

1 Understandings of culture in nine European countries

Advancing the study of cultural stratification

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1. Introduction

On 21 March 2023, in the final television election debate preceding the advance voting period for the Finnish parliamentary elections, the leader of the nationalist Finns Party declared that “culture is a luxury service, which unfortunately costs too much money in present-day Finland” (Lehmusvesi, 2023, p. B5). Not surprisingly, this statement triggered an instant social media backlash, thrusting “culture” – not only how worthy it is but also *what* it really is – into the forefront of election debates. The whole range of definitions of culture characterising the debate was arguably not peculiar to the Finnish case but revealed aspects of political discourses typical of European and North American societies in recent years. First, culture seems to be a contemporary catchword capable of fuelling identity political fights, or indeed “culture wars”, which polarises people along the left/right and, perhaps even more so, liberal/conservative dimensions (DellaPosta et al., 2015; Hartman, 2019; Heinich, 2000). Second, it is not easy to argue for or against the worth of culture, nor calculate its exact value, even when it comes to its economic value (Belfiore, 2015; Brook et al., 2020; O’Brien, 2010). Third, people

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have various definitions and understandings of culture and seem quite reflective about it – at least the ones interested enough in debating the matter on social media, including the implications of what it means to argue for or against the funding of “culture” using certain definitions rather than others (cf., European Commission, 2007; Pereira et al., *this volume*; Yodovich et al., *this volume*). The value of culture appears different depending on whether it is considered narrowly as arts or “creative sectors” or, for example, as crucial building blocks of national identity, language, and heritage.

Despite culture’s political resonance – and despite the long history of debating the complexities of the meanings it carries and its unprecedented ubiquity as a concept and the volume of cultural objects circulating in our environment – the social sciences have surprisingly overlooked how ordinary people in different national and social contexts interpret the concept. In this chapter, we address this challenge by exploring the varying understandings of culture among Europeans – their patterning, mutual relationships, and wider networks of meanings. We reveal how major understandings of culture differ cross-nationally and across key sociodemographic divisions such as age, gender, education, residential area, migrant background, and religion, drawing on comprehensive survey data from the INVENT project in nine European countries.

The chapter begins by discussing the relevance of studying ordinary people’s understandings of culture and their potential social differentiation from the perspectives of the concept’s complexities, cultural stratification research, and cultural policy studies. Following this, we provide a concise overview of our bottom-up approach utilising state-of-the-art computational methods alongside qualitative analysis before delving into the empirical findings.

2. Theoretical background and the relevance of understandings of culture

Culture is arguably a key concept in contemporary social sciences (Lizardo, 2016; Shweder & Beldo, 2015), and its significance and ubiquity has increased substantially ever since Raymond Williams wrote that the concept is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (1976, p. 87) and confessed a few years later that “I’ve wished that I’d never heard the damned word” (cited in Bennett, 2005, p. 63). The expansion of its academic usage is evident already in the rise of subdisciplines like cultural studies, cultural policy studies, cultural sociology, cultural geography, and cultural economics.

Academic discourse is no exception but mirrors a broader societal trend where culture has become increasingly prominent in popular, mediatic, commercial, and organisational discourses (Brook et al., 2020; Fornäs, 2017; Purhonen et al., 2019). Simultaneously, the global circulation of culture, in digital or material forms, has reached unprecedented volumes (Arditi, 2021; Bail, 2014; Beer, 2013). Thus, the present-day ubiquity of culture denotes equally the concept of culture and cultural content – the “cultural abundance” of our everyday life (Wright, 2015, p. 146). Some even argue that in the era of “cultural capitalism”, culture has transformed

into a mere “expedient”, with its conventional notions “emptied out” (Yúdice, 2003, p. 9).

Against this background, there is a surprising lack of knowledge about how different actors in diverse contexts understand the concept. While the historical trajectory of the concept from antiquity to the modern state is well documented (Elias, 1994; Fisch, 1992; Fornäs, 2017; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Kuper, 1999; Williams, 1981), systematic research on how ordinary people understand culture is scarce (for the exceptions before the INVENT project, see European Commission, 2007; Guy, 2016). Scholarly interest has focused more on theoretical debates around the meanings of culture rather than exploring how various actors understand it.

In contemporary sociology, culture serves a dual role as both an analytical perspective (as in “cultural sociology”) and a research object (as in “sociology of culture”): the explanans and the explanandum (Inglis, 2016). The former usage includes conceptualising culture as, among other things, “values”, “frames”, “repertoires”, “narratives”, “symbolic boundaries”, “capital”, and “institutions” (Lamont & Small, 2008). The latter usage involves considerations of culture ranging from “a whole way of life” (Williams, 1981, p. 10), basically meaning any common denominator of a social group (anthropology’s signature definition; see Kuper, 1999) to cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1984) and the narrower meanings of expressive culture (Meyer et al., 1997), popular culture (Gans, 1974), and, finally, arts (Zolberg, 1990). This conceptual polysemy, with its multiple meanings, also creates real-world problems, particularly in communication. Differences in how the concept is used can lead to misunderstandings (Mohr et al., 2020, p. 15), especially concerning broad and narrow conceptions of culture.

The issue is particularly evident in cultural policy. Bennett (2004, p. 237) notices “the torn halves of cultural policy research” – the existence of two different worlds within the cultural policy research, one which recognises culture as limited to symbolic practices and goods and another that calls for treating culture as broad as everyday life. Belfiore (2009, pp. 343–350) criticises the tendency to formulate cultural policy goals with a broad conception of culture in mind but implementing much narrower means as “bullshitting”. The issue also has a cross-national dimension; countries vary in their processes of public institutionalisation of “culture”, leading to different framings of what gets included and excluded in official discourses (Katz, 1987). Moreover, globalisation further complicates the issue by introducing competing concepts of culture based on global neoliberal, economically viable creative industries versus institutionalised, national identity building (Craik et al., 2003). Finally, Gray (2015) argues that the cultural field is even “endemically polysemous”, which poses challenges for coherent cultural policy-making and inevitably causes ambiguities.

We argue that increasing our knowledge on the understandings of culture across different national and social contexts is important, first, because of the sheer lack of previous research and, second, because such insights could contribute to the development of more conceptually coherent and transparent, potentially less hierarchical, and more inclusive cultural policies. Third, studying the diverse understandings

of culture among people could reveal a hidden dimension of cultural stratification. While existing research focuses on how cultural resources and practices maintain and reproduce inequality (Bennett et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1984; Brook et al., 2020), examining how also conceptual understandings of culture are stratified could extend this research tradition. This raises questions about the implications of this cultural stratification at the level of conceptual understandings for core questions of the field, such as cultural omnivorousness and tolerance (Ollivier, 2008; Peterson & Kern, 1996), cultural boundary-making and exclusion (Daenekindt, 2019; Lamont & Molnár, 2002), or the link between cultural and political orientations (DellaPosta et al., 2015; Flemmen et al., 2022). In light of these considerations, we turn to our empirical investigation of understandings of culture among Europeans.

3. Methods

We use the survey data collected in nine European countries as part of the INVENT project (cf. the Introduction and Methodological Appendix of this book). First, we identify the major types of understandings of culture among Europeans. Second, we validate the meanings of the main understandings quantitatively and by qualitative close reading of open-ended survey answers. Third, we examine how the understandings are associated with sociodemographic divisions in and across the countries.

We focus on the open-ended question: “What comes to mind first when you think of the word ‘culture’? Please elaborate”. The question’s phrasing was intentionally very simple and open, and it did not include any specifications about the length of the answer. The question thus produced answers ranging from single or only a few words to quite elaborate reflections of multiple, long sentences. Importantly, we take advantage of the development of machine learning-based, computational methods for text analysis (see McFarland et al., 2016) in our examination of the open-ended answers – an endeavour which would be practically impossible by human readers because of the amount of data, our wish to avoid *a priori* classifications, and the almost inevitable issues with intercoder reliability (DiMaggio et al., 2013). After translating the multilingual text data from all countries into English (in each language, the word for “culture” was directly derived from the same root, as in, e.g., “cultura”, “cultuur”, “Kultura”, or “kulttuuri”) and necessary data cleaning procedures, we used structural topic modelling. It is an unsupervised machine learning method for text analysis, based on computing the co-occurrence of words and aiming to identify hidden thematic structures in large collections of documents. Structural topic modelling proved very useful in analysing open-ended survey answers (Roberts et al., 2014), as it allows topics to be correlated with each other (thus fitting well with our idea of investigating distinct but potentially interrelated understandings of culture). Moreover, it enables including structural factors as “metadata” in the topic estimation procedure (thus fitting well to our cross-nationally comparative research design, in which the understandings of culture are nested in specific national contexts with distinct languages and histories). Therefore, we included the respondent’s country as the only structural factor in our

topic estimation. The method employed, accompanied by the description of data cleaning, is reported in full in Sirkka et al. (2024).

From the survey data, we also utilise a structured question including a list of 20 items (shown in Table 1.1), regarding which the respondents were asked whether they see them belonging to culture (“yes, definitely”), not belonging to culture (“no, definitely not”), or if they remained ambivalent (“it depends”). We apply principal component analysis to detect hidden dimensions in how the boundaries of what is counted as (not) belonging to culture are patterned among the respondents (using categorical principal component analysis produced essentially similar results, suggesting that the assumption on the ordinal nature of data is plausible). This allows us to investigate how the understandings of culture (topics) derived from structural topic modelling of the open-ended questions associate with the main dimensions (factor scores) behind respondents’ evaluations of the boundaries of culture. Thus, while a more comprehensive analysis of this structured question about the boundaries of culture is presented in Purhonen et al. (2023), it is here used as our quantitative validation method for the main understandings of culture

Table 1.1 Principal Component Analysis for Evaluations Whether Items Are Seen as Belonging to Culture, Not Belonging to Culture, or Whether It Depends

	<i>Factor I: Modern Popular</i>	<i>Factor II: Everyday Leisure</i>	<i>Factor III: Established High Arts</i>	<i>Factor IV: Traditional Folk</i>	<i>h²</i>
Graffiti	0.71	0.05	0.16	0.23	0.59
Hip hop and rap music	0.71	0.04	0.09	0.29	0.59
Tattoos	0.65	0.18	−0.09	0.33	0.57
Comics	0.58	0.29	0.43	−0.05	0.61
Video and computer games	0.57	0.47	0.01	0.06	0.55
Political cartoons	0.54	0.26	0.30	0.01	0.46
(Hollywood) blockbuster films	0.52	0.25	0.34	−0.02	0.46
Shopping malls	0.12	0.74	−0.07	0.06	0.57
Hiking	−0.01	0.70	0.18	0.15	0.55
Football	0.25	0.53	−0.03	0.34	0.46
TV reality shows	0.39	0.51	−0.12	0.13	0.45
Designer clothes	0.33	0.51	0.24	0.05	0.42
Yoga	0.24	0.50	0.11	0.35	0.44
Literature (e.g., novels)	0.13	0.08	0.73	0.01	0.56
Opera	0.21	−0.13	0.66	0.18	0.54
Historical monuments	−0.04	−0.08	0.57	0.34	0.45
Antique shops	−0.04	0.38	0.56	0.16	0.49
Pilgrimages	0.02	0.18	0.06	0.73	0.57
Folk dances	0.09	−0.14	0.38	0.59	0.52
Food festivals and food fairs	0.19	0.26	0.10	0.54	0.40
Eigenvalue	3.17	2.85	2.33	1.88	
% of variance explained	15.84	14.24	11.64	9.40	

Notes. *N* = 13,813. Rotation method: Equamax with Kaiser normalisation. The items are interpreted as ordinal scales, where the evaluation of an item belonging to culture was coded as 2, the ambivalent “it depends” was coded as 1, and not belonging to culture was coded as 0.

revealed by the structural topic modelling. Our qualitative validation of the meanings of the major understandings of culture involves close-reading samples of the open-ended survey answers from each country against the solution produced by our structural topic modelling, a step considered crucial when topic modelling is employed (DiMaggio et al., 2013).

Besides the key structural variable, the country of the respondent, we include the following sociodemographic variables in our analysis: age (grouped into four: 18–34, 35–49, 50–64, and 65–80 years old); gender (female, male); education (categorised into three: low, including a lower secondary degree or less; medium, including upper secondary general or vocational; and high, including vocational tertiary or university); place of residence according to city size (grouped into four: big city of more than 250k inhabitants, medium-sized city with 80–250k inhabitants, small city with 10–80k inhabitants, and country/town with less than 10k inhabitants); migrant background (binary), with “yes” meaning that either of the parents of the respondent was born outside the country of the survey; and religion (grouped into five: Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, not belonging to any religion, and other).

4. Findings

Ten topics of understandings of culture that vary cross-nationally

Analysing thousands of open-ended textual answers is far from easy, even when using advanced computational methods. Thus, our process with the analysis was rather long, explorative, and iterative, following the dictum “build, compute, critique, repeat” (Blei, 2014, p. 203). Thus, after using many variants of topic modelling and running different models, discussing the results by emphasising substantial interpretability besides more technical criteria, we obtained the solution which demarcates ten topics, each representing a major understanding of culture. Figure 1.1 summarises its key results by showing how the ten topics are distributed in our data, country by country. The coordinates of the answers, represented by points, are obtained by t-sne dimension reduction on tf-idf vectorised corpus. The closeness of the answers in the two-dimensional space indicates their similarity. The colours of the points indicate the most probable topic the answer stems from, which is obtained by finding the topic with the highest probability of generating the answer. In the following, we aim to justify the labels assigned to each topic in Figure 1.1 when considering their more in-depth meanings.

The first two topics – culture as *Arts* and *Institutional* – belong to the traditional narrow way of understanding the meaning of culture. Interestingly, although highly positively correlated, these two are distinct, with *Arts* referring to a more abstract idea and *Institutional* being anchored in concrete institutional settings where arts are performed and participated in. Second, the left-hand side of each panel features various broad understandings of culture as opposed to the narrow understandings (right-hand side), confirming the continuing importance of the distinction between narrow and broad for the structure of different understandings of culture among contemporary Europeans. These four variants, strongly correlating with each other

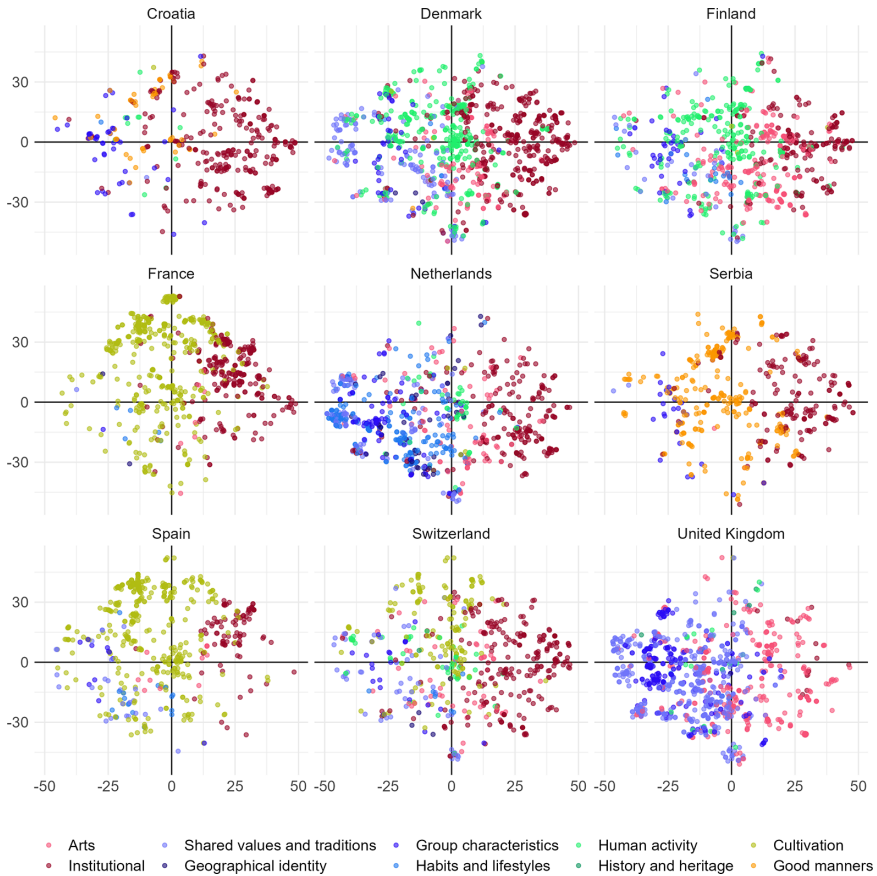


Figure 1.1 Distribution of Ten Topics Obtained from Structural Topic Modelling Across Countries (Most Probable Topics for Every Answer by Country)

(and negatively correlating with the topics of narrow understandings), include culture as *Shared values and traditions*, *Geographical identity*, *Group characteristics*, and *Habits and lifestyles*. These understandings involve broad, anthropological notions of culture with strong social aspects. Third, Figure 1.1 shows a pair of topics labelled *Human activity* and *History and heritage* that correlate positively, and both refer to culture as broad human accomplishments due to either present/continuing or past human activity. Finally, we find two rather specific and outspoken normative yet uncorrelated topics, referring to culture as *Cultivation* and *Good manners*.

Figure 1.1 also highlights the apparent cross-national variations in how the topics are distributed and structured against each other in every national context. While the topics representing the narrow understandings are present in all countries, others are highly country specific. Moreover, comparing the country panels reveals

several “pairs” of relatively similar countries. The Nordic countries, Denmark and Finland, both have remarkably identical and well-balanced clouds of topics, with a relatively prevalent component of understanding culture as *Human activity*. There is also a notable similarity between the two large Southwestern European countries, France and Spain, where understanding culture as *Cultivation* is much more common than elsewhere. Another similarity can be found between the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – where the broad understandings of culture in their different variants are more dominant than elsewhere (*Shared values and traditions* being more prevalent in the United Kingdom and *Habits and lifestyles* in the Netherlands). Yet another pattern is found for the two Southeastern European countries, Croatia and Serbia, the only countries where the *Good manners* topic is prevalent (although *Institutional* is the most common topic in Croatia). Finally, Switzerland falls outside the various country pairs based on the most apparent shared patterns but represents a relatively well-balanced mixture, similar to the Nordic countries, combined with a much more pronounced understanding of culture as *Cultivation*.

To further highlight the cross-national variation, one can calculate from the topic proportions that the narrow understandings (*Arts* and *Institutional*), when counted together, range from 24% in the United Kingdom to 52% in Croatia; the broad understandings (*Shared values and traditions*, *Geographical identity*, *Group characteristics*, and *Habits and lifestyles* together) range from 12% in France to 62% in the United Kingdom; the understandings of human accomplishment (*Human activity* and *History and heritage* together) range from 7% in France to 24% in Denmark and Finland, while *Cultivation* ranges from 2% in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom to 42% in France and *Good manners* from 1% in France to 31% in Serbia.

Quantitative validation: How the ten topics are associated with the evaluations of the boundaries of culture

To determine how the topics are associated with respondents’ evaluations of the boundaries of culture – whether they see different items as belonging to culture – we used a structured survey question probing this with a list of 20 items. The items included a variety of objects and practices of cultural consumption and leisure time contexts, thus focusing on expressive culture, evidently only one part of the whole spectrum of the meanings attributable to culture (leaving aside the more social and broad notions), as revealed by the structural topic modelling previously. Nevertheless, the question enabled us to investigate whether and which topics are similar or different in their associations with respondents’ evaluations of the boundaries of expressive culture. Most traditional and legitimate items in the list were evaluated as belonging to culture by virtually all respondents (e.g., “historical monuments”). Yet some items’ status as culture emerged as more contested (e.g., “shopping malls”) (see Purhonen et al., 2023).

To investigate how the topics are associated with these evaluations of the boundaries of culture, we first used principal component analysis to crystallise the latent dimensions behind the interrelationships among the 20 items. Subsequently,

we analysed how the topics are associated with each dimension. Table 1.1 presents the solution of four latent dimensions accounting for 51.12% of the total variance.

The first dimension shows the highest loadings for items such as graffiti, hip hop and rap music, and tattoos. Therefore, as it essentially involves modern and urban popular culture, including aspects of youth cultures, we labelled Factor I as “Modern popular”. The second factor shows the highest loadings for everyday leisure time contexts and objects ranging from hiking and football to shopping malls and TV reality shows. Thus, we labelled Factor II as “Everyday leisure”. The third dimension involves rather straightforwardly four items: literature, opera, historical monuments, and antique shops: We labelled it as “Established high arts”. Finally, the fourth dimension – labelled as “Traditional folk” – shows the highest loadings for pilgrimages, folk dances, and food festivals. Table 1.2 shows how these four dimensions are associated with the ten major understandings of culture derived from structural topic modelling.

There are numerous correlations between the topics and the factors measuring the evaluation of the boundaries of expressive culture, and they are clear and intuitive overall, thus giving further nuance to the meanings of our ten topics (Table 1.2). First, the two narrow understandings, *Arts* and *Institutional*, are otherwise similar to each other – they are both negatively associated with the factors of “Everyday leisure” and “Traditional folk” and, not surprisingly, positively associated with “Established high arts” – but understanding culture as *Arts* is slightly positively associated with the “Modern popular” factor, while *Institutional* is slightly negatively associated with it.

Second, the four broad understandings of culture with strong social emphasis – *Shared values and traditions*, *Geographical identity*, *Group characteristics*,

Table 1.2 Correlations Between the Proportions of the Ten Topics and the Four Factor Score Dimensions Measuring the Boundaries of Evaluating Which Items Belong to Culture

	<i>Factor I: Modern Popular</i>	<i>Factor II: Everyday Leisure</i>	<i>Factor III: Established High Arts</i>	<i>Factor IV: Traditional Folk</i>
1: Arts (0.15)	0.10***	−0.10***	0.14***	−0.14***
2: Institutional (0.19)	−0.06***	−0.13***	0.25***	−0.24***
3: Shared values and traditions (0.10)	−0.00	0.06***	−0.39***	0.27***
4: Geographical identity (0.07)	0.06***	0.08***	−0.40***	0.27***
5: Group characteristics (0.09)	−0.01	0.05***	−0.33***	0.26***
6: Habits and lifestyles (0.07)	0.03*	0.06***	−0.37***	0.26***
7: Human activity (0.10)	0.14***	0.19***	0.01	0.04**
8: History and heritage (0.05)	0.06***	0.08***	0.01	0.04**
9: Cultivation (0.12)	0.04**	0.01	0.19***	−0.12***
10: Good manners (0.06)	−0.25***	−0.01	0.15***	−0.02

Notes. $N = 6,287$. The proportions of each topic are given in parentheses after the topic label. Pearson's correlation coefficients: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

and *Habits and lifestyles* – all share very similar associations with the evaluations of the boundaries of expressive culture. All of them are strongly negatively associated with the “Established high arts” factor while being strongly positively associated with Factor IV, “Traditional folk”. Moreover, they are all slightly positively related to the “Everyday leisure” factor but only very little, if at all, to “Modern popular”.

Third, understanding culture as *Human activity* or as *History and heritage* resemble each other in how they associate positively with all other factors but not with “Established high arts”.

Fourth, understanding culture as *Cultivation* is positively associated with delimiting the sphere of culture to “Established high arts” (Factor III) and negatively associated with the factor “Traditional folk”, whereas understanding culture as *Good manners* is similarly positively associated with Factor III “Established high arts” while strongly negatively associated with Factor I “Modern popular”.

This section has significantly advanced our interpretation of the meanings of our ten main topics. Understanding culture as *Institutional* seems more restrictive than the other narrow understanding, *Arts*, as it is associated with evaluations that consider only “Established high arts” as belonging to culture while delimiting other, more popular forms of expressive culture outside its realm. Furthermore, all four broad understandings of culture emphasising social aspects are in sharp opposition with evaluations that only count established high arts as culture; instead, they associate positively with traditional folk forms of expressive culture. Another broad understanding of culture, *Human activity*, is different in that it is positively associated with evaluations that regard both modern popular items and everyday leisure contexts as culture. Understanding culture as *Cultivation*, in turn, resembles the narrow understanding of *Institutional*, but it does not preclude modern popular items or everyday leisure contexts from the status of culture – similar to what the understanding of culture as *Good manners*, another topic having an affinity with delimiting the realm of culture to established high arts, does in its sharp opposition to modern popular culture.

Qualitative validation: A closer look into five key understandings of culture

For the sake of brevity, while trying to cover the most interesting topics content-wise given their diverse distributions cross-nationally, in the following, we focus on the following five topics: *Institutional*, a narrow understanding connecting “culture” to the places and institutions where arts are practiced, prevalent in countries such as Croatia (42%), France (25%), Serbia (27%), and Switzerland (23%) but existing clearly in all nine countries; *Habits and lifestyles*, a broader understanding, which connects culture to some customs typical to certain social groups or countries, such as those related to food, language, or religion, most common in the Netherlands (16%) and the United Kingdom (11%); *Human activity*, a wide understanding connecting culture to a variety of activities, most prevalent in Finland (19%) and Denmark (18%), but only a very marginal understanding, for instance, in France; *Cultivation*, an understanding connecting culture to educating oneself, a

dominating understanding in France (42%) and Spain (38%) and substantial also in Switzerland (16%), but only very tiny in other countries; and *Good manners*, a normative conception of culture associated with proper ways of behaviour, most common in Serbia (31%) and substantial also in Croatia (16%), while being only tiny in all other countries. By close-reading samples of open-ended answers labelled under these five topics (due to the topic probability being the highest in them), we qualitatively illustrate how these understandings of culture are embedded within specific national contexts.

In the case of *Institutional*, culture equals specific cultural institutions that respondents quote – “exhibition, show, painting, sculpture, museum, theatre, cinema”, as put by one French respondent. The institutions mentioned are predominantly high art institutions and refer less to popular culture. However, cinema, referring to both popular and more artistic cultural content, tops the list of mentioned cultural institutions in France, while theatres are the most mentioned type of institution in Croatia and Serbia. Interestingly, culture understood this way is often supra-national: One can find, for example, Viennese, Venetian, or Milanese cultural institutions in the Serbian responses. This understanding also seems to be the most obvious one – respondents rarely put effort into further explaining their answers if they mention cinema, theatre, or other cultural institutions. This self-explanatory character suggests that it is normalised to the extent that respondents see no need for further elaboration, partly because such understanding fully aligns with dominant notions in cultural policies. Here, we should remember that the structural topic modelling presented previously underestimated the prevalence of *Institutional* since the shortest answers of only one or two words – most typical in the responses falling into this category – were excluded from our final model.

Under the *Habits and lifestyles* topic, we find rather loose and broad definitions and associations that explain things that a group of people does. This understanding is close to what is usually considered the anthropological understanding of culture as a way of life. Culture is, according to not one but two respondents from the United Kingdom phrasing identical answers, “the way people live, their values and beliefs”. Or, as put by a Dutch respondent, “Customs in a country. E.g., food, drink, religion, etc.”, or according to another, “food, clothing, customs, traditions, perspective on the world that suit a certain population group”. This is a very neutral and open-ended understanding, stripped of normative and hierarchical underpinnings of culture, and its scope is much broader than dominant cultural policies would suggest.

The lengthy answers, often involving multiple sentences falling under the topic of *Human activity*, are very broad, emphasising culture’s role in a multitude of activities, often contrasting culture to nature, biology, or other necessities of life, sometimes even money. Culture, according to this understanding, is something that elevates humans and gives them pleasure and joy. One Finnish respondent crystallised this as follows: “A broad concept that includes things that are not about livelihood, health, or anything else related to survival”. Another participant explained: “Culture reminds me of activities related to human life that aim for something other than the necessary survival”. Sometimes, the understanding overlaps with other

topics, such as *Habits and lifestyles* (because of its generality and broadness, but usually *Human activity* is not as neutral but expresses openly positive attributes on culture) or *Cultivation* (in the cases in which development or “Bildung” are mentioned, but the difference is the focus on social aspects of activities, not so much the individual growth). The Danish answers scoring high in *Human activity* are similar to the Finnish ones. As summarised by one Danish respondent: “Culture vs nature – the two sides of being human”.

Quite distinct from the previous understandings, the concept of culture as *Cultivation* depicts a rather intrinsic understanding of culture, which revolves around personal well-being and growth. Culture is about learning, pleasure, and development. A French respondent summarises two important directions here as “Spiritual and intellectual enrichment”. A first notion of this understanding of culture deals with knowing, keywords being knowledge, learning, and education, led by the personal desire for knowledge or curiosity. A Serbian answer puts it as “Culture is knowledge, understanding, curiosity”. Furthermore, culture as *Cultivation* is about the enrichment of the soul. One French respondent claims, “Nurturing the spirit is for me even more important than the nurturing of the body; culture is the foundation of my life”. Thus, compared to *Human activity*, which also often includes a positive aspect of culture and its meaning to the individual, *Cultivation* multiplies the normative ethos even to spiritual growth. However, the normative nature of *Cultivation* does not necessarily imply an exclusive vision of culture as precisely something instead of something else; instead, it often refers to “open-mindedness” or even “tolerance”.

In contrast to the previous understandings, culture as *Good manners* revolves around the link between moral and behavioural norms and culture, making it a highly normative topic. Although marginal in other samples, quotes such as “being nice, polite, not throwing garbage everywhere”, “when someone is polite, when he greets others and asks for their health”, or, as identically put by two Serbian respondents, “Good manners especially in relation to the elderly”, are part of the dominant notions of culture in Serbia and, to a lesser degree, in Croatia. According to this understanding, culture is not a voluntary or creative act but imprinted in those who possess it and linked to a “proper upbringing”. Typical are references to family upbringing; “it is acquired at a very young age; it starts at home”, as noted by one Serbian respondent. Accordingly, culture acts as a sharp distinction, separating people who are well-mannered, polite, and respectful – in a word, “cultured” – from those without these traits – the rude, unpolished, and uncivilised. Indeed, culture understood as *Good manners* comes closest in its meaning to the old sister concept of culture, that is, civilisation (Fisch, 1992; Williams, 1976), but in a very mundane and local mode of the significance of polite, correct, and respectful customary culture.

Our results indicate that, unlike the usual view in cultural policies that sees different notions of culture as clearly separated, the understandings found in our survey are more permeable to diverse notions. While our structural topic modelling allowed assigning multiple topics to the same answers (meaning the topics are not mutually exclusive), here, we interpreted them as such for simplicity.

Therefore, we should note that it was common for respondents to offer multiple definitions of culture simultaneously, irrespective of the country. Thus, a French respondent writes: "culture: habits, transmission, traditions, history . . . or culture: music, museums, cinema, films, books", thereby explicitly referring to the divided meanings of the concept of culture. A respondent from the United Kingdom writes in a similar fashion: "Either the arts such as music and theatre, or aspects of the lifestyles and attitudes of different nations or backgrounds". This shows that these respondents are familiar with the primary distinctions inside the concept of culture, most prominently the narrow meaning of culture as arts versus the broad notion of culture. However, packing all understandings of culture into two opposed camps or even one continuum does not fully grasp the richness and diversity of understandings among people. Various understandings entail not just a different scope of elements, with broader understandings adding to the narrower ones. Rather, many interpretations exclude others or arrange them in different scales of priorities. What may change is not only elements of culture but also loci, actors, or temporal arrangements; some are more historical, others more present, some intimate, others public, some political, others apolitical, and so on.

The social correlates of the major understandings of culture

After validating our topic solution of ten major understandings among contemporary Europeans quantitatively and qualitatively, we examine how the topics are associated with major sociodemographic divisions in and across our nine countries.

Table 1.3 shows that *Institutional* understanding of culture is associated with old age, while *Habits and lifestyles* is associated with young age. Apart from this, however, age is a very weak, perhaps surprisingly weak predictor. Gender also produces only minimal differences, but *Institutional* understanding of culture is slightly associated with female gender.

Regarding education, *Institutional* and *Good manners* are the least typical and *Human activity* and *Cultivation* are the most typical among the highly educated. However, these associations are, again, surprisingly weak. The place of residence matters, considering that respondents living in the countryside understand culture relatively often as *Institutional* and *Good manners*. That the understanding of culture as *Institutional* is associated with rural – instead of urban – areas and not with high education is interesting, as it goes opposite to the ideas of typical privileged "heavy users" of cultural institutions and the whole supply of such cultural activities, as the conventionally understood cultural institutions tend to be located in big cities. Furthermore, Table 1.3 shows that migrant background matters: Respondents with parents originating in another country understand culture less often as *Institutional* or *Cultivation* and more often as *Habits and lifestyles* than others.

Finally, there are strong associations with religion, which are, however, very much overlapping with the cross-national differences. *Institutional* prevails among Orthodox Christians, *Habits and lifestyles* among those not belonging to any religion, *Human activity* among Protestants, *Cultivation* among Catholics, and *Good manners* among Orthodox Christians. However, investigating these associations

Table 1.3 Mean Scores of the Five Topics Measuring Different Understandings of Culture According to Sociodemographic Factors (F-values in bold)

	<i>Institutional</i>	<i>Habits and Human</i>	<i>Cultivation</i>	<i>Good</i>	
		<i>Lifestyles</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Manners</i>	
Age group (<i>F</i>)	30.85***	76.04***	4.82**	5.39**	4.30**
18–34	0.15	0.09	0.09	0.10	0.06
35–49	0.19	0.07	0.09	0.13	0.07
50–64	0.21	0.07	0.10	0.11	0.06
65–80	0.22	0.06	0.10	0.12	0.06
Gender (<i>F</i>)	9.18**	0.13	5.27*	3.10	0.04
Female	0.20	0.07	0.10	0.11	0.06
Male	0.18	0.07	0.10	0.12	0.06
Education (<i>F</i>)	41.19***	3.17*	22.36***	17.45***	87.55***
Low	0.21	0.07	0.08	0.11	0.08
Medium	0.22	0.07	0.09	0.10	0.08
High	0.17	0.08	0.10	0.13	0.05
Place of residence (<i>F</i>)	42.73***	63.70***	0.33	42.92***	34.86***
Big city	0.17	0.08	0.10	0.12	0.06
Medium-sized city	0.19	0.08	0.10	0.15	0.06
Small city	0.18	0.08	0.10	0.08	0.05
Country/town	0.24	0.06	0.10	0.13	0.08
Migrant background (<i>F</i>)	89.67***	228.96***	1.19	15.62***	3.95*
Yes	0.15	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.06
No	0.20	0.07	0.10	0.12	0.06
Religion (<i>F</i>)	82.80***	144.97***	247.30***	198.44***	1695.95***
Catholic	0.23	0.06	0.07	0.21	0.06
Protestant	0.22	0.06	0.16	0.06	0.04
Orthodox	0.26	0.04	0.06	0.05	0.28
Not belong to any religion	0.16	0.09	0.09	0.11	0.04
Other	0.11	0.11	0.08	0.07	0.04

Notes. Total *N* ranges between 6,442 and 6,479. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (F-test for the significance of the differences between categories).

country by country reveals that they are almost entirely spurious. For instance, the non-Catholic respondents in France and Spain do not differ from the Catholic population in these countries in their understandings of culture. The case of *Good manners* in Serbia is similar: Orthodox Christian respondents are no different from other (tiny) religious groups. Finally, Finnish and Danish protestants are not substantially different from their non-religious counterparts in how often they share the *Human activity* understanding of culture. Thus, it seems to be the country, not religion, which mostly matters for people's understanding of culture in contemporary Europe.

Interestingly, national contexts modify some other sociodemographic associations, such as those between the understandings of culture and age or education. Figure 1.2 presents how the associations of our five key understandings of culture and age vary across countries. Partly similar results are obtained for the associations with education (not shown here).

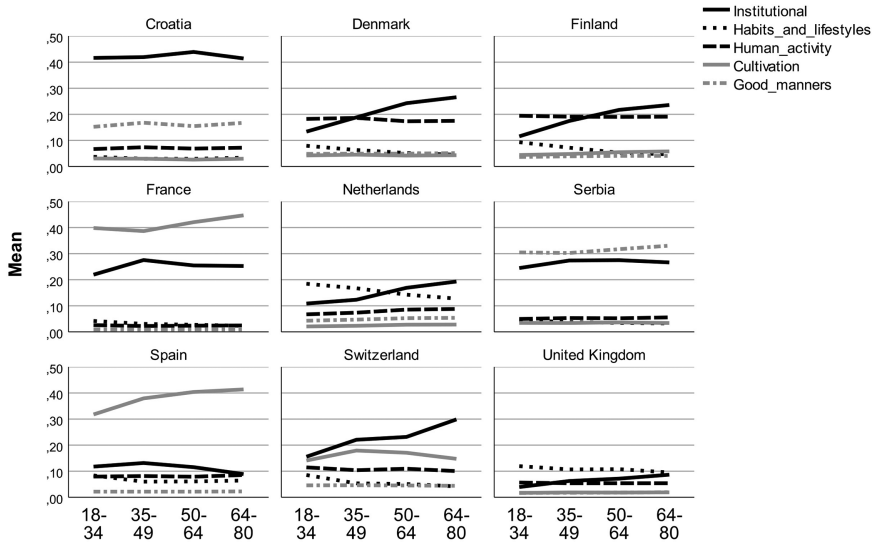


Figure 1.2 Mean Scores of the Five Topics Measuring Different Understandings of Culture According to Age Group and Country (total $N = 6,442$)

First, Figure 1.2 highlights how crucial the cross-national differences are for the prominence of the key understandings of culture, no matter how they are associated with age. In addition, it reveals that age-related differences indeed vary across countries. For instance, understanding culture as *Institutional* is clearly related to old age in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland but not in other countries, where the line is rather stable (also meaning that in none of the countries, the association is reversed). Another example is *Cultivation*, which is more typical amongst old age groups in France and, especially, in Spain but not in Switzerland (the only other country where this understanding is prevalent). The panel of the United Kingdom in Figure 1.2 looks very flat overall because the five topics examined here do not include the most typical understandings of culture in the United Kingdom, *Shared values and traditions* (with a proportion of 23%), *Group characteristics* (18%), and *Arts* (17%).

5. Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the understandings of culture and their social correlates among contemporary Europeans using comprehensive survey data from nine countries. For our analysis of open-ended survey responses, we relied on an advanced machine learning method, structural topic modelling. Our results, abstracted from thousands of unstructured textual responses, suggest that the understandings of culture among Europeans fall into ten interrelated and overlapping yet distinguishable topics. We validated the meanings behind the topics. The quantitative validation showed, for instance, that the topics appearing “narrow”

(e.g., *Institutional*) are indeed narrow, and the topics appearing “broad” (e.g., *Human activity*) are indeed broad also when using other measurements. The qualitative validation showed, among other things, that the broader and more nuanced meanings of the topics vary in their normativity (e.g., ranging from very neutral *Habits and lifestyles* via positive connotations of *Human activity* to the elevated normativity of *Cultivation* and, finally, *Good manners* echoing the sharp distinctions between the civilised and uncivilised) while also paying attention to the coexistence of multiple meanings inside the same answers and the overall high level of reflexivity demonstrated by the respondents in their awareness of different meanings of the concept. While examining the five topics previously more in depth, the other five complemented the picture, with *Arts* being a narrow understanding along *Institutional*; *Shared values and traditions*, *Geographical identity*, and *Group characteristics* being the three other broad understandings close to *Habits and lifestyles*; and *History and heritage* sharing certain commonalities with *Human activity* in understanding culture as past or present human accomplishments.

Importantly, we showed that the understandings of culture among ordinary Europeans vary primarily according to national context and only to a lesser degree along sociodemographic divisions. While the prevalence of all topics varies across countries, some of them are found more consistently in every country (e.g., *Institutional*), whereas others are highly country specific (e.g., *Cultivation*, which dominates in France and Spain, and *Good manners* in Serbia). Moreover, some countries have significant resemblances while being sharply different from others. Thus, we identified several “pairs” of countries that are close to each other: Denmark and Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, France and Spain, and Croatia and Serbia. Fittingly, Switzerland, in the middle of the European map and famously often considered a culturally mixed country, is the only country without a clear “pair” but represents a unique combination with hints of Nordic and French features. Further research is warranted on the reasons behind these cross-national differences in understandings of culture, analysing, for instance, institutional contexts such as school systems and how “culture” taught in them might vary across countries (cf. Daenekindt & Roose, 2015).

The differentiation along sociodemographic divisions is not insignificant, however – the power of cross-national variation just tends to overshadow its part. First, the main understandings of culture are associated with the usual suspects in cultural stratification research; age and education. Of the major understandings, *Institutional*, for instance, is associated with old age and low education, while *Habits and lifestyles* is associated with young age, *Human activity* with high education, and *Good manners* with low education. Understanding culture narrowly as *Institutional* or *Good manners* was associated with living in rural areas, while broad views such as *Habits and lifestyles* are more common in cities. Having a migrant background increases the broad understanding of culture as *Habits and lifestyles* and decreases the narrow understanding of culture as *Institutional*. Gender or religion – after finding out that the drastic differences according to religious denomination are mostly due to the cross-national variation – proved overall not very powerful predictors of understandings of culture in contemporary Europe. However, future research

certainly should disentangle more in depth the ways these associations are inter-related and how they interact with the crucial determinant of understandings of culture, the national context.

Our study has several implications. For cultural stratification research, the challenge remains that if conceptual understandings are systematically patterned along similar lines as cultural practices and lifestyles, what is the best way to capture such patterns, or avoid letting them unintendedly influence the research and its findings? Considered methodologically, if social groups located in different social and national contexts understand the very concept of culture dissimilarly, it raises the question of whether the results of cultural stratification research might be in certain aspects shaped by the differences in understanding the concept, if the concept is used, for instance, in survey questionnaires or interviews without sufficiently clear explanations. What complicates this further is that citizens and social groups can use culture in multiple ways to describe its manifold aspects simultaneously. Therefore, future research should pay more attention to what meaning is used, in which situation, in which context, and from which position.

Moreover, our results about the differences in understandings of culture across European countries can be interpreted in general as bad news for cross-nationally comparative research on cultural issues. Especially in cross-national surveys, aiming at measurement equivalence by phrasing questions identically – perhaps referring to “culture” without further qualifications – our findings highlight the risk of systematic problems with comparability. These issues are relatively well known in general (e.g., Livingstone, 2003; Purhonen & Wright, 2013; Schuster, 2007) but rarely explicitly considered relating to the usage of the concept of culture.

Regarding cultural policy research, we argue there are not only two “torn halves” in it (Bennett, 2004, p. 237). The two poles of narrow and broad notions are not insignificant, as we have seen their presence in all national contexts, but they are far from the whole picture. Our results indicate what Gray (2015) has argued: The concept of culture is polysemic and, therefore, can be well prone to ambiguity and misuse in cultural policy contexts. Therefore, in cultural policy and research, it is paramount to clarify how one uses the concept of culture to avoid confusion and misunderstandings. Increasing thereby the conceptual clarity and transparency of cultural policy documents might be the only route to be able to redesign more realistic and honest, less “bullshitting” (Belfiore, 2009, p. 343) cultural policy ideas and practices. There is a plethora of understandings of culture among Europeans to which dominant cultural policies and their mechanisms remain blind. Cultural policies can aspire to be more inclusive, democratic, and participatory only by recognising the richness of discourses, experiences, and relations citizens have with culture.

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