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Role of Culture in Defining Human Societies

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Abstract

The Yale conference challenged and improved my thinking about the relationship between culture and society. I understand culture as an advanced way of being social, insofar as it improves societal efficacy (ultimately contributing to population flourishing for which the human species as cultural animals has been exceptionally successful) by means of shared and accumulating information, economic trade, common praxis, interlocking roles, advanced forms of collective decision-making, and social systems. Culture requires intergenerational transmission rather than being a temporary arrangement. Cooperation and trust build upon shared identity. Society comprises the culture plus the members. Defensive possession of shared territory is a complicating but valuable addition to this emerging understanding. The usefulness of culture as a defining attribute of human societies is complicated by the lack of full uniformity. Nevertheless, a human society has multiple interacting but semi-independent social systems, and citizens move and act among them.

My career as research psychologist has focused on the effort to understand the essence of the human condition. The basis of my thinking has been that the human mind was created by nature, for culture (Baumeister, 2005). That is, our species solves the universal biological problems of survival and reproduction by organizing social life with social systems based on shared information, interlocking and complementary social roles, agreed-upon ways of doing things, and normative guides for behavior. Such systems facilitate collective decision making, accumulation of knowledge, and economic trade.

Insofar as it has been necessary to distinguish culture from society, I have understood society as the culture plus the people who belong to it. This simple definition

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is clearly inadequate for the present task, as it is best suited to human societies (my own focus), as well as neglecting some key aspects as developed by Moffett (2025).

In my understanding, something only qualifies as culture if it includes some capability for transmitting it to the next generation. Although definitions of culture vary, many require that it be not just a momentary arrangement but rather something that endures over time, which requires continuity across generations. Harris's (1997) theory of cultural materialism is based on the fundamental idea that whatever else cultures do, they must enable participants to continue life, which includes obtaining food, water, shelter, safety, and providing what is needed to raise children into future adults who will carry on the culture. Intergenerational transmission was the first of Moffett's three criteria, so to me it is already implicit in the understanding of culture and thus also of society.

Moffett's emphasis on shared identification (a second defining criterion of a society) articulated a point that had not been evident to me before encountering his work. The members of a society do not necessarily all know each other, especially in what he calls the anonymous societies. (In contrast, individual-recognition societies do require that every member can personally recognize every other.) Nevertheless, society memberships have strict boundaries, so that any individual is either definitely a member or definitely not one, with hardly anyone in limbo or liminal status. Even those may be mostly in transition. Identity markers are therefore often vital for establishing who is in versus out. To be sure, such markers are not necessarily always visible. At the conference meeting from which this article emerged, it was repeatedly noted that there were countless people on the street outside, some of whom were American citizens and others not — but when we ventured outside ourselves, we had no basis for knowing which ones were which.

To be sure, the distinctions were nevertheless valid, despite identities not being readily discernible. Non-Americans must have had passports to enter the country (at least if they entered legally), which unambiguously identified them as citizens of a country other than the United States. Some American citizens do not have passports, but their identities are well recorded in verifiable records, including the Social Security numbers that are issued at birth, unique to each person. Some people have multiple passports, which (assuming they are legal and not forgeries) indicate dual citizenship, but that does not undermine the strict boundary. Dual citizenship simply affirms that the individual is a genuine and legitimate member of both societies. I do not know whether there is anything corresponding to dual citizenship in the animal world, but if it is, I assume it is rare.

Control over territory is a third definitional criterion of a society. The territory too has strict boundaries, though they may change over time. As one familiar example, the Alsace-Lorraine has belonged alternately to Germany and to France, changing as a result of repeated wars. Nevertheless, the territorial boundary, like the membership boundary, is presumably strict and precise. Territory was the most contentious criterion at our conference, with multiple adjustments needed. For example, to prevent sports teams (who defend their home field) to count as societies, it was necessary to stipulate that society members must normally sleep on their territory.

Cooperation was also discussed as another potential criterion for defining societies, but it was rejected, given that some societies do not show cooperation. For human

societies, however, cooperation may be a common feature. To be sure, not all interactions within a society are cooperative, and some are downright hostile! Nevertheless, why do societies form at all? Cooperation means that people interact in ways that have positive-sum outcomes, ideally benefiting both parties, or at least reaching the point that the total benefits outweigh the costs. For example, altruistic helping among society members typically fits the pattern that the benefits to the recipient outweigh the costs to the helper (Ent et al., 2020). This is the opposite of the case with evil and violence, given that the costs to the victim often far outweigh any benefit to the perpetrator (Baumeister, 1997). Human societies typically have economic marketplaces, which are inherently cooperative: Buyers wish to buy, sellers seek to sell, and the transaction benefits both. Modern marketplaces require governments to regulate them, prevent abuses, and even to authorize the money that the markets use. In any case, it seems vital to assume that individuals derive some benefits from membership in societies, and cooperation is one way that those can be provided.

Communication might be another key factor to consider. All human societies communicate, as do many animal societies. Individuals benefit from having more information (at least about personally relevant topics), and so they may be motivated to belong to a society that can furnish them with more information. To be sure, societies also share plenty of false information, sometimes because they do not know better, and sometimes deliberately so as to advance the interests of a particular subgroup within the society.

A major objection to the usage of culture as part of the definition of a human society is the combination of elusive definition and lack of uniformity. As Moffett (2025) wrote, societies with one uniform culture “only existed before sedentary peoples incorporated outsiders en masse” (p. XXX). As an easy example, it is difficult if not impossible to identify meaningful aspects of a uniform American culture that are shared by all Americans. Certainly not a common language, nor any particular values, nor even shared beliefs. Even the societal criteria noted above do not apply to all: Not all American citizens live in the territorial United States, nor do they all participate in ensuring that the societal identity is transmitted to future generations.

Perhaps it is useful to consider a culture as a nexus of social systems. These include the government, the economy, the legal system (both making and enforcing laws), the media for sharing information, the education system, the food systems, the military, and a few more. The government and the economy can have major impact on each other, but neither fully controls the other. The food system depends on the economy, again with bilateral influence but neither fully in control. The education and religious systems can support the government or not, and vice versa. In some countries the military periodically takes over or changes the government and intrudes into the economy.

A member of American society participates in many but not necessarily all of these systems. That person's life is shaped by those systems. Across the border lies a different society with a different set of systems, though this is again complicated by interlocking economies, cooperating or competing governments, and (these days) much flowing of information across the border. The systems are largely designed for cooperation, so that together the citizens can survive and reproduce.

Warfare highlights the differences between societies. Each person belongs to one or the other, though sometimes divided loyalties can require painful choices. The social systems of each society strive to prevail in the war. Ants have wars, and chimpanzees have group fights, but human warfare has been transformed by cultural systems into something vastly different, including military ranks, technology for weapons, ad hoc strategies and tactics, military intelligence (though often derided as oxymoronic), and economic support.

Working together in these large social systems is something humans are almost uniquely evolved to do. Therefore, what applies to human culture might well not generalize to other animal societies, though many of them have social systems too (and several dozen have small amounts of culture). Humans are of course of particular interest, indeed to many other species (as we affect them) but particularly to ourselves. Humankind's evolutionary advances are in communication and cooperation, and culture is a giant system for using communication and cooperation to make a society function better so its population can flourish.

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