

Culture as Patterns:

An Alternative Approach to the Problem of Reification

Glenn Adams

University of California, Irvine

Hazel Rose Markus

Stanford University

Abstract

To challenge the treatment of culture and self as reified entities, Hermans proposes a model of both culture and self as a multiplicity of dialogical positions. We question whether this model fully responds to his challenge. First, the notion of positioning itself appears to reify culture by treating flowing patterns as fixed locations. Second, the notion of dialogue appears to neglect the possibility of automatic influence from implicit cultural patterns. This implies a core, universal self whose functioning is insensitive to cultural variation. We suggest an alternative approach to the problem of reification: to conceive of culture, not as group, but as patterns. Corresponding to this shift, we propose a distinction between the negotiation of cultural identity and the cultural grounding of self. As a model of identity negotiation, Hermans' dialogical self makes several important contributions. It emphasizes the multiplicity of identity, highlights the agency of the self as a constructor of identity, and suggests the importance of psychology—and the study of self, in particular—for the study of culture.

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Hermans challenges the conception of culture and self as core, essential entities in favor of a more dynamic conception as "a multiplicity of positions along which dialogical relationships can develop" (p. 3). More generally, Hermans and colleagues (e.g., Hermans & Kempen, 1998) hope to contribute to a conception of culture that is less stereotypical, monolithic, or reifying than the conception that typically prevails in the discipline of psychology. These are worthwhile objectives, and this is a significant essay if it serves no other purpose than raising awareness of the extent to which the treatment of culture in psychology reflects and fosters reification. However, it is not clear whether the dialogical self meets the objective of a non-reifying account of culture and self. Regarding the former, a treatment of culture as positions may itself entail the reification of dynamic, flowing patterns into static, fixed entities. Regarding the latter, the metaphor of dialogue restricts cultural influence to knowable, objectified, "me" aspects of the Jamesian self and appears to neglect or understate the possibility of cultural influence on knowing, subjective, "I" aspects. This implies an essential, core self—whether unitary and continuous or multiple and discontinuous— that is insensitive to cultural variation.

These observations do not constitute serious objections if the purpose of the dialogical-self framework is to model how people negotiate relatively explicit, cultural identities. In that case, it is likely that people construct an experience of both self and culture that is more coherent, continuous, reified, or thing-like than is true in fact. These observations are more serious if the purpose of the framework is to elaborate a dynamic, non-reifying account of culture and self. In that case, a promising alternative might be to abandon the conception of

culture as group entity that underlies Hermans' framework (and prevails in the field of psychology) in favor of a less reifying conception of culture as patterns.

Reifying culture: Turning names into things

Hermans refers frequently to a 1998 article in which he and Kempen discuss problems associated with the reification of culture: "People turn names into things and endow nations, societies, and cultures with the qualities of internally homogenous and externally distinctive objects" (p. 1113). They join Wolf (1982) in wondering, "Why do people persist in turning dynamic, interconnected phenomena into static, separated things?" (Hermans & Kempen, 1998, p. 1113). They then link this tendency toward reification to the "perilous problem of cultural dichotomies": the common practice—at least in psychology—of investigating cultural differences as dichotomous distinctions.

This discussion parallels a similar concern with the reification of culture in other social science disciplines (cf. Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1992; Meyer & Geschiere, 1999; Said, 1977). For example, in their introduction to a volume on "globalization and identity", Meyer & Geschiere (1999) note "a need to 'liquidate' culture, that is, to exchange a static, homogenizing concept of culture in favour of more open, fluid notions" (p. 3). Later in the same paragraph, they add that success in this endeavor

is only possible if we leave behind the view—propagated by anthropology, but internalized by social scientists in general and by the people concerned—of the world as a conglomerate of separate and internally homogenous cultures, each with its own essence, so that intercultural contacts are understood in terms of loss of authenticity. (p. 4, emphasis in original)

Another example of the concern with reification is what Appadurai (1996) refers to as "the mutually constitutive relationship between anthropology and locality" (p. 178). Although most anthropological work considers neatly bounded societies, "tribes," "cultures," or communities, these objects of study do not necessarily occur naturally. Instead, they are, to some extent, ethnographic constructions: dynamic, flowing, societal patterns turned by ethnographic description into static, clearly bounded, concrete things. In some cases, this reification takes the form of "construction of the other": the process by which the object of study is presented as a homogenous outgroup, defined mainly by its difference from the observer's ingroup (Said, 1977). In other cases, this reification takes the form of "the invention of tradition": the tendency of ethnographic description to freeze flowing, behavioral patterns into timeless, defining, group characteristics. In extreme (but not unusual) cases, this reification takes the form of outright identity-creation: the construction of cultural categories that did not previously exist as such (Appiah, 1992; Mudimbe, 1988).

The point here is that the reification of culture cannot be solely a function of dichotomous comparison because the problem also arises in ethnographic studies of a single society. Rather than a product of comparison, the reification of culture—the tendency to turn names into things—may be inherent in the act of naming (Appadurai, 1996).¹ That is, by naming or describing an observed pattern as "American" or "Dutch", one takes something that was dynamic and flowing and renders it—at least for a moment—static and fixed. One proposes a baseline or implicit standard against which deviations or innovations appear "un-American" or "not Dutch". Those individuals who already do not fit the modal pattern or who would produce innovation get marginalized, labeled as "bad" members, and have less influence over the

meaning and direction of ethnic categories. Thus, the act of naming itself contributes to homogenization and cultural conservatism (Appiah, 1992; Said, 1977).

Hermans' concept of positioning seems to have similar consequences. The notion of positioning is based on the idea that selves and "cultures" can be represented or "fixed" as locations in space. Yet, as Hermans notes, a conception of culture as spatially localized tends to freeze dynamic, interconnected patterns into static, separated things. Ironically, then, Hermans' dialogical-self framework is not free from reification of culture; instead reification, in the form of "positioning", may be a central feature.

From Entity to Patterns: A Less Reifying Conception of Culture

Rather than a "perilous problem of cultural dichotomies" (Hermans & Kempen, 1998), we propose that a more fundamental source of reification in the discipline of psychology is the prevailing tendency to equate culture with group. This tendency is based on and fosters a conception of culture as a more-or-less explicit, internally homogenous, externally distinctive, collective entity. This conception of culture as group entity is evident in Hermans' paper in his discussion of culture as collective voices (p. 22), his discussion of being caught between cultures (p. 33), and—along with a conception of culture as geographically localized—in his distinction between core and contact zones (p. 34). More generally, this conception is evident in phrases like "members of culture X" and in the practice of using culture synonymously with society, nation, or ethnicity.

One consequence of this entity conception of culture is a static, essentializing, stereotype-prone account of cultural difference. Audiences interpret descriptions of modal patterns as claims about invariant, characteristic, group properties. Similarly, they treat these

patterns as inherent in group categories rather than the product of circumstances associated with categories.

More relevant for the present topic is another consequence: It is largely due to an entity conception of culture that the act of naming promotes reification. The mere description of modal patterns does not necessarily imply abrupt, categorical boundaries. Instead, the turning of names into things requires the idea that the patterns being described correspond to some object—in this case, a group of people. Given a conception of culture as group, description of modal patterns becomes definition of group boundaries. It "fixes" group membership around a particular way of being, makes group boundaries more concrete and categorical than they are in reality, and even reinforces or confers their sense of entity-ness (cf. Appadurai, 1996; Meyer & Geschiere, 1999; Mudimbe, 1997; Said, 1977).²

In contrast to this reification-prone conception of culture as group entity, we borrow from a classic definition (see Shweder, 2001) and advocate a less reifying conception of culture as patterns:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments of artifacts; the core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on one hand, be considered as products of actions and on the other hand as conditioning elements of further action (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 357, emphasis added).

This definition makes clear that culture resides, not in groups themselves, but in the implicit and explicit patterns that are (often) associated with groups (cf. Sperber, 1984). It frames cultural

involvement, not as membership in a more-or-less recognized group, but as engagement with patterns. Though an entity conception of culture tends to limit cultural influence to those people who are defined by (or in opposition to) some group, a conception of culture as patterns allows for broader, more diffuse influence. A person need not be a member of some cultural group to engage and be shaped by cultural patterns.

These two conceptions of culture are conveniently juxtaposed in an introductory chapter to a popular collection of papers on "culture and psychology" (Veroff and Goldberger, 1995). After quoting the above definition, Veroff and Goldberger (1995) remark in their very next sentence that: "More useful definitions, perhaps, are less encompassing and more accessible, but most support the usage of the word 'culture' as referring to a collectivity of people ..." (p.10, emphasis added). We agree that this conception of culture as group entity may be "more useful" for certain topics, like the construction and negotiation of cultural identity. However, this conception of culture is less useful (and perhaps even misleading) for discussing the cultural grounding of self-experience. We will return to this distinction shortly. First, though, we discuss the implications of this definition for Hermans' dialogical self.

Implicit and Explicit Patterns

Although there are several important features of this definition that we might emphasize, the most relevant feature for a discussion of Hermans' dialogical self is the distinction between explicit and implicit patterns. Hermans' model appears to be concerned mostly with cultural patterns, like group entities or collective voices, that are sufficiently explicit and consciously considered that they can be localized as positions and engaged in dialogue.³ However, cultural influence does not just happen through explicit, consciously considered patterns like group entities and their collective voices. In addition, as the Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) definition

emphasizes, cultural influence is also mediated by implicit, unrecognized, nameless, or "positionless" patterns that are embedded in local meanings, institutions, practices, and artifacts. A full account of the relationship between culture and self requires an appreciation for this automatic shaping of self by patterns that are implicit in everyday life and do not necessarily coincide with explicit, group entities.⁴

It is not clear from the present paper whether Hermans' model of the dialogical self can accommodate this sort of automatic or implicit patterning. At issue is the notion of dialogue. It is clear from his discussion of "prelinguistic and embodied dialogues" that Hermans does not intend to restrict the notion to its verbal form. What remains unclear is whether the extension of dialogue to include embodied forms is sufficient to capture the "automatic" shaping of behavior and experience described above. Some passages suggest that it could be. For example, Hermans notes that dialogue is sometimes patterned by "culturally established and institutionally congealed provisions and constraints on communicative activities (p. 25)" (an observation he attributes to Linell, 1990). However, having dialogue shaped by implicit, "institutionally congealed" patterns is not the same as being in dialogue or otherwise involved with these patterns. More important, it is not clear that the notion of dialogue—rather than some other form of involvement, like engagement or negotiation, that connotes a less explicit activity—is the optimal characterization of these automatic influences.

Even if one extends Hermans' notion of embodied dialogue to include engagement with implicit, unrecognized patterns, his model of the dialogical self apparently restricts cultural influence to patterns that become explicit and known. Using the Jamesian model of self, Hermans proposes that cultural influence happens as subjective I-positions take potentially formless patterns and construct them into a multiplicity of more-or-less concrete, objective me-

positions. Accordingly, cultural influence in Hermans' model appears to focus on the objective content of self-knowledge.

But what about cultural influence on the subjective processors of self-knowledge: the Jamesian I-positions themselves? Hermans' model appears to neglect automatic influences on self-experience from implicit cultural patterns that, because they remain unrecognized by knowing subjects, do not get constructed into me-positions. Yet, the moment-to-moment way of being an I (as in "I perceive," "I think," "I feel") is also culturally patterned. A set of I-positions that engages a cultural setting where it is commonplace in everyday activity to explicitly reference the feelings or expectations of specific others may well have a different experience of "I" than a set of I-positions that engages a setting where explicit referencing of specific others is less common.

As a result, it remains unclear whether Hermans' model can (or is intended to) account for the cultural grounding of the subjective I or knowing self. Although Hermans does not deny the possibility of such variation, neither does he mention this possibility (nor is it clear from his model how such variation might arise). Instead, he tends to describe the subjective, identity-synthesizing, I-positions as if their processes were relatively impervious to contextual variation.

The Dialogical Self as a Model of Identity

Although perhaps incomplete as account of the cultural grounding of self, Hermans' framework works better as a model of identity construction. Using Hermans' framework, we define cultural identity as a system of positions derived from or organized around a cultural group. (We will defer for a moment the issue of whether this organization is objectively provided in the social world or "merely" a subjective construction.) One can then consider Hermans'

framework as a model for understanding how the subjective self negotiates these identities. Understood as such, Hermans' model makes several welcome contributions.

Multiplicity

One important contribution is to emphasize the multiplicity of self and identity. As Hermans notes, this emphasis on multiplicity and discontinuity contrasts with the emphasis on unity and continuity that has characterized the field of psychology. In general, bicultural or multicultural being has been and continues to be characterized as an abnormal or marginal condition (for similar points, see LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Root, 1998). In contrast, Hermans' model suggests that most people in normal circumstances are constituted by multiple cultural influences. Rather than a marginal condition, multicultural being may be the norm.

Here again, though, the discussion of multiplicity is hindered by reliance on an entity conception of culture. From this perspective, "multiplicity" translates into "multiple group memberships", an idea that seems incompatible with typical articulations of an entity conception.⁵ Even if one stretches the notion to allow that people can be members of multiple groups, the entity conception remains inadequate for understanding how people can be shaped by mutually exclusive groups. In contrast, the multiplicity of self and identity entails no such problems for a conception of culture as patterns. This conception allows that a person can engage and be shaped by patterns associated with seemingly incompatible identities.

To illustrate, consider the cultural setting of Protestantism. A entity conception of culture would seem to limit Protestantism's influence to members of Protestant groups. (Whether the groups are based on religious identity or something akin to ethnic identity, as in Northern Ireland, is not important for this example. Instead, what is important is that the site of cultural

involvement is more-or-less explicit category.) Although one can stretch this conception to allow that people can be members of multiple groups—Protestant and a university student, of Surinamese ethnicity, a resident of Amsterdam, a fan of the Ajax football club, etc.—it seems inadequate for understanding how, say, a staunchly loyal member of a Catholic group, resident in the USA, might be shaped by forces of Protestantism.

However, the power of Protestantism to shape psychological functioning is not limited to members of Protestant groups. Instead, the more pervasive and enduring source of Protestantism's power is as a cultural pattern. It is an often implicit, unrecognized part of the institutions, practices, and artifacts that constitute everyday reality in mainstream American settings. In these settings, the legacy of Protestantism is embedded in the common ground for interaction and experience. Its legacy is present, for example, in the idea that success is the result of self-discipline and one's own hard work, or in the relationship of control feelings and internal attributions to happiness and well-being (Ji, Peng, & Nisbett, 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lachman & Weaver, 1998). Regardless of personal identity, people in mainstream American settings necessarily encounter this cultural legacy in the course of everyday activity. A person can fervently embrace cultural patterns associated with Catholicism but must simultaneously engage—often unwittingly—the Protestantism-informed patterns that dominate everyday reality in mainstream American settings. Clearly, a person need not be a member of a Protestant group to engage and be shaped by Protestant cultural patterns.

Agency

A second contribution of Hermans' model is to highlight the dynamic role of an agentic self in negotiating these multiple identities. As Granovetter (1985) puts it "Actors do not ... adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories that

they happen to occupy (p. 487)". Instead, different persons—and the same person at different times—can create different syntheses from the same "intersection of categories" (cf. Root, 1998). Hermans' dialogical self provides a useful framework for theorizing this agency. For example, his discussion suggests that the construction of identity may be more a matter of alternation between, or the integration of, existing positions rather than the construction of new positions "from scratch" (p. 15; see also LaFromboise et al., 1993).

Ironically, another form that this agentic construction of identity takes is often the reification of cultural groups. People caught in the uncertainty of cultural flux often solidify group boundaries that used to be flexible—and sometimes construct new group boundaries—in an attempt to reassert power or gain some control over macrolevel or global forces (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Meyer and Geschiere, 1999). So, rather than the supposed disappearance of cultural diversity predicted by global-systems theorists, entry into the world system often fuels the defiant "production of locality" (Appadurai, 1996).

The important point for present purposes concerns the product of the identity-construction process. The self does not just synthesize identities; it also constructs identities. It organizes flowing patterns into reified structures that extend beyond the person into institutions, practices, and artifacts of the physical world. This implies that the organization of patterns into reified identities is not simply a "subjective" construal. In addition, the organization of patterns into reified identities is to some extent given in "objective" reality. In other words, the reification of culture into group entities is often not illusory but is present in the structure of worlds that individuals inherit. This point has several implications for Hermans' framework.

First, reacting to practices in psychology that lead to the reification of culture, Hermans appears to underweight the extent to which received identity categories have objective reality

(cf. Holdstock, 1999). Rather than deny this apparent "fixedness" or reification of identities, perhaps the task for a cultural psychology should be to emphasize the dialectical process through which identities arise. Cultural identity categories—and the supposedly "defining features" associated with these categories—are not "just so"; instead, they are the way they are because people make them so. Their reified fixedness is not natural or inevitable but is instead a social construction: the cumulative, material residue of the identity syntheses achieved by wave after wave of subjective selves.

Despite common misconceptions, to say something is "socially constructed" does not mean that it is optional or inconsequential. Instead, inherited categories place very real, objective constraints on the identity-construction activities of the subjective self. In the first place, inherited categories provide the raw materials from which individuals construct personal identity. It is difficult to build a personal identity as a footballer if football is unknown in a setting. In addition, inherited categories constrain identity construction by defining consensual reality. On one hand, individual attempts to claim certain identities are subject to ratification by social consensus. For example, no matter how much an adolescent who is conventionally defined as White tries to claim Black identity, the typical consequences for self-experience of being Black in America will not follow unless others treat or accept him as Black. On the other hand, some individuals will have identities imposed upon them regardless of individual acceptance or resistance. For example, no matter what identities a person who is conventionally considered Native American tries to claim, research suggests that she will be treated according to a limited number of identity representations propagated by and for mainstream American society (Fryberg, 2001; cf. Waters, 1990).

Accordingly, the second implication for Hermans' model is that the subjective I is not infinitely agentic or entirely free to take any position or construct any identity that it wishes. Instead, as the notion of dialogue implies, identity construction is a dialectical process. In the process of doing personal identity, individual selves produce and reproduce institutions, practices, and artifacts of identity that take on a life of their own (Appadurai, 1986; Bourdieu, 1977; Kopytoff, 1986). Products of identity-construction activity at one moment, these objective patterns serve as "conditioning agents" (à la Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952) on the identity-construction activities of other selves in the next moment (Gone, Miller, & Rappaport, 1999). Hermans' dialogical-self framework is an explicit articulation of this dialectical process. However, perhaps reacting to oversocialized accounts of culture and self, the present paper highlights the agency of the subjective self in this dialectical process, while underweighting the countervailing, objective constraints.

Finally, a third implication for Hermans' framework is a particularly important constraint on the process of identity construction: the possibility of contextual variation in the subjective I or self-experiencer. Although objective constraints on identity construction exist in all settings, the process may be more constrained in some settings than others. A history of engagement with settings that constrain identity construction may foster a subjective I that is less agentic than the one portrayed in Hermans' framework. More appropriately, the relatively unconstrained identity negotiator portrayed by Hermans' framework may be the product of particular circumstances—"borders", instability, or people living in especially "postmodern" spaces (cf. Holdstock, 1999)—that do not apply, or apply to a lesser extent, in other settings. Not all people may be free to do (or burdened with) the task of postmodern identity construction.

The Dialogical Self as a "Zone of Proximal Development"

Perhaps the most generative contribution of Hermans' essay is to suggest how psychology in general, and the study of self in particular, can contribute to the study of culture. The model illustrates how the self functions as a "zone of proximal development" (cf. Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978): a key site where personal identity and cultural-identity categories "make each other up" (Shweder, 1990; cf. Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Gone et al., 1999). Historically, psychologists have emphasized the agentic construction of personal identity. Increasingly, psychologists recognize the social and cultural grounding of this identity-construction process. What remains is a greater appreciation for the consequences of this identity-construction process. What gets developed in this zone is not just personal identity but also the received, identity categories that seem like natural features of the inherited world (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Hermans' dialogical-self framework is a useful base from which to explore this process.

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Footnotes

¹A recognition of the reification inherent in naming underlies Appadurai's (1996, p. 13) suggestion that scholars refrain from using culture as a noun (e.g., "people from this culture") and instead restrict their use of the concept to its adjectival form, cultural (e.g., "cultural pattern" or "cultural group").

²As, Kelly (1999) suggests, "Nothing, it seems to me, is less likely to solve the problem of 'grasping the flux'" —avoiding the reification of culture in the context of globalization (Hannerz, 1992)—"than allowing new names to revitalize the old units and keep us operating as if the world is first of all a collection of nameable groups" (p. 241).

³This implies one way of integrating the two approaches to culture that we contrast above. One can consider cultural groups to be particularly explicit, reified sets of cultural patterns. In this way, the conception of culture as patterns subsumes the conception of culture as group entity.

⁴See Bargh (1997; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999) on the concept of automaticity, although he probably did not have "culture" in mind when discussing implicit patterns. Likewise, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) probably did not intend the word "implicit" to have quite the same sense that it has in contemporary social psychology. Even so, this coincidence of terminology is nevertheless provocative.

⁵For example, the singular, "in one's culture"—but not the plural "in one's cultures"—is the common formulation in both scholarly and lay discourse.