

## Culture and Development: Rethinking Implications for Policy Research

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David (Dollar) has rightly introduced me as one of the “social scientists” in the Development Research Group at the Bank, and though it is usually (and somewhat pejoratively) used to define me by what I am not—namely, an economist—it is a title I actually really like, since it accurately captures what I try to do, namely to take both economics and the non-economic social sciences seriously. Even so, however, I must confess that I was a little concerned when I saw that two economists were going to be hosting a conference on culture... But then I read in yesterday’s *New York Times*<sup>1</sup> about our former colleague Ashraf Ghani, a noted anthropologist, who is now the Minister of Finance in Afghanistan! So I’m delighted that it seems those trained in one discipline can now move more confidently into the terrain once considered the exclusive purview of “the other”.

In my brief remarks today I first want to comment on what I think a research agenda on culture should *not* be about; I will then outline what I think it is we *should* be studying that is of general interest to development scholars and policymakers, and that is also particularly relevant to culture; and then finally consider some implications for *how* we should go about studying it.

### A. What Culture is *Not*

1. A mere add-on
  - \* As an assumption in the utility function (e.g., Becker and Murphy<sup>2</sup>)
  - \* As a new variable in growth regressions, “absorbing another 3% of the variance that neo-classical theory somehow missed” (quote from Granovetter<sup>3</sup>)
2. A parallel universe
  - \* i.e., separate (soft) issue that only anthropologists should worry about or be concerned with, since it is disconnected from mainstream development policy, discourse, and research
3. A “best practice” (as suggested by a World Bank staff member in response to a talk by Sen)
  - \* i.e., something that can be reduced to, or responded to via, a standardized package (Scott<sup>4</sup>)
  - \* (ironically, the highly technical theories, models, and analyses of economics lend themselves to the design of relatively straightforward technocratic “policies” and

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/30/international/asia/30AFGH.html>

<sup>2</sup> Gary Becker and Kevin Murphy (2001) *Social Economics: Market Behavior in a Social Environment* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press

<sup>3</sup> From memory (!), but I think it comes from his interview with Richard Swedberg in the latter’s (1990) *Economics and Sociology* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

<sup>4</sup> James Scott (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* New Haven: Yale University Press

bureaucratic “programs”; culture is necessarily complex. Moreover, many “well-designed” development policies and programs come unstuck in the implementation and delivery phase.)

4. A set of immutable, static, essentialist national traits (cf. Harrison and Huntington<sup>5</sup>, Landes<sup>6</sup>)  
\* (it is important to stress the centrality of understanding the historical evolution—which is to say, the fluidity and contingency—of given institutional forms and behavior; virtually all are an adapted amalgam of ideas that have been borrowed, stolen, imposed, or exchanged from elsewhere: Sen, Chang<sup>7</sup>)
5. Something “out there” in exotic developing countries or indigenous communities  
\* (inherently “in here” too, including, especially, the World Bank)
6. Just artifacts, music, language, food, or (the preservation of) cultural heritage  
\* (a necessary, but very insufficient, understanding)

## B. What we Should be Studying

A research agenda on culture and development should study issues of direct practical relevance to poverty reduction, including the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. To this end, the aspects I think are most salient when viewed through a “cultural lens” are:

1. ‘Giving and Receiving’ (Klitgaard)  
All the major world religions and moral philosophies admonish the rich to share with the poor. In an integrated world economy it is increasingly in the interests of the rich countries to ensure that poor countries don’t get left behind. Most desperately poor people would presumably prefer not to be desperately poor. In short, values and interests point in the same direction regarding the importance of reducing global poverty, but there is little agreement as to *how* this “giving and receiving” should take place. How, exactly, should the riches of wealthy countries best be shared? Should the “giving” continue even when the “receivers” are known to be crooks or tyrants, or the institutional environment obviously inadequate? Should just the *fruits* of rich-country prosperity be shared, or would it be better to try to also share the *sources* of that prosperity? What do we do if our best efforts to “give” are spurned by the poor, even if this makes them more vulnerable to destitution, disease, or predation?  
\* Necessary tension between autonomy and benevolence  
How can we work for change while respecting what exists? How can we exercise analytical skills and make critical judgments while still affirming the imperfect people and situations we encounter? And how can we extend our limits in order to receive from the people to whom we are trying to give?<sup>8</sup>  
\* Under what conditions are spaces for a transparent and inclusive negotiation regarding the exchange of ideas, resources, and ‘epistemologies’ created and sustained? (Guggenheim)

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington (eds.) (2001) *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* New York: Basic Books

<sup>6</sup> David Landes (1999) *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* New York: Norton

<sup>7</sup> Ha-Joon Chang (2002) *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* London: Anthem Press

<sup>8</sup> Robert Klitgaard (1990) *Tropical Gangsters* New York: Basic Book, p. 12

2. Change and Transitions
  - \* Power, the “rationality of resistance” (Scott<sup>9</sup>, Platteau)
  - \* Identities, incentives, aspirations (Apaduri)
3. Difference and Conflict
  - \* Histories, sources, maintenance of boundaries between “us” and “them” (however defined)
  - \* Managing disagreement, forging political cohesion; *succeeding* at development (e.g., empowering once-marginalized groups) means creating conflict
4. Contexts and ‘Durable Inequalities’ (Tilly<sup>10</sup>)
  - \* Structures, rules, constraints
  - \* Agency, choices, preferences (how are they formed and perpetuated?)
  - \* Patterns of social organization<sup>11</sup>
5. Survival and Mobility
  - \* Asset ‘portfolios’, their deployment as part of risk management strategies
  - \* Access/barriers to services and citizenship (WDR 2000/01)
6. Coordination and Connectivity
  - \* Strategies for successfully solving collective action problems
  - \* Nature and extent of social networks

### C. How we Should be Studying it

1. By beginning with important, researchable, and substantive questions—*not* by cultivating a “cultural perspective” or a set of “cultural tools”, and then searching the world for questions they will happen to be able to answer (the same applies for methodological issues in general).
2. By working both inductively (learning from what’s already being done in existing Bank—and other development—projects) and deductively (formal testing of hypotheses and theories). We can’t wait until the scholars agree on definitions and theories before proceeding, especially when there is already a wealth of “data” available in existing projects. Having said that, causal knowledge claims need to be verified—and tested as regards their generality—using the best data and most appropriate methods. (There are endogeneity concerns with inductive approaches, of course, but this can be addressed.)
3. To this end, we need to take more seriously the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods and data; more and better data gathered in response to pressing development questions equals greater likelihood of better development policies, programs, and practices.

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<sup>9</sup> James Scott (1985) *Weapons of the Weak* New Haven: Yale University Press

<sup>10</sup> Charles Tilly (1999) *Durable Inequalities* Berkley: University of California Press

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Michael Cernea for stressing this particular point.