

Cultural Relations Collection

Edited by J.P. Singh



British Council and Cultural Relations: Betwixt Idealism and Instrumentality

J.P. Singh

Culture Education English

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The British Council

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Foreword

I am delighted at the release and publication of the first contributions to what I hope will be an important collection on cultural relations and the mission of the British Council. Not always easy to describe and at times even more difficult to measure, when you see cultural relations in action you know what it is about: working over the long term with individuals, communities and institutions in a spirit of mutuality.

Our mission is not only about what we do but also how we engage. This is what distinguishes a cultural relations approach from other forms of public or cultural diplomacy. It is about activities and opportunities, but it is also about how relationships are formed and nourished. And in our case as the British Council it happens in over one hundred countries, working with the English language and through cultural engagement in the arts, education and skills.

This collection provides an overview and analysis of diverse examples of this distinctive cultural relations approach and how it is used to further the British Council's charitable objects, and how the approach benefits both the UK and the people with whom we work. The ways of working apply whether convening the global leaders of international higher education, or building partnerships with civil society organisations or artists within a single country. The cultural relations thread also applies across the British Council's largest programmes, including those such as English Language teaching which deliver income.

Over the past decade the British Council has been consolidating its activities in order to increase the commonality across different countries and regions. Yet a cultural relations approach will always necessitate some variety, because mutuality involves degrees of exchange, co-production and adaptation to local needs. An example in this collection shows how in 2016 within Shakespeare Lives, a global programme celebrating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and operating to consistent global production values, a small, country-based arts investment in Nigeria saw the production and touring of a locally relevant Shakespeare play performed in Nigerian Pidgin.

The collection also reflects on the long view and includes two contributions which draw on historical investigation to understand the British Council's role over many decades in Burma/Myanmar and the Soviet Union/Russia, drawing on deep scholarship of post-colonialism and the Cold War respectively. It is to be applauded that the editors and authors allow such critical reflection, avoiding the risk of self-congratulation and enabling organisational learning and growth.

Reading these contributions together as a collection reminds me that while all these different areas constitute cultural relations in their own right, together they add up to more than the sum of their parts. Hard work in one area leads to networks and builds the trust that enables the British Council to undertake activities in different areas and with diverse kinds of partners.

It is not always easy to quantify cultural relations or the impact of an individual institution like the British Council over the arc of time and geography. Today, great effort is put into evaluating both the programmatic and organisational impact of our work. Yet the methodologies to assess the effects of multiple decades of engagement are still developing. Friends made, understanding gained and trust increased are things we know to be important. Proving their worth is harder.

Historical investigation helps, but in the end, as Martin Rose says of cultural relations in his essay in this collection: "It has been said of diplomacy that its success can be measured by wars not fought.... The same might be said of the British Council, though it operates at a more human level with individuals and communities rather than nations." Seen in this way, cultural relations is as much about the absence of negatives as the presence of positives. Cultural relations delivers the calm, reflective response as well as the bustling, creative one. This collection, authored by both well-known scholars and authoritative practitioners shows both. And it does so in a way that I hope you find to be accessible, enlightening and compelling. I commend it to you with enthusiasm.

Sir Ciarán Devane,
Chief Executive, *British Council*

Preface to the Cultural Relations Collection

The British Council is often viewed as an organisation that ‘does’, and it does a great deal, but it is also a ‘thinking’ and learning organisation and in recent years has begun to increase its investment in commissioning, using and sometimes undertaking research. It does so for three key reasons.

As an organisation that provides thought leadership in cultural relations it is important that the British Council contributes to, demonstrates and shares a thorough understanding of cultural relations, and of how this approach contributes to the United Kingdom’s attraction and trusted connections in international relations. It does this, for example, through regular studies on the influence and measurement of soft power that track perceptions of the UK, particularly among young people across the world.

Second, we commission and undertake research as trusted expert practitioners in the thematic areas in which we work: in the arts, international education, English language teaching and assessment, and activities undertaken largely with young people in communities and civil society organisations, such as through the Active Citizens Programme. In each of these areas we convene informed debates based on the provision, sharing or curating of new knowledge, in many cases disseminated in well regarded publications and series.

A third reason is to increase the evidence and understanding for ourselves and others of what works to generate cultural relations impact and why. We seek to demonstrate engagement of the highest standard to supporters and partners, while also building our capacity as an organisation to benefit from using research and evidence, both our own and work by others’, in order to make strategic decisions, engage global stakeholders, and exchange knowledge. Together, each of these research areas contributes useful new knowledge to further our charitable purpose through generating new insights and understanding in areas relevant to our work, in turn enhancing our ability to influence policy or to impact debates.

This cultural relations collection arose out of an early initiative when the British Council first established the small research team that would become part of the new global function led from the Research and Policy Insight Directorate. In commissioning a series of in-house and external studies it had three key aims. The first was to clarify our understanding of cultural relations as an encompassing venture that permeated all our work, whether specific to a sector or not and whether income generating or not. Here the contributions on English language and on assessment are particularly illustrative. The second aim was to provide an opportunity to country offices and regional teams, through a competitive bidding process, to commission research on initiatives that were able to illustrate a cultural relations approach in action at a local level. The fascinating contribution on Shakespeare in Nigerian Pidgin stems from this call. A third aim was to grapple with the challenges of understanding and demonstrating impact when reviewing the British Council’s work in an area of activity or in a country over a long period of time. The contributions on science diplomacy and on Myanmar fit here and demonstrate the richness of reviewing cultural relations over time, alongside the challenges of making assessments across the long arc of history.

This cultural relations collection has provided an opportunity to show the work of the British Council in its rich diversity, linked by this common thread and demonstrating that as with the best partnerships, mutuality in approach often produces things that are not what were originally designed, which are often better as a result and that sometimes grow in ways over which no individual or organisation has control.

Dan Shah
Director Research and Policy Insight
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Introduction

The British Council was created in 1934 amidst the cultural uncertainty of the times and driven by an idealism that sought to counter rising extremism and fascism on the continent. Cultural relations among nations – involving state and non-state actors – were envisioned as being mutual, reciprocal, and as leading to trust-building. Cultural relations would be engendered through exchanges in arts and science, education and language, and also came to include understandings involving societal issues such as human rights and empowerment.

The idealism of cultural relations also reflected a practical vision and necessity of foreign policy. British colonialism was on the decline and trade relations with the colonies and the new world would occupy the interest of British negotiators in the 1930s. One account of such diplomacy quotes Lord D'Abernon from his mission to South America in 1929: “to those who say that his extension (of cultural influence) has no connection with commerce, we reply that they are totally wrong; the reaction of trade to the more deliberate inculcation of our own culture which we advocate is definitely certain and will be swift.” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 19). Trade was only one instrument contributing to a more active foreign policy. Fostering non-economic intercultural exchanges was another way. The instrumental link between foreign policy and cultural relations was a particularly Anglo-Saxon undertaking. The United States, one of the few countries in the world without a ministry of culture, also established (a now defunct) Division of Cultural Relations within the Department of State in 1938.

Historically, the British Council has catered to both goals: that of advancing mutual understandings and respect through intercultural exchanges, while also reflecting British foreign policy goals. In doing so, it has sat both at arms-length and under direct scrutiny of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It has been governed by a Royal Charter since 1940 and is also a non-departmental public body (NDPB) that is sponsored through the FCO. It is also a public corporation: over 70 percent of its budget comes from commercial activities such as English language teaching.

National cultural institutes such as the British Council must balance a broadly defined notion of cultural relations with the prerogatives of the nation states within which they operate. The link between cultural relations and foreign policy in the UK is tighter than some other countries. The British Council has looked enviously at its cousin, the Goethe-Institut in Germany, which has a strong view of culture in German foreign policy as its third pillar after security and trade. In policy terms, that means somewhat more autonomy to shape cultural relations from foreign policies in security and trade. However, even in Germany, the shift from less purpose-bound cultural dialogues to employing culture at the service of exports has produced lively debates and political pushbacks (Sacker, 2014, p. 94). The British Council has also seen the rise of new powers such as China and India, the former especially with its well-endowed and resourced cultural diplomacy in recent times.

This introduction briefly reviews the ways that the concept of cultural relations has evolved at the British Council and its relationship to the broad foreign policy goals of the British government. Thereafter, it reviews a few contributions of the British Council from two important perspectives covered in the essays in this compendium. These include the ability of the British Council to engage societies and organisations culturally, and the diverse methodologies that can be employed to assess the impact of such efforts.

Cultural Relations at the British Council

Cultural relations broadly defined include key terms such as dialogue, reciprocity and trust among cultures. A recent review of cultural relations from the Goethe-Institut and British Council (2018, p. 7) adopts the following definition of cultural relations:

Cultural relations are understood as reciprocal transnational interactions between two or more cultures, encompassing a range of activities conducted by state and/or non-state actors within the space of culture and civil society. The overall outcomes of cultural relations are greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between people and cultures, shaped through engagement and attraction rather than coercion.

These broad norms in cultural relations can be broken up into key roles for the actors involved and the recorded practices, including the historical evolution of the ways that cultural relations link with foreign policy. The British Council defines its role as supporting the prosperity, security, and influence of the United Kingdom through its cultural relations activities. The notion of cultural relations is expansive, including eight important ways in which cultures interact through arts, English, education and science, skills and enterprise, young people, civil society and justice, testing and assessment, and women and girls (the accompanying essays in this compilation cut across these issues).

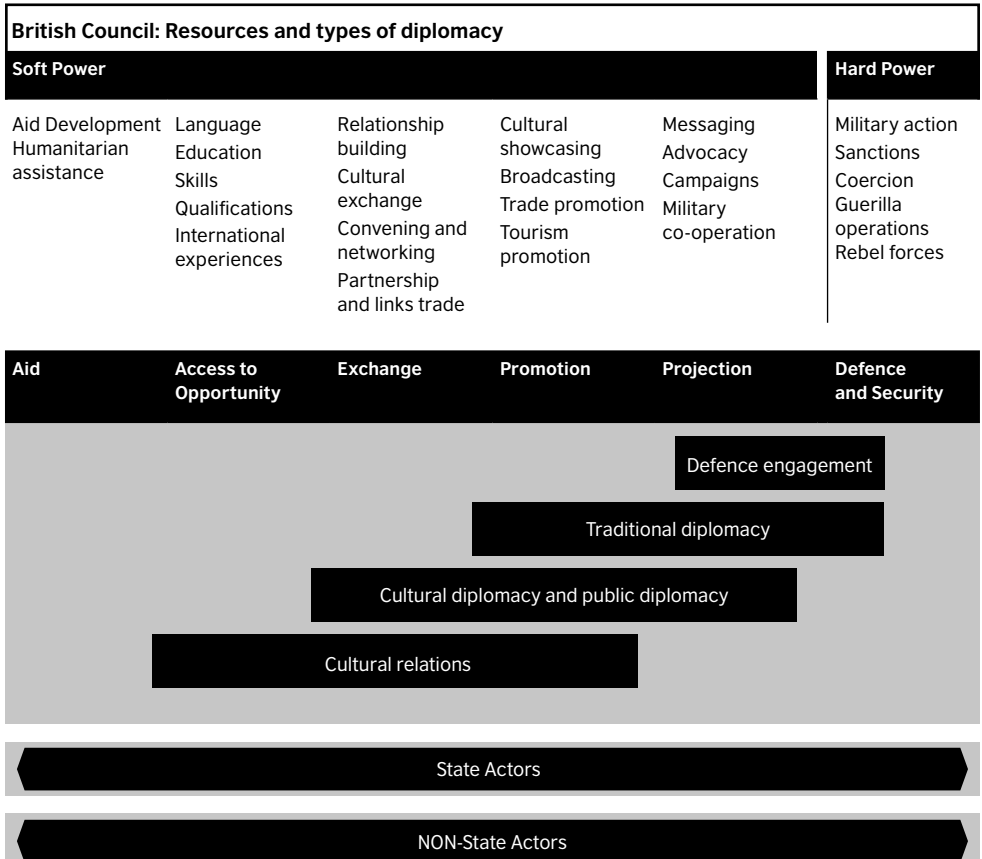
The evidence for British Council's global cultural engagement is impressive. It has a presence in over 100 countries with a staff involvement of 10,000 people. In 2018-19, it reached 80 million people directly and another 791 million overall through its online programmes, broadcasts, and publications (British Council, 2019, p. 6). A few notable data encompassing the activities described above may also be mentioned here. The British Council's income in 2018-19 was £1.250 billion of which 14.7 per cent was grant-in-aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). From its income generating activities, for example in English language teaching and assessment, operating surpluses grew by six per cent, leaving a positive bottom line of over £30 million in 2018-19. Further, for every £1 received from the FCO grant-in-aid, the British Council yields £6.20 (British Council, 2019, p. 80). This in turn is reinvested in

cultural relations activities.

In education, the British Council's work helps in attracting over half a million international students to study in the UK each year. Conversely, between 2013 and 2017, the British Council worked with 10,093 schools throughout the UK to establish international connections. In terms of culture, which spans work in the arts and in society, British Council in 2018-19 engaged in partnerships with 8,000 UK-based artists and arts organisations and with 39,000 arts and arts organisations around the world. Its work in society also included building the capacity of 2000 civil society organisations around the world (British Council, 2019, p.18).

The British Council has also fashioned a vocabulary that places the relative position of cultural relations within the full gamut of thinking about soft power and the forms of diplomacy. Soft power is the ability of a country to influence the world through its values, institutions, and foreign policy (Nye, 2002). Diplomacy refers to the management of relations among countries through official representatives, often involving negotiations rather than use of force. Cultural diplomacy is "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment through facilitating the export of an element of that actor's life, belief, or art" (Cull, 2019, p. 5). Instruments of cultural diplomacy vary from one-way cultural gifts and flows to interactive forms that may include cultural capacity building and dialogues (Cull, 2019, pp. 73-76).

The overlap between cultural relations and various forms of diplomacy can both strengthen and challenge foreign policy establishments. Historically, the role of the cultural attaché or the cultural officer spoke to the strong link between foreign policy and cultural relations. Three years after starting the Division of Cultural Relations, the United States began appointing cultural officers abroad, starting with Latin America. Thomson and Laves (1963) provide a description of the portfolio of these early appointees: "He was supposed to possess a broad and rounded knowledge of the social, educational, scientific, and artistic life of the United States, and of the leading public and private organizations in those areas of activity...He was in short the human channel or rather the human engineer who sought to make the two-way flow of cultural information and experience mutually helpful and useful." (p. 45).

Figure 1: Cultural Relations within a Soft and Hard Power Spectrum

Source: Adapted from internal British Council document, 2017.

Figure 1 is adapted from an internal diagram, which illustrated an organisational perspective of British Council's position relative to other international relations interventions. The intention was to demonstrate and situate the complexity of cultural relations, which here is shown as intersecting with traditional forms of diplomatic statecraft such as cultural and public diplomacy. Interestingly, a cultural relations approach overlaps with and falls between traditional development aid and hard power.

There are also challenges to the fine lines between cultural relations and diplomacy. Whereas cultural relations involve non-state actors and long-term horizons, diplomacy is often conceived in strategic and instrumental ways. Therefore, a cultural attaché or cultural affairs officer may or may not be suitable for a cultural relations position. A further challenge – which can alternatively be also viewed as an impetus – to a cultural affairs officer's work now comes from the proliferation of new social media and information technologies. Diplomatic practices are now fast changing to accommodate these technologies (Leguey-Feilleux, 2009; Pamment, 2016).

¹See <http://www.greatbritaincampaign.com>

As soft power has become a priority for the conduct of diplomacy, the post of the public diplomacy officer has become salient, alongside that of the cultural attaché, in connecting diplomatic statecraft with non-state actors or the public at large. Cull (2019), cited above, defines the British Council's work more or less as cultural diplomacy rather than cultural relations. The British Council's work includes exchanges and dialogue that go beyond instrumental diplomacy; at the same time it plays an important role in nation-branding, such as the campaign for 'cool Britannia' under former prime minister Tony Blair (p. 128) and the current GREAT Britain campaign promoting Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The distinction between cultural relations and diplomacy and the need to keep some autonomy from the latter is frequently pointed out. Rivera (2015) notes:

The absence of government is just as important for cultural relations as its presence is for cultural diplomacy. Cultural relations is the mutual exchange of culture between peoples to develop long-term relationships, trust, and understanding for the purpose of generating genuine goodwill and influence abroad (p. 11).

In practice, the intersecting lines between cultural relations and foreign policy have often resulted in a messy resolution, maintaining both the distinctions and the overlaps. Recent analysts have pointed out that the trend in the United Kingdom has been to maintain some distinction but also to emphasise cultural relations as being part of the broader foreign policy establishment. James Pamment (2016) points out the successive reviews of the British Council in seeking to place its work within the parameters of the foreign policy goals of government and its public diplomacy. He notes that the 2002 Wilton Review and the 2005 Carter Review following 9/11 were especially important "to investigate how the FCO, BC and other public diplomacy organisations sought to influence foreign citizens in support of the Government's foreign policy goals" (p. 4). The net result of these efforts, notes Pamment, has been to make public diplomacy more 'transactional', rather than one fostering dialogues and reciprocity (Chapter 8). Pamment also points out the challenge to such

an approach within the British Council, such as from a study by Martin Rose and Nick Wadham-Smith which pointed out that the British Council's public diplomacy work is at the behest of the government, but that its cultural relations work was based on the independence of the British Council:

If our cultural relations work is seen as indistinguishable in motivation from our public diplomacy work, it will not – and we will not – be trusted, because we risk being seen as a 'front' for political interests. This damages not only our ability to do cultural relations; but also our ability to do public diplomacy. (Rose & Wadham-Smith, 2004, p.35, cited in Pamment, 2016, p. 101).

More broadly, the British Council's position can be viewed as similar to other organisations that find themselves betwixt the humanism and realism of international relations. Ostensibly, a cultural relations approach begins with a humanistic and relational emphasis, while a cultural or public diplomacy approach ends with a realist emphasis on a nation state's foreign policy goals. The former emphasises dialogue and trust, whereas the vocabulary of the latter is more instrumental and focused on the end goal. Both are important in the conduct of foreign policy although the relative weights vary among nation states. By the same token, the two are not coterminous either.

Assessing the British Council's Work

Cultural relations encompass a variety of engagements from instrumental soft power work to engagements that foster trust, participation and dialogue, and reciprocity. A variety of methodologies can be employed to assess the impact of this work ranging from ethnographic techniques to various types of quantitative evidence. This section analyses the forms of engagements addressed in the essays collected here as well as the assessments mobilised to analyse their impact.

Four cross-cutting themes can be identified across the contributions in this collection, with most contributions speaking to multiple themes below:

1. Instrumental objectives – an example here is the objective of showcasing the UK's convening power in global education (see McGovern and Saunders in this collection);
2. Building trust – The British Council's work in teaching the English language has increased trust toward the UK both in being able to understand the UK's language and culture but, more importantly, through the kinds of intercultural understandings that arise from bilingual and multilingual skills (see Martin Rose in this collection).
3. Participation and Dialogue – my own essay on culture and development in this collection shows how participatory efforts in the arts lead to dignity and confident cultural identities. A particularly interesting example comes from performing Shakespeare's play, *Two Noble Kinsmen* in Nigerian Pidgin English (see Ezegwu in this collection). It brings to the fore both the strengths and challenges of such participatory and syncretic efforts.
4. Reciprocity – The British Council's science diplomacy programmes have involved networks of scientists working on common interests (see for example Beall and Bassett in this collection) as well as reciprocal exchanges among specialists in language assessment (O'Sullivan and Patel in this collection).

Collectively, these four themes underscore the definition of cultural relations outlined by the Goethe-Institut and British Council as cited above: "greater connectivity" comes from instrumental objectives and active networking; "better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships," underlie long-term engagement and the concerted efforts in building trust; and, "mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between people and culture" sit at the core of participation and dialogue, as well as mutuality and reciprocity.

The key to identifying these themes at the core of the British Council's work is to regard them as important processes in their own right, leading to a variety of outcomes. Qualitative and normative objectives such as reciprocity and trust are particularly hard to operationalise in terms of evidence, and thus evaluation must leave room for a process-rich and a purpose-free endeavour. As noted above, the Goethe-Institut emphasises these processes in its outreach.

The studies within this collection provide a rich description of processes, real-life data, and empirical cases to document, substantiate and expand the theories of how cultural relations work. The identification of consistent patterns across the work of the British Council, as well as being able to provide evidence through the use of multiple methodologies, increases the reliability and rigour of evidence. The methodologies employed in the contributions here have involved a range of data-collection techniques that document numbers participating in activities, surveys that have operationalised key questions on impact, interviews and focus groups that have brought out nuances and complexities in British Council's efforts and engagement, and historical/descriptive/ethnographic techniques that trace processes and sometimes posit causal links towards impact. These contributions will neatly complement and enrich the broader quantitative techniques that provide evidence on trust and correlations with soft power indices among UK and other countries.

Conclusion

The British Council's activities take place through a variety of programmes, which, as noted above, reach 80 million people (British Council, 2019, p.6) and over ten times that number indirectly through online, publication and broadcasting. These broad indicators reveal the expansiveness of the British Council's work, but the nuances and complexities that are analysed in these thematic contributions relating to different scales, provide deeper and richer meaning to our understanding of cultural relations.

At normative and organisational levels, the British Council has addressed issues that extend to many governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental organisations working across borders. The normative challenge is to balance idealism with pragmatics or realism (Carr, 1940). The former translates into the mutual respect and dialogues that the British Council fosters, but it must also address the strategic goals of the British government while doing so. The organisational challenge comes from managing its work in over 100 countries with a staff involvement of over 10,000 and constant budgetary challenges. Frances Donaldson's (1984) history of the first 50 years of the British Council until 1984 identified a similar tension between idealism and governmental pressures, including frequent budgetary cutbacks.

A recent assessment of participatory practices in the arts applies equally well to the spaces where the British Council 'pushes the envelope' to think of the world beyond the strict aims of the nation state: "Participatory art...values relationship and community. Because it is an open resource and a human right. Because the world is changing and it helps meet that challenge. Because it matters to so many" (Matarasso, 2019, p. 198). Organisations such as the British Council can and do challenge people to think of themselves first and foremost as human beings, involved in participatory and reciprocal cultural relations, while at the same time being aware that they are circumscribed by boundaries and borders, including those of nation states.

The conceptual breadth and relevance of the British Council's work is important. Cultural diplomacy and soft power with their instrumental aims sits betwixt narrow tools of hard power and the idealistic 'purpose-free' aims of cultural relations, characterised by dialogue and exchange. The conceptual breadth addresses the complexity of international interactions and poses a challenge to document the value of cultural relations. The empirical exercises in the contributions that follow provide a stimulating impetus towards appreciating the value of cultural relations.

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