

Vera Nünning, Philipp Löffler, Margit Peterfy

Key Concepts for the Study of Culture:  
An Introduction

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study of culture enjoys great popularity among students and has become an indispensable part of the curriculum of many BAs and MAs in English and American studies. Students who want to become teachers often – and rightly so – stress the usefulness of the study of culture and the knowledge generated in this field of research. Although it became clear some years ago that a lecture series introducing students to the study of culture was highly desirable, the difficulties of narrowing down the field and choosing exactly what we could discuss in a limited time frame were quite challenging. Trying to identify the main areas and key concepts that students should become acquainted with in an introductory lecture, we reluctantly left out information about founding figures and their ideas (e.g. Ernst Cassirer and his influence on the definition of symbolic forms), dominant approaches to the study of culture (such as postcolonialism or gender studies) and even the development of cultural studies in Great Britain (emerging with the founding of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham and the enormous influence of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams) or recent developments in American studies. We decided that what students need most at the beginning of their studies is the introduction to key concepts, because the latter can both provide insight into a broad range of cultural phenomena and developments and enable students to pursue their own research projects.

This volume therefore tries to provide an introduction to some of the most important and promising key concepts for the study of culture, such as identity, performativity, intersectionality, cultural memory, the emotions and values. Rather than focusing on one approach throughout this book, we explore selected key concepts from a variety of perspectives, ranging from cultural anthropology and cultural psychology to philosophy, sociology and postcolonial theory. Each chapter is based on its own combination of insights from several disciplines, depending on the expertise and preferences of the individual author. We hope that the mixture of approaches reflects some of the numerous facets of the study of culture today and will also inspire students to make their own choices. In addition, the chapters offer introductions to a few broader fields such as material culture and visual culture studies, which include key terms relevant for the study of culture. The discussion of examples taken from British and North American history from the sixteenth century to the present is meant to demonstrate both the usefulness and applicability of the key concepts that, we hope, will help young researchers to find their feet in a booming and highly promising field of study.

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This book would not have been possible without the generous help of many colleagues and friends, and it is a privilege and pleasure for us to express our appreciation and gratitude for the help that we received. Special thanks are due to Désirée Link, who spent many days acting as a highly competent coordinator and copy editor of the whole publication process and mastering the problems involved in the design and inclusion of illustrations and images, which turned out to be many. We also received invaluable help from Nina Gillé, who formatted the book, and our research assistants, who, throughout the long gestation period of this book, made many pertinent suggestions, checked countless quotes and bibliographical data and carefully unified the bibliographical format: A big thank you to Marion Mohr, Cara Vorbeck, Kai Klingler, Tine Bez and William Weigle! We would like to give very special thanks to Cristian Camilo Cuervo, a research assistant who worked tirelessly throughout the production of this book, as well as Max Cannings, who spent more time than he reasonably could reading the whole manuscript, checking and reading the chapters as a highly knowledgeable native speaker and stylistic advisor. In addition, we would like to thank David Westley and his library team at the English Department at Heidelberg University, who made this book possible by providing all major publications in next to no time.

Last but not least, our thanks goes to the students of our introductory lecture on key concepts for the study of culture, whose liveliness, questions and suggestions inspired us to write this book.

Heidelberg, August 2020      Vera Nünning, Philipp Löffler and Margit Peterfy

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## MEANINGS AND FUNCTIONS OF CULTURE AND CULTURAL KEY CONCEPTS

VERA NÜNNING

**Why culture?** Everyone roughly knows what culture is, be it in the form of ‘high culture’ or ‘popular culture’ or anything in between. Understood in this way, culture is a given – and not very interesting. Looked at more closely, however, culture becomes a very complex issue and we can see that we are profoundly shaped by the culture we live and are ‘enculturated’ in. This process of enculturation begins at a very early age. It makes a difference, for instance, whether babies are given away to wet-nurses for the first few years of their lives or stay with their parents who cuddle and play with them. In a similar vein, it influences the development of children whether young girls are expected to wear clothes and corsets that impede their movements, or whether they can dress comfortably and do all kinds of sports. However, neither children nor adults are likely to perceive anything unusual or ‘cultural’ in the way they are treated. Though usually unnoticed, culture is there as a formative influence throughout our lives. It has an impact on the kind of experiences we have, the kind of identity we create for ourselves and the communities we live in.

Since we are **surrounded by cultural practices** and products throughout our lifetimes, we tend to think of these as ‘**natural**’ or at least ‘**normal**’. Only when we travel great distances and are confronted with completely different ways of thinking, feeling and behaving do we realize that most things we take for granted could be very different indeed. Such a ‘culture shock’, however, does not generally induce people to question their own cultural beliefs. More often than not, we think of the ‘other’ as strange and of ourselves as ‘normal’. This lack of scrutiny limits our knowledge; it blocks off important insights into ourselves, into our beliefs and actions and into the fascinating ways in which we are influenced by the cultures we live in.

This book is meant to illuminate the many ways in which **cultures have an impact upon human lives**. It serves as an introduction to the processes that influence your behaviour and ways of thinking, and we hope that you will gain more than simply academic knowledge by reading it. This book is also designed as an introduction to the study of culture. We will try to make you aware of key

concepts that describe the most important facets of cultures and we want to illustrate the ways cultures work and the functions they fulfil. Our ultimate aim is to enable you to understand and apply these key concepts and empower you to conduct your own research on a wide range of aspects of British, American or other cultures.

## 1. Major Characteristics of Cultures

As many other seemingly simple terms, culture is difficult to define. There are hundreds of ways the term is used, for instance, to designate consumer culture, regional culture, mass culture, high culture, Jewish or Christian culture and so on. This **wealth of designations** is partly due to the fact that the term ‘culture’ encompasses many different aspects and thus lends itself to a vague usage: It can be understood in many different ways. Moreover, everybody intuitively understands what culture is. So why should we bother with definitions and characterizations?

If we want to understand the importance and the functions of culture, we need to comprehend what is meant by it. Cultural practices have an impact on our way of acting, thinking and feeling. Their influence runs deep. We are shaped by reciprocal relations with the culture we are raised in. Even **the brain is a cultural organ**. Obviously, our physiology does not differ much: Apart from some deviations that are considered illnesses, we are born with the same organs – even though the brain of a newly born baby has only 25% of its adult weight. During our lives, the brain changes; cells are renewed, and particularly during childhood and adolescence, there are many important physiological developments that influence the structure of and the processes within the brain. This formation is impacted by the environment; the (re)actions and responses to the stimuli that we are surrounded with manifest themselves in the brain (cf. Greenfield 2015 [2014]).

A **famous example** is that of changes in the brains of **London taxi drivers** in the old days before GPS and digital maps, when in order to get a licence, one had to memorize the streets of London and the best ways of navigating them. When the brains of such taxi drivers were analysed, it was found that their hippocampus, which is related to the working memory, was significantly larger than that of the average population. The necessity of remembering and retrieving so many streets and places had an impact on the drivers’ brains – and this was not due to the fact that they were born with a bigger hippocampus, but related to the number of years they had worked in their field (cf. *ibid.*: 56). As neuroscientists stress, there is the principle of “use it or lose it” (*ibid.*: 57) – either you use your cognitive abilities or you will lose them. The use of and dependence on