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Cultural Warrant
Old and New Sights from Knowledge Organization

Abstract:
Culture is a controversial and multi-discursive term in different disciplines. A dimension of Knowledge Organization (KO) appears in the cultural warrant (CW) because KO systems, processes and products show “the values of the cultures involved” (Guimarães et al. 2019). We identified four theoretical elements necessary to understand the CW: the need of adjusting the concept of culture to the KO field; the focus placed on local dimensions of knowledge; the intention to promote biased classifications in favour of minority and relegated social sectors; and the ethical issue expressed in the respect for the integrity of the cultural thought of a community. The suitable techniques for the application of the CW in the processes of construction, evaluation, and revision of knowledge organization systems (KOS) are qualitative. Some methods are common to KO: content, terminological, discourse, and domain analysis techniques. We also propose a categorization of three cultural hospitabilities. It is concluded that the concepts of culture and CW are not neutral since they favour forms of knowledge organization that replace the criteria of objectivity and neutrality, by those of cultural pertinence and respect for the values of a community. We also suggest considering the extrapolation of some methodologies from social sciences to study the linguistic behaviour of subcultures in order to improve the CW of KOS.

1.0 Culture, warrant, cultural warrant: consensuses and conflicts
1.1 Culture
Culture is a controversial and notoriously ambiguous term used in different disciplines (anthropology, sociology, politics, feminism, humanities and cultural studies). It is also a “multi-discursive” term, because “it can be mobilized in a number of different discourses” (Hartley 2004, 51). The fact of being multi-discursive explains much of the difficulty to agree on a unique concept of culture. Not surprisingly, more than 150 definitions have been collected in the classic review by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), and all of them are adequate.

Culture is “a term that evolves in the historical period during which it develops,” and therefore, “it has changing contents” (Rodríguez Pastoriza 2006, our translation). Its oldest antecedent is associated with agriculture. In Latin ‘cultus’ means cultivation, cultivated, or treated with care. The semantic background has several positive connotations since crops imply subsistence, regularity, and continuity (Di Tella et al, 2004), the vigorous growth of new forms of life.

The concepts of culture and civilization have been bound together for several centuries, and have been seen from the French tradition of the Enlightenment “as a progressive, cumulative, distinctively human achievement” (Kuper 1999, 5) to which everyone can aspire. Hoggart (1957) and Williams (1958) were the first to propose to overcome the idea of culture as proper of an elite and planted the seed of the so-called cultural studies, which transformed the concept, seen today as “a dynamic concept, always negotiable and in process of endorsement, contestation, and transformation” (Wright 1998, 10).

From an individual perspective, culture can be considered as the measure of a person’s education, manners and knowledge of the world.
But what matters for the objectives and purposes of Knowledge Organization (KO) is culture considered from a social perspective, because it gives an adequate dimension of the information problems and the solutions that have to be addressed, and because each individual (and therefore, each information user) belongs to several cultural communities due to ethnicity, religion, nationality, political thought, habits, and preferences. This was confirmed by Baumann, when he studied five ethnic groups in a London sector, looking for common elements of each culture and found, in addition to those identity traits, what he called “communities within communities as well as cultures across communities” (Baumann 1996, 10). The educational background, professions, and disciplines are also important personal cultural variables.

Even if culture is often defined as a system of shared meanings, Burke (2005) determined that it was difficult to hold this position when large groups, such as nations, were studied. Burke argued that this approach showed the strengths and weaknesses of the Durkheimian model of society, where consensus prevails over conflict (two major topics in culture). He proposed -as an alternative- “the use of the concept of subculture, defined as a partially autonomous culture within a larger totality,” without intending to give an idea of inferiority (Burke 2005, 177).

Burke added that sociologists had dealt with the most visible subcultures (ethnic or religious minorities), those deviant according to the rules of a given society (criminals and heretics), and young people. Historians have also studied groups such as the Jews in Medieval Spain (Pérez 1993) or beggars in Elizabethan London, “but they did not always pay attention to the relationship between the culture of those minorities and those of the surrounding society” (Burke 2005, 178).

Hebdige put an end to this perspective by analysing the process through which dominant mentalities in a society become hegemonic, and treat subcultures in a somehow pejorative way; this gives rise to a tension between the powerful groups and minorities (Hebdige 1979).

Briefly, the following approaches can be taken into account in KO:

i) On the one hand, those that promote consensus values, such as cultural integration and tolerance between cultures. Unesco follows that trend, when it states that culture is conceived “as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and [...] it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and belief” (Unesco 2001).

ii) on the other hand, those that focus on the analysis of the conflict between different cultural expressions, stating that a dominant culture is usually shielded to strongly resist changes and innovations; thus, they cause different contradictions (higher or elite culture vs. popular culture; hegemonic culture vs. subcultures or minority cultures, accepted cultures vs. rejected cultures, urban culture vs. rural culture, literate culture vs. non-literate cultures).

Besides accepting that classificationists must take into account consensus and conflict between cultures when they develop knowledge organization systems (KOS), it may be more appropriate to give equal importance to the principles and methods that ensure reciprocal tolerance, respect for 'otherness' and the promotion of cultural integration values.
1.2 Warrant

As said in a previous paper, “there are no substantial differences regarding the definition of the notion of warrant” (Barité 2019, 652). In 1986, Beghtol developed such a precise and detailed definition of warrant, that it is still peacefully accepted to this day: “the warrant of a classification system can be thought of as the authority a classificationist invokes first to justify and subsequently to verify decisions about what classes/concepts to include in the system” (Beghtol 1986, 110-111).

More than 30 years after its formulation, it might only be added to that definition that: i) warrants are currently seen as an essential component of three KOS processes: construction, evaluation and revision; ii) we can also consider warrants as tools for terminology selection in contexts other than KOS: information and data systems, big data analytics, social classifications, terminological data banks and specialized dictionaries, among others.

The different existing warrants have recently been compiled and explained (Barité 2018), and a discussion on the usefulness of a general understanding of the problems associated with the characterization and application of warrants (Bullard 2017; Barité 2019) has started.

The fact that in KO literature there is an unequivocal understanding of what a warrant is, its utilities, and applications, is a sound foundation for research.

1.3 Cultural Warrant

While the concept of culture turns out to be multi-discursive and controversial and that of warrant is peacefully accepted in KO, what is left to say about the concept of CW? It has been written that the CW is “a critical activity [that] can be used to evaluate both classification schemes and knowledge fields” (Hjørland and Albrechtsen 1999, 135) because KO systems, processes and products reflect “the values of the cultures involved” (Guimarães et al. 2019, 29, our translation).

It has repeatedly been said that although classifications try to represent the map of disciplines in an objective and neutral way, their schemes are historically and culturally conditioned, since they reflect the social, political and religious thought as well as the state of the scientific evolution of their times and designers’ mentalities (Shera 1961; Lee 1976; Beghtol 1986; González Casanova 1996).

KOS have recurrently been criticized for unequal (Trivelato and Moura 2016), improper (Kua 2004), discriminatory (Furner and Dunbar 2004; Olson 2007) or colonialist (Pacey 1989) treatment, or for making invisible many topics (Olson and Ward 1998) in religion, social sciences, literature or gender studies. In all these cases, the classificationists’ cultural perspectives have been seriously questioned, and this has compelled to look for systematic solutions to these issues.

It was Beghtol who refined and expanded Lee’s original and basic idea (1976), pointing out that CW “posits that every classification system is based on the assumptions and preoccupations of a certain culture, whether the culture is that of a country, or of some smaller or larger social unit (e.g. ethnic group, academic discipline, arts domain, political party, religion and/or language)” (Beghtol 2002a, 45).

For a better understanding, in the following sections, the concept of CW will be broken down into theoretical and methodological aspects.
2.0 Theoretical approach to cultural warrant

In the literature review performed for this paper, we identified four theoretical elements necessary to understand the CW:

i) The relevance of adjusting the concept of culture to the KO field. In the literature of the area, it has seldom been explained on what concept of culture the development of an idea is based on. A broad sense -that may not be acceptable to everyone- is usually taken for granted.

Lee made a relevant contribution when she reviewed definitions of culture from both KO and anthropology literature and compiled the definitions in four families of definitions (Lee 2015).

As culture is a multi-discursive and controversial term, it seems logical to seek an operational definition to be used as a reference for each research in KO, integrating the peculiarities of vocabulary control processes, classification, indexing, tagging and information retrieval on culturally determined topics.

ii) The focus placed on local dimensions of knowledge as opposed to universal approaches. The recognition of the local dimensions of knowledge means addressing the conception of science and technology as a set of ideas, solutions and applications valid in any place and time and alternative thinking that addresses specific beliefs, values, and contexts where knowledge acquires a more immediate legitimacy. Tensions between global culture and local cultures are expressed through language, which always operates as a reference to cultural identity.

Notwithstanding the recognition that KO has traditionally favoured universal systems to ensure some uniformity in the international communication of data on publications, in recent years two insurgent movements against universalistic perspectives have been identified. On the one hand, there is a series of critical studies on the serious limitations that universal systems have for the classification and indexing of issues of local impact. On the other hand, we see the emergence of new KOS - especially thesauri - developed for subject representation of local affairs (Brasil, Ministério de Cultura 2006).

Some disciplines are supported by the cultural dimensions of a field (law, history, cultural anthropology, music, literature, and arts), or by approaches built by various disciplinary cultures; they were the first to raise issues of subject representation. For example, the “mate” culture -widespread in Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay, and southern Brazil- has its own body of literature and terminology. Its status requires the creation of classification systems or mini-thesauri to adequately represent the specific documentation on the “mate” infusion and the cultural elements (rituals, objects, procedures, codes of conduct) that surround it.

Likewise, different cultures classify birds differently, and this is studied in ethnobiology (Berlin 1992) and in biological systematics, where different paradigms such as numerical taxonomy and cladistics are competing perspectives.

iii) The intention to promote biased classifications in favour of minority and relegated social sectors. This approach implies accepting the distinction between dominant and subjugated cultures that coexist in the same society. Although this may be an excessive simplification, part of the social conflicts may be related to the non-peaceful coexistence between different cultural communities.

Minority cultures strongly protect their cultural characteristics (language, customs, and ways of understanding reality). They result in followers, theories, documentation,
regulations, objects, liturgies and procedures that require visibility in KOS. Members of minority cultures often develop strong religious, ethnic, ideological and/or philosophical cohesion, especially when the dominant or hegemonic culture reacts showing indifference or real discrimination.

The DDC and UDC classification systems have validated, in many cases, anachronistic or ideologically biased, tendentious, and even offensive constructions of social and cultural knowledge areas. The CW intends to compensate for these imbalances, and maintain the integrity and identity of minor or ‘minoritized’ cultures (Olson 2007).

iv) The ethical issue expressed in the respect for the integrity of the cultural thought of a community. By involving in subject representation the visibility of particular groups, showing their patterns of coexistence and communication, the CW introduces the ethical factor in KO (Beghtol 2002b; Guimarães et al. 2008). This is especially important when attention is focused on the demands of social movements or people who promote ideas based on new ethical presuppositions, or the deconstruction of hegemonic cultural perspectives or forms (Garcia Gutiérrez 2007).

The identification of the CW with essential ethical precepts regarding the recording, availability, access to and retrieval of information in the most open and free way allows us to place it in the pragmatic epistemological approaches to KO advocated by Hjørland (Hjørland 1999, 2013; Barité 2019).

In this context, the concern for not enhancing the hegemonic aspects of a society and considering alternative interpretations of reality forms should be central theoretical orientations in the application of the CW.

This will imply the use of non-discriminatory or non-inclusive indexing terms and politically correct expressions that take into account all the possible perspectives for the formulation of a culturally determined topic or issue. In particular, terminology selection should be endorsed by movements or social groups considered as potential users of an information service or system.

The different dimensions of culture (culturality, culturalism, multiculturality, multiculturalism, interculturality, and transculturality) - studied by Boccato and Biscalchin (2014) - will have to be taken into account among other aspects for the development of the CW concept. The customized and comparative treatment of these dimensions results in a better disaggregation of the concept of culture, but methodological precautions have to be considered.

3.0 Methodological approach to cultural warrant

From a methodological perspective, the suitable techniques for the application of the CW are qualitative. Some methods are common to KO:

Content analysis: a classical tool used for indexing and tagging (Krippendorff 2004; Hsieh and Shannon 2005) which allows identifying culturally marked expressions to be used as appropriate indexing terms for specific user communities.

Terminological analysis: used to create KOS biased towards certain aspects of social and human sciences, or the understanding and judgment of situations where the parameters of two different cultures may be in conflict. The paper by Benyaich (2014) on the consequences of the relative incompatibilities between family law in Spain and Morocco is a good example.
Critical discourse analysis: the assumptions of this methodology listed by Kress, one of the pioneers, have several points of support for the CW. Kress assumed that language is a social phenomenon. Therefore, individuals, institutions and social groups convey meanings and values through language in an organized way. In this context, texts are fundamental units of language in communication. Readers are not passive recipients of texts; on the contrary, they interact in various ways with those texts based on their cognitive structures, perceptions, and cultural patterns (Kress 1989).

Van Dijk (1999) developed categories and procedures for the critical study of the discursive reproduction of domination and hegemonic thinking in societies. These categories and procedures can also be articulated with the CW methods.

Domain analysis: Under this generic name, Hjørland gathered eleven techniques for mapping areas of knowledge from different perspectives and bases of analysis (Hjørland 2002). Some domain analysis techniques -whether qualitative or quantitative- can also be fruitful for the CW, for example: the creation of literature guides; the construction of special classifications and thesauri; empirical user studies; historical studies; epistemological and critical studies; database semantics and discourse studies; and even bibliometric studies.

The CW can be used throughout a KOS specialized in cultural issues, such as the Art & Architecture Thesaurus (Getty Research Institute 2017) or the Brazilian Folklore and Popular Culture Thesaurus (Brasil, Ministério de Cultura 2006).

Some culturally oriented terms can also be inserted into a pre-existing scheme, to make visible a certain perspective. This implies the need to intervene in that pre-existing system, adding specifications in precise areas of the schemes, or inserting alternative tables of local value.

To that end, it is necessary to make changes in the pre-existing system, adding specifications to certain areas or inserting alternative tables of local value.

Beghtol (2002a, 2002b) introduced the principle of hospitality that promotes and values the insertion in the KOS of new, alternative or local specifications. The 'cultural hospitality' implies the capacity to create procedures so that KOS are permeable to different cultural perceptions and conceptions.

In one of her papers, Beghtol pointed out that the cultural hospitality “needs to be debated, assessed and tested further to assess its potential for effective implementation” (Beghtol, 2002a p. 48). In response to that call, we propose here the initial categorization of three forms of cultural hospitality:

i) The technique of creation of paradoxical spaces (Rose 1993; Olson and Ward 1998) to insert gender terminology into the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) tables. The method could also be used in any KOS to insert other culturally determined terms (by race, religion or subculture).

This technique proposes to subdivide a general concept in order to incorporate particular concepts that have been omitted. As an example, Olson and Ward (1998) subdivided 'Economic basis of labor' to include the topic 'Unpaid labor', as follows:

331.116 Economic basis of labor (recorded in DDC)
331.116 2 Unpaid labor (incorporated by the creation of a paradoxical space)
331.116 3 Paid labor (recorded in DDC)
ii) The creation of schemes biased towards certain cultural orientations within pre-existing or autonomously built classifications. In a recent paper about bias in KO, Colombo and Barité (2015) identified and categorized three forms of bias in KOS: positive bias, negative bias and neutral bias. Of the three, the positive bias, understood as the premeditated will to orient the terminology of a KOS in a certain direction (Buddhist thought, Marxist conception, an evangelical approach, a feminist stance in the choice of terms) is a door of access to a cultural perspective with its own identity.

iii) The local adaptations of universal classification schemes to represent the specific characteristics of a country or region. Local adaptations of universal classification systems are a traditional way of expressing cultural hospitality, insofar as they seek to address the peculiarities of a country or region, its geography, administrative division, literature or history. These adaptations can be designed by those officially responsible for the KOS (Beall 2003; Choi 2018), or they can be of local nature, or internally generated in an information system, or a library system or network, with the advantages and disadvantages it entails.

4.0 Conclusions

The term 'culture' has been used in many different contexts, by various disciplines, with different scopes, thus becoming an essentially ambiguous, controversial and changing concept. Neither anthropology - its field of origin - nor the development of cultural studies have been able to overcome this ambiguity, or reach definitive agreements on its meaning, since each discipline loads the concept with original contents, according to its specific needs. The notion of warrant, instead, has a wide and peaceful consensus in KO.

It can be said that the CW is at the midpoint: while some specific theoretical, methodological and application guidelines have been drawn up, they have been established in a somewhat dispersed and sporadic way in specialized literature. Besides, the reasoned extrapolation of concepts related to culture and cultural aspects from the disciplines that have most discussed these issues to KO still seems insufficient. A more comprehensive work, more case studies, and the promotion of theses that include KO in an orderly way, as well as methodological aspects of anthropology, cultural studies, history, and sociology are required.

It is concluded that the concepts of culture and CW are not neutral. They favour knowledge organization forms that replace the objectivity and neutrality criteria with those of cultural pertinence and respect for community values.

It can be stated that the CW is more directly related to pragmatic epistemological approaches to KO, and, therefore, the ethical factor is naturally included in the CW. The need for KO to have its definition (or definitions) of culture is reaffirmed. It is proposed to use the subculture concept as an operational approach because the CW can possibly be more useful to promote the terminology and expressions of minority or relegated cultures.

In other situations, a broader conceptualization of culture may be necessary, especially for the subject representation of the elements of two or more cultures coexisting in the same territory where it is necessary to find linguistic mechanisms for social, political or religious integration.

The best methodological solutions will surely arise in each particular case. Perhaps it
will be possible to extrapolate some methodologies used to study the linguistic behaviour of subcultures. It definitely seems that qualitative methods are the most suitable tools to work with the CW. In this paper, it has been possible to systematize a set of useful methodologies for the CW and to propose a first categorization with three forms of cultural hospitality.

The CW contributes to reaffirm the identity of local cultures and neutralize the acculturation effects associated with globalization and political-economic processes of social exclusion from KOS.

It is essential to privilege the analysis of users’ relationship with indexing terms and documents organization involving their cultural baggage, their way of understanding reality and assimilating established knowledge.

It is important to point out the integrative and democratic role that the CW can give to our area of knowledge, as it postulates tolerance between different cultures and respect for the cultural integrity of subcultures inserted in our societies.

New questions arise about the CW and its purposes, and they require new answers: should it be a tool to prevent or correct deviations from the culturally appropriate, acceptable or tolerable issues? Should we be satisfied if we obtain politically correct tags? Or should we be involved with the cultural, political or ideological conceptions of social movements that claim a different reality in terms of language? The emphasis on consensus (appeal to cultural integration) or conflict (preferential attention to subjugated cultures or social movements) will give the answer in each case.

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References


