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Different Perceptions of Cultural Diplomacy: a dive into the operational theories of cultural diplomacy practitioners[1]

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[1] Capitalisation is intentional: "Cultural Diplomacy" refers to the scientific field while "cultural diplomacy" to the practice

Introduction

What are the perceptions about the nature of Cultural Diplomacy and why is the answer to this question pertinent? This concept merits closer examination because of the academic discourse around it. There are different definitions for the term according to the objectives for which culture is instrumentalised - national interests or mutual exchange. The present effort explores this conversation from the side of practitioners of cultural diplomacy, through a series of in-depth interviews with representatives of National Institutes of Culture. It aims to present the different perceptions around Cultural Diplomacy and understand the reasoning behind them.

In order to unravel all these issues, the paper will be split into six sections. In Section Two there will be a literature review so as to present the discussion that exists in the academia on the topic of Cultural Diplomacy. In Section Three the present effort will go into detail on the methodology that has been followed - from the research questions and the collection of primary data and the limitations of the study to the analysis of the data using grounded theory and their interpretation. In Section Five the most pertinent findings will be expanded upon. Finally in Section Six the research questions will be answered and their contribution of this research on the academic discussion as well as on the practice of cultural diplomacy will be pondered.

Literature Review

In this section the two major schools of thought in the field of Cultural Diplomacy will be presented as well as the range of topics that it tends to be connected to. For starters, Cultural Diplomacy has a long history as a practice and many studies have been dedicated to the tracking and understanding of its past (Paschalidis, 2009). The more modern concept of Cultural Diplomacy seems to have arisen during the Cold War, with George Kennan claiming that cultural exchange would be beneficial for the perceptions of the United States of America in the eyes of other states (Bu, 1999: 393). However, the term was popularized by Milton Cummings who coined it in 2003 and defined it as the use of culture with the aim to build "mutual understanding" (Baskoro 2020:38). The difference in objectives between the

interpretation of Kennan and that of Cummings has created two divergent definitions in the literature. Reviews of it in several previous studies point to one definition connecting the use of culture with the strategic promotion of national interests while the other with the dissolution of barriers between different national groups through international cultural exchange (Popovic et al., 2020; Baskoro, 2020; Ang et al., 2015;). Apart from these two definitions there exists also a mixed approach in which a state may subscribe to Cumming's definition in rhetoric as a façade to influence perceptions and de facto promote its national interests or may truly support it but fail to go beyond national interests (Iwabuchi, 2015: 425). Popular terms like *soft power*, pointing to the attraction that a state's cultural capital which can be instrumentalized for the promotion of that state's interests (Nye, 2011;85), and public diplomacy, which indicates a state's strategic communication aiming to influence its image positively in the perceptions of third states (Iwabuchi, 2015:419), add another layer of complexity to the concept. The criticism that these two terms have received may also affect the understanding of Cultural Diplomacy to which they are tied to, that of national interests' promotion. More specifically, Clarke points to the role of consumers of cultural products as actors in their own right (2014:8) and posits that *soft power* is not an automatic process with the state as a sole actor (2014:15). In this case the state may be the initiator of the cultural diplomacy action but consumers can also influence this procedure.

Despite the lack of a universally accepted definition of Cultural Diplomacy, the field has attracted the interest of scholars with many different approaches and questions. From studies trying to understand how National Cultural Institutes operate (Kizlari & Fouseki, 2017), how states actively conduct their Cultural Diplomacy (Jang & Paik, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2015) and even the connection to International Relations and Cultural Studies (Clarke, 2014) to papers considering the link with other fields such as archeology (Luke & Kersel, 2012) and educational exchange (Bu, 1999).

The contribution of this paper to the academic discussion lies in remedying the lack of a discussion around Operational Theories of Cultural Diplomacy. Dennis McQuail defines Operational Theories as theories that focus on the perceptions of the professionals of a field in order to explain phenomena (2010;46-49). While there have been studies taking into account the perspective of practitioners of cultural diplomacy they focus on the relationships

of National Cultural Institutes with states (Kizlari & Fouseki, 2017) and not on their understanding of Cultural Diplomacy itself. As a result, there is a gap in the literature on that point which this effort will attempt to fill.

From the review of the literature there emerged a two research questions and two working hypotheses:

> Research Question 1: "What are the Operational theories of Cultural Diplomacy?"
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> Research Question 1.1: "What is the relationship between Social Scientific and Operational theories of Cultural Diplomacy?"
>
> Research Question 1.2: "Are there independent variables[2] beyond "objectives" causing the creation of different definitions of Cultural Diplomacy?"

Methodology

The present effort is exploratory in nature, meaning it seeks to delve into research questions that have not been studied in similar depth before (Swedberg, 2020). The main question to be addressed is "What are the Operational theories of Cultural Diplomacy?"[3]. The reason that practitioners are the subjects under study stems the lack of a systematic review of the Operational theories together with the fact that:

> "Such knowledge merits the name of theory because it is usually patterned and persistent, even if rarely codified, and it is influential in respect of behaviour" (McQuail, 2010;49)

As regards the other two supplementary research questions that emerged from the review of the literature, they question the similarity of the academic and practitioner discourse on Cultural Diplomacy (Research Question 1.1) and the parametres that lead to the formation of different perceptions of Cultural Diplomacy (Research Question 1.2).

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[2] For an in-depth overview of theories of causality see "Evera SV (1997), *Guide to methods for students of political science* , pp. 136. Cornell University Press."

[3] Research Question 1

In order to answer those questions a qualitative study comprised of in-depth interviews was chosen together with the supervisor. This choice was made as it would permit to take note of perceptions while allowing for the conversation to go beyond the central topic in an attempt to observe the themes that might emerge.

In practice, 12 Brussels-based National Cultural Institutes were contacted: 9 responded and 7 agreed to have an interview. Those were, in the order they were interviewed: the Klub Krug (Serbian Non-governmental Cultural Institute), the Croatian Cultural Association Brussels (Croatian Non-governmental Cultural Institute), the European Institute of Arab Culture (Arab Non-governmental Cultural Institute), the Czech Centre Brussels (semi-independent Cultural Institute[4]), the Liszt Institute Brussels ("under the auspices of the Hungarian Embassy"[5]), the Austrian Cultural Forum in Brussels ("organized by the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs"[6]) and the Korean Cultural Center ("affiliated organization to the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism"[7]). Most of the interviews lasted around 30 minutes, were with high-ranking officials of the respective institutes and tackled issues of the interviewees' perceptions of culture, diplomacy, Cultural Diplomacy, of their organisation and of the relationships between institutes. The main goal was to understand their Operational theories of Cultural Diplomacy but in order to build intimacy the first questions had a more personal tone, inquiring into their personal connection with culture and their organisation. Despite their initial role, as it will be expanded upon in the presentation of the empirical findings, those questions proved useful in the analysis of the Operational theories. More specifically, on more than one occasion there seemed to be a correlation between the answers to those questions and the Operational theories. After that what followed was the central questions about the theory and practice of cultural diplomacy and the interviews ended with a question about the relations between National Cultural Institutes. This final

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[4] "The Czech Centres are a cultural institute that is, I would say I usually use the phrase, semi-independent" (Czech Centre Brussels interview)
[5] Liszt Institute Brussels, retrieved from: https://culture.hu/en/brussels/aboutus-en
[6] Austrian Cultural Forum Brussels, retrieved from: https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/european-foreign-policy/international-cultural-policy/cultural-fora/
[7] Korean Cultural Centre Brussels, retrieved from https://brussels.korean-culture.org/en/6/contents/357

inquiry is beyond the scope of the present effort but the data that was collected could provide a good foundation for further study on the topic.

At that point the research was considered by the author as a thematic analysis in the making. As the interviews progressed, however, and it was not different themes that were prevalent but divergent combinations of perceptions that led to different definitions of Cultural Diplomacy, the research opted for a grounded theory approach. This method of analysis was chosen for the flexibility it provides. Following a grounded theory approach amounts to interacting with the empirical material so as for new research questions and working hypotheses to be developed from it (Bryman, 2012;575). After transcribing the interviews mot-a-mot[8] and conversing with the product of this process there were seven working hypotheses that were created- Working Hypothesis 1.1 was linked to Research Question 1.1, Working Hypotheses 1.2a, 1.2b, 1.2b1 and 1.2b2 with Research Question 1.2 and Working Hypotheses 1.2a1, 1.2a2 with both of the Research Questions 1.1 and 1.2:

> Working Hypothesis 1.1: "In the field of Cultural Diplomacy Social Scientific theories and Operational theories are identical to each other",
>
> Working Hypothesis 1.2a: "The variable 'type of actor' can serve as an independent variable leading to different definitions of Cultural Diplomacy"
>
> Working Hypothesis 1.2a1: "National Cultural Institutes that are connected to their state will define Cultural Diplomacy as the promotion of 'national Interests' "
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> Working Hypothesis 1.2a2: "National Cultural Institutes which are not connected to their state will define Cultural Diplomacy as the promotion of 'mutual understanding' "

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[8] A copy of which was forwarded to the interviewees in order to give them the opportunity to request that specific parts of the interview stay off the record.

Working Hypothesis 1.2b: "Personal beliefs of the interviewees about topics other than Cultural Diplomacy itself can determine their definition of it"

Working Hypothesis 1.2b1: "Personal beliefs about the nature of Culture greatly influence the definition of Cultural Diplomacy by National Institutes of Culture"

Working Hypothesis 1.2b2: Personal beliefs about the nature of Diplomacy and Politics greatly influence the definition of Cultural Diplomacy by National Institutes of Culture"

Having established a series of working hypotheses the next step was to utilize the other part of the grounded theory approach; the formation of analytical categories (Bryman, 2012;575). The categories reflected the questions that were posed to the interviewees and were supplemented by in-verbatim justifications. The question regarding the role of Culture in the interviewees' life and one regarding the theoretical and practical definition of Cultural Diplomacy each received two categories of their own (Culture-Content and Culture-Influence, Cultural Diplomacy-Theory and Cultural Diplomacy-Practice respectively) so that their full depth could be explored. Questions regarding the relationship of the interviewees with their Institutes as well as the relations with other Institutes received one category. Finally there was one category which was not formulated directly from the questions but was a recurring theme in all of the interviews. That category was Diplomacy-Politics, the perceptions of interviewees regarding their states and the way in which they conduct politics. This was the model resulted from this procedure:

Questions	I would like to ask you is what is the role of culture in your life?		Allusions made in other questions	what is your relationship with this institute?	What is Cultural Diplomacy for you? How do you make it into practice to promote the policy of X in such an event?		what is the relation with other cultural institutes?
Institute: A1	Culture-content	Culture-influence	Diplomacy	Organisation	Cultural Diplomacy-Theory	cultural diplomacy-Practice (+who is it for)	Relations between institutes of culture

After completing the codification of the empirical material, the data that emerged were examined in relation to the Research Questions and the Working Hypotheses of the present effort and what follows in the next section is the result of that process.

Empirical Findings

The data showed a polyphony in the Operational theories of National Cultural Institutes going way beyond Social Scientific theories of the literature. Initially, the main factor influencing them appeared to be the existence of a connection to a state and the more linked they were to the state (semi-independent) the more they leaned towards a "national interests" perspective:

> *"there is an image of you that you want to convey to the others and it's a basic part of our national image, culture."*[9]

> *"Cultural diplomacy as a soft tool to transport, focus the focus of our foreign ministry topics, transfer through the arts to our partners"*[10]

and most of them supported that Cultural Diplomacy requires a link between the practitioners and a state:

> *"I would always say that the state has to be facilitator in that or a partner or whatever you call it in order to consider this cultural diplomacy."*[11]

Meanwhile, the National Cultural Institutes that presented themselves as independent generally fit more into the "mutual understanding" perspective with an emphasis on people:

> *"Extend the cultural riches of our people but also learn about the others. So exactly the focus is towards relationships"*[12]

> "We would like to be the promoters of certain aspects of the Croatian cultural heritage towards the other national groups in Brussels, which is I think what you're doing and just not for tourism purposes but just to showcase the beauty and diversity and be proud of it"[13]

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[9] *Liszt Institute*
[10] *Austrian Cultural Forum*
[11] Czech Centre
[12] Klub Krug
[13] Croatian Cultural Association

In both cases the distinction the National Cultural Institutes made was twofold: one pertaining to the type of actor (connected to the state or independent) and one to the goal of the practice of cultural diplomacy (state interests or cultural exchange).

Nevertheless, for both types of institutions this discussion was just one part of their definition of Cultural Diplomacy. For the independent National Cultural Institutes, the goal of international cultural exchange would at times be accompanied by other objectives as they had the ability to freely determine their agenda. For example, the European Institute of Arab Culture was seeing its cultural diplomacy as a tool for change and a space of expression that was provided by states but utilized by and for people:

> *"It came like this naturally because I'm interested also in changing things. So, I think that in the democratic process cultural diplomacy is something very important. It's a relationship between the people and the government"*[14]

For the institutions connected to the state there were differentiations on the specifics of interest promotion albeit always within the limits set to them by the states. For example, the Korean Centre understood Cultural Diplomacy as an extension of Public Diplomacy and the Liszt Institute also included the celebration of Hungarian culture on top of its promotion and the Austrian Cultural Forum viewed Cultural Diplomacy as an agenda setting tool:

> *"you know there is three part in Public diplomacy. One is cultural diplomacy and second is policy diplomacy and the last one is knowledge diplomacy. I think main path is Cultural Diplomacy in conducting public diplomacy"*[15]

> *"I'm working for the Hungarian Cultural Centre here which is entitled to help, to promote Hungarian culture and well but there are some other diplomats as well who will do cultural diplomacy. So it's something we really have to collaborate with each other on because the aim is really common: to show the colourfulness of Hungarian culture"*[16]

As regards the practice of cultural diplomacy, irrespective of the type of organization it was linked with the promotion of people through the organization of events. What is more all the organisations, even the ones connected to the state kept their distance from politics - and even with the term "Diplomacy" (none of them have Cultural Diplomacy in their title) - in order to avoid being associated with the distrust that sometimes accompanies them. Hence

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[14] European Institute of Arab Culture
[15] Korean Cultural Centre
[16] Liszt Institute

the focus of their cultural diplomacy was more on the "Culture" and less in "Diplomacy", at least in rhetoric:

> *"The goals of this fund are to keep the Croatian community connected to the Croatian society. Often it sounds like they want right wing voters"*[17]

> *"semi-independent cultural institutes also have their raison-d'-être in the sense that they are able to I would say more easily work with partners from artistic and societal and media sphere"*[18]

> *"Cultural diplomacy as a soft tool to transport, focus the focus of our foreign ministry topics, transfer through the arts to our partners"*[19]

Another parametre of interest was that of "Culture". More specifically there seemed to be a correlation not only between the definition of Culture and the activities the Institutes organized but also in the way they defined Cultural Diplomacy itself. For example, the representative of Klub Krug felt culture as a point of connection. As such they perceived their role as that of a "community manager" and their cultural diplomacy was about forming connections with Serbian culture as a vehicle:

> "the region where I come from is extremely culturally rich and we are all connected. So, whether people like to say or not we are all mixed, we all have families in all these republics, regions. I even have my great grandmother originating from the northern Greece. So, I mean, I saw the world as a connected friendly place early on and later throughout my work"[20]

> What we want is we want other nations, other groups to get to know as people and to see what are we sharing as humans you know, can we exchange something, can we organize a festival together, can we have a film event together[21]

From the above it becomes apparent that there are different perceptions of Cultural Diplomacy. There is the cultural diplomacy that promotes national interests and is connected to state institutions and the cultural diplomacy that supports mutual understanding and is practiced for the people by independent organisations. Those two different perceptions of Cultural Diplomacy are not mutually exclusive and for the most part actors from both sides recognize the validity of their counterparts. What is more, even within them there exist differentiations which appear to be connected to their understanding of culture and

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[17] Croatian Cultural Association
[18] Czech Centre
[19] Austrian Cultural Forum
[20] Klub Krug
[21] As above

diplomacy. For example, the aforementioned interpretation of Cultural Diplomacy of the European Institute of Arab Culture pointing to it being a space of expression is complemented by their belief that culture is a unifying factor and that the ones conducting diplomacy are first and foremost people acting for the benefit of humanity:

> "Even the people that work in diplomacy that are doing culture they are humans at the end of the day. They're going to do the things that benefit the people always because they're part of this, they're citizens."[22]

After presenting the main findings of the research this effort will continue with the answer to the research questions as well as the practical implications of its empirical findings.

Conclusions

The dive into the Operational theories of Cultural Diplomacy brought forth one more distinction apart from that of the objective, that of the actor. It also showed that beliefs about the subsets of Culture and of Diplomacy may also have a role in the understanding and by extension the practice of cultural diplomacy.

The main operational theories of Cultural Diplomacy reflect the academic discourse but differentiate themselves insofar as they are permitted by their organisational culture (independent institutions) and the states they are connected to. Moreover, the type of institution is not the only deciding factor in the shaping of perceptions of Cultural Diplomacy as perceptions of Culture and of Diplomacy are equally important.

These findings allow firstly for the testing of the Working Hypotheses and secondly for the answering of the Research Questions. As regards Working Hypothesis 1.1 it is refuted as Operational theories are way more complex than present Social Scientific theories of Cultural Diplomacy. Working Hypothesis 1.2a is corroborated since the parametre "type of actor" (independent or with a connection to the state) was found to be a cause for different definitions of Cultural Diplomacy. Working Hypothesis 1.2a1 and Working Hypothesis 1.2a2 were both corroborated as a connection to a state was found to be linked with the objective

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[22] European Institute of Arab Culture

of "national interests" while independence had a tendency to be linked with the goal of "mutual understanding". Nevertheless, that does not preclude the cases in which state connected organisations did promote national interests but they also had a place for mutual understanding in their definitions of Cultural Diplomacy. As regards Working Hypothesis 1.2b, 1.2b1 and 1.2b2, they are partially corroborated since there does seem to be link between those parametres and the definition of Cultural Diplomacy but the relationship does not to be one of causation but rather one of influence.

With the newfound knowledge from the tested Working Hypotheses it is at this point possible to answer the Research Questions of the present effort. As pertains to the main question, Research Question 1, the Operational theories of Cultural Diplomacy gravitate mostly either towards the promotion of national interests or of mutual understanding. However, the perceptions of Cultural Diplomacy are heavily case-specific. Each organization has to adapt its strategy and operations to the relationship of not just Belgium with their states but also of the people of Brussels with their culture in general because of the city's international nature. As a result no two definitions were exactly the same even among organisations that shared the same type or the same general objective. As regards Research Question 1.1 Operational theories exceeded Social Scientific theories in complexity and scope. It would seem that the academia has an extensive awareness of the core of the concept of Cultural Diplomacy. Nonetheless, in practice there are factors such the perceptions of "Culture" and "Diplomacy" which seem to not only make up the concept of Cultural Diplomacy linguistically but also conceptually. In that way Operational theories seem to include Social Scientific theories and build on them by inserting the parametre of the perceptions of organisations. Finally regarding Research Question 1.2 apart from the parametre of the "objectives" the "type of actor" was identified as an independent variable to the Operational theories of Cultural Diplomacy. Understandings of "Culture" and "Diplomacy" were also found to influence them. However the findings were not sufficient to recognize those two parametres as independent variables. As a result their role in the definition-making process is arguable and they require further examination so as for a definitive answer to emerge.

These findings add to the existing literature a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of Cultural Diplomacy and create the basis for further research on the parametres

that form perceptions about it. Finally, as regards the practical implications of the research, the codification tool is recognized as the main contribution of the present effort to practitioners of Cultural Diplomacy, as knowing the range of perceptions in the field can allow them to formulate cultural diplomacy strategies including in their planning organisations whose intents or in some cases even existence was previously unknown to them.

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