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Sophie Kunert

The Eight Universal Dimensions of Culture from a Synthesis of Cultural Taxonomies

A Compendium on Cultural Taxonomies and a Tool for the Universal Dimensions of Culture

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Sophie Kunert

The Eight Universal Dimensions of Culture from a Synthesis of Cultural Taxonomies

A Compendium on Cultural Taxonomies and a Tool for the Universal Dimensions of Culture

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TU Bergakademie Freiberg, Germany

Von der Fakultät für Wirtschaftswissenschaften der Technischen Universität Bergakademie Freiberg genehmigte Dissertation zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades doctor philosophiae, Dr. phil.,
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Preface

"Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough, what it hides most effectively from its own participants" (Edward T. Hall, 1959, p. 39). Our today's society is fulled by the condition and continuing dynamic, called globalization. Globalization is the catalyst for the so-called "*interdependent global society*", creating not only global economic interdependencies, but also a wide range of circumstances that affect our world (Samovar et al., 2016). Because of these dynamics, there is an urgent need for cooperation, improvement of relations between countries, effective intercultural communication and cooperation, and the creation of a sustainable world in peace through effective intercultural communication (Featherstone, 1990; Hofstede & Hofstede (2005); Samovar et al., 2016; Tayeb, 1994). The overall objective of this dissertation is to provide a valuable and comprehensive understanding and tool for enhancing, international cooperation, improving co-country relationships, and making intercultural communication and collaboration more effective. The crucial element of this dissertation constitutes the synthesis of cultural dimensions from existing cultural taxonomies, extended by the operationalization of the eight identified universal dimensions of culture (UDCs) into a questionnaire. Three research questions guide the research of this dissertation. First, an extensive Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is pursued to identify the current state of research, demonstrating the research gap on a unified approach for classifying national cultures into cultural dimensions. Eight assumptions displaying the eight UDCs are derived from the results of the SLR. Subsequently, an evaluation and selection framework for identifying the research base of comparable existing cultural taxonomies is developed. A research base of 11 cultural taxonomies and 50 cultural dimensions is retrieved. These serve as the basis for developing the eight UDCs, following a synthesis process and protocol. All eight assumptions are demonstrated to form the eight UDCs of

this dissertation. The eight UDCs are operationalized into a questionnaire, which was extensively pre-tested by experts and in the field. An example country study for Germany, Canada, and Brazil is conducted, and the corresponding country profiles for the eight UDCs are displayed.

Keywords: National cultures · National culture classification · Cultural dimensions · Cultural taxonomies · Globalization · Intercultural communication · Synthesis of cultural dimensions · Questionnaire · Universal dimensions of culture

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"A single arrow is easily broken, but not ten in a bundle"

– Japanese Proverb –

Contents

1 Introduction 1
- 1.1 Motivation, Problem, and Objective of Research 1
- 1.2 Research Questions (RQs) 5
- 1.3 Structure and Classification of Research 6
- 1.4 Contribution to the Field of Research 8

2 Current State of Research 11
- 2.1 Methodology and Systematic Literature Review (SLR) 13
- 2.2 Assumptions 48

3 Evaluation and Selection of Existing Cultural Taxonomies 59
- 3.1 Evaluation of Cultural Taxonomies 61
- 3.2 The Resulting Cultural Taxonomies 90

4 Introduction to the Synthesis of the Universal Dimensions of Culture (UDCs) 93
- 4.1 Premises and Analysis Protocol 93
- 4.2 Special Report on the Remaining Synthesis Dimension 99
- 4.3 Overview of the Eight Universal Dimensions of Culture (UDCs) 104

5 The Environment—One Connecting Concept? 111
- 5.1 Synthesis of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Distribution of Power and Status 111
- 5.2 Synthesis of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Relationship with the Natural Environment 122
- 5.3 Synthesis of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Social Organization 131

5.4 Delimitation Between the Concepts of Distribution of Power and Status and Social Organization 145
5.5 Delimitation Between the Concepts of Social Environment and Relationship with the Natural Environment 147
5.6 Results of the Syntheses 149

6 Time—One Connecting Concept? 161
6.1 Synthesis of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Perception and Use of Time 161
6.2 Synthesis of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Traditionalism versus Secularism 170
6.3 Synthesis of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Uncertainty Avoidance and Coping Mechanisms 179
6.4 Delimitation Between the Concepts of Uncertainty Avoidance and Relationship with the (Natural) Environment ... 189
6.5 Delimitation Between the Concepts of Perception and Use of Time and Traditionalism versus Secularism 193
6.6 Results of the Syntheses 195

7 Human Behavior—One Connecting Concept? 209
7.1 Synthesis of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Human Orientation 209
7.2 Synthesis of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Gratification and Expression of Emotions, Feelings, and Desires 215
7.3 Results of the Syntheses 224

8 Questionnaire for the Eight Universal Dimensions of Culture (UDCs) 233
8.1 Process and Methodology of Questionnaire Development 236
8.2 Pre-Test of the UDC Questionnaire 237
8.3 A Country Study for Brazil, Canada, and Germany 297

9 Conclusion 325
9.1 Implications 325
9.2 Limitations of Research 330
9.3 Outlook 332

References 335

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Process and Research Output 7
Figure 2.1 Thematic Position of Chapter 2 12
Figure 2.2 Methodology of Systematic Literature Review (SLR) 14
Figure 2.3 Search Queries and Search Requirements 18
Figure 2.4 Flow Chart of Search in Electronic Databases 21
Figure 2.5 First Manual Screening 23
Figure 2.6 Second Manual Screening 24
Figure 2.7 Third Manual Screening 25
Figure 2.8 The Framework of the Narrative Synthesis 31
Figure 3.1 Thematic Position of Chapter 3 60
Figure 3.2 Evaluation and Selection Criteria 63
Figure 3.3 Evaluation and Selection Framework 69
Figure 4.1 Thematic Position of Chapter 4 94
Figure 4.2 Approach and Premises of the Synthesis of the Eight Universal Dimensions of Culture (UDCs) 98
Figure 5.1 Assumption 1 (A1): The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Distribution of Power and Status 112
Figure 5.2 Assumption 2 (A2): The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Relationship with the Environment 123
Figure 5.3 Assumption 3 (A3): The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Social Organization 133
Figure 5.4 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Distribution of Power and Status 150
Figure 5.5 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Relationship with the Environment 155

Figure 5.6 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Social Organization 156
Figure 6.1 Assumption 4 (A4): Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Perception and Use of Time 162
Figure 6.2 Assumption 8 (A8): The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Traditionalism versus Secularism 171
Figure 6.3 Assumption 5 (A5): The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Uncertainty Avoidance 180
Figure 6.4 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Perception and Use of Time 197
Figure 6.5 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Traditionalism versus Secularism 201
Figure 6.6 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Uncertainty Avoidance and Coping Mechanisms 205
Figure 7.1 Assumption 6 (A6): Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Human Orientation 210
Figure 7.2 Assumption 7 (A7): Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Indulgence versus Restraint 216
Figure 7.3 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Human Orientation 225
Figure 7.4 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Gratification and Expression of Emotions, Feelings, and Desires 228
Figure 8.1 Thematic Position of Chapter 8 234
Figure 8.2 Process of Item Selection 235
Figure 8.3 Results of the First Debriefing Question 271
Figure 8.4 Results of the Second Debriefing Question 273
Figure 8.5 Results of the Third Debriefing Question 274
Figure 8.6 Results of the Fourth Debriefing Question 276

List of Tables

Table 1.1 Classification of Research as Deductive Definition and Measurement 8
Table 2.1 Selection of Search Terms 17
Table 2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria 19
Table 2.3 Identified Articles from the Search within Electronic Databases 22
Table 2.4 Overview of Identified Articles 25
Table 2.5 Overview of Evaluation Indicators 26
Table 2.6 Evaluation of the Nine Articles from the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) 29
Table 2.7 Synthesized Concept of Distribution of Power 33
Table 2.8 Synthesized Concept of Relationship with the Environment 35
Table 2.9 Synthesized Concept of Social Organization 37
Table 2.10 Synthesized Concept of Uncertainty Avoidance 41
Table 2.11 Synthesized Concept of Time 43
Table 2.12 Synthesized Concept of Human Orientation 45
Table 2.13 Summary of Narrative Synthesis and Overview of Concepts 47
Table 2.14 Overview of the Eight Assumptions, Details, and Characteristic Features 49
Table 3.1 Analyzed Cultural Taxonomies by the Four Synthesis Methodologies 60
Table 3.2 The 34 Cultural Taxonomies 71
Table 3.3 Overview of Selection Criteria for the 34 Cultural Taxonomies 73

Table 3.4 Overview of Evaluation Criteria for the 34 Cultural Taxonomies 85
Table 3.5 Research Base: The 11 Selected Cultural Taxonomies 91
Table 4.1 Overview of the 50 Cultural Dimensions from the 11 Cultural Taxonomies 95
Table 4.2 Analysis Protocol for the Syntheses of the Eight Universal Dimensions of Culture (UDCs) 99
Table 4.3 Higher Gender Egalitarianism Societies vs. Lower Gender Egalitarianism Societies 103
Table 4.4 Overview of the 50 Cultural Dimensions and their Synthesis into the Eight Universal Dimensions of Culture (UDCs) 105
Table 4.5 Overview, Description, and Cultural Components of the Eight Universal Dimensions of Culture (UDCs) 107
Table 5.1 Synthesized Cultural Dimensions of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Distribution of Power and Status 153
Table 5.2 Synthesized Cultural Dimensions of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Relationship with the Natural Environment 157
Table 5.3 Synthesized Cultural Dimensions of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Social Organization 159
Table 6.1 Synthesized Cultural Dimensions of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Perception and Use of Time 199
Table 6.2 Synthesized Cultural Dimensions of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Traditionalism versus Secularism 203
Table 6.3 Synthesized Cultural Dimensions of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Uncertainty Avoidance and Coping Mechanisms 206
Table 7.1 Synthesized Cultural Dimensions of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Human Orientation 226
Table 7.2 Synthesized Cultural Dimensions of the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Gratification and Expression of Emotions, Feelings, and Desires 230
Table 8.1 Overview of Panel of Experts 238
Table 8.2 Overview of Development of First Revised Set of the 37 Items 241

Table 8.3 General Recommendations from Experts 1–3 250
Table 8.4 Overview of Development of Second Revised Set of the 35 Items 253
Table 8.5 Expert Evaluation of the Second Revised Set of the 35 Items 260
Table 8.6 Background Questions 268
Table 8.7 Background Information on Respondents of the Pre-Test 268
Table 8.8 Overview Respondents Nationality by Category 269
Table 8.9 Comments and Implementation of the First Debriefing Question 271
Table 8.10 Overview of Comments of the Second Debriefing Question 273
Table 8.11 Comments and Implementation of the Third Debriefing Question 275
Table 8.12 Comments and Implementation of the Fourth Debriefing Question 276
Table 8.13 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Distribution of Power and Status by Items and Implications 279
Table 8.14 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Relationship with the Natural Environment by Items and Implications 280
Table 8.15 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Social Organization by Items and Implications 283
Table 8.16 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Perception and Use of Time by Items and Implications 286
Table 8.17 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Uncertainty Avoidance and Coping Mechanisms by Items and Implications 287
Table 8.18 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Human Orientation by Items and Implications 289
Table 8.19 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Gratification and Expression of Emotions, Desires, and Feelings by Items and Implications 291
Table 8.20 The Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Traditionalism versus Secularism by Items and Implications 293
Table 8.21 Overview of Item Adaptation after Field Pre-Test 295

Table 8.22 Overview of Pre-Test Respondents for Brazil, Canada, and Germany 298
Table 8.23 Implications Country Score Calculation per Cultural Taxonomy 300
Table 8.24 Country Study Results for the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Distribution of Power and Status 302
Table 8.25 Country Study Results for the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Relationship with the Natural Environment 304
Table 8.26 Country Study Results for the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Social Organization 307
Table 8.27 Country Study Results for the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Perception and Use of Time 310
Table 8.28 Country Study Results for the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Uncertainty Avoidance and Coping Mechanisms 312
Table 8.29 Country Study Results for the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Human Orientation 314
Table 8.30 Country Study Results for the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Gratification and Expression of Emotions, Desires, and Feelings 316
Table 8.31 Country Study Results for the Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) Traditionalism versus Secularism 318
Table 8.32 Summary on Country Study per Country and Universal Dimension of Culture (UDC) 323
Table 9.1 Overview of the Eight Universal Dimensions of Culture (UDCs) 328

Introduction

1

Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough, what it hides most effectively from its own participants

Edward T. Hall (1959, p. 39)

1.1 Motivation, Problem, and Objective of Research

More than ever, people are influenced by circumstances in their immediate environment as well as by people and events in other parts of the world (Samovar et al., 2016). In other words, people are confronted more than ever with people who are acting, speaking, and thinking differently. At the same time, people worldwide are exposed to similar problems regarding, for example, political, ecological, economic, or meteorological issues since these issues do not follow human-made borders, neither national nor regional (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

This interdependency of people—*the interdependent global society*—was and is fuelled by the constant increasing mobility of capital, goods, people, and services as well as a fast-paced change in the state-of-the-art and use of technology (Samovar et al., 2016; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2017). The increasing worldwide connectedness is expressed in an existing condition, and a continuing dynamic, known as globalization. Globalization not only causes global economic interdependences, but it also constitutes the cause for a broad spectrum of circumstances that influence and addresses the world in general (Samovar et al., 2016).

With the ongoing dynamic of globalization and thus the ongoing involvement of divergent groups from different parts of the world emerged the need for international cooperations, strengenth of co-country relationships, effective

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intercultural communication and collaborations, (Featherstone, 1990; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Samovar et al., 2016; Tayeb, 1994). The overall objective of this dissertation is to provide a valuable and comprehensive understanding and tool for enhancing international cooperation, improving co-country relationships, and making intercultural communication and collaboration more effective.

One way to understand globalizing dynamics is to explain the differences in people's thinking, feeling, and acting compared to people from other parts of the world. The concept of culture can serve as one explanation for this. The concept of culture is assumed to give meaning to differences between individuals by explaining their attitudinal, behavioral, and emotional patterns. Although, no simplistic explanation for the behavioral patterns of an individual exists just because the individual can be subsumed to a specific cultural group (Aneas & Sandín, 2009). Even if a cultural pattern is specifically applicable for one cultural group, it is not guaranteed that the pattern is equally distributed among the individuals of that group (Triandis, 1996).

The word culture originates from the Latin word colere meaning to cultivate, its modern anthropological connotation can be traced back to Tylor[1] (1871), and its understanding as an academic subject can be dated back to the 1950s. Mainly Hoggart (1957), Williams (1958, 1976), and Thompson (1963) shaped the transformation from the word culture towards its today's characteristic as the phenomenon it is (Aneas & Sandín, 2009; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Sarangi, 1995).

As the introduction quote by Hall (1959) pointed out, the concept of culture cannot easily be understood, applied, nor defined. Over the past decades, many contradictory and incompatible definitions evolved for the concept of culture (Groseschl & Doherty, 2000; Triandis, 2000; Williams, 1976). The challenge is to comprehend the concept to a holistic and accessible concept, especially in Social Sciences (Keesing, 1974). The main reason for the complexity of the concept of culture constitutes its entangled connection to its surrounding context (Sarangi, 1995; Tayeb, 1994).

For the application of the concept of culture in this dissertation, the following two assumptions were made. First, the concept of culture can explain differences in the behavior of humans or a group of humans (Poortinga, 2015). Second, the definition of culture is never detached from the context in which the concept is considered (Chapman, 1996). One basic notion that most researchers agree on

[1] Tylor (1832–1917) is considered as the founder of Cultural Anthropology. His work *Primitve Culture* (1871) is one of the essential works in Cultural Anthropology (Street, 2019).

is that culture consists of "shared elements" that are either explicit or implicit prevalent in a culture (Groseschl & Doherty, 2000; Shweder & Levine, 1984).

The shared elements are displayed in psychological constructs—for example, behaviors, norms, and values (Groseschl & Doherty, 2000)—simplified in a metaphoric illustration as an onion (please refer to Hofstede (1980)). One of the most cited and applied definitions for culture was written by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) (Groseschl & Doherty, 2000; Poortinga, 2015). Their definition served as a "common denominator" for various later definitions (Vijver & Hutschemaekers, 1990). Kroeber and Kluckhohn defined culture as follow:

> Culture consists of pattern, explicit, and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as product of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181)

This dissertation seizes on the above definition by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) for the concept of culture. However, the concept of culture cannot explain single individual behaviors (Poortinga, 2015). Each individual possesses a unique cultural heritage unique to the individual, and the individual belongs to a group with which it then shares one cultural heritage (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952).

The concept of culture alone is insufficient to provide an easy-to-understand tool for improving co-country relationships, effective intercultural communication, and collaboration. In order to benefit from the implications and assumptions of the concept of culture, it needs to be and is distilled to the more precise form of national culture, inducing the passport approach in this dissertation. Also, the concept of national culture is not free of controversies, mainly when applied in terms of the passport approach (Groseschl & Doherty, 2000; Poortinga, 2015). The main controversy regarding the passport approach originates from implementing the construct nation, applying artificially drawn national boundaries. These artificially drawn national boundaries could cause false conclusions when referring to cultures as one national culture or a nation as one culture. Additionally, due to artificial boundaries, cultural identities could not be homogenously distributed within one nation. In terms of causality, this would lead to biases in the distribution of adequately representative values of a corresponding population (Taras et al., 2016).

The counterarguments against the application of the passport approach and, to a greater extent, against the concept of national culture raise the question of

the approach's benefits (Smith, 2004). Hofstede (1980) concluded and justified the application of the passport approach by "cultures are not king-size individuals. They are wholes, and their internal logic cannot be understood in terms used for the personality dynamics of individuals" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 17). Some researchers searched for empirical proof of the application of the concept of national cultures. Inglehart and Baker (2000) analyzed three waves of the World Value Survey (WVS) regarding a link between economic development and the systematic change in individuals' underlying values in a country. The researchers concluded from their statistical analysis that individuals could serve as a study element for national cultures, mainly due to their shared experiences of their surrounding systems (e.g., education, media, institutional system). Similar conclusions were drawn by Taras et al. (2016), Peterson and Smith (2008), and De Mooij (2013).

Researchers distinguish different behavioral aspects of their defined (regional) groupings and form cultural dimensions (Low & Chapman, 2003). As the intangible concept of culture induces, the classification of national cultures into cultural dimensions also induces various biases, bijectivity, and interpretations. At this point, the research of this dissertation sets in. In the search for attempts to classify national cultures in cultural dimensions, one comes across various approaches—*the theory jungle of cultural taxonomies* (Nardon & Steers, 2009). Usually, the following six existing cultural taxonomies are stated for explanations of cross-cultural issues: Hall (1959, 1966, 1976, 1983; Hall & Hall, 1990), Hofstede (1980), House et al. (2004, 2007, 2014), Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Schwartz (1992, 1994b), and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012). These cultural taxonomies provide unique cultural dimensions to classify national cultures, causing a jungle of cultural taxonomies that lacks clarity and conformity (Nardon & Steers, 2009).

This dissertation challenges the inconsistency of cultural dimensions from existing cultural taxonomies, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of national culture by identifying the core concepts and cultural components developed over decades to classify national cultures in cultural dimensions. The urgency and currency for such clarification were just before the end of this dissertation demonstrated by Kaasa (2021). Kaasa (2021) focused on the possibility to merge different cultural dimensions from existing cultural taxonomies into one system, applying only the three taxonomies of Hofstede (1980), Schwartz (1994b), and Inglehart (1997).

In this dissertation, various existing cultural taxonomies are analyzed and precisely selected. The focus is placed on taxonomies written in English since English also predominates the research field. All existing cultural taxonomies

that significantly influenced the area are written in English (Mangas-Vega et al., 2018). The research of this dissertation does not stay at this point, like Kaasa (2021), only providing synthesized cultural dimensions. It further operationalized the synthesized dimensions into a valid and reliable tool for assessing national cultures.

The focus in this dissertation is distinctively placed on practicability and managerial views. The main aim of this dissertation is to provide a conclusive synthesis of multiple existing cultural taxonomies. The synthesis required the identification of meaningful interlinkages and causal relations among existing cultural taxonomies. This dissertation presents an integrated model of cultural taxonomies, classifying national culture into eight universal dimensions of culture (UDCs)—the eight UDCs of this dissertation. This research demonstrates an in-depth analysis of existing cultural dimensions. Also, this dissertation provides a synthesis of the cultural dimensions and demonstrates their operationalization and thus applicability.

It should be noted that all humans are subjective and every research in Social Sciences implies inevitable subjectivity by the conducting researcher (Hogan & Emler, 1978). As Hofstede pointed out, "one should realize that dimensions [of national culture] do not 'exist'. Like 'culture' itself, they are constructs, products of our imagination, that have been introduced because they subsume complex sets of mental programs into easily remembered packages" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 71).

This dissertation demonstrates an extensive, and thus, unique (as later substantiated by a systematic literature review (SLR)) synthesis of existing cultural taxonomies, guided by the following three research questions.

1.2 Research Questions (RQs)

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Which attempts have been undertaken to synthesize cultural dimensions from existing cultural taxonomies in current literature?

The first research question intends to guide the research of this dissertation to the current state of research on the development of UDCs by a synthesis of existing cultural taxonomies. While identifying the current state of research, the focus is on researches that attempted to clarify and synthesize the heterogenic range of cultural dimensions provided by existing cultural taxonomies. In order to answer RQ1, an SLR is conducted. The results of RQ1 were operationalized into eight assumptions, which were identified in the course of the SLR. The eight assumptions reflect the eight UDCs of this dissertation.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Which universal dimensions of culture (UDCs) evolve from a synthesis of cultural dimensions from existing cultural taxonomies under the application of a structured and rigorous approach?
RQ2 builds on the results of RQ1 and seeks to verify the eight UDCs of this dissertation, which were isolated in the SLR and displayed in eight assumptions. A structured synthesis following implications is conducted based on a pre-selected range of 11 existing cultural taxonomies. The 11 pre-selected taxonomies constitute the research base of this dissertation. The research base of these taxonomies is filtered out from a range of 34 existing cultural taxonomies, which were identified in the SLR. A selection and evaluation framework is developed to filter the research base out of the 34 existing cultural taxonomies.

Research Question 3 (RQ3): Can the universal dimensions of culture (UDCs) be operationalized, and can a national culture be understood empirically in terms of the eight UDCs?
In RQ3, it is determined whether or not the UDCs can be operationalized with a questionnaire, and how this can be accomplished. A pretest is carried out to determine if the UDCs are suitable to be empirically operationalized and appropriate to describe national cultures empirically.

1.3 Structure and Classification of Research

In order to answer the three research questions—RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3—this dissertation was structured and conducted along the following process. Firstly, the current state of research was identified in an extensive SLR. Eight assumptions were derived from the results of the SLR, demonstrating the eight UDCs of this dissertation.

Secondly, the research base was determined by the evaluation and selection of cultural taxonomies. Thirty-four taxonomies were evaluated by a framework developed for and applied in this dissertation, resulting in 11 existing cultural taxonomies as the research base of this dissertation. Thirdly, 50 cultural dimensions were retrieved from the 11 cultural taxonomies. These 50 cultural dimensions were synthesized following six premises and a rigorous synthesis protocol. Finally, the identified eight UDCs were operationalized by items, and subsequently, a questionnaire was developed to assess the eight UDCs empirically. Four experts reviewed the developed questionnaire, resulting in an improved version of the questionnaire. Then a pre-test was conducted to ensure the validity

and reliability of the developed questionnaire. The finalized UDC questionnaire is suitable to be applied in a large-scale cross-cultural study. The research of this dissertation was then concluded with a country study, illustrating the eight UDCs and their cultural components for Brazil, Canada, and Germany based on the pre-test results.

Figure 1.1 demonstrates this dissertation's research process and structure.

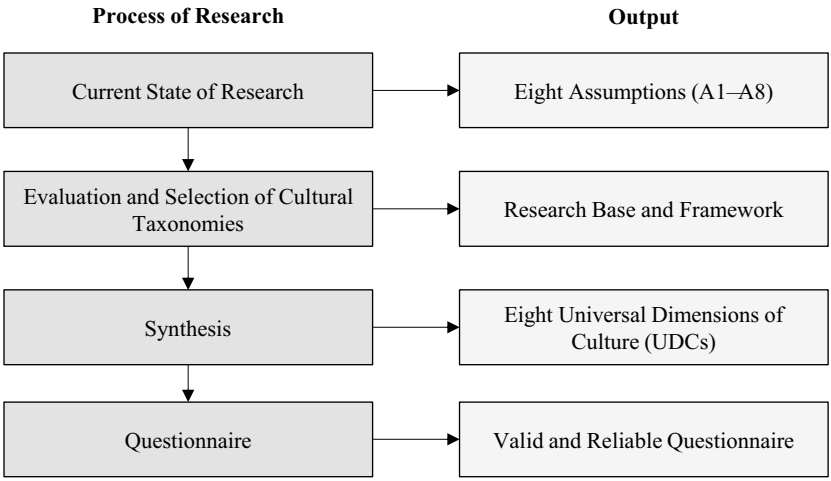

Figure 1.1 Process and Research Output

The research of this dissertation is classified as a deductive definition and measurement of a theoretical concept followed by a subsequent operationalization of the theory to conduct empirical research (Döring & Bortz, 2016). Moreover, the research of this dissertation can be displayed in terms of the guidelines for deductive definition and measurement of theoretical concepts by Döring and Bortz (2016).

Table 1.1 displays the three levels of the guidelines for deductive definition and measurement of theoretical concepts, including their implications for the research of this dissertation, by Döring and Bortz (2016).

Döring and Bortz (2016) provide nine criteria for the classification of research in general[2]. A selection of four out of the nine classification criteria can be

[2] For further information about the nine criteria, please refer to Döring and Bortz (2016, p. 183).

Table 1.1 Classification of Research as Deductive Definition and Measurement

Level	Implication
1. Theoretical Level	**Concept specification** by dimensionalizing national cultures based on a synthesis of selected cultural dimensions from cultural taxonomies, resulting in eight UDCs **Settlement of implications** for the theoretical concept specification as a starting point for a subsequent quantitative study
2. Operationalisation	Selection and development of a **standardized instrument** to convert the theoretical concepts—the eight UDCs—into measurable variables, resulting in a reliable and valid UDC questionnaire
3. Empirical Level	**Development** and **pilot test** of the questionnaire

Note. The table was adapted with changes from *Forschungsmethoden und Evaluation in den Sozial- und Humanwissenschaften* (p. 223), by N. Döring and J. Bortz, 2016, Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg (ISBN 978-642-41088-8). Copyright 2016 by Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg.

applied to describe and classify this dissertation's research in more detail: epistemological approach, scientific aim, subject, and aim of empirical study. The research of this dissertation was pursued with a mixed-method epistemological approach. This dissertation combines a qualitative study with a theory-building of eight UDCs with a subsequent quantitative study, operationalizing the eight UDCs into a questionnaire and conducting a pilot test. This dissertation takes advantage of combining qualitative and quantitative research since both approaches complement each other, enhancing the research and reducing biases and flaws. As the SLR revealed, no previous research attempts at synthesizing cultural dimensions employed the mixed-methods approach discussed here (Döring & Bortz, 2016).

The subject of this dissertation constitutes a theoretical study, merging different existing cultural taxonomies and their concepts argumentatively together into a new theoretical model. Subsequently, the theoretical model was enriched by an empirical assessment of the eight developed UDCs. Finally, the objective of the empirical pilot study is to validate the questionnaire for further applications in large-scale studies.

1.4 Contribution to the Field of Research

This dissertation comprehensively studies cultural dimensions, their underlying concepts, and cultural components from cultural taxonomies. As identified in the

SLR, no existing research demonstrated such a comprehensive study on the topic. Therefore, an objective evaluation and selection framework was developed and applied to identify the research base of this dissertation. As demonstrated in the SLR, the four synthesis methodologies, and the synthesis methodology by Kaasa (2021), published just before submitting the present dissertation, did not apply a structured or objective selection of considered existing cultural taxonomies.

The selected 11 existing cultural taxonomies constitute the base for the next significant advancement and contribution to the area of cross-cultural research of this dissertation by isolating the eight universal dimensions of culture—the eight UDCs of this dissertation. These eight UDCs were synthesized to display the core concepts for distinguishing national cultures in cultural taxonomies. The synthesis in this dissertation, not done by any other synthesis approach, was conducted following a structured, objective, and rigorous procedure.

This dissertation's third advancement and significant contribution to the research area lies in its operationalization of the developed UDCs into a questionnaire, allowing testing and measuring the eight UDCs for further application. No other synthesis approach for cultural dimensions demonstrated such an operationalization of its findings. Finally, the questionnaire was tested to ensure validity and reliability by applying a rigorous pilot test procedure.

Current State of Research

2

This dissertation's current state of research was compiled according to the following first research question (RQ1). Which attempts have been undertaken to synthesize cultural dimensions from existing cultural taxonomies in current literature? The following sub-questions guided the literature review. How did the research of synthesized cultural dimensions evolve over the last years? Which central research lines and results are applicable for synthesizing cultural dimensions from existing cultural taxonomies? What is the extent, quality, and direction of current research attempts in the area? Where would the research of this dissertation be located in the overall landscape for synthesized cultural dimensions?[1].

Figure 2.1 displays the thematic position of the first chapter in the overall structure of this dissertation.

The methodologies of SLRs and narrative literature reviews are most commonly applied in today's research and were more in-depth reviewed for their application (Rother, 2007). Narrative literature reviews are often favored over SLRs. On the one hand, narrative literature reviews provide a general overview of the currently available literature on any topic of interest as well as assessing existing literature in the area of interest reasonably, comprehensively, and critically by applying less explicit inclusion and exclusion barriers (Bryman, 2012). On the other hand, narrative literature reviews are not based on structural approaches, neither applying a review strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, or a research protocol, resulting in low informational content. The low informational content is

[1] The sub-questions for the conduction of the current state of research were framed following Döring and Bortz (2016).

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S. Kunert, *The Eight Universal Dimensions of Culture from a Synthesis of Cultural Taxonomies*, Gabler Theses, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-38765-5_2

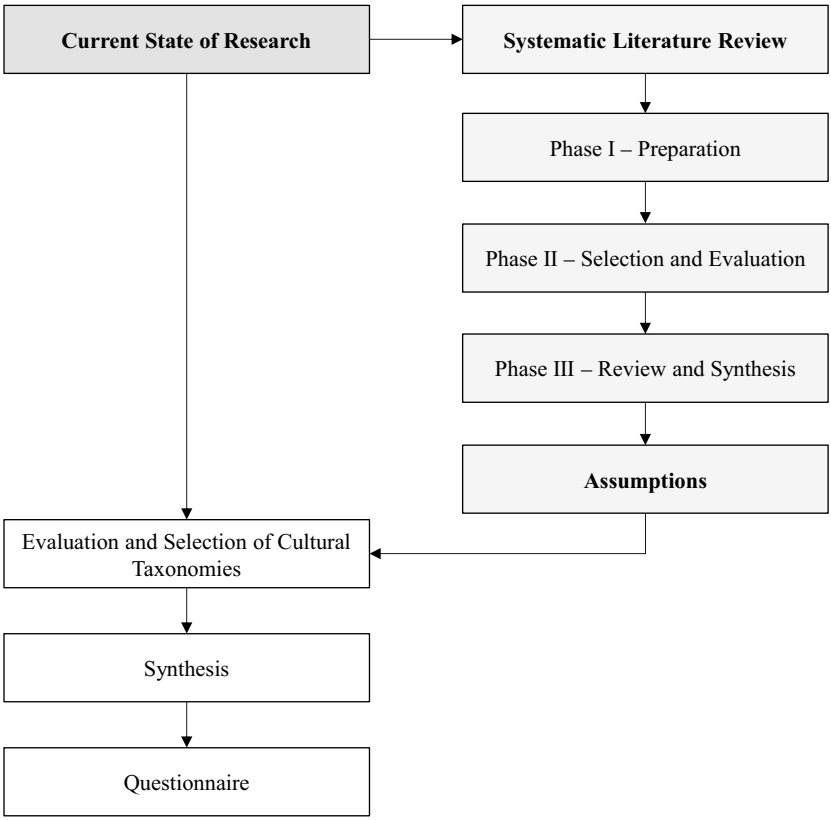

Figure 2.1 Thematic Position of Chapter 2

most likely to cause difficulties reproducing the review itself[2] (Rother, 2007). The lack of transparency and low informational content of a narrative literature review constituted the decisive reasons for this dissertation's rejection of this methodology. Instead, an SLR was conducted to ascertain the current state of research on synthesized cultural dimensions, answering RQ1.

SLRs are acknowledged to enable the conduction of an objective theory foundation on any research question or hypothesis, demonstrating a valuable tool to

[2] For detailed information about the limitations of narrative literature reviews, please refer to Haddaway et al. (2015).

comprehend any range of literature of interest (Rother, 2007; Tranfield et al., 2003). SLRs constitute the most accurate method for conducting scientific literature reviews because SLRs allow for a transparent and practical review of the literature. Their methodology provides guidelines for exploiting any intellectual territory (Mangas-Vega et al., 2018; Needleman, 2002; Tranfield et al., 2003).

The conduction of an SLR consumes considerably more time than the conduction of a standard narrative review, especially since the development of the systematic search strategy can be highly time-consuming. Additionally, the reviewer is advised to keep records of any details during the conduction of the review (Tranfield et al., 2003). The stringent pre-definition of research questions can also be obstructive. Such narrow boundaries can cause constraints to required adaptations during the literature search. Additionally, a stringent methodology can cause "bureaucratization" of the review process. Another common critique on SLRs refers to its evaluation of the quality of an article. The inclusion or exclusion of an identified study depends on the selected evaluation criteria, which could be biased by the reviewer's preferences (Bryman, 2012).

While recognizing these disadvantages, the SLR methodology was selected for the literature review in this dissertation to identify the current state of research on synthesized cultural dimensions from existing cultural taxonomies. For the development of a suitable SLR methodology, the following five approaches were consulted: Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (2009), Mangas-Vega et al. (2018), Massaro et al. (2016), Needleman (2002), and Tranfield et al. (2003)[3].

2.1 Methodology and Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

The SLR of this dissertation, aiming to demonstrate the current state of research on synthesized cultural dimensions from existing cultural taxonomies, was conducted by the author of this dissertation. The conduction of a literature review by one author/the author of a dissertation is common practice for SLR (c.f., Kitchenham, 2004). A specific methodology was developed for the SLR, following the approaches of the five consulted sources. The applied methodology is displayed in Figure 2.2.

[3] The five SLR approaches were identified in a prior literature research. The five listed approaches display a summary on existing approaches; whereas other approaches for SLRs are available and the here given listing is not exhaustible.

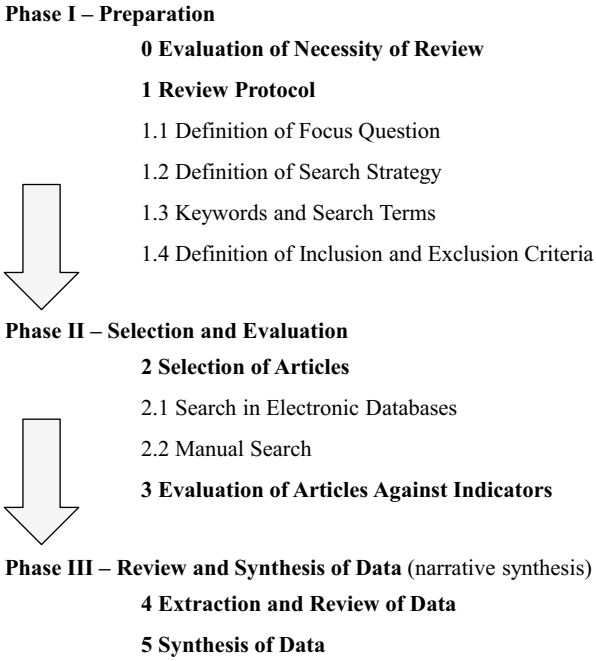

Figure 2.2 Methodology of Systematic Literature Review (SLR). (*Note.* The titles of the steps were adapted with changes from the five consulted SLR methodologies of Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (2009), Mangas-Vega et al. (2018), Massaro et al. (2016), Needleman (2002), and Tranfield et al. (2003))

2.1.1 Phase I—Preparation (Review Protocol)

Step 0: Evaluation of Necessity of Review
The SLR was conducted to detect the current state of research on the synthesis of cultural dimensions of existing cultural taxonomies, as questioned by RQ1.