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Postgraduate Course on Developing Countries

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### GRID-GROUP Matrix

Sources: Mary Douglas (1921-2007)*: Risk and Blame. Essays in Cultural Theory. Routledge, London, N.Y. 1992 / Richard Sennett: Der flexible Mensch. Berlin 2007 / Peter Sloterdijk: Zorn und Zeit. Frankfurt 2006 / Jan Philipp Reemtsma: Vertrauen und Gewalt. Versuch über eine besonderen Konstellation der Moderne. Hamburg 2008

### 1. Background

Few thinkers have changed how we see the world; even fewer have changed how we think about how we see the world. Social anthropologist Mary Douglas is one of the rare exceptions. She examines **how people give meanings to their reality** and how this reality is expressed by their **cultural symbols**. She has believed that humans actively create meanings in their social lives in order to maintain their society.

Douglas gained wide recognition by her publication *Purity and danger. An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo.* In the book, Douglas cross-culturally examined people's definition of impurity and argued that pollutants play an important role in maintaining social structures. For example, in the Lele culture of Zaire, people have rules for protecting themselves from what they define as polluted, such as the following: feces, blood, military groups, milk, used clothing, and sexual intercourse. Another example is the Old Testament, whose dietary rules define dozens of unclean animals. Obviously, these two examples are not about hygiene, but about moral symbols based on people's concepts of impurity. By defining what is polluted, people classify their social life into two opposite categories: what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. This symbolic system gives moral order to societies. Douglas further argued that in societies where the categories of purity and pollutants are rigid, people have developed secular and religious rituals to keep themselves physically and morally pure. She claimed that these practices enforce the symbolic system and keep order in the society.

### 2. Two cultural dimensions

Douglas' analysis on the links between **symbolic classifications and social systems** leads to her next book, *Natural symbols(1970)*. In this book Douglas claimed that all societies can be compared by their **two cultural dimensions: GROUP** and **GRID.** Any culture, Douglas argued, can be mapped on these two dimensions.

> **GRID** stays for the extent to which behavioural patterns and rules are defined and differentiated, for example by public rules deciding who can do what according to their age, race, gender or qualifications. It refers to rules that relate individuals to one another. Examples of "high grid" would include a large corporation with strong internal culture, or a traditional agrarian society, or families with clear demarcations of roles and times (when to eat, go to bed).

> **GROUP** is the extent to which people bond with each other, and divide the world into insiders and outsiders of a society. The more people do with a group of other people, the more they experience testing trials, or the more difficult the group is to get into, the stronger this sense of group will be.

**- group societies** are characterized as non-regulative of social behaviour; the individual/self is exalted; the cosmos is dominated by impersonal powers and principles. Religion generally does not serve as a moral regulator; they offer no system of reward or punishment, in this world or the next and are not used to explain the reasons for our everyday problems, which are attributed to rational causes or stupidity (+ grid societies) or to luck (- grid societies).

**+ group societies** are characterized as regulative of social behaviour; the self is subordinated to the group; the cosmos is dominated by personal powers, like the spirits of the dead or a creator god, who punish or reward one's moral or immoral behaviour and are used to account for problems in our life.

**- grid societies** are characterized by an affirmation of individualistic spiritual joys. If the society is - grid, + group, the body is viewed as negative; there are strict controls on bodily enjoyment and sensual experience. If the society is - grid, - group, the asceticism is revealed as a valuing of human fellowship above material things.

**+ grid societies** are characterized by an affirmation of the value of material things. Wealth and luxury are good in and of themselves. There is no feeling of guilt about spending. The outward expressions of society and self are not despised or feared the world, society, the church, organization in general and all of their signs are affirmed.

A "high group" way of life exhibits a high degree of collective control, whereas a "low group" one exhibits a much lower one and a resulting emphasis on individual self-sufficiency. A "high grid" way of life is characterized by conspicuous and durable forms of stratification in roles and authority, whereas a "low grid" one reflects a more egalitarian ordering.

This simple model turns out to be a powerful tool for understanding intercultural and social relations, and for making sense of how people see the world. We may like to believe that we choose and shape our own beliefs - but Douglas, drawing on the work of Emile Durkheim and others - suggested that it is much easier to understand societies by turning that assumption on its head: societies and institutions think through us much more than the other way around.

These two dimensions come together to provide a simple matrix: high grid and high group stands for **hierarchy**; low grid and low group is **individualism**; high group and low grid is **egalitarianism**; low group and high grid tends to shape **fatalism**.

**3. The application as a matrix**

GROUP stands for the social bonding forces that hold a group together and enables consensus. GRID stands for social differentiation through order, rules and roles. In anthropology, both dimensions are also related to the willingness to take risks, self-image or religious symbolism. Collective narratives, discourses and myths serve to consolidate the two dimensions over time and generations. For example, the American myth of frontier and armed self defense generates bonding and shared values.

The two dimensions of Douglas form a pattern that each society develops differently. Different sectors, stakeholder groups, civil organizations, dominant groups, gender and age groups

generate their own typical pattern. This diversity may lead to misapprehension, disagreements, tensions and conflicts. At the same time certain constellations may enable respect for diversity, dialogue and conflict transformation.

If the two dimensions are interlinked in a matrix, four square fields are created that are helpful for characterizing a cultural pattern that explains the degree of participation, shared values and inequalities and power distribution. The central questions are: What parts of the four quadrants make up the culture pattern? Which parts predominate? What parts are missing?

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **GRID (rules & values)** | **strong** | Little cohesion, individuality is valued, unpredictable and volatile rules, powerful groups prevail, favors and nepotism, the individual feels at the mercy of fate and authorities | Strong cohesion with binding, explicit rules, hierarchical and centralized management and control, positive appreciation of belonging to the group, individuality is judged negatively as disengaging |
| | **weak** | Little cohesion and mutual support, absence of collective values and objectives, small, flexible, autonomous groups prevail, unpredictable events are formative, the individual is on his own | Strong cohesion with few collective rules, egalitarian and complementary groups, pronounced collective values, positive appreciation of individuality and flexibility within the framework of collective orientation |
| | | **Weak** | **strong** |
| | | **GROUP (social bonding & inclusion & cohesion)** | |

The simple model proves useful and meaningful to describe and understand a culture pattern. The proportions of a culture in the four quadrants can be different, as indicated by the positioning of the oval in the matrix. In a society there may be different cultural patterns that coexist without interfering with one another or competing or trigger conflicts.

The matrix also indicates the power distribution and modalities of governance between different groups. For example, dominant power groups sometimes develop a culture pattern with strong social bonding forces in order to enforce their interests and the rules for other groups.