

1 Society, Culture, and Communication

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Define culture and society in such a way as to distinguish them clearly from each other.
- Describe the problems that can result from using the term “culture” inaccurately.
- Understand the difference between terms like language and languaging.
- Contrast the American idea of ritual with that of social scientists, especially anthropologists.
- Define signs in relation to metasigns and language in relation to metalanguage.
- Understand communication-centered approaches to culture.

Introduction

In this first chapter, we explore the argument for studying **communication** from the perspective of culture and society – which is another way of saying that we explore languages as “forms of life” (Wittgenstein 1958).

We begin by defining culture and society in such a way as to carefully distinguish between the two as different but interacting types or orders of reality. Along these lines, this chapter explores speaking as a **social activity** and language as a cultural resource (Duranti 1997:1–2).

In this chapter, I also advocate studying what we often call “identity” or even “identities” – social, cultural, and personal – from the perspective of **identification** (meaning *actions, often laden with emotion, linking oneself to another individual, group, or practice*).

I further call for the **processualization** of not just identity, but culture, society, and language. That does not mean I completely eliminate these more familiar terms, but I do emphasize them as denoting the *products* of processes because it is crucial to give process its due.

With all of that in mind, let’s get back to directly considering the terms culture and society. Both are notoriously difficult concepts to pin down – even before processualizing these concepts (for instance, by replacing “culture” with “enculturate/enculturation”). Thus, the distinction between culture and society can easily



Figure 1.1 Societies are made up of individuals in interactional patterns together. (Yenpitsu Nemoto/Getty Images)

be blurred. By taking care to avoid such blurring, I aim to help you understand the intersection of culture, society, and communication as a foundation for understanding the rest of this book.

Society

English speakers use the term “society” routinely in the course of our everyday lives. Indeed, we may give it a variety of meanings, depending on how we individually choose to use it. For the purposes of this book, however, we need a shared understanding of the word.

Obviously, “society” is similar to the word “social,” and we use both words to refer to something beyond the individual. (See Figure 1.1.) In fact, “social” comes from the Latin word *socialis* meaning allied, whereas “society” comes from the Latin *societas*, meaning a union for a common purpose (Lewis and Short 1891). With these Latin derivations in mind, let’s look at some definitions for “society”:

- “The aggregate of persons living together in a community, [especially] one having shared customs, laws, and institutions” (OED Online 2016b).
- “... an enduring and cooperating social group whose members have developed organized patterns of relationships through interaction with one another” (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2016).
- “... an encompassing level of social organization that can include, for example, multiple ethnic groups” (Barth 1969:16–17).

From my perspective, society is the word for a very high level of social organization – a population with which people identify and through which they

accomplish necessary tasks to an extent that would be impossible for individuals or small groups.

All of these definitions hint at something crucial to our understanding: *The underpinning of society is interaction, and interaction requires communication.*

We have many terms to describe human societies, such as “villages,” “towns,” “cities,” “communities,” and “countries” (or “nation-states”). These human societies rely on living, breathing, cultural phenomena of various sorts. Crucial among these phenomena are multiple systems of communication. Indeed, one of the six models of culture that linguistic anthropologist Alessandro Duranti (1997) proposes is *culture as communicative system*.

I do need to clarify one thing: “The social” is not confined to our species. Because the social is that realm of organismic reality in which complex interactions make collective achievements possible – beyond that which any individual organism could achieve alone – we recognize that ants, for instance, are social creatures who live in societies. So do termites (in “colonies”) and baboons (in “troops”), among others.

Culture

If “society” is an organized population that transcends an aggregate of individuals, what is “culture”? Again, this is a word we use often – and in a variety of ways. In fact, it is not uncommon for some people to use the words society and culture interchangeably. But for the purposes of our shared conversation in this book, we need a definition that we can all use, all of the time – a definition that clearly distinguishes between society and culture.

As you might imagine, the word “culture” is closely related to “cultivate,” derived from the Latin *cultivus*, meaning ‘tilled soil’. Of course, in English, “cultivate” has changed from a strictly agricultural focus to something broader over time – for instance, cultivating language and literature, ideas, customs, and artistic expressions of a group or, as we might say, a society.

So how is the word “culture” itself defined? Here are two perspectives.

- “The distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period” (OED Online 2016a).
- “... that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [*sic*] as a member of society” (Tylor 1871:1–2).

However, such definitions are today considered **essentializing** or *objectifying* of a process (“culturing”) or a dimension (“the cultural”) that cannot be defined simply.

Thus, I insert a relatively recent definition, by Ulf Hannerz, which perhaps represents the far end of the spectrum from the previous definitions. Hannerz’s vision of culture is one that

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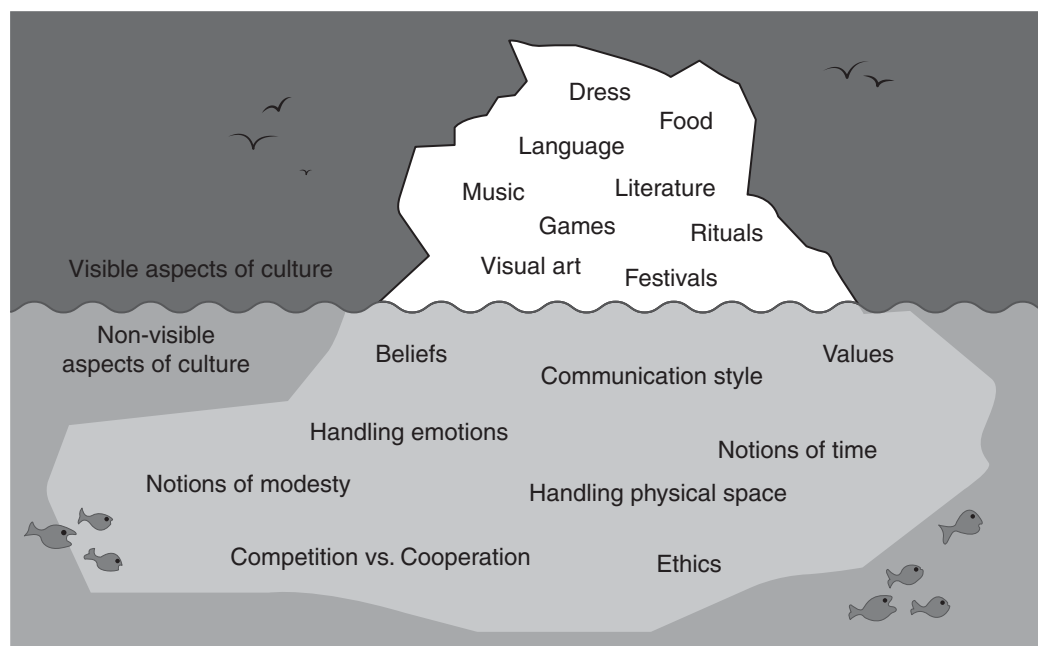


Figure 1.2 Some indicators of culture are visible, and some are under the surface. (Slide 6, Introduction to clinical cultural competence. Clinical Cultural Competency Series. Courtesy of the Centre for Innovation and Excellence in Child and Family Centered Care at SickKids Hospital)

suggests that the flow of culture between countries and continents may result in another diversity of culture, based more on interconnections than on autonomy. It also allows the sense of a complex culture as a network of perspectives, or as an ongoing debate. People can come into it from the diaspora, as consultants and advisors, or they can come into it from the multiform local cultures, from the bush. The outcome is not predicted. Creolization thought is open-ended. (1992:266)

Each of these definitions provides a useful window on this oft-used (oft-misused) term. My definition, which we use throughout this textbook, is this: *Culture denotes the set of principles guiding human thought and action together with the products of thought and action in a society and in the now-continuous intersocietal encounters.*

As you can see, the word “culture” includes many things. You may have heard archaeologists talk about “material culture,” the physical “stuff” of a group or society. And then there is everything else – the stories, customs and traditions, values and beliefs, social practices, and of course language. (See Figure 1.2.) We discuss all of this and more, in detail, from many different angles, throughout this book.

To help us clarify our understanding, it is also useful to talk about what culture is not. It is *not* a space, a sphere, a territory, or a population. Various cultures, instead,

are “organizations of diversity,” as Anthony F. C. Wallace argues. Wallace’s recognition of the complex processes by which individuals grow up and relate to the organization of life (i.e., culture) in their society was a touchstone of his life’s work: “The organizing of diversity emerges as a developmental process that provides . . . an arena for conflict and culture change” (2009:254). Recent descriptions of culture echo Wallace’s, stressing that culture is a world of practices and ideologies that are to some extent fought over (Wallace and Grumet 2004).

Directly or indirectly, the following perspectives on culture reflect these underlying features – namely, culture as:

- a “glue” that holds a particular society together;
- a circulatory phenomenon (something that circulates across time and space);
- a process or, more accurately, a complex nexus of processes;
- sets of rules that operate in various activities from, say, hopscotch to drinking scotch;
- a set of practices, signs, values, and ideologies.

Concepts of Culture and Society – and the Problems They Raise

If we are concerned with human societies and with culture-making, culture-sharing, and cultural values – *as all anthropologists are* – then we must view **the cultural** (the levels of human reality defined by culture) and **the social** (the human and infrahuman levels of reality defined by complex interactions structured over time and manifest as **social structure**) as intertwined parts of a whole. Alfred Kroeber says it thus: “Just as culture presupposes society, so society presupposes persons. It is an assemblage of individuals – plus something additional – that something which we and termite societies share” (1949:183).

Yet, even in the early twentieth century, Kroeber was concerned that scholars too often confused or conflated **culture** (*ideas, practices, and products*) with society (*a group of people held together by culture*). His is a concern that I share strongly as well. That’s why, in this section, we explore some of the ways this confusion of terms is problematic and then more generally how misunderstandings of the word “culture” itself can cause harm.

We start with the problem of conflating the common (i.e., too generalized) meaning of culture with what more careful anthropologists call “society.” At least for most of the twentieth century, **cultural anthropologists**, among others, have marginalized the concept of society or treated it as a concern only for sociologists. Instead, as we are beginning to see, “*culture*” and “*society*” are in a complex dialectical relationship – cultural notions govern societies and how they populate their institutions and subgroups. Focusing on these interrelationships results in a more useful understanding that *societies are collectives bound together through cultural phenomena*.

It is worth noting that it is really the word “culture” that is most misunderstood and misused. The term “society” is less often misused – although society is sometimes left out of the conversation entirely.

An anthropology of culture without a clear vision of society can miss the social distribution of power and wealth – to which ways of speaking, and speaking about speaking, contribute. In fact, it is enormously important for anthropologists to focus not only on isolated cultural practices and beliefs (which the uninitiated might even consider quaint or exotic) but also on social hierarchy, global power structures, and the **ideologies** (i.e., the cultural ideas related to, and typically supportive of, the structures of power characterizing a society) that maintain them.

Let us consider a very troubling example of how some national and international authorities think about culture. Sadly, this thinking echoes some of the most unfortunate passages in the work of an otherwise outstanding anthropologist and human being – Franz Boas. In some of his writings (1917), Boas treats culture as a kind of “jail” or “jailor” (Bauman and Briggs 2003:282–283) – something that entraps us, preventing us from seeing “the truth.”

Briggs and Mantini-Briggs’ (2003) account of a cholera epidemic in Venezuela shows the damage that can result from thinking in terms of culture-as-jailor. In trying to stop the cholera epidemic, public health officials tried to communicate to the public about ways to reduce the spread of cholera. Unfortunately, the unexamined cultural biases in these communication efforts resulted in another kind of damage: Briggs and Mantini-Briggs document how communication pieces, including flyers and leaflets, from these public health officials *indirectly spread the notion* that indigenous cultural beliefs and practices rendered indigenous people “ignorant” as well as polluted and polluting.

In other words, in contrast to public health and other government officials’ imagination of themselves as “sanitary citizens,” the discourse of public health – in Venezuela and far beyond – constitutes indigenous people as “unsanitary subjects.” And, in that discourse, they “seemed to be intrinsically linked to a particular package of premodern or ‘marginal’ characteristics – poverty, criminality, ignorance, illiteracy, promiscuity, filth, and a lack of the relations and feelings that define the nuclear family” (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003:33). (See Figure 1.3.)

Briggs and Hallin assert that news media transmit to the general public “instructions from medical professionals and the state on how to behave as a ‘responsible consumer’ in an environment of scarce medical resources” – maintaining that “the form of the information flow is hierarchical, and patients are imagined paternalistically, as ignorant and irresponsible” (2007:57). As a result, in Venezuelan public health pamphlets, the indigenous peoples of Venezuela, especially those of the Orinoco River delta, were essentially identified as the *cause* rather than the *victims* of the deadly epidemic. This framing of “culture as a form of ignorance” shifts the blame for the victims’ illnesses away from the Venezuelan government officials (e.g., public health officials) who ensured a grossly



Figure 1.3 Living conditions – not choices, habits, or culture – contribute to the spread of diseases like cholera and malaria. This Indian child is standing beside an open sewer. (Howard Davies/Getty Images)

unequal distribution of hygiene-related infrastructure, medical resources, and so on (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003:5). Instead, the blame is shifted to the indigenous people who are seen as “blinded” by their “jailor” – meaning their “traditions” or “culture.”

Let’s look for a moment at this flawed logic from an even more general perspective. This representation of culture-as-jailor is an example of what Briggs and Mantini-Briggs refer to as “cultural logic” or **cultural reasoning** – a set of attitudes held by elites, such as national and international public health officers, who substitute “culture” for **race** (*a social category projected falsely onto biology* [American Anthropological Association 2016]) in an era when it has become untenable to attribute stupidity, for instance, to a “race.” (For evidence against the notion of race as a scientific or biological category and its usefulness in racism as a “cultural project,” see Hill 2009.) Briggs’ concerns about widespread and damaging uses of the term “culture” are shared by other anthropologists. Abu-Lughod’s essay “Writing against Culture” (1991) and Ortner’s discussion of attempts to replace “culture” with “ideology” (1984) come to mind.

As unfortunate as this widespread echoing of Boas on the notion of culture is, there is little to be gained by abandoning it altogether, which some anthropologists have advocated. More accurately, what we *can* and *must* do is to reject an

essentialist view of culture. Popular views treat culture as an “essence” equally distributed among all “members of a culture.” Of course, talking about a culture having “members” is absurd if we recognize culture as a set of activity systems, processes, products, and ideologies, but not as a group of people, as we have been discussing.

But what does essence mean in this context? It is a way of referring to the nature of “X” – something very important to defining X, something that is inside every copy of X. This view of culture imagines essence as a kind of “substance” inside everyone affiliated with a given “culture.” People thus affiliated are then thought to manifest this internal cultural essence in their thoughts and actions. The expectation is that we will find an overwhelming homogeneity “inside” a culture. This can result, for instance, in Venezuelan public health workers declaring the indigenous people of the Amacuro River delta as problematic in a cholera epidemic simply because the “essence of their culture” keeps them from seeing and understanding the means of cholera’s transmission.

Taking problems with the word “culture” further, we see that some of the ways it is commonly misused are reifying. **Reification**, from the Latin *res*, meaning ‘thing’, treats a dynamic process such as culture as a static object – not as the glue that holds a population together or as *a complex interlocking set of processes*, but as the kind of thing one might check off on a census form, thus making “culture” auditable. Medical, psychiatric, and public health studies, among others that are based on such a concept, can thus never be sensitive to the internal complexities of culture. (See Chapter 12.)

Not only is the word culture, as popularly conceived, problematic, but this is even more true of the word “cultures,” which may conjure up images of small, exotic indigenous groups living in far-off jungles, unchanged since the beginning of time. This image reduces complex and dynamic systems to populations with supposedly distinct boundaries. In fact, though, the cultural is rarely isolated and does not respect boundaries. In this age of **globalization** (discussed at length in Chapter 11), the boundaries of nation-states are at best porous.

In fact, we know that globalization today involves mass migrations, the diversification of the world’s large cities, and a rapid flow of goods and ideas around the world. As people (i.e., members of societies) are in constant motion around the world, so are their cultural concepts, products, and practices. And, although we tend to think this current period of globalization is unique, there is evidence for earlier explosions of globalization dating back thousands of years. To think realistically about society, culture, and their interconnections, we must today be aware of ongoing “waves” of globalization, starting from classical Greece (Friedman 1994) or with the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” (Pollock 1996), resulting in the sharing and mixing of cultural concepts, products, and practices over time. That is what it takes for us to truly grasp the notion of culture as dynamic and ever-evolving, rather than static.

A Sign-Centered Approach to Society, Culture, and Communication

We turn now to a discussion of signs. Why is it important to do so? Because *Culture and Communication* is about more than language, and its lessons in language are enriched by a sign-centered approach. It reflects a semiotic linguistic anthropology.

I bring to this book an interest in all human signs (and some animal signs as well) – an interest in all forms of communication. I am convinced that we can understand culture *and* communication only by grasping culture *as* communication. That means studying languaging and culturing as forms of signing.

This book advocates treating society and culture as systems of signs – or more accurately, as communicative systems, systems of signing. One important theory of signs and signing, upon which I draw more than any other, is that of Charles Sanders Peirce, who referred to processes surrounding signs as **semiosis**. He wrote, “A sign is something which stands to someone for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce 1931–1958:2.228 [CP 2.228]). (Note that it is conventional in citing Peirce’s *Collected Papers* to use the abbreviation CP, along with the volume – in this case “2” – and paragraph number – in this case “228.” I follow this convention throughout the book.)

So Peirce is saying that sign is always a combination of a thing that carries meaning, the thing represented, and an understanding of how the sign means. Key to such theories is the recognition that our signs and our signifying activities are layered. Thus, for any given sign₁ – say, a Japanese communicative **style** oriented to politeness (Clancy 1986) – there are metasigns (signs₂) about signs₁. I am speaking, for example, of metasigns positively evaluating children and adults who successfully and gracefully perform the ideal (polite) Japanese communicative style. Those metasigns (signs₂) are not the end of the process at all. My writing about them becomes a new sign (sign₃) in a new context, a process called **recontextualization** (Bauman and Briggs 1990).

Semiotic Reflexivity

Social relations rely not just on “simple” signs, but reflexive signs (i.e., metasigns). Among all human communicative systems I know of, we can manage in only one to explicitly reflect on the sign system we are using. I know of no explicit musical reflections/evaluations/critiques of music. But there is language about language, especially talk (linguistic metasigns₂) about talk (linguistic signs₁). This potential of one utterance, for example, to reflect on another (like “Damn!” followed by “Oops, I’m sorry I swore”) is called the **reflexive**, reflective, or **metalinguistic capacity** of language. The function of “Damn!” as an utterance of its own is “expressive.” (For a commonly used model of six **functions** of language, see Jakobson 1990.)

Reflexivity applies to more than just language. Anthropologist Greg Urban (2001) places reflexivity at the heart of his model of culture. A culture, according to Urban, is a set of ideas embodied in material objects – including spoken or written utterances – which we always and only encounter in their material (audible or visible) form. These sets of ideas that constitute culture face the challenge of moving across time (as culture is transmitted from generation to generation) and space. Drawing on the physics of motion and specifically a metaphoric invocation of momentum and inertia, Urban envisions **metaculture** as a kind of gas pedal and brake rolled into one. Metaculture – “culture about culture” – may accelerate or slow the motion of cultural ideas, products, and so on. Examples of metaculture include advertisements (which are metacultural in relation to what they advertise, such as a popular brand of jeans) and book and film reviews (which are metacultural in relation to the “merely cultural” books or films being reviewed).

The “simply cultural₁” objects (blue jeans, books, and films) are all material objects. All of them happen to be commodities as well. And they are all complex signs. They “say” many things in many ways. Metaculture is what causes these **signs** to accelerate or decelerate. Again, “culture₂ about culture₁” is at the level of **metasign** or **metacommunication** – the level of signs about signs or communication about communication.

Among cultural elites and non-elites in this postmodern era, the one metacommunicative label that is probably most important to the way we human actors talk about cultural items/performances is “authentic.” “Authenticity” (Fenigsen and Wilce 2015; Lindholm 2008, 2009; Wilce 2017) is a sign₂ (a metasign) that denotes a particular relationship between two signs₁, such as an older “traditional” performance and another performance intended to either echo the first performance in particular or reflect the tradition that produced the first. To label the second performance “authentic” is to acknowledge that the second succeeded in its intent, as it was received and perceived by some legitimate or duly authorized audience. Such an audience would itself be an example of a group authorized to make judgments about the authenticity of some bit of culture (whether or not it represents “their culture”). Note that the judging of authentic cultural production can be a “local” or a “global” process.

Viewing Culture through the Lens of Communication

This section treats culture as dynamic processes mediated by communications as sign systems. In it, I outline and describe many complex intertwinings of culture and communication that linguistic anthropologists study.

I begin by providing a foundational definition of culture as *systems of shared meanings and interactions that both produce and “re-produce” social structures*. From there, we explore culture and language as toolkits whose constituent tools both shape and are shaped by their uses. These analogies serve as preparation to