

Ulrike Notarp

Cultural Differences in Concepts of Life and Partnership

A Comparative Study
on Lifestyles in Europe

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1. Introduction

The central question of the present study revolves around the existence of the phenomenon “culture.” Can we safely assume that a phenomenon, which we denominate with the term “culture,” exists? Or is there nothing in our world that should carry that name? Can we understand the world as a stratification structure – with physical, biological and social systems that build on one another? And does the social system include phenomena, which can be labeled as “cultural” and go beyond the basic characteristics of the social system?

The present study aims to answer these questions by observing the cultural specifics of social communities that only become apparent in comparison with other communities. The observation of cultural specifics led to my interest in searching for a systematic description of culture, and to the development a *model of cultures* that enables us to fully grasp the phenomenon “culture.”

The starting point of the present study is the assumption, that social groups develop certain characteristics in different areas of social life that then distinguish them from other groups. These characteristics can be empirically proven and summarized under the concept of “culture.”

Considering the multitude of different concepts and definitions of the term culture (see Baumhauer 1982, Fleischer 2001, 2003, Inglehart, Welzel 2007, Kuße 2012), I refer to a concept of culture that considers the particularities of thinking, feeling, and (communicative) acting of a given social group, which distinguish them from another group, and thus allows for a pertinent description and explanation. In line with *dimensional analysis* in Comparative Cultural Studies, I understand “culture” to be value-based (see also Vinken, Soeters, Ester 2004, Inglehart 1989, 1990, Inglehart, Welzel 2007, Javidan, House 2002, Triandis 2004,

Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner 1994). I posit that all decisions made in the social sphere are based on values. Decisions made in the private and the public sphere (in politics, in economics, in court, etc.) are based on the core values and beliefs of a given society. *Cultural values* are key elements in (guiding) culture, or in a culture's *worldview*. Cultural values are verbally mediated communicative objects that form the basis of our patterns of thinking, feeling and acting. They control a culture's communication, and form the general perspective and characteristics of a culture.

In line with Michael Fleischer's Constructivist Culture Theory (2001, 2003, 2006), I understand *culture* to be a *sign-based phenomenon*, an *operational and organizational mode of the social world* that is based on communication. We have to differentiate the *general socio-cultural system* from its very concrete manifestation, also called *second world* (Fleischer 2003, p. 18). A concrete social community, such as the Czech, Polish or German community, establishes a *second, sign-based world* by using linguistic signs and communication, which is based on the first world (the reality). In communication, a community establishes the *second world* according to their communicative and cultural criteria, and in line with the conditions of the first world. The *second world* helps to guide its members through their reality (both in the first and in second world) by organizing and controlling their actions and their communication.

“Culture is (...) the world of the signs. (...) it covers all phenomena and affects all aspects that are based on signs. Whenever signs and therefore meaning (...) occur, whenever discourses are generated and worldviews function, we are dealing with (...) culture.” (translated¹ from Fleischer 2003, p. 31)

Further, I consider culture to have an object-like character. All elements of culture (values, norms, standards) not only have a sign-based character but also always have an object-like character. They refer to characteristics and features of individuals and social communities, they become visible in their actions, and they unfold in the natural and in the social world (in the first world).

This study focuses on Western and Eastern Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland. This region in Central Europe is the point of intersection between West and East. Differences in core values and basic attitudes in Western and Central Europe come to light when comparing these four cultures.

1 All citations are translated by Kristina Förster.

Even though there is a multitude of studies comparing value systems in Western and Eastern European countries (see for example Andorka 1997, Gerhards, Hölscher 2006, 2005, 2003, Klingemann, Fuchs 2006, Inglehart 2006, Jacobs 2001, Arts, Hagenaars, Halman, Moors 2003, Krawietz 2012), many questions regarding cultural specifics and the ensuing problematics, e.g. in regard to immigration, remain unanswered.

This problem manifests itself most blatantly when it comes to European integration. The crises of the European Union that began in 2008/2009 and was reignited with the refugee crises in 2014/2015, revealed fundamental structural shortcomings of the “House of Europe,” which not only pertain to the economic difficulties of a few member states but rather point us to fundamental differences in value systems.

The initial excitement gave way to disillusionment, or even skepticism and disapproval, especially among the “young” member states of the union. In Central and Eastern European member states, the general preconception prevails that their voices, and the voices of their representatives, remain unheard or are not respected, and that they are expected to adapt to European – meaning German – value systems. There is a general mistrust against all decisions made in Brussels, and economic competition with other member states is understood to be a threat rather than an advantage. In their disappointment, many have turned away from the European concept and consider themselves to be foremost Poles, Estonians, Greeks or Slovaks rather than Europeans. Here, one of the most fundamental shortcomings of the process of unification comes to light: a lack of equal social and cultural integration based on mutual trust and respect that could lead to the dissolution of national and cultural boundaries.

Even though it is commonly known that shared economic interests are not enough for the unification of the European Union, and that the union can only prevail if there is deeper integration on a cultural and social level, it remains unclear how such integration can be achieved. The present study addresses this issue by explaining the existence and the function of culture in general and that of Western and Eastern Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland in particular.

The content analysis of personal advertisements placed in the print media in Western and Eastern Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic in 2006 and 2007 provides the empirical base of this study. The analysis of personal advertisement allows for the reconstruction of specific concepts of life and partnership in each culture and can help us to understand the predominant mindset of its members (Notarp 2013, p. 124). Fur-

thermore, it allows for the reconstruction of a specific set of lifestyles for each culture considered here.

The comparative study of material derived from several, different cultures not only enables us to compare the cultures; it is also the premise for our *perception* of cultural characteristics. The reconstruction of concepts of life, partnership and lifestyle in the four cultural spheres considered is the precondition for the goal of this study: To *explain* cultural characteristics, and the reason behind their specific differences. I want to find reasons which draw light on why the concepts of life and partnership in the four cultural areas differ. I posit that a society's predominant attitude in different areas of life, and thus, the concepts of life reconstructed in this study, express the value preferences of that society. The question at the core of this study is thus why a society has a particular set of values.

A thorough explanation of the phenomenon "culture" needs to address the *functions* of culture. We have to understand the function of culture in and for a social community, and how that culture developed historically. Thus, I do not only consider particular specifics of a single culture, but also the structural similarities of cultures in general. The structural commonalities present culture as an *operational and organizational mechanism*, which exist in all social communities (in Spain, in Finland, in China in the 19th century) and organizes our coexistence in communication. The present study thus aims not only to describe cultural characteristics but also to explain them with the help of general models.

According to Aristotle (2003, Book Five, p. 211, 1876), we can grasp the world in four different ways, and we have to explain all four primal causes if we want to describe and explain an object. The *causa materialis* describes the material of an object. The *causa efficiens* describes the *energy*, or *driving force*, the agent behind a phenomenon. The *causa formalis* describes the *form*, the *pattern* or *blueprint* of an object. The *causa finalis* describes the *aim*, *goal* or *function* of an object. Rupert Riedl explains Aristotle's four primal causes with the construction of a house:

"The construction of a house (...) requires first force, sweat, money or power, *causa efficiens*, second suitable material, *causa materialis*, third a plan that specifies the positioning of all materials, (...) a shape-forming selection principle, *causa formalis*, and fourth, an intention, a goal or program that calls for the construction, *causa finalis*. None of the four conditions is dispensable." (Translated from Riedl 2000, p. 163.)

Thus, the present study wants to develop a *general model of socio-cultural systems* on the basis of empirical data taken from personal advertisements, by alternating perception and gradual explanation of phenomena in a spiral process of increasing knowledge. Such a model designates and describes

- a) the *material* of socio-cultural systems (such as cultural values, norms, basic attitudes)
- b) the specific *form*, or socio-cultural pattern (such as ideals, gender roles, concepts of life and partnership, lifestyles)
- c) the *cause* behind the specific shape of socio-cultural systems
- d) the *function* of culture in general, and the mechanism behind its development.

After the analysis of *material* (a) and *form* (b) of the four cultural areas considered here, and the description of concepts of life, partnership and lifestyle, I analyze the *cause* (c) for the specific shape of a culture's characteristics. I hope to find causes that can explain the particular value set in each culture considered here.

In empirical cultural studies, Ronald Inglehart most notably ties a culture's value system to the standard of living in that society. Inglehart posits that a culture's fundamental values depend on the given level of prosperity. He further assumes that the characteristics of a value system are subject to the historic, cultural and philosophical heritage, and to the constitutional past of a society (Inglehart 1989, 1990, Inglehart, Halman, Welzel 2004, Inglehart, Oysermann 2004, Inglehart, Welzel 2007).

Building upon Inglehart's hypothesis, and hoping to find an answer to the question regarding the reason behind specific value systems in Eastern and Western Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland, I consider the level of prosperity in all four countries and interrelate it with the value systems. This allows for careful consideration of the correlation between the *material status quo* and the cultural *awareness* (the value system) of a society, already asserted by Karl Marx. It further allows for a close look at the interdependence of a society's *second world* – their culture – and their first world, their reality.

Further, I consider the importance of the historic-philosophic and the national heritage – in this case, especially the democratic or communistic past – for the formation of value systems in the four societies considered here. Can they serve as *one* possible explanation for the specific value systems of each culture? I present important economic, political and social factors of the post-war development in Western and Eastern Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland, and then correlate these factors with

the respective value systems, in order to present the current formation of a culture inter alia as the final product of its historic development.

The examination of value systems in Eastern and Western Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland – insofar as they are represented in the personal advertisements – and their aggregation in *Concepts of Life and Lifestyles*, does not only offer insights into the particularities of these concepts but also forms the basis for their explanation. Examination and description of an object always precede the object's explanation (Riedl 2000, Poser 2001). The description of value systems is the premise for their explanation. The present study considers the value systems both from the bottom up – starting with the society's material conditions – and from the top down – starting with the society's historic-philosophic traditions, its constitution. A culture's values and fundamental attitudes comply with the possibilities and the conditions of the lower system, and at the same time correspond to the higher system – the historical-philosophical world-view of the culture (Riedl 2000, see also Notarp 2013, p. 124).

Given that every human society always leads to the formation of culture, we have to consider the *function* of culture (d). What makes culture necessary for the continued existence of a society? This question leads to the structural similarities between the four cultural spheres considered here. I hope to find the reason for the existence of the phenomenon *culture* in these structural commonalities. I posit that *culture* and *worldview* take on important guiding- and control functions – independent of their specific shape. They level our communication, and, at the same time, come to existence through communication, and they organize a community's social life. I further posit that the particular shape of a (single) culture is the product of adaptation to internal and external conditions and opportunities of the respective society.

In order to explain the specific shape of a culture (its value system, its world view) I will take an object-theoretical approach. In order to explain the existence and the function of the general guiding and organizing modus “culture” I will take a more theoretical, abstract approach. We can explain the reason behind the existence of the phenomenon *culture* – as organizing modus – and its function when we consider structural and functional commonalities of different cultures, when we see these commonalities with regard to the phenomenon *culture* itself (as subject in science), and when we make use of theoretical approaches that allow us to consider single cultures from a general point of view.

Taken as a whole, the present study builds on analytic philosophy and modern empiricism (Stegmüller 1978, Vol. I, Chapter X; Notarp 2006,

Finke 1982, Kuhn 1993). According to modern empiricism, a scientific explanation is only valid “when it has empirical content, meaning that it can be validated in reality. But scientific theory (...) also relies on abstract principles and theories that we cannot observe empirically. Scientific hypotheses cannot be verified directly – at least not in their entirety – and we have to find ways with which we can test them” (Notarp 2006, p. 41). To infer general theory directly from empirical observation is thus impossible. The only way out is a gradual rapprochement of empirical observation and explanatory theory in a multistage process of increasing or decreasing abstraction (Poser 2001, p. 101). With increasing abstraction, the observation of an object has to be conceptualized in language. The description becomes more and more general and finally turns into theory. The result of such a process of abstraction is a number of statements that based on empiric observation finally turned into theory. These statements claim to describe and explain real phenomena according to the current state of research. At the same time, existing theories can only be verified in a process of decreasing theoreticity. This process, however, is often only partially possible; we can only verify parts of the hypotheses and not the entire theory (Stegmüller 1978, Vol. I, Chapter IX, p. 409, Poser 2001, p. 101, Notarp 2006, p. 52).

In order to bridge the distance between empirical observation (of the personal advertisement) and the general model of culture in the present study, I turn to a multistage process of convergence to provide the missing link between the empiric and the theoretic approach to culture.

To find this missing link is one of the central objectives of the present study. I want to connect empirical research of culture (see Inglehart 1989, 1990, Inglehart, Welzel 2007, Hofstede 2001, 2005, Gerhards, Hölscher 2006, Klingemann et al. 2006, Arts et al. 2003, Vinken et al. 2004, Kra-wietz 2012) to the explanation of culture as a *basic organizational mode of the social world* based on general theory (Fleischer 2006, 2003, 2001, Dux 2011, 2008, 1997, 1994, 1994a, 1982, Riedl 2000, 1990, 1984, 1984a). The objective of the present study is to connect empirical and theoretical approaches to the study of culture by making both fields of research productive for each other.

The mutual dismissal and indifference of theoretical deductive research on one hand, and empirical inductive research in cultural studies on the other hand, comes with disadvantages for both sides. Abstract, theoretical models that cannot be validated, run the risk of being written off as aesthetical constructs without any practical relevance. Empirical studies that only describe and interpret phenomena and that cannot be

framed in a larger theoretical framework, limit their epistemological value to the respective object they describe and add little or nothing to scientific progress. If we could bridge the divide between empirical and theoretical research, both directions of research could find their corrective and their justification in the other.

Given that the present study aims to connect empirical and theoretical findings, I have to provide theoretical models of culture that are accessible for empirical research, meaning that can be validated in reality. Further, the theoretical background has to be appropriate for the object of study in that there have to be points of intersection that help to organize the findings and to explain them in a larger context. Finally, the theoretical background has to be up to date in order to reflect present knowledge in cultural studies (Poser 2001, Notarp 2006).

To begin with, I need a *realistic theory of culture*, based on the assumption that we can gain real knowledge about culture. I need a theory that starts with the empiric existence of a culture that developed under certain circumstances, that has a systemic connection, and that has a specific impact and function. Such a theory is based on systemic and procedural logic. Second, I have to consider culture as a sign-based phenomenon, given that culture is based on linguistic signs, and that its operational mode is communication. Finally, I have to keep in mind that culture as a socio-cultural system is always subject to evolution, and in the specific form of a particular culture, subject to the historic change. Historico-genetic theory of Culture (Dux 1982, 1994a, 2008, 2011, Meinefeld 1995), Constructivist Culture Theory (Fleischer 1996, 1997, 2001, 2003) and Evolutionary systems theory (Vollmer 1984, 1990, Riedl 1984, 2000) are theories that answer to all the above-mentioned requirements. They form the theoretical framework for the present study.

The empirical section consists of content analysis of the personal advertisements. My interpretation of the data is based on Ronald Inglehart's object-theoretical approach (Inglehart 1990, Inglehart, Welzel 2007). Inglehart's approach starts with empirical observation, facilitates the description and interpretation of data and works as a mediator between empirical and theoretical research. His approach allows for predications that are general enough to be part of a general theory.

I will then consider my findings at the level of the individual culture deductively, from a general systems- and cultural theory perspective, as well as from a historic-genetic perspective. The empirical results thus turn into an *object* of study on a general, systematic level. This allows me to come to the core of structural commonalities in all four cultural

spheres considered here. The theoretical model of socio-cultural systems will thus be verified by the results of my empirical analysis. At the same time, the empirical results will be explained with the theoretical model of socio-cultural systems laid out in the theoretic chapter of the present study. Inductive and deductive methods will jointly form a spiral of increasing knowledge, and empiricism and theory will converge.

Contrary to comparative, empiric cultural studies, the present study is not based on survey data² (see for example Inglehart, Welzel 2007, Gerhards, Hölscher 2006, Klingemann et al. 2006, Arts et al. 2003, Vinken et al. 2004, Esmer, Pettersson 2007). I posit that the core values and basic attitudes can be found in actions, in communication, and in *texts* of the members of a culture, and that cultural characteristics captured in writing can be analyzed more precisely than when the analysis is based on survey data.

The content analysis of print media is a novelty in comparative cultural studies. My material and methods not only allow the consideration of the *quantitative* dimension of a culture's value system that research based on survey data is usually restricted to but they also enable us to see the *qualitative*, content-based dimension of value patterns and larger cultural structures. My data gives insight into the prevalence and content of value systems in all four cultural areas considered here.

² World Values Surveys: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>.
European Values Surveys: <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu>.

2. Theoretical Framework

The fundamental concern of this study is to close the gap between empirical cultural studies and their concentration on singular cultures on the one hand, and theoretical cultural studies and their goal to formulate general models explaining culture on the other hand. The body of research that forms the foundation of this study has been chosen accordingly.

This study takes both an inductive and a deductive approach and alternates between internal and external points of view since both offer different and specific insights into cultural systems. The empiric, inductive, internal perspective allows for a description of particular cultural characteristics, which builds upon Inglehart's research and Dux's Historico-genetic theory.

The *Historico-genetic theory of Culture* (Dux 1982, 1994, 1994a, 1997, 2008, 2011, Holz, Wenzel 2003, Meinefeld 1995) stands in the tradition of the systemic and processual logic of cognition. Dux theory describes the beginning, the existence, and the development of socio-cultural systems in consideration of the conditions and possibilities that form each cultural system. Thus, Dux theory offers a general framework for Inglehart's approach. The internal descriptive perspective or *thought of the priority of nature* opposes a mode of *thought that proceeds from the priority of an absolute mind*. The internal perspective allows us to describe distinct cultures in detail, and to consider the economic and historic reasons behind certain cultural structures. The current culture is thus seen as the final product of a historic development, which is subject to certain conditions (Dux 2008, p. 68, 2011, p. 55).

Evolutionary Epistemology (hereafter EE) (Volmer 1984, 1990, Riedl 1984, 1984a, 2000) assumes that there are two ways to gain knowledge: the method of perception, of induction, and the method of explanation,

of deduction. They are two sides of the same coin of knowledge (Riedl 2000, p. 7). One is based on observation and experience, and the other is based on theoretical expectations, examination and modification but they depend on each other and can only jointly lead to knowledge. The present study makes use of both methods.

Evolutionary Epistemology or Systems Theory looks at (living) systems and their evolution in general. The present study will apply Riedl's Evolutionary systems theory (1984, 1984a, 2000) to the area of "culture." In combination with Fleischer's constructivist theory of culture (2001, 2003), I develop a general model of socio-cultural systems that will serve as a structural framework, and that I assume to be the base of modern cultures in general.

Constructivist cultural theory focuses on the symbolic and constructive character of culture and describes the cultural system explicitly from an external perspective, as a cognitive, sign-based construct. Fleischer posits that the relevant mode of organization for a cultural system is communication (2003, p. 22). Constructivist cultural theory allows us to describe culture as a system that divides into subsystems with different elements and control mechanisms, most importantly *worldview* and *discourse*. The *cultural values* – that are central to this study – can be integrated in this concept and their significance and function in the socio-cultural system can be ascertained. However, Constructivist cultural theory is limited to explaining the communicative part of a cultural system. Communication is explained through communication. External factors, such as material conditions or historic changes cannot be taken into account to explain the specific shape of a culture. In other words, Constructivist cultural theory cannot connect the cultural system – built upon signs and communication – to the relevant non-symbolic systemic (spatial) and historic (temporal) environment.

Thus, Constructivist cultural theory faces a fundamental problem that Holger Kuße (2012) addresses in his book *Kulturwissenschaftliche Linguistik (Cultural Linguistics)*. Kuße describes the problematic relationship between language and culture and asks if culture can be a purely symbolic phenomenon, if language is a fundamental part of culture, and if culture is always reflected and realized in language (Kuße 2012, p. 13). While sociologic, comparative cultural studies (Inglehart, Welzel 2007, Dux 2008, Hofstede, Hofstede 2005, Parsons 2003) do not pay much attention to the linguistic-symbolic character of cultures, concentrate on content, and presume that language (in communication) is the vehicle for culture, without putting emphasis on language itself, semiotic (Eco