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LINKING BRAIN AND CULTURE: UNIVERSALISM AND DIFFERENTIALISM

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In 2009, Joan Y. Chiao, one of the leading experts in Cultural Neuroscience, labeled the research field as „a once and future discipline“. Ten years ago neuroscientists began to study cultural phenomena applying functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI). Since then the number of publications and research grants related to this topic has tremendously increased. This was reason enough to examine the concepts of culture implicated, but rarely explicitly discussed, in these studies. Therefore we analyzed 42 English language manuscripts of original fMRI studies spanning from the advent of Cultural Neuroscience in the year 2000 to 2010 published in peer-reviewed journals (indexed in large databases [MEDLINE, PsychInfo, PubMed). Common to all of them were cultural comparisons between divided groups and communities, as e.g. black vs. white, easterners vs. westerners, Asian vs. Caucasian, Americans vs. Turks.

We reviewed the manuscripts with regard to the following aspects: type of comparison, the conveyed concept of culture using the classification by Reckwitz [normative, totality-oriented, differentiation-theoretical and the meaning- and knowledge-oriented], implicit valuation of the comparisons, and the artifact of the comparison. We extracted two main lines of reasoning:
1) Universal models for the interaction between cultures and
2) investigations pursuing a differentiation of divided cultural groups.

Both lines tend to simplify culture as an inflexible set of traits, specificities or biological diversities. We argue against the rigid understanding of culture, point out its disguised valuation and risks considering the Hackingian 'looping effect'.

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