

What are cultural systems made of?

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There is an unreflective way of thinking about culture, as practices and ideas we share unproblematically with other people like us, and an unreflective way of thinking about cultures, as bodies of culture that we share unproblematically with other people like us. Sharing practices, ideas, and bodies of culture is far from unproblematic, yet these unreflective views remain a useful foil because we still lack a consensus on how to move beyond them. A more coherent concept of culture must at least solve the problems implicit in these views. Above all, we need to know how culture, and cultures, can exist in a form that bridges between different people, given that only people have the mental capacities to hold ideas and form commitments to practices.

De Munck & Bennardo have taken us a long way towards solving the first problem – what is culture? – in their impressive and creative synthesis. I would like to use this comment to ask how we can extend this thinking towards a resolution of the second problem – what are cultures? They gesture towards this problem with their comments on *cultural systems*, suggesting for example “that cultural models are the basic molecular units of the cultural system” and indicating the need for further research on the ontology of larger cultural systems. I assume that cultural systems are radically plural in the sense that there are many different cultural systems at many different levels of granularity, organised around various social domains and adhered to by profusely overlapping groups (broadly, norm circles); that each cultural system is composed in some way of a set or sets of cultural models; and also that different people, even within the same groups, hold to different sets of cultural models.

Therefore we must ask how some particular set of such models could be thought to constitute a system.

I suggest that in many important respects cultural systems share the ontology of cultural models as de Munck and Bennardo have described it. In other words, the idea of a given cultural system as composed of a coherent set of cultural models is itself a cultural model and our belief that it is something more widely shared is also an individual projection of a supposedly collective representation. Perhaps a crucial step towards bringing a cultural system into existence is to name it, thus providing a hook upon which to hang a collection of cultural models (here Gellner's account of the creation of European national cultures is exemplary: Gellner 1983 & also see Elder-Vass 2012 chapter 9). Even once they share a name for it, however, any given cultural system may mean different things to different people (both within and across contexts and periods) because different people associate different sets of cultural models with it, and because different people may have different understandings of individual cultural models that they consider to be part of it. Some cultural systems may thus be quite diversely understood by different people who nevertheless believe that they all share some sort of commitment to the same system, and act *as if* they unproblematically share such a commitment. Perhaps political ideologies or musical genres might be cultural systems of this type, each drawing together a set of related cultural models, but with different adherents understanding the models differently and/or disagreeing on exactly which models should be considered part of the system.

However, just as with lower level cultural models, there are also forces that tend to produce convergence or homogenisation in these sets, even if that convergence can never be perfect. Let me illustrate the argument with a relatively simple example of a well homogenised cultural system: the game of tennis. The existence of global authorities, written rules, books and videos about how to play, organised tennis clubs, playing lessons, and at the most fundamental level the need for a playing partner who shares a common understanding of various elements of the game, all tend to produce a convergence between different people's understandings of the various cultural models that make up the game of tennis. Convergence is achieved at two levels: the content of each model, and in understandings of which models make up the

set that constitutes tennis. These forces tending to produce convergence also help to make it seem plausible to participants that tennis is a real cultural system that somehow stands outside them. Yet in a strictly representational sense, there is no genuinely collective representation here but rather a very effectively coordinated set of individual representations that function for those that hold them "as if" they were a collective representation.

Even a cultural system as well integrated as this one, however, will have its divergences. There will, for example, be novice players who misunderstand the rules, there will be disputes about how they should be applied at even the highest level of the game, and there will be innovations that are adopted in some places and not others at any one time.

The homogeneity of a cultural system across the different individuals who feel a commitment to it, in other words, is always a partial and provisional accomplishment. Yet there are elements of cultural practice that encourage convergence. The sheer materiality of cultural practice, both as observable performances of practices themselves and in the form of material traces in objects, texts and indeed the spoken word, provides a public element, open to inspection and thus able to secure shared understandings without direct access to other minds. We must therefore ask whether cultural systems should be thought of as hybrid structures, including both mental representations scattered across individuals – cultural models – and these non-human material traces, and in some way emergent from these sets of parts. In theorising cultural models De Munck and Bennardo have made an important step towards explaining the ontology of culture more broadly.

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References

Elder-Vass, Dave 2012 *The Reality of Social Construction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Gellner, Ernest 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell.