Conceptual and Empirical Roots of “Cultural Additivity”

Ho Manh Tung

立命館アジア太平洋大学、大分県別府市十文字原 1-1、874-8577、日本

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

manhho18@apu.ac.jp

This essay seeks to explore the conceptual and empirical roots of the concept “cultural additivity” through the framework of ontological and epistemological divides of concepts and measurement put forth by Goertz and Mahoney (2012).

The concept “cultural additivity” was first used in Klug (1973) in his doctorate dissertation on Judeo-Christian-Black concept of man and history in values education. However, the term was only used in passing, and the author did not attempt to give substances to it. After 45 years, in Vuong et al. (2018a), in exploring the coexistence, interaction, and fusion of the elements in the Three Great Teachings/Religions in Asia: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism using Bayesian statistics on Vietnamese folktales, the authors rediscover the term and identify the implication of the concept in explaining various cultural phenomena in Vietnam. Moreover, by placing “cultural additivity” in the literature on various forms of cultural interaction and merging, i.e., “syncretism,” “hybridity,” “creolization,” the new term is fused with substances and forms.

It is notable that the authors did not come upon “cultural additivity” by exploring the literature on “syncretism,” “hybridity,” “creolization” (Grayson, 1984, 1992; Kapchan, 1993; Drell, 1999; Cohen and Toninato, 2010; Stewart, 2011). Rather, the use of the concept was inspired by the additivity principle in statistics the logic models used in the Bayesian statistical analysis of more than 300 folktales and the mention of the concept in Klug (1973) (Vuong et al. 2018b). This is the reason why the authors argue “cultural additivity” could be seen as the extension of “syncretism,” “hybridity,” and “creolization” into the technical space. Here, it is important to unpack this claim to understand the roots of the term in question. This claim is, first and foremost, substantiated by the hard fact that the old terms were discovered in their unique circumstances. Thus they carry with them their unique contents. For example, “syncretism” was first used in the sixteenth century in religious studies; “creolization” was first used in the same period but given the context of linguistics studies, displacement, and

indigenization; “hybridity” was first used in the nineteenth century in the context of post-colonialism and modernization (Vuong et al., 2018a). As a consequence, in the context of a modern society with a high level of complexity and technical advancement, it is arguable that social scientists would find it difficult to operationalize these concepts and render them useful for quantitative analyses.

This point was briefly brought up in Vuong et al. (2018a). However, it is worth going in more depth here. The three concepts “syncretism,” “hybridity,” “creolization” appear to be developed and applied the most in qualitative discussions, while “cultural additivity” was informed primarily by rigorous statistical analyses. Moreover, a close look at the previous works of the authors reveals other related concepts that also take shapes through in-depth empirical measurements such as “mind-sponge” (Vuong & Napier, 2015) and “creative quantum” and “the 3D information process of creativity” (Vuong & Napier, 2014). It can be extrapolated the “cultural additivity” is either the extension of the three concepts above or the extension of the thinking process, i.e., the philosophy that produces them.

Here, it is helpful to invoke the issue of ontological and epistemological divides between concepts and measurements of Goertz and Mahoney (2012). Goertz and Mahoney (2012) pointed out qualitative and quantitative researchers differ sharply and systematically regarding the ontology of concepts. Qualitative researchers tend to use the semantic approach to fledge out the intrinsic properties of a concept, while quantitative ones would focus on the quality and nature of measures, hence operationalization, aggregation, and resulting datasets. This difference leads to the difference in epistemology, in other words, in what we can know about certain subjects. Quantitative approaches are concerned with “error,” i.e., statistics is about how to generate valid knowledge with the presence of an error. By contrast, qualitative approaches are about generating valid knowledge in spite of the “fuzziness” in placing a concept as a member of a set. Goertz and Mahoney (2012) point out that “error” is inherently epistemological, while fuzziness is an ontological claim about what exists that has implications for what we can know.

Returning to the issue of identifying the conceptual and empirical roots of “cultural additivity,” we find that the birth of the concept, as a data object, seems to violate the aforementioned demarcation of concepts and measurement of Goertz and Mahoney (2012). Specifically, “cultural additivity” comes to takes its space in the conceptual realm through a qualitative exploration of how the concepts can exist together and fit into the literature of various forms interaction and fusion of cultural elements. In other words, the place of “cultural additivity” is identified by examining the fuzziness and more importantly, the gap left behind by other similar concepts. However, one may also ask “What is cultural additivity?

What forms does it take? What is the evidence for its existence?" These ontological questions can be most appropriately answered by referring to the Bayesian logistic analyses, an epistemological process, that back it up. Here, we can grasp the necessity of epistemological and ontological interplay that involves in the birth of a concept.

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