Is the desire for democracy universal? A connectionist theory analysis of Mongolians' perspectives

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When someone mentions democracy, we all form pictures in our heads of what it is and what it means to our country, our community, our families and ourselves. Since Woodrow Wilson, the US government has pursued a policy of exporting democracy to other sovereign nations and—following World War II—to the territories we administered for the UN as well. The democracy exporters in the government are often joined by political scientists, who propose how other nations can import democracy. Some of them consider British and US democracy as "true democracy." I have seen one professor's world map that literally shades countries around the globe according to their "degree of democracy" from interviews conducted with government officials. The US and Great Britain are the color of the white paper. The farther the other democratic countries are from the US or Great Britain, the darker their shading is. Even France is tinged.

Some policy makers and political scientists also assume that the desire for democracy is universal. Everybody wants what we have! But is the desire for democracy universal? Do all people want democracy in their country? And what do they mean by democracy? We know from decades of applied anthropology research (among other sources) that a governance structure cannot be imposed on a people. They will not accept it if it doesn't fit their culture, their history and their goals for the future. In 1963, the anthropologist Ward Goodenough wrote Cooperation in Change, in which he noted that people (or peoples) will not change their behavior if the suggested change does not make sense to them –does not fit their ways of thinking. People do not adopt a governance structure; rather, they adapt it to their own way of thinking. This insight from my discipline has led me to ask, is the desire for democracy universal, or is this something the US government and people have been urging other countries to adopt?

This research question has significance for US policy: what are our foreign policy goals? And how well do implementation programs match those goals? Policy goals should also be practical: what will other nations accept? The research question is also based on a disconnect between psychology and the folk psychology of lay people. Psychologists have not determined a basic list of universal emotions or universal desires. Yet we lay people assume that everyone wants democracy. Is this so? The answer to this question will—or should—affect foreign policy.

I set out to learn the answer to these questions in 1998, using Mongolia as a case study. Mongolia is a good case study because it was the second Soviet socialist nation in the world. Therefore its people had been taught a Marxist-Leninist definition of democracy for a long time. Yet the Mongolian people demonstrated for open, multiparty elections just a few weeks after the Berlin Wall was torn down. In the 1990s, Mongolians had to change their definition of democracy, just as their 1992 Constitution had.

I want to share my research with you, including a new methodology that I am developing with Dr. Tanya Elliott, a former Omidyar Fellow here. But before beginning, here are some quick facts about Mongolia:

- Following the demise of Chinggis Khaan's Mongol empire, the Mongolian territory became a vassal state of the Manchu Dynasty in China (1696-1911).
- In 1924, Mongolia became the second nation to adopt the Soviet version of socialist political economy and Communist Party governance.
- Mongolia was one of the early nations to protest Communist Party rule, starting on Human Rights Day – December 10, 1989.
- The nation held free, multiparty elections in June of 1990.
- In January, 1992, the people ratified a capitalist, democratic constitution.

Is present-day Mongolia relevant to Afghanistan? The statistics show very different countries, although both are landlocked; both are buffer zones between big powers and both have mineral deposits considered valuable on the world market.

Afghanistan	Mongolia
• .5 million sq. km	• 1.6 million sq. km
• 29 million people	• 3.1 million people
– 24% urban	– 57% urban
– Life expectancy: 44 yrs.	– Life expectancy: 68 yrs.
– 42% Pashtun, 27% Tajik, 9% Hazara, 9% Uzbek, 4 % Aimaq…	– 95% Mongol; 5% Turkic; 0.1% other
– Religions: Sunni, Shia, other	– Religions: Buddhist, none, Muslim, shaman, Christian
– 28% literate (15+ yrs.)	– 98% Literate (15+ yrs.)
• GDP per capita: $1,000 (2010 est.)	• GDP per capita: $3,300 (2010 est.)
• Buffer state	• Buffer state
• Mineral-rich	• Mineral-rich

However, the differences are great: Afghanistan is smaller than Mongolia but has a much larger population. Afghanistan has a literacy rate of 28% while Mongolia's is almost 98%, (see figure, above, from the CIA Factbook 2011). Mongolia has been relatively peaceful, has a relatively homogeneous population, and is rapidly adapting their history and culture to capitalist democracy. These population differences mean that Mongolia can be used as a foil to Afghanistan, an example that makes us think about the Afghanistan people's way of thinking. I would also argue that the methodology I used to learn about Mongolians' knowledge and attitudes toward democracy is relevant to Afghanistan, and my results are, too.

Methodology

Anthropologists have many goals. Some of the most important are to figure out what is special about humans, that is, what makes us human and what makes one group different from another. Although we all go through the same life cycle of birth, puberty, procreation, adulthood and death, cultures vary in how they experience this life cycle. In order to understand

how and why cultures differ, anthropologists winnow out cultural themes from people's behavior (speech, writing, actions and artifacts). We search for these themes in several ways: we observe people's behavior by immersing ourselves in a culture, learning the language and engaging in participant observation. We also conduct in-depth or open-ended interviews. In these interviews, we do not provide our research participants with answers; we don't give them multiple choice questions. Instead, we ask open-ended questions where the respondents have to provide the answers. It has been rare for anthropologists to enter a society with a multiple-choice questionnaire prepared in advance. We are much more comfortable listening to people and then asking them open-ended questions. This is what I did in Mongolia.

In 1998 and again in 2003, I assembled teams of Mongolian researchers and taught them the research method called free listing, from psychology. The questionnaire had only 2 questions:

People built their free list in one to three words.

Then they explained their answers in a few sentences. The researchers started by pilot-testing the questions on family members. Then they asked people of different demographic backgrounds to answer the questionnaire, using quota sampling to find appropriate people to represent the different demographic subcategories.
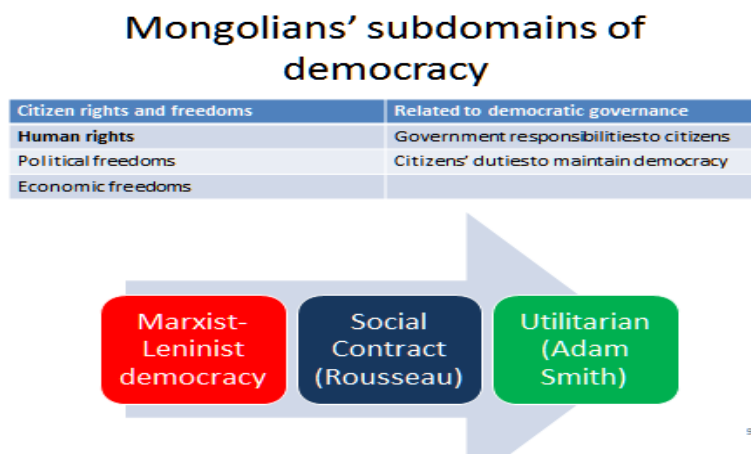

We interviewed 867 people in 1998 and 416 in 2003.

The researchers enjoyed the experience until it got too repetitive; the respondents mostly enjoyed thinking aloud about something that was very much on their minds; we learned that the interviewing process stimulated some family discussions that night.

Analysis of the surveys

I used a software package, NVivo, to code the interviews. I looked for key words or phrases as well as underlying attitudes, such as hopeful or fearful, and knowledge of democratic characteristics, such as human rights or economic freedoms. In the process, I found that Mongolians do not only answer in the abstract. That is, they do not only mention general characteristics like "rule of law" or "voting in multiparty elections." Instead, they also told us what they think democracy is doing for them. And this was very important to the analysis.

I also found that the Mongolians we interviewed share certain subdomains of thought when talking about democracy. These are human rights, political freedoms, economic freedoms, responsibilities of a democratic government to its people and the duties of citizens to democratic governance. These, in turn, have subcategories, or cultural themes, as we shall see.

Mongolians' subdomains of democracy

Citizen rights and freedoms	Related to democratic governance
Human rights	Government responsibilities to citizens
Political freedoms	Citizens' duties to maintain democracy
Economic freedoms	

Marxist-Leninist democracy → Social Contract (Rousseau) → Utilitarian (Adam Smith)

The data and subsequent statistical analysis suggested that people's ideas changed between 1998 and 2003. When I think about summing up the change, I think that they went from a Marxist-Leninist view of democracy in 1989 to a Social Contract view of democracy (as articulated by J.-J. Rousseau) in 1998 to a Utilitarian (Adam Smith) view in 2003. If even the ideas of a relatively homogeneous population like Mongolia can change over five years, then the concept of democracy is not universal. However, I found that underlying the Mongolians' descriptions of democracy are **deeply held values.** And these deeply held values just might be universal.

As we look at the deeply held values that Mongolians associate with human rights (the first subdomain of democracy), I hope you are thinking about Afghanistan. Do the Afghans hold similar deeply held values? Or do they hold different deeply held values? Either way, how do their values relate to their thoughts about governance?

Mongolian respondents' deeply held values surface when people talk about human rights. The first is freedom from oppression; they know from experience that the advent of democracy has freed them from the oppression—and repression—of the Communist Party. A Kazakh male herder in Khovd who was 40-55 and had not completed high school illustrates this value:

Freedom from oppression

"In the previous society, people had some rights but they couldn't enjoy them. In socialist times, the commanding mechanism [i.e., the authoritarian socialist government] **restricted human rights**, and people had more obligations and responsibilities than rights. Even more, state property was protected more than a man was. But now democracy has resolved the human rights issue in the true sense." (Khovd 1998 Ns007)

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The next deeply held value is a desire for personal dignity. This was said by a 61-year old woman in Ulaanbaatar; she was now a pensioner and had completed high school:

Desire for personal dignity

"Human rights became open. **Everyone is guaranteed** the right to speak out, travel and study abroad, trade with foreign countries and participate in meetings and competitions in foreign countries." (Ulaanbaatar 2003Ay006)

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Another deeply held value is self-determination. Two young men from Ulaanbaatar illustrate this idea. The first, said in 1998, was studying for his bachelor's degree; the second, said in 2003, is a 25-year old who already had his baccalaureate and was then in business.

Desire for self-determination

"Human rights mean freedom of speech and having **freedom of choice** when doing things. There is **no control and no pressure over one's feelings and thoughts.**" (Ulaanbaatar 1998 Tj030)

"[During socialism] young university graduates were sent to work in remote aimags [provinces] by the State with no regard to their wishes or desires. Now the situation is completely different; **everyone can choose where to live and work.**" (Ulaanbaatar 2003 Bu016)

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The last deeply held value is the desire for national dignity. Here, a young woman with a high school education who is performing unskilled labor in Ulaanbaatar in 1998 says:

Desire for national dignity

"Democratic countries respect human rights. **Our country is developing according to the democratic way**. The law has already guaranteed human rights." (Ulaanbaatar 1998 En033)

These deeply held values can be seen as a reaction to decades of socialism. They also reflect the pastoral nomadic tradition of Mongolians, even though only about 25% of the population practices a pastoral nomadic lifestyle today. I have presented Mongolians' deeply held values in list form. Lists like this are lovely, but they're rather superficial. To understand what is really going on and to make successful policy, a model that reflects the complexity of people's thoughts on democracy can be more helpful. I have been working on such a model with Dr. Tanya Elliott. I turn to a modification of one complexity model—connectionist theory—to compare the 1998 and 2003 interview data. My purpose is to show that comparison is possible and beneficial—for change over time, for variation within a population (by demographic category or any other criterion), and even for noting similarities and differences between populations or nations.

Connectionist theory

Connectionist theory

- Based on the notion (from cognitive science) that the human mind acts as an information processor similar to a computer (Bermúdez 2010:6).
  - A mind does not process information in a linear (serial) manner
  - Rather, multiple pathways come together to influence the processing of information.
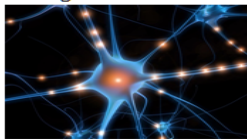
Connectionist theory is one of many models found within the framework of complexity. It was developed in cognitive science and imported to other sciences from there. Cognitive scientists treat the human brain as an information processor much as a computer is. How the brain processes information is analogous to how a computer processes information, not in a linear fashion but through multiple pathways.

Anthropologists use the connectionist theory model to visualize the decision processes of a person or a whole group of people. The goal is to understand how people share one or several interpretations of a particular situation such as invasion, an event like an earthquake or a birth, or an object such as a computer or a NY Yankees baseball cap—which was very popular in Mongolia because it was made in Mongolia and rather inexpensive.

Connectionist theory in cognitive anthropology

- Decision process of a group
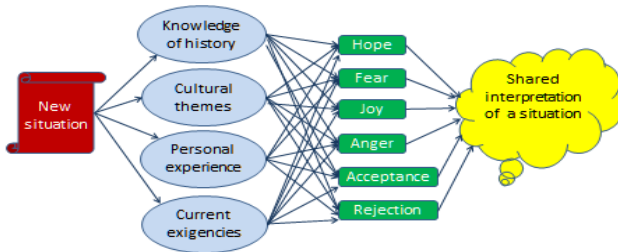- The decision process → shared meaning

When talking about democracy or human rights, people's thought network looks something like this:


Hypothetical diagram of the process

A new situation such as the Democratic Revolution or an interviewer asking a question triggers thoughts – conscious and unconscious, verbal and nonverbal – about the past and present and even the future. These thoughts are filtered through human emotions or deeply held values, which modify the relative weight, or value, of the original thoughts and affect the relative importance of different cultural themes that are relevant to the particular situation. We can see that the model is complex, and it illustrates the complexity of thought involved in shared meanings (here represented as cultural themes).

This model is nice, but it's not enough. Let's compare it with the original cognitive science model to see what more can be done. In cognitive science, units (called nodes in other kinds of models) have "activation values" and the arrows (called connections) have "connection weights" – measures of intensity of their impulse. The point is to see which measures of the "input units" eventually lead to which measures of the "output units." One can run the experiment multiple times and note the relation between input and output values. However, the cognitive science model is an imitation of a decision process rather than a representation of reality. It is merely a toy. In contrast, the anthropology model represents a database collected by the researcher. It is an analysis based on empirical data. However, it lacks measures—activation values or connection weights. Therefore we can use the model to visualize connections between people's knowledge and attitudes and their decisions (cultural themes) at one point in time, but we cannot compare change over time or variation within a population (e.g., variation between demographic subcategories) without numbers, or values.

Can we combine the strengths of the cognitive science and anthropology models to build a stronger, more useful, anthropological model? If we can assign numeric values to the units and arrows in the anthropological model, we could determine the relative power of different ideas in a population, thereby tracing the relative power of different influences on people's ideas. Then we can (a) target different policy programs to specific parts of a population; (b) evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programs in different places and (c) understand why a policy (and its program implementation) is successful in Nation A but not Nation B.

Tanya and I have been working to assign measures to the units and arrows for a connectionist model of a group's shared cultural themes. We used the Mongolian database to work out the model, which looks like this without the numbers:
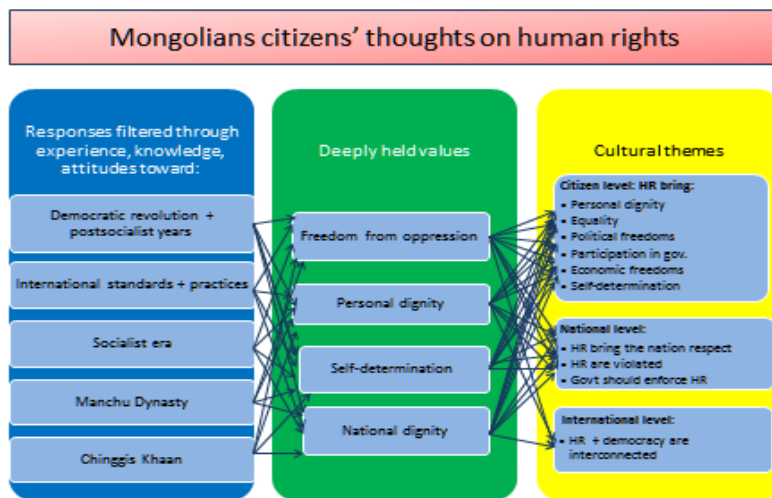
When asked to mention the characteristics of democracy, the people interviewed talk about human rights. They filter their responses through their experience and knowledge of human rights, from the socialist era to the 1989-90 Democratic Revolution as well as the international standards and practices that they had learned. These experiences and knowledge flow into four deeply held values that people consider relevant to human rights (among other things) and then out to a range of cultural themes held by the community. Not everyone shares (accepts or knows) all the cultural themes, but a significant number do (i.e., the cultural themes are not idiosyncratic to one or two people). This is model is obtuse, so we have to break it down in order to add the numbers. In the next figure, I focus on people's thoughts regarding 1 deeply held value, self-determination so that you may see the numbers (values) in operation. The data are from the 1998 interviews.
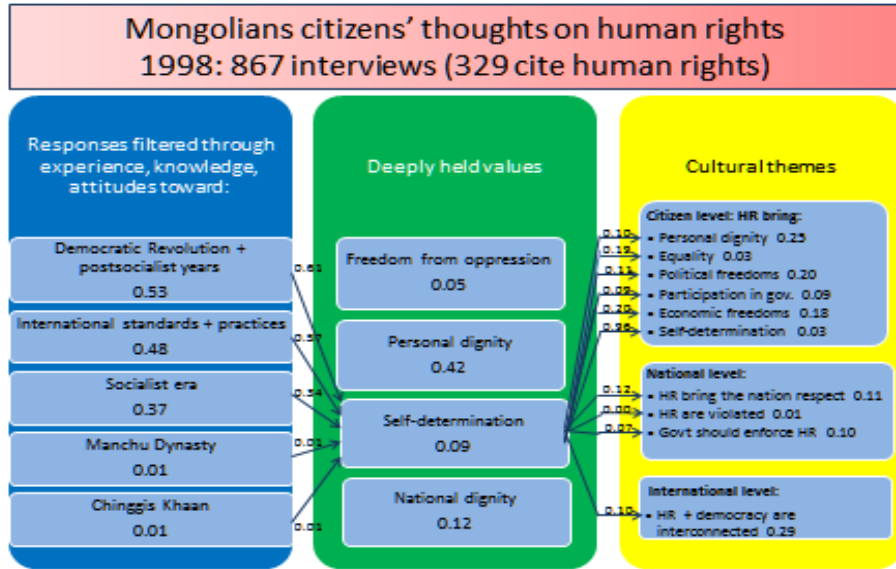
Now we can see that 329 of the 867 interviewees mention human rights. The numbers in the input units (Democratic Revolution, international standards, etc.) are simply the percent of the total sample population (867) who name the different items. For example, 459 of 867 respondents mention the Democratic Revolution, which is 53%. We substitute the percentages for the activation values in a cognitive science connectionist model, using the format acceptable in connectionist theory (0.53 rather than 53%), where all values must be between 0 and 1.

The numbers on the arrows are the connection weights. They show the variable strength of influence/connection—of the input units on the hidden units, the deeply held values. We calculate them by figuring out the number of people who mention both the Democratic Revolution and the deeply held value of self-determination and divide this number by the total number of people who mention self-determination. Tanya explains it as follows:

$$ IH_{ij} = \frac{C_{i \bullet j}}{H_j} $$

- Where I is the input values (the left-hand boxes) and H is the hidden values (the middle boxes)
- Where $C_{i \bullet j}$ is the number of respondents that mention *both* the input unit *as well as* the hidden unit
- And H_j is the total number of respondents who mention the hidden unit.

A second equation normalizes the raw count so that it becomes a 'weight' between zero and one.

Because the data come from people's responses, the connection weights are not random numbers either; they are based in real data.

<u>What can the model do for us?</u>

Although we cannot use the model to predict future thinking, it does help us understand current thinking – where people's ideas come from, what influences people's decisions about governance, etc. It also lets us compare one situation to another. For example, I used the model to compare change over time. Here is the same model with the 2003 numbers:
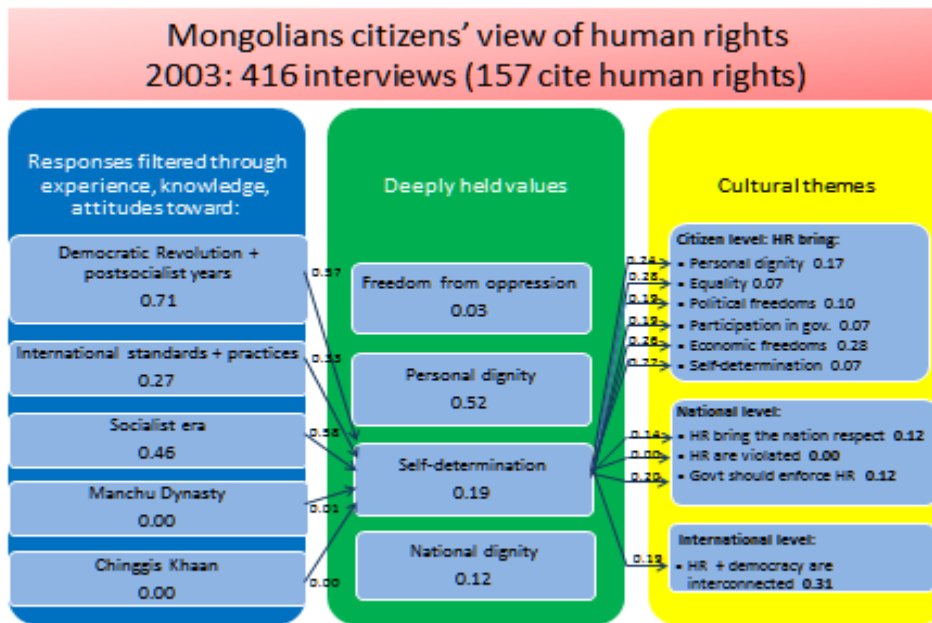
To see the changes more clearly, I have built a table comparing 1998 and 2003:

Change over time

Influences on people's thoughts re democracy	1998	2003
Democratic Revolution + postsocialist years	0.53	0.71
International standards	0.48	0.27
Socialist years	0.37	0.46
Freedom from oppression	0.05	0.03
Personal dignity	0.42	0.52
Self-determination	0.09	0.19
National dignity	0.12	0.12

Cultural themes re human rights	1998	2003
Personal dignity	0.25	0.17
Equality	0.03	0.07
Political freedoms	0.20	0.10
Participation in governance	0.09	0.07
Economic freedoms	0.18	0.28
Self-determination	0.03	0.07
HR bring the nation respect	0.11	0.12
HR are violated	0.01	0.00
Govt should enforce HR	0.10	0.12
HR + democracy are interconnected	0.29	0.31

While I have not yet run these numbers through a chi-square statistical test to see if the change is significant, we can eyeball the table and assume that significant change has taken place in people's reference to the Democratic Revolution, international standards and practices and the socialist years (the Manchu Dynasty and Chinggis Khaan are not relevant here). When asked to list and describe the characteristics of democracy, people increasingly refer to the Democratic Revolution and compare the current situation with socialism while they decreasingly talk about international standards and practices, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Perhaps they are gaining more confidence in their own ideas or their country's situation.

In the right-hand red table, the increases in mention of two deeply held values may also be statistically significant, that is, not due to chance. The association of human rights with the first four items decreases somewhat, while the association with economic freedom and self-determination increase. To me, this pattern suggests an increasing concern with economic security or even success in people's responses.

When looking at the arrows, or connection weights, in the next slide, we see that within the context of human rights, the overlap between those who mention self-determination and the socialist years rises, while the other two possible influences fall (see the left-hand, blue table). This suggests that when thinking about self-determination, people recall the lack thereof in the socialist years with greater frequency while the other two possible influences do not come to mind as much.

Change over time

Relative influence on self-determination	1998	2003
Democratic Revolution + postsocialist years	0.61	0.57
International standards	0.57	0.33
Socialist years	0.34	0.58

Relative influence of self-determination on cultural themes. Human rights bring:	1998	2003
Personal dignity	0.10	0.24
Equality	0.19	0.28
Political freedoms	0.11	0.19
Participation in governance	0.09	0.19
Economic freedoms	0.20	0.26
Self-determination	0.96	0.77
Respect for the nation	0.12	0.14
HR are violated	0.00	0.00
Govt should enforce HR	0.07	0.20
HR + democracy are interconnected	0.10	0.19

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Again, when mentioning self-determination, people increasingly mention the association between human rights and personal dignity, equality, political and economic freedoms, etc.

This analysis can also be used to compare one part of the population to another (men vs. women, old vs. young, etc.). The purpose is to learn how the population divides on democracy and therefore where policy work should be focused.

<u>What can the model do for policy?</u>

I have been working hard on this methodology for several years, hoping that it could prove enlightening to countries other than Mongolia and useful to policy makers everywhere. It is relatively easy to train researchers to use this data collection method (freelisting combined with people's description of their lists), and it is easy to change the questions to fit the needs of policy makers. Certainly the resulting data are more realistic than those derived from multiple-choice surveys, which can be developed in research centers rather than "on the ground." Respondents' answers also enable us to delve below the surface and find the ideas and emotions (or deeply held values) that influence their thoughts. And this method can lead to an understanding of the shared cultural themes and the relative strength of the themes that influence people's acceptance or rejection of a particular policy.

Possible uses of the research model

- Pose the same or different questions, e.g., characteristics of
  - Democracy, governance, the U.S., etc.
- Find what people refer to when they think about a topic like democracy:
  - international standards
  - economic patterns —e.g., pastoralism, farming, industry
  - national history or current events
  - personal experiences
- Determine cultural themes re any topic
- Find the linkage between people's ideas and emotions and/or deeply held values

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Regarding Afghanistan, the Mongolian data, as well as the model, can be useful, acting as a stimulus for thinking about the relevant questions to pose in Afghanistan:

Possible uses of the Mongolian data

- Are the Mongolians' deeply held values found in other populations?
  - Can these (or other) deeply held values be used to build the desire for democracy among the populace, not just the leadership?
- Comparison with other countries, e.g., Afghanistan, Pakistan
  - How do people of different demographic categories and regions think about
    - Democracy?
    - Security?
    - Government?
    - Governance?
- What is in the (shared) thoughts of Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, Yemenis and Bahrainians to cause them to protest for democracy now?
  - Do people in other countries (Middle East, Central Asia) share these thoughts about democracy, and does that increase the likelihood that they will also start to protest in 2011?

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<u>Conclusion</u>

A highly modified connectionist theory model can be useful for policy, especially if we can assign measures to it and compare one set of measures with another – another population, another time, etc. Regarding policy, the research questions can be modified to fit the policy under consideration, and the database can also be modified. One could use interviews, texts, etc., for a database, as long as the people who are being asked to change their behavior are involved.

The result of using this analytical tool is that new governance situations, for example, are not oversimplified, and true connections between influences, deeply held values and cultural themes come into play.

Thank you!

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