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# Causes, Effects, and the 'Mush' of Culture

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De Munck and Bennardo set an ambitious task for themselves in the target article: 'disciplining' the often used but often critiqued concept of 'culture.' They seek to move beyond what they call the 'mush stage' of defining culture and address central outstanding questions including how culture can be a collective system while only being instantiated within individuals and what constitutes an appropriate 'unit' of culture.

To do so, they rely on an interdisciplinary set of resources. At the centre is the idea of cultural models, loosely defined here as 'shared mental constructs.' They argue that culture should be reconceived as "an organization of cultural models that molds intersubjective, imagined realities" and that, "as a consequence of their assumed sharedness, cultural models generate social commitments to act in appropriate, expected ways." By focusing on cognitive representations that individuals have of their social identities and the 'as if' sharedness that such representations possess for their bearers, the authors argue that they have succeeded in accounting for cultural structure and individual agency in a way that social theorists like Giddens and Bourdieu have not.

We applaud the authors' efforts to increase the scientific precision of our concept of culture. Further, we agree that the notion of cultural models is helpful in this effort, as the methods associated with cultural models (cultural domain analysis and cultural consensus analysis), have proven useful in the measurement of both sharedness and idiosyncrasy in mental representations of such phenomena as romantic love (de Munck & Kronenfeld 2016), domestic violence (Collins & Dressler 2008), and the minds of gods (Purzycki 2016). We would argue, however, that the authors' goals would be better advanced through further conceptual clarity and engagement with existing bodies of research in the cognitive and evolutionary science of culture, social identity, and cooperation.

The word 'culture' has been and continues to be used by a number of social actors and scholars to designate an array of distinct phenomena, including but not limited to: 1) a species level trait of human beings, 2) the 'high' culture of a society, 3) socially acquired capabilities and habits, and 4) distinct ethnic groups. It is not always clear in the target article which notion of 'culture' de Munck and Bennardo are looking to 'discipline', yet, what may be helpful in creating a more rigorous account of one phenomena may be less helpful with another. Further, despite being central to the authors' enterprise, the nature of cultural models is not explained beyond 'shared mental constructs,' a definition that raises more questions than it answers. While the notion of cultural models is explained and defended elsewhere (Strauss & Quinn 1997; Shore 1996 ; de Munck & Bennardo 2014), the absence of a full description in the target article is unfortunate. Without a clear and empirically supported account of what cultural models are and why they deserve a place in our scientific ontology, it is difficult to evaluate many of the target article's claims regarding what is shared and what is not, what possesses causal force and what does not, and what should count as a basic unit of culture and what should not. Given this lack of clarity, it is tempting to follow Sperber in abandoning the notion of 'culture' as a noun, recognizing the existence of both public and mental

representations, and labelling some mental representations 'cultural' to the extent that they are shared (1996).

In our view, de Munck and Bennardo are justified in arguing for both the existence and relevance of cultural models in understanding the dual collective/individual status of cultural representations. However, de Munck and Bennardo also wish to make claims concerning the causes and effects of their notion of culture. In particular, they argue that the ultimate origin of culture is as "a human adaptation to social life in micro-contexts" and that the perceived sharing of cultural models "generates social commitments." Here, we are less convinced, as no real attempt is made to either provide evidence for the claims or engage with the extensive literatures in cognitive and evolutionary anthropology and social psychology on the evolutionary history of humanity's status as a cultural species (e.g. Richerson & Boyd 2005; Henrich 2015; Laland 2017; Boyer 2018) or the complex dynamics of cooperation and group psychology (Kurzban & Neuberg 2005).

Dual-Inheritance theorists (Richerson & Boyd 2005; Henrich 2015) define culture as 'socially transmitted information' and provide both theoretical models and cross-cultural evidence for an account of how and why humans evolved as a cultural species. This account is able to explain a number of human psychological quirks such as a prestige-bias (Henrich & Gil-White 2001) and CREDs bias (Henrich 2009) in cultural learning. It is unclear from the target article what evidence supports de Munck and Bennardo's evolutionary claim and what particular human traits it can explain more parsimoniously than other accounts.

Moreover, a vast literature exists in social and evolutionary psychology, as well as evolutionary anthropology, on why humans would be motivated to commit to social groups and their norms, with numerous paradigms marshalling substantial evidence, both correlational and experimental (e.g. Turner et al. 1987; Navarrete et al. 2004; Whitehouse et al. 2017). Many of these accounts are quite precise about what is being shared across individuals and how this leads to social commitments (e.g. Whitehouse & Lanman 2014). Moreover, the ubiquitous presence of Machiavellian manipulation demonstrates that detecting shared cultural models in another person leads to exploitation as easily as mutualistic benefit, mirror neurons notwithstanding (Mercier & Sperber 2017). Without providing evidence or engaging substantially with such literatures to see where the notion of cultural models may contribute, it is difficult to accept de Munck and Bennardo's broad claims of sharing cultural models as a primary driver of social commitment.

Despite these reservations about causal claims, we are convinced that de Munck and Bennardo are engaged in a valuable enterprise in seeking greater precision in our discussions of the nature of culture and that the literature on cultural models is an important component of this effort.

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