less inaccurate, but still retains some condition of the mental as an inner realm (Mulhall, 1996).

Heidegger does not think Dasein's world is populated only by physical objects or entities *(medium-sized dry goods)*[1], but there is at least one other class of beings, which belongs to Dasein, and they must be accommodated by analysis of that world.

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[1] The phrase "medium-sized dry goods" is often used by philosophers—sometimes humorously or critically—to refer to

a view of the world populated only by tangible, physical objects. Heidegger challenges this reductionist perspective by

The problem of other minds for a dualistic understanding of human beings as mind-body couples combined with a materialist desire suggests that our relations with putatively human beings are, in effect, relations with physical objects of a particular sort to which we are inclined to attribute various distinctive additional characteristics. The similarities between our own bodies and behavior and the bodies and behavior of others are mind, Being-towards-Other in terms of Being-towards-oneself (Mulhall, 1996).

A Cartesian understanding of other minds faces the same difficulty as a Cartesian understanding of the external world. Heidegger concludes that we should throw away an essential compositional understanding of other persons: the sceptic's ability to destroy our best attempts to treat that concept as a construction from more basic elements. We must rather recognize that the concept of the other is irrational. Their Being must be of the same kind as Dasein.

But Heidegger's point is anti-solipsistic as well as anti-Cartesian. The concept that another person must not only be understood non-compositionally, but is also essential to any adequate ontological analysis of Dasein. (i.e. the Being of Dasein is essentially Being-with-others). Ready-to-hand is inherently intersubjective; and since a parallel argument applies to the recontextualized world of present-to-hand objects, it entails that Dasein's inherently worldly being is essentially social. Our world is both mine and yours; intersubjectivity is not the denial of subjectivity but of its further specification

The two issues are ontologically inseparable; to determine the one is to determine the other. This understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and intersubjectivity determines Heidegger's characterization of Dasein's average everyday mode of existence. The everyday form of that understanding focuses upon one's differences from those with whom one's own sense of self derives. Heidegger claims that it is purely a function of our sense of how we differ from others. In addition, '*the others*' are not a group of genuinely individual human beings whose shared tastes dictate the taste of everyone else; and neither do they constitute an intersubjective or supra-individual being, a

sort of communal self. *'The they'* is neither a collection of definite others nor a single definite other but it is a free-floating, impersonal construct, a sort of consensual vision to give up capacity for self-relations and lead an individual life. As Heidegger put it, *"everyone is the other and no-one is himself*. The *"they",* which supplies the answer to the question of the *"who"* of everyday Dasein, is the *"nobody"* to whom every Dasein has already surrendered itself in being-among-one-another."

In short, the average everyday mode of Dasein is inauthentic. Its 'mine-ness' takes the form of the 'they', itself is a '*they-self'*—a mode of relating to itself and to others in which it and they fail to find themselves and so fail to achieve genuine individuality. Heidegger's view is rather that Dasein's being is '*being-with'*. There is something inherently public or impersonal about that world. It acknowledges the individuality of a public transportation system, a newspaper of each of its readers or a 'custom'. Others appear in our shared world primarily as functionaries, they appear not as individuals but as essentially interchangeable occupants of impersonally defined roles in practice.

Winch talks about rule-governance by culture or cultural determinism, which is the cultural definition following social law. According to his opinion, such a definition points out that 'Given Culture' has already existed in society. But for Heidegger, the action or human existence arises when people are being in action or when they associate with other people. If there is no association among each other, that is not called culture by Heidegger. Therefore, culture is constructed by human beings and does not exist beforehand.

Peter Winch conceptualizes culture as a given system governed by pre-existing social rules, emphasizing cultural determinism and the necessity of cultural relativism in understanding human behavior. In contrast, Martin Heidegger argues that culture is dynamically constructed through human interactions and Being-in-the-world, rejecting the notion of culture as a fixed entity. While Winch focuses on rule-governance, Heidegger underscores intersubjectivity, asserting that cultural identity emerges through continuous social engagement.

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asserting that the world of Dasein is far more complex. It includes not only physical entities but also beings that are bound up with meaning, relationships, and social practice—

none of which can be adequately understood through reference to objects alone.

Differences between cultural relativism and hermeneutics

In this part, the author explores some works from four main thinkers in two main schools of thought: Peter Winch and Clifford Geertz in cultural relativism, and Heidegger and Wittgenstein in hermeneutics. These two groups will be discussed for culture in different contexts.

First of all, the author will find some answers to "What is cultural relativism?" Cultural relativism is the view that morals or ethical systems, which vary from culture to culture, are all equally valid and no one system is "better" than any other. This is based on the idea that there is no ultimate standard of good or evil, so every judgment about right and wrong is a product of society. Therefore, any opinion on morality or ethics is subject to the cultural perspective of each person. Ultimately, this means that no moral or ethical system can be considered the "best," or "worst," and no moral or ethical position can be considered "right" or "wrong".

However, the problem with moving from a cultural perspective to cultural relativism is the erosion of reason that it causes. Rather than simply saying, "we need to understand the morals of other cultures", it says, "we cannot judge the morals of other cultures", regardless of the reasons for their actions. There is no longer any perspective, and it becomes literally impossible to argue that anything a culture does is right or wrong. Holding to strict cultural relativism, it is not possible to say that human sacrifice is "wrong", or that respect for the elderly is "right". After all, those are products of the culture. This takes any talk of morality right over the cliff, and into meaningless gibberish.

The contradiction of cultural relativism becomes immediately apparent. A society that embraces the notion that there is no ultimate "right" or "wrong" loses the ability to make any judgments at all. The way in which relativism, including cultural relativism, has permeated modern society is demonstrated in the bizarre ways in which we try to deal with this contradiction. "Tolerance" has mutated to imply unconditional support and agreement for all opinions or lifestyles. However, those who choose to be "intolerant" are not to be supported or agreed with. Tolerance, therefore, becomes an "ultimate good" in and of itself, which is contradictory to the entire idea of relativism. In the same way, heinous crimes such as rape and murder demand a moral judgment -- but strict cultural relativism cannot say that such things are always wrong.

Relativism in general breaks down when examined from a purely logical perspective. The basic premise is that "truth is relative." If every truth statement is valid, then the statement "some truths are absolute" must be valid. The statement "there are no absolute truths" is accurate, according to relativism, but it is an absolute truth itself. These contradict the very concept of relativism, meaning that absolute relativism is self-contradictory and impossible.

Peter Winch argues that the understanding of society differs from the understanding of nature (Winch, 1970). He gained his idea from John Steward Mill's thesis (in A System of Logic). The theory is that explanations of human behavior must appeal not to causal generalizations of individuals but appeal to our knowledge of the institutions and ways of life that give meaning. Mill's idea is that understanding social institutions is fixed at empirical generalizations. Empirical generalizations are the foundation of natural science to observe regularities in the form of uniformity. Regularities or uniformity is the constant recurrence of the same kind of event on the same kind of occasion. For natural science, it is logical that there is an investigation of regularities from an empirical point of view. Natural science has made the rule of nature that stands on empirical generalization. Judgments are intelligible only relative to a given mode of human behavior, controlled by its own rules. For example, in physical science the rules controlling the process of experiments in the question of science. In this way, to understand the outcome of an experiment, Winch would have to learn the nature of rules. The rules rest on a social context of common activity that has two sets of relations: their relation to the phenomena and their relation to the fellows or companions.

According to Mill's view, a social institution consists of regularities. Regularities express themselves in the form of generalizations. Generalizations are based on an empirical method that natural science holds. Additionally, social science follows natural science. Therefore, sociological investigations have done the same as science. Thus, in two situations the same thing happening or the same action performed must be understood in relation to the rules controlling it. But social science is different from natural science. Social

science does not only deal with one set of rules, but also with observed participants. For example, Pharisees and Publicans pray (Mill, 1843). The rule for the question is religious and both have participated to identify or answer the question, whether they are doing the same thing or not. This point is important because observers tend to be more concerned with the observed as subjects that have feelings by reflected common-sense considerations.

Although the reflective social scientists may find it necessary to use concepts which are taken from the context of an investigation, they are not taken from the form of the activity investigated. They are still technical concepts. This point led to Max Weber's theory. Winch uses Weber's concept-understanding (Verstehen) to clarify the problem of an explanation of social behavior. Verstehen, or understanding, means situations grasping the point or meaning of what is being done or said (Weber, 1978). The question is the understanding of whom - understanding by the members of society that cannot be understood by outsiders or by those who are not members of society.

In addition, it is impossible to go specifying the attitude, expectations and relations of individuals without referring to concepts. Interpretation aims at self-evidence or immediate plausibility or reasonability. Additionally, the meaning cannot be explained in terms of the actions of any individual person. Verstehen is logically incomplete and needs supplementing by a different method altogether. The method is a collection of statistics. Therefore, an appropriate way to verify the hypothesis is to establish statistical laws based on the observation of certain things. In this way, he arrives at the concept of sociological law as a statistical regularity. Statistical regularity matches an intelligible intended meaning.

The problem is how we say that something is "understood". In accordance with the ability to formulate statistical laws from Weber's idea, this has enabled us to predict with fair degrees of correctness. In other words, Weber attempts to define a social role in terms of the possibility of actions. Therefore, we can predict, but that explanation is not real understanding. The notion of meaning should be carefully distinguished from that of function, in its quasi-causal sense. The relations between ideas are internal relations that include species within them. This idea contrasts with

Hume's principle that there is no object and never looks beyond the ideas which we form of them. In Winch's opinion, culture is a constructed meaning.

Social relations are internal relations where people share the same meanings that are presented by both linguistic expression and non-linguistic performance. The meaning from signs where, for example, a smile means friendliness in the film Shane, while a flower means happiness in the Buddha story. The symbolic relationships perform the function of providing the satisfaction of the basic biological needs.

In Geertz's theoretical contributions it starts with his definitions and descriptions of culture. For Geertz, culture is "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about, and their attitudes toward, life" (Geertz 1973). In an alternative (and more quoted) formulation, Geertz states, "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1973).

Geertz, following Wittgenstein's stance on language, believes that culture is not something that occurs in the heads of humans; "Culture is public, because meaning is" (Geertz, 1973). Cognition is largely the same throughout humanity (Geertz, 1973), while the symbols that people use to communicate are different. Symbols are not to be studied to gain access to mental processes, but as formations of social phenomena. It is the anthropologist's job to unravel the webs of meaning and interpret them.

Culture is also not a force or causal agent in the world, but a context in which people live out their lives (Geertz, 1973). This goes back to Geertz's early distinction between social structure and culture. Culture is only the pattern of meanings embedded in symbols. Social structure is the "economic, political, and social relations among individuals and groups" (Geertz, 1973). Geertz does not dismiss the study of social structure but takes culture to be his object of study.

The concept of culture used here refers to meaning, norms and aesthetic/ritual practices in a broad sense. It coincides with the understanding of culture as

manifested in generalized patterns of communication and interpretation, in line with the thinking of Geertz (1973). Culture is 'there', as given, forcefully shaping perceptions and modes of interpretation. But it must be enacted and interpreted by social actors to retain its force. For analytical purposes culture cannot be grasped as a totality, however, it has to be broken down into patterns or pieces, what Griswold (1987). has termed cultural objects: messages in the form of utterances, picture narratives, songs, rituals, games, arguments, tools, buildings— often linked into broader patterns, such as styles, aesthetic doctrines, theological systems and scientific theories. Such carriers of signification are interpreted in the light of constitutive rules, classification systems, genres and grammar.

To sum up and generalize what Geertz has taught us: a cultural paradigm collects the scattered practices of a group, unifies them into coherent possibilities for action, and holds the resulting style up to the people concerned, who then act and relate to each other in terms of it

Heidegger and Wittgenstein, thought of human activity in terms of shared social practices. All current social practice theories of knowing, learning, and understanding take their central elements from these two philosophers (Dreyfus, 1992).

According to Tylor, culture or civilization is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and for Tylor includes any other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Asad (1990) has noted this notion of culture with its enumeration of capabilities and habits, the focus on learning, gave way in time to the idea of culture as "text". This shapes the individual body as a picture of this text through painful rituals so that society and culture are made present. For Wittgenstein this is entirely different.

Despite the studies on socialization, the question of how one comes to a sense of shared culture and one's own voice in that culture has rarely been addressed anthropologically. The surest route to understanding this concept is to understand it through the eyes of the child. The remark is the voice of the child that has been excluded from literature. Wittgenstein shows that we cannot speak of an inner understanding, nor can we say that there are some basic rules that can tell us how to interpret the other rules because children are raised up

by being judged all the time. Kripke (1982) has agreed with Wittgenstein's proposal to have a criterion of agreement as a "skeptical paradox". If everything can be made out to be in accordance with a rule, then it can also be made to conflict with it. Kripke (1982) counters him by stating that while the community would license him or her to apply the rules, one cannot apply them blindly. As with there being no "inner state" called understanding that has occurred, there are language games in our lives that license, under certain conditions, assertions that someone means from previous application.

By speaking of obeying a rule blindly it seems to resemble the way one speaks of wishes, plans, suspicion or expectations, which is an unsatisfying proposition. Ethnographic vignette shows the entanglement of the ideas of rules, customs, habits, practices constituting agreement with a particular form of life. In some examples, a male child is being socialized, taught his place in the community in terms of rules that he must learn, where the rules he is being initiated into are the rules of vengeance. It is the aesthetics of violence that makes him a man.

Wittgenstein makes a distinction between regulative rules and constitutive rules, which may give new direction to questions of how to distinguish the nature of prescriptions in ritual actions and other kinds of actions. Humphrey and Laidlaw said that what was distinctive about ritual prescriptions in general is the constitutive nature of rules that define rituals. This addressed features of ritual observations that are ironed out of final ethnographic texts. Wittgenstein questions "where is the connection effected between the sense of expression and all the rules of the game?" He used the analogy of chess to illustrate what it means for language to be governed by rules. Both have rules but rules that have no foundation. They are autonomous and they could be different. Rules of chess are devised to cover every possible situation whereas our language cannot and will not cover every conceivable circumstance. There is always a gap between the rule and its execution. In fact, a situation of completeness would make rituals like the invented languages of Wittgenstein rather than natural languages, which are never complete. The invented one is presented as a complete language while the natural languages, can only be mastered in fragments.

Clifford argued that thick ethnography is embedded as a performance. Others have spoken of the difficulty of portraying ways of life that are experiences distant from readers. If culture has capabilities and habits as members of society, then it is participation in forms of sociality that define the inner and the outer. It will allow a person to speak both within a language and outside it. Agreement in forms of life is never a matter of shared opinion. It thus requires an excess of description to capture the entanglements of customs, habits, rules, and examples. It provides the context in which we could see how we are to trace works back to the original while we do not know our way out. The anthropological quest takes us to the point at which Wittgenstein takes us on his grammatical investigation.

With the term *"language-game,"* Wittgenstein means to propose the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity of the form of life. Consequently, he views the meaning of words not as something inherent but as emergent from their use. Because language is a life form, there is a mutually constitutive relationship between language and the world. He attempts to construct a being as a seamless, indefinitely extensible web of relations with others and things in the world of our experience (Roth, 1997).

Wittgenstein argued that meaning is not best understood to be something private and personal. Rather, meaning is constituted by the public use of words (Wittgenstein, 1953). Winch extended the idea to the significance of action. Action becomes meaningful; Winch argued, when it is put into the context of the norms and expectations of the group (Winch, 1970). Clifford Geertz recognized that these new trends in philosophy could be combined with the hermeneutic tradition in a way that supported mainstream ethnographic practice. In many ways, his "interpretative" view was the culmination of the classical model of ethnography

Heidegger, the founder of the hermeneutic paradigm, rejected the traditional account of cultural activity as a search for universally valid foundations for human action and knowledge. His main work, Sein and Zeit (1927), develops a holistic epistemology according to which all meaning is context-dependent and permanently anticipated from a particular horizon, perspective or background of intelligibility. The result is a powerful critique directed against the ideal of objectivity. Gadamer shares with Heidegger the hermeneutic reflections developed in Sein und Zeit and the critique of objectivity, describing cultural activity as an endless process of "fusions of horizons." On the one hand, this is an echo of the Heideggerian holism, namely, of the thesis that all meaning depends on a particular interpretative context. On the other hand, however, this concept is an attempt to cope with the relativity of human existence and to avoid the dangers of radical relativism. In fact, through an endless, free and unpredictable process of fusions of horizons, our personal horizon is gradually expanded and deprived of its distorting prejudices in such a way that the educative process consists of this multiplication of hermeneutic experiences. Gadamer succeeds therefore in presenting a non-foundationalist and non-teleological theory of culture.

Cultural Relativism asserts that values and morality are context-dependent, rejecting universal judgments, but it risks moral indifference. In contrast, the hermeneutic approach emphasizes interpretation and meaning making within social and linguistic contexts, allowing for evolving cross-cultural understanding. While cultural relativism stresses acceptance of differences, the hermeneutic approach enables critical engagement and dialogue across cultures.

How to contextualize culture as given or culture as constructed

In practice, cultural relativism cannot overcome the boundaries of logic, nor can it override the sense of morality inherent to mankind. We instinctively know that some things are wrong, so cultural relativists attempt to tweak their philosophy to fit that need. Declaring certain actions "mostly" wrong, or "mostly" right is nothing more than making up the rules as one goes. Saying that some morals are "better," even if they are not "the best," still implies some ultimate standard that's being used to make that judgment. How do you know which cloud is higher unless you know which way "up" is? To firmly state that anything at all is always wrong is to reject relativism itself. In the end, those who insist on clinging to cultural relativism must jettison logic, because there isn't room for both. It is literally impossible for a person to rationally believe that there are no moral absolutes, or at least to live out that belief in any meaningful way.

Since this philosophy is nonsensical, there must be some fundamental absolutes of right and wrong, regardless of the opinions of any given society. Since there are disagreements among different cultures, we cannot assume that these truths are developed by one group of people. In fact, the only logical place for these concepts to originate from is something more universal, or at least more fundamental, than culture.

In Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight (1973), Geertz develops his idea of reading cultural practices as "texts." Examining the cockfight as text enables Geertz to bring out an aspect of it that might otherwise go unnoticed: " its use of emotion for cognitive ends" (Geertz, 1973). Going to cockfights is an emotional education for Balinese. It teaches and reinforces the emotions and reactions of Balinese culture in an external text. Eventually, Geertz makes his general statement: *"The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong"* (Geertz, 1973).

In the notorious " private language argument" Wittgenstein argued the following; a rule requires the possibility of making a mistake, and mistakes are possible only if there are public criteria for correct and incorrect ways of applying the rule. He concluded that " obeying a rule is practice" (Wittgenstein, 1953). Insofar as the meaningful use of words requires adhering to the rule for their use, the meaningfulness of words depends on their public use.

Here, we can see from their works that they relate to other philosophers. In theory of practice, both Wittgenstein and Heidegger talk about practice in a methodological level that is in terms of mediating between meaning and context. Heidegger's theory is the relationship between act and meaning, and Wittgenstein's idea is meaning in use

For Heidegger, an act is always in present time. An axe has no meaning when it is put aside or left there. An axe is known when it ready-to-hand. It can have many possibilities. It becomes a tool for cutting wood or becomes a weapon to cut someone. The meaning of the axe is ongoing (Soffer, 1999). A hammering carpenter no more represents the hammer as it moves through specific coordination in space, than this writer represents the keyboard while writing this sentence. The hammer and keyboard are ready-to-hand or, in other words, are transparent, so that users no longer notice them (Roth, 1997). Heidegger's fundamental category of meaning is located within life itself. Life itself becomes the intelligible context within which the meaning of any experience is constituted, and any meaning is relativized to a life context wherein it acquires force. Therefore, his idea is about every experience. Subsequently, other people have drawn on his idea and use new words, such as " practice" or "everyday practice" (Howarth, 2004).

Ready-to-hand is inherently intersubjective; and since a parallel argument applies to the recontextualized world of present-to-hand objects, it entails that Dasein's inherently worldly being is essentially social. Our world is both mine and yours; intersubjectivity is not the denial of subjectivity but its further specification. The two issues are ontologically inseparable; to determine the one is to determine the other. As he recommends that everyone is the other and no-one is himself, in "Being-among-one-another". Heidegger claims that the relationship between a person's inner life and the vocabulary available to them is an intimate one. *First*, the context might make it very difficult or impossible to live in the way to which one has committed oneself. *Second*, someone who wishes to take on a certain social role may lack the necessary talents, or never be offered the necessary educational opportunities, or find themself in a state-of-mind in which a presented opportunity no longer possesses the attractions it once seemed to have. And *third*, the range of existential possibilities upon which someone can project is determined by their social context. This shows that understanding always has only a relative autonomy; our projective capacities are as conditioned as our affective states. Dasein always faces definite possibilities because it is always situated. No situation reduces the available possibilities to one, but unless a situation excluded many possibilities altogether, it would not be a situation at all. Being is situated in condition or context. State-of-mind is a process of thinking that leads to understanding the meaning (Mulhall, 1996). For Heidegger, meaning is constructed on the act or meaning and cannot be separated from the act. We will know the meaning when we are part of the act. An act is not an idea; it is something we do or are doing. Acts create meaning.

Likewise, Wittgenstein rejects idealists, particularly Kant and Hegel who have a theory that our

understanding is through ideas or mental processes. Since Husserl thinks that meaning is related to actors or actor's meaning, then Wittgenstein proposes that we can understand in use not in grammar (language). Understanding language means that we know how to use it, not looking for hidden logic or a theory of usage. For Wittgenstein, practice always links to the idea of space or the space of language meaning.

But can't the meaning of a word that I understand fit the sense of a sentence that I understand? Or the meaning of one word fit the meaning of another? — Of course, if the meaning is the use we make of the word, it makes no sense to speak of such 'fitting.' But we understand the meaning of a word when we hear or say it; we grasp it in a flash, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the 'use' which is extended in time!" (Wittgenstein, 1953).

Wittgenstein and Heidegger saw the human condition as fundamentally linguistic and social: "What the younger Heidegger tells us about the sociohistorical situation of Dasein is just what the older Wittgenstein tells us about situation in regard to language – that when we try to be transcended by it by turning metaphysical, we become self-deceptive, inauthentic" (Rorty, 1991). This inescapability from being-in-the-world results in an existence in which we cannot predict the outcome of human activity in advance, which leads to an understanding of cultural context as situated and emergent rather than as a deterministic process.

Language plays a central role in the work of both philosophers: "Language is the house of being. In its home man dwells", and, "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'-" (Heidegger, 1978; Wittgenstein 1958). With the term "language-game", Wittgenstein meant to put forward the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity or form of life. Consequently, he viewed the meaning of words not as something inherent but as emergent from their use. Because language is a life form, there is a mutually constitutive relationship between language and the world: What looks as if it had to exist, is part of the language" (Wittgenstein, 1958). Heidegger, too, regards the world of experience and language as coemerging. His systematic and deliberate blurring of the distinction between language, humans, and being corresponds to Wittgenstein's blurring between language and its object:

"To describe a fact, or description of a fact is also a misleading expression for the assertion stating that the fact obtains, since it sounds like: 'describing the animal that I saw'" (Wittgenstein, 1993). That is to say, speaking, thinking, and acting are inextricably bound up with one another.

Pierre Bourdieu is without a doubt one of the main figures in the sociological study of culture today. Yet, for a theorist so central to the subject matter of cultural studies, there is no coherent account of Bourdieu's stance in relation to the 'concept of culture' among current commentators. More importantly, in the sister-discipline of anthropology, Bourdieu is thought of as a central figure precisely because he helped move contemporary anthropological theory away from the centrality of the culture concept. Some statements appear to suggest that Bourdieu held on to an unusually extensive (and possibly incoherent) set of definitions of culture concept while other analysts suggest that Bourdieu had a specific notion of what culture was. Zeuner (2003) suggests that,

Bourdieu understood culture to be everything which is intuitively understood, self-evident and unspoken, and which it is difficult to objectify. It is everything one has learnt at one's mother's knee, in the pre-verbal stage. It cannot be explicitly formulated. He also emphasized the need to regress culture to the anthropological concept of culture. Finally, we [find] the idea of a common set of master patterns, which are presented in educational works and to some extent in anthropological works. Bourdieu spoke of these oppositions as cognitive structures, as basic systems for understanding, or as classificatory systems. Bourdieu considered such a set of common patterns a social mythology. We thus see three key concepts to illuminate Bourdieu's perception of culture and these are: the intuitively understood, the anthropological and the mythological. At the same time, Bourdieu recognized that culture can be objectified. It can exist as works, books, articles, theories, concepts, etc.

Table 1 Comparative overview of cultural relativism and hermeneutic understanding

Dimension	Cultural relativism (Geertz, Winch)	Hermeneutics (Heidegger, Wittgenstein)
Key Thinkers	Peter Winch, Clifford Geertz	Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein
View of Culture	Culture is a context-dependent system of meanings shaped by social rules and internal logic (Winch, 1958; Geertz, 1973).	Culture is understood through language-in-use and forms of life. Meaning emerges from shared practices, not fixed definitions (Wittgenstein, 1953; Heidegger, 1962).
Understanding Human Action	Actions are intelligible within the internal rules of a culture. Interpretation must be culturally grounded (Winch, 1958).	Understanding arises from being with others and engaging in shared social practices (Heidegger, 1962; Wittgenstein, 1953).
Role of Language	Language reflects culturally embedded meanings and serves as a medium for transmitting norms (Geertz, 1973).	Language is constitutive of meaning; it functions through context-specific 'language-games' (Wittgenstein, 1953).
Conception of Truth	Truth is relative to cultural frameworks; there is no universal standpoint (Geertz, 1973).	Truth emerges from dialogical interaction and interpretive participation (Heidegger, 1962).
Strengths	Promotes cultural sensitivity and challenges ethnocentrism.	Enables deeper insight into meaning, rooted in lived experience and language.
Limitations	Risk of excessive relativism; difficult to criticize cultural practices.	Abstract and difficult to operate in empirical research.

Source: This table is a conceptual synthesis by the author, based on interpretations of key thinkers including Geertz (1973), Winch (1970), Heidegger (1927), and Wittgenstein (1953).

Before proceeding with the case studies, the author finds it helpful to pause and lay out the conceptual contrast between cultural relativism and hermeneutic thinking. The following table (Table 1) highlights their key differences, not merely as abstract theories, but as frameworks through which we can make sense of how culture operates in real-world contexts.

Professor Yos Santasombat's work, particularly Power, Space, and Ethnic Identity: Cultural Politics in the Thai Nation-State (Santasombat, 2001), aligns significantly with the discourse on contextualizing culture as constructed rather than given. By meticulously dissecting the formation of ethnic identities within Thailand, he illustrates how cultural constructs are not static, inherent traits but are actively shaped by historical, political, and social forces. This perspective directly challenges the notion of cultural

relativism's ability to fully account for moral absolutes. Instead, Santasombat's analysis echoes Geertz's approach to interpreting cultural practices as "texts" and resonates with Wittgenstein and Heidegger's emphasis on meaning emerging from practice and social context. He demonstrates how the Thai state, through its policies and spatial control, actively constructs and manipulates cultural narratives, thereby highlighting the dynamic and politically charged nature of cultural formation, a concept that Bourdieu further elaborates through his analysis of culture as both embodied and objectified.

Another compelling example of how "culture" may appear as given but is in fact constructed can be found in Lueangaramsri's (2023) study The Womb of the Nation. This work reveals how Thai state discourse has produced a normative understanding of womanhood and motherhood, constructing the "Thai mother" not

merely as a biological role but as a symbol of national morality and economic value. Through policies, medical authority, and nationalist ideology, the female body—especially the reproductive body—is made to carry the meaning of the "nation." Much like the manner in which the longboat festival in Nan is framed as an ancient tradition, while being shaped by tourism and local politics, Lueangaramsri's analysis shows that even deeply embodied cultural roles are not natural givens but carefully contextualized and regulated constructions.

In the author's dissertation and subsequent publications (Kanatham, 2021; 2023), the author investigates how the longboat racing festival in Nan Province functions as a dynamic cultural formation rather than a static tradition. The author's research demonstrates that cultural meaning is not inherently given, but is continually negotiated among social actors, including the state, local elites, community members, and the private sector. Through critical ethnography and historical analysis, the author shows that what appears as "tradition" is often constructed in specific socio-political contexts—for example, as a tool of tourism promotion, a symbol of national heritage, or a site of contestation over local identity. This approach aligns with the theoretical framework that culture should be understood as constructed through social practice, not merely inherited or given. The author's work exemplifies how to contextualize culture by unpacking its embeddedness in structures of power, spatial transformation, and symbolic negotiation.

The author's work on Nan's longboat tradition, alongside Santasombat's study on ethnic identity and Lueangaramsri's analysis of reproductive politics, demonstrates that cultural meaning is constructed rather than given. These cases reflect how ethnic identity, gender roles, and local rituals are shaped by political and institutional forces. Understanding culture, in this sense, requires attention to the role of power and practice, not just cultural relativism.

Understanding culture as "given" or "constructed" isn't merely a theoretical distinction. From the author's reading — and particularly in reflecting on field experiences — the author has come to see that meaning rarely arrives fully formed. Cultural relativism offers a useful framework, yet it falters when confronted with deep-seated moral intuitions that seem to transcend context. Thinkers like Geertz, Wittgenstein, Heidegger,

and Winch offer something more textured; an account of culture that is enacted, lived, and interpreted through shared practice. Additionally, for scholars like Bourdieu, culture remains simultaneously embodied and structured by power. In all of this, what stands out is not the fixed definition of culture, but its shifting, situated negotiation.

Conclusion

This article began by questioning whether culture is something we receive 'as given' or something we construct through practice. What may seem like a conceptual tension reveals itself, in lived experience, as an ongoing negotiation. Culture rarely presents itself in a pure form. It is constantly shaped and reshaped by actors who live within its lifeworld; through memory, movement, and contestation. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Winch, Geertz, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger, the author has argued that the meaning of culture is never fixed, but always unfolding, emerging through use, action, and embedded social relations.

Winch's account reminds us that meaning is made intelligible from within and that cultural forms "make sense" only within the internal logic of a shared form of life. Yet this very logic is never immune from reinterpretation. Geertz's notion of culture as text opens a way to reading practice as layered, as performed, as emotionally charged. Wittgenstein further complicates any static view of meaning by insisting that meaning arises in us, not behind words, but in the way we use them. Heidegger's notion reminds us that understanding happens not in the mind alone, but in our being-in-the-world-with-others, in time, in space, in uncertainty. Together, these thinkers do not resolve the tension between culture-as-given and culture-as-constructed; instead, they push us to dwell within that tension, to see it as productive.

The author's fieldwork in Nan Province gives texture to these ideas. The longboat racing festival, often framed as "tradition", is in fact continually negotiated among state actors, local leaders, community members, and market forces. What appears stable is often a result of layered adaptation, re-signification, and even resistance. Culture is not just preserved; it is activated. To contextualize culture, then, is not to choose between structure and agency, or between given and constructed. It is to see how meaning is lived; how it moves through

practice, how it is entangled with power, and how it opens possibilities for being and becoming. This is not a closure, but a gesture toward ongoing interpretation.

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