

## MENTAL CULTURAL MODELS: HOW MODERN GEORGIANS PERCEIVE LOVE, SEXUALITY AND FAMILY

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### Abstract

Socio-cultural factors affect the formation of the models of cognitive processes, world perception, interpersonal interactions, social exchange and learning as well as the specificity of beliefs and values. Linguistic factors, including the cultural perceptions of words and concepts show differences not only in perception and judgment but also in attitudes to the events represented by concepts. Cognitivist direction of modern anthropology understands culture as shared cultural experience organized by schemas. Cultural schema or cultural model is thought to be a mental structure developed through cultural experience and used to form expectations and judgments. Our model is based on the conceptual framework of cultural models.

The purpose of the study is to examine the Georgian's mental cultural models using 145 selected concepts. 50 people of Georgian nationality (age range 18 - 25) participated in the study. The study used emic approach.

Methodology: The study used experimental psychosemantic method and interview with participants. Experimental psychosemantic method was employed to create a semantic space which was analyzed using respondents' ideas about the rational bases of the classification of concepts. Hierarchical clustering was used for experimental data and semiotic and discourse analysis for qualitative data. A synthetic approach was applied to data analysis. The study is interdisciplinary and the interpretation is based on linguistic, ethnographic and folkloric material. Out of the 17 cultural models identified in the basic study, we will focus on 3 thematically interrelated cultural models (love, family, sexuality) corresponding to mental representations obtained through sustainable analysis.

Conclusion: The cluster 'love' reflects universalist orientations of traditional cultures where 'love' is perceived in the context of social capital and reproduction. However, male and female do not belong to the given cluster. They belong to the 'family' cluster which means that research participants unconsciously separate romantic love from family. 'Love' is not part of the sexuality cluster, the structure of which is strongly influenced by the Orthodox perspective. Sexual attraction as a component of romantic love is presented in the context of 'sin'. 'Virginity' is represented as an opposition to the categories related to 'sin.' On the whole, the content of the three models represents the orientations of collectivist cultures. Despite a deep penetration of western and emancipatory tendencies into gender relations, understanding of romantic relationships is affected by tangible socio-cultural influences reflected in the perception of family and sexual relations.

**Keywords:** *Cognitive anthropology, cultural model, psychosemantics, semantic space, natural concepts.*

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### 1. Introduction

In the last decades cognitive science has been purposefully focusing on the issues which gradually distance this direction of science from the computer metaphor of mind. Human cognitive system is no longer considered an abstract "information processing system." It is considered a system of functions formed in the course of evolution specific of a human being whose body has certain physical characteristics, who interacts with the environment where she/she lives, who is a member of different social groups and belongs to a certain culture (Falikman, 2012; Chkhaidze & Surmanidze, 2019).

Culture operates at individual and collective levels through cognitive processes. Socio-cultural factors affect the formation of thinking models (Nisbett, 2004; Wang, Nisbett, & Peng, 2002), memory, problem solving skills, perception of world, information processing, social exchange and learning, the specificity of interpersonal relations, beliefs and values. At the collective level culture forms relationships

and social interactions, taboo topics, forms of emotional expressions, relationship style, etc. (Triandis, 1994, 1995; Matsumoto et al., 2008). It has been proved that the cultural practice of meditation improves attention and cognitive control (Brefczynski-Lewis, Lutz, Schaefer, Levinson, & Davidson, 2007). Cultural practice of narration is a powerful socialization mechanism, since it ensures the passing of knowledge and information to cultural groups through generations which increases the chances of survival.

Linguistic factors (everyday concepts, metaphors, idioms, etc.) is of paramount importance in the processes described above. Cultural perceptions of words and concepts are manifested in versatility of perceptions and judgments as well as in the attitudes towards the events denoted by concepts.

Given a vast variety of peoples and ethnic groups, a typical sample mainly composed of representatives of Western culture, used in the majority of cognitive studies, becomes questionable if we look at its psychological characteristics which point to its atypical character. This evokes a tendency to use more ethnically diverse samples (Falikman & Cole, 2014).

Cognitivist direction in modern psychological anthropology is based on the assumptions of both cognitive anthropology and cognitive psychology. It focuses on the relationship between culture and individuals' mental structures (Quinn, 1987; D'Andrade, 1992; D'Andrade, 1995; Shore, 1996; Strauss & Quinn, 1997). Culture is defined as shared cultural experience organized by schemas, whereas cultural schema or cultural model is understood as a mental structure formed through cultural experience. Cultural schemas and their mental representations are studied by school of cultural models (Quinn, 2011; Bennardo & de Munck, 2014; Dressler, 2018). The studies use different methods. Explanation/specification of activities provided by research participants is considered especially important (White, 1987; Quinn, 2005). Cultural models characteristic of both Western and non-Western cultures have been identified (Shore, 1996; Gatewood, 2012; Bennardo & de Munck, 2014; Quinn, 2018). Cultural models of personality traits, adaptive behavior and fatalism have been studied in the context of Georgian culture (Surmanidze, 2023; Chkhaidze, 2021; Chubinidze, 2018). There is a clear tendency to use different methods in a balanced and synthetic way (Surmanidze, 2021). The conceptual framework of our study is represented by this particular school of cultural models. The content of present article is based on secondary (sustainable) interpretation of the studies conducted in 2007-2008 (partially represented in Surmanidze & Tsuladze, 2008; 2010).

### 1.1. Objective

Examination of the Georgians' mental cultural models using 145 concepts selected according to certain criteria.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

50 people of both genders (28 females, 22 males) aged 18-25, for whom Georgian was native language.

### 2.2. Strategy

The study used emic approach which centers on the participant's (insider's) point of view. This approach is based on the following principle: "Let's look at the culture through the locals' eyes" (David Ho). Therefore, interpretation is based on the cultural meanings of the concepts and the characteristics of the cultural context.

### 2.3. Methodology

The study used two types of methods: **experimental** (namely, psychosemantic experiment) (Petrenko, 1988; 1997; Petrenko & Mitina, 2010) and the so-called **soft interview**. **Psychosemantic experiment - construction of semantic space:** We used Miller's classification method as a primary method to reconstruct the categorical structures of consciousness and build the corresponding semantic space. Research participants individually grouped 145 concepts according to similarities in meaning (duration 40-45 minutes). **Interview:** The experimenter collected from each participant information on the rational basis of classification (duration 25-30 minutes).

Hierarchical cluster analysis was performed to process **experimental data** (data analysis tool - SPSS 23) and the dendrogram reflecting semantic space was constructed. NVivo 10 was used for thematic classification and content analysis of data obtained through **interviewing**. Therefore, the present study represents a synthesis of positivist and hermeneutic approaches. It is an interdisciplinary study and interpretation is performed using linguistic, ethnographic and folkloric material.

17 more or less independent clusters were identified on the basis of 145 concepts (See Surmanidze L., Tsuladze L 2008; 2010 for the primary interpretation of a part of the study). Due to a size limitation, out of the 17 cultural models identified in the above study, the present article concerns only the results of secondary (sustainable) analysis of the interrelated cultural models as represented in the psyche of modern Georgians. Specifically, the article focuses on the cultural models of *'family'*, *'sexuality'* and *'love'*.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1. 'Family'

It is the most numerous cluster in terms of its content. The semantic basis of family becomes explicit in the perceptions and definitions provided by research participants. The classified categories reflect different aspects of family: kinship (sibling, child, family, parent, offspring, descendant), gender component (femininity, woman, man). The concept 'warmth' is related to an ancient Georgian ritual symbolizing creation of family, in particular, walking a newly married young married couple around the fire in the middle of dwelling. In the context of given cluster, the concept 'obedience' is understood as a precondition for keeping harmony. When explaining the rationale of used classification research participants emphasize attachment: belonging to family, empathy, emotional affinity, friendship and the importance of interactive and functional relationships, as well relationships determined by role and normative responsibilities. It should be noted that for research participants having a family is an unquestionable necessity ("It is necessary for a person to have a family. She or he can't be a full-fledged person without a family." - male, 19). The value of family was established throughout the centuries of self-defense and permanent struggle for survival. In the conditions like these, unity and cohesion of family has actually become a micro-model for state. Another element of the same cluster - 'femininity', reflects the same reality: while men were often away during defensive wars the woman managed the family and created its image. It is interesting to note that for our research participants the opposition masculinity/femininity represents a functional division: masculinity represents the cultural model of so-called state (Surmanidze & Tsuladze, 2008), whereas femininity is a component of the cultural model of family. Therefore, Georgians perceive family as 'feminine' and the state as 'masculine'. This could lead to the conclusion that according to its meaning the cultural model of family as a representation of social capital plays a classificatory function for Georgians.

#### 3.2. 'Sexuality'

The components of the cultural model in this cluster are represented by 7 concepts distributed among 12 sub-clusters.

The cluster consists of groups with opposite connotations. Negative: homosexual, prostitute, passion; those attributes that reflect 'power' in the social environment and, at the same time, are linked to the attributes of the sphere of sex: power, sexual freedom, sex, sexual attraction, sex organs, strength, power; opposing concepts – hesitation and control; concepts reflecting culturally unacceptable circumstances: loneliness, disconnection and inertness; Positive: overcoming obstacles, persistence; experience, motion; virginity, following the rules, conscience, responsibility; faith, god, religion; individuality and youth.

Thus, the given cultural model reflects sexuality as one of the most tabooed spheres for Georgians. The model shows a strong influence of Christian ideology (viewing sexual life from the religious-ethical perspective, normative regulation of eroticism and sexuality). Differently from the reproductive aspect eroticism is related to sin (which is reflected in certain words of the Georgian language). Ideological background is represented by negative components of this cultural model. It is interesting to note that the neutral concept 'passion' reflecting an attribute of instigating power is an element of negative context. The positive dimension reflects the emancipation tendency linked with individuality and youth (overcoming obstacles, persistence, motion, etc.) However, the ideological influence of religion is observed in the perception of virginity which belongs to the positive dimension and as a symbol of woman's purity and dignity is still considered to be a norm by a large part of young people (Kristesashvili., Surmanidze, Tsuladze, Shengelia, & Zardiashvili, 2009). Discourse analysis shows that in the definitions provided by research participants in relation to sexuality the main argument emphasizes a strong influence of referent groups on both mental and behavioral dimensions and the cultural practice of the participation of 'important others' in people's lifestyle in general. The concept of responsibility in the given cluster assumes that the perception of sexual relations largely implies family as one of the most important cultural institutions which actively participates in organizing career, marriage and personality identifications.

The sphere of sexual life is quite controversial and ambivalent for Georgians. The mental categorical structures of young people participating in the study can be traced back to traditional ideologies which served as a basis of normative sexual morality throughout the centuries. The results of the given

study have been supported by other studies conducted in the recent period with the use of different methods (Gamsakhurdia, 2019).

### 3.3. 'Love'

The given cluster unites the following concepts: love, loyalty, wealth, vanity and fertility. Its content does not reflect the characteristics of romantic love like intimacy, sexual passion, pleasure (eroticism), spiritual affinity or physical connectedness (Karandashev, 2021). This cluster with quite a poor content reveals a general orientation specific of traditional cultures which implies that gender relations, especially sexual contacts are justified by reproductive purposes, mainly in the context of family. This can be demonstrated by the presence of the concept of 'fertility' in the given sub-cluster. The concepts 'wealth' and 'vanity' point to the fact that research participants link romantic love with social capital. The value of romantic love is certainly recognized in real life where it takes form of the relationship with its specific attributes, but as shown by our study, the cultural model of this phenomenon ingrained in deep mental layers still preserves the meaning characteristic of traditional societies at the normative level.

## 4. Conclusion

The cultural model of **family** is represented with the attributes characteristic of collectivist cultures. Its components are kinship, children, parents, gender, warmth, emotional affinity, attachment, belonging to family and obedience. Family is 'feminine' for Georgians.

Cultural model of **sexuality** is complex and ambivalent. It is strongly influenced by Christian ideology and is represented dichotomically by negative/positive dimensions. Negative components are represented by the phenomena perceived in the context of religious sin (homosexual, prostitute) and the attributes that reflect 'power' in the social environment (power, strength, money) and, at the same time, are linked to the attributes of the sphere of sex: sexual freedom, sex, sexual passion, sex organs. One of the groups of concepts on the positive dimension is represented by emancipation tendency linked with the concepts of individuality and youth (overcoming obstacles, persistence, motion, etc.) whereas the other group of concepts is represented by phenomena (virginity, following the rules, responsibility, conscience, religion) perceived in the normative regulatory context of eroticism and sexuality.

The cultural model of **love** exhibits a general orientation of traditional Christian cultures according to which inter-sex relationship, specifically sexual contact, is approved if it serves reproduction mainly in the context of family. The components of the model (love, loyalty, wealth, vanity and fertility) emphasize, at the normative level, a primary importance of social capital in the perception of love, which is typical of traditional cultures.

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