

Introduction

The aims of this essay are, first, to set out and explore critically the many, sometimes competing, ways in which the idea of culture has been theorized, and then to see how it has been used, or dismissed, by students and practitioners of conflict resolution. This is a moment in conflict resolution and peace research when attention is being directed to the place of culture in the discourses of practitioners and theorists. But along with the realization that culture matters has come great conceptual confusion about the term, resulting in work in the field that is less satisfactory than it should be.

The confusion arises not only from the difficulty of the term itself and from the plethora of ways in which it has been theorized and explained (or explained away) but also from the way culture has been factored into the design stage of conflict resolution processes. Partly, this confusion stems from the curious history of the term and from the varied academic disciplines that have adapted the notion to their own disciplinary idioms. In some idioms “culture” is merely a label, a handy name for persons aggregated in some social, often national, sometimes ethnic, grouping; the name given to the group distinguishes it from other such groups. In other idioms, related to the one we shall adopt, “culture” is conceived more deeply, as an evolved constituent of

human cognition and social action. In some measure, too, the confusion over culture arises because the term is increasingly used in conflict situations by the parties or contestants themselves, usually as part of highly politicized and conflict-saturated discourses of identity, ethnicity, and nationalism. In fact, the ultimate usefulness of “culture” as a social science term is now threatened by its having been taken over by the political actors it is meant to explain—think, for example, of its strategic use in the human rights debate.

In part I of the essay we develop a conception of culture that, avoiding some of the inadequacies of past ways of thinking about it, gives us a framework for considering its uses in conflict resolution theory and practice. In part II we discuss different ways of theorizing social conflict, and the sorts of conflict resolution these different ways entail. In this part we also introduce the notion of two divergent views of conflict resolution, the broad and the restricted. Next, special attention is given to the role of culture in international relations theory and the practice of diplomacy. The views of “skeptics” as to the usefulness of cultural approaches, especially views representing the dominant realist paradigm in international relations, are addressed here.

Part III brings culture and conflict resolution into the same frame of reference by considering critically two strategies for understanding culture: the actor-oriented emic and the analyst-oriented etic approaches. In part IV we examine the role culture has played (or not played) in different theories and practices of conflict resolution, highlighting the development of the problem-solving workshop and addressing once again the views of some culture skeptics. This part concludes by returning to our two conceptions of conflict resolution (broad and restricted) in terms of the current state and the future of the field.

In the essay’s conclusion we address practitioners and trainers/educators, those whose major concerns with conflict resolution lie not so much in theory as in practice.