

## Culture is not a Thing, and other Antidotes to the Ravages of Reification

We should not be asking what things really are and how to describe them accurately; rather, we should be asking how to observe and describe things appropriately for our purpose.

### What is reification?

Reification refers to the objectification of an observation into a ‘thing.’ For instance, when we perceive a pattern of light and dark with a particular ratio of height to width and with a particular configuration of extensions, we have learned to call it a ‘tree’ (or *albero*, or *baum*, etc.). This is a basic function of language – to provide us with a set of categories that allow us to coordinate observations within group. So we can tell someone who shares our language to “stand behind that tree” with a high degree of certainty that they will know what we mean.

**Perception and the perceiver** Apparently our brains are wired to use whatever perceptual shortcuts they can, so outside of introductory philosophy we seldom question the simple existence of trees any more than a bat questions the simple existence of sonic echoes. So far, so good, except we humans have developed the habit of using language self-reflexively to objectify ourselves. This creates a paradox, since the class of perceptual objects now includes itself, the perceiver. Mostly, we don’t think of that any more than we do about trees, as noted by Berger and Luckmann in their seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality*: “Reification implies that (people are) capable of forgetting their own authorship of the human world, and further, that the dialectic between people, the producers, and their products is lost to consciousness.... That is, people are capable paradoxically of producing a reality that denies them.”

### What is culture?

Now if you’ve stayed with me so far, we can talk about culture. Culture is not a thing; it is a description that we apply to an observation about people’s behavior in groups. When we argue about the best definition of culture, we are really arguing about what kind of observation is the ‘best,’ such as “it’s best to observe how groups create institutions,” or “it’s best to observe how people in groups communicate with one another.” And it is better to observe the behavior in one way or another, depending on the goal of the observation.

In the case of intercultural communication, the goal of our work (arguably) is to understand the process whereby people with different worldviews communicate with one another, and to help people get better at doing that. So our observation of culture (which could be almost anything about the group) should be something that supports that goal.

In my work, I use a definition that I think is consistent with E.T. Hall’s original idea of treating culture as a kind of communication and intercultural communication as a kind of meta-communication: culture is “the coordination of meaning and action among people interacting in a bounded group,” and intercultural communication is “the meta-coordination between two or more differing coordinating systems (worldviews).” This definition is not more or less accurate than any other, but it is based on observations about communication that support intercultural work.

### Constructed Culture

When we forget that our treatment of ‘culture’ is necessarily a constructed definition, we risk a severe detriment to our work. A common criticism of interculturalists is that they generate stereotypes by ‘essentializing’ culture. Although it certainly is not our intention to create stereotypes, if we use any definition of culture that does not self-reference its origin in observation, we thereby implicitly assume that the thing we are describing has an essential existence outside our observation of it. So when we think we are describing cultural generalizations based on various etic comparisons, others may hear us as describing immutable a priori stereotypes. Their antidote to this reification is to not talk about culture, but that’s silly and unnecessary. The better antidote to reification is to be aware of our necessary construction of definition and be prepared to explain how it is appropriate to our work.



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