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# Cultural dynamics

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Cultural dynamics can be characterized as macro-level phenomena of the stability and change in distribution of cultural information within a human population, and the micro-level mechanisms about the social transmission of cultural information that drive the trajectory of cultural formation, maintenance, and transformation. This article focuses on the micro-level mechanisms, which consist of the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes of production, grounding, interpretation, and memory of cultural information. The review of recent empirical research suggests that the cultural transmission tends to favour the retention of cultural information beneficial for the individual survival in the hunter–gatherer ecosystem, and collective action that supports a group living.

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Cultural dynamics is concerned with the formation, maintenance, and transformation of culture over time. In this article, culture is defined as a set of non-genetically transmissible information that is available, accessible, and applicable for a group of people. Cultural information includes ideas (e.g., liberty, equality, fraternity) and practices (e.g., how to do things — how to deliberate, vote, and aggregate votes). Cultural dynamics, then, is typically concerned with first, a macro-level stability and change in distribution of cultural information within a group over time, and second, the micro-level mechanisms that generate the stability and change in distribution. For example, they may be about the frequency distribution of given information within a group (e.g., how many people have learned it, can access it readily, or use it often), and how the distribution changes over time within the group. For a broad theoretical overview, see Kashima *et al.* [1] and Mesoudi [2]. For methodology, see Kashima [3]. This paper complements them by reviewing recent empirical research on the micro-level mechanisms of cultural

dynamics — psychological processes involved in the social transmission of cultural information.

### Mechanisms of cultural dynamics: social transmission of cultural information

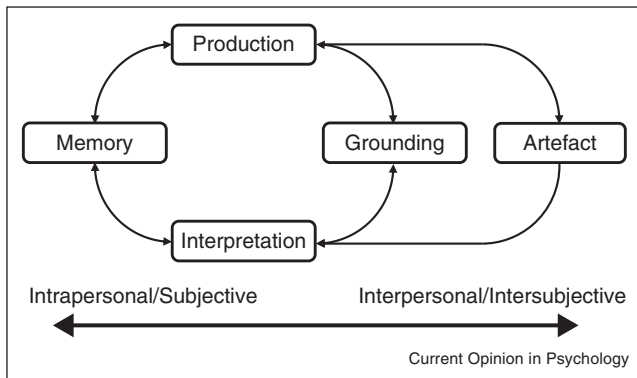
The social transmission of cultural information — transmission of cultural information from its sender(s) to its receiver(s) — is at the heart of the mechanisms that drive cultural dynamics. It consists of four interacting subprocesses — production, grounding, interpretation, and memory (see [Figure 1](#)). Other things being equal, cultural information more difficult to remember and communicate (i.e., cognitively and communicatively costly) is more likely to be selected out of a culture, whereas cultural information with the content and structure more easily remembered and communicated is likely to be retained in the group's culture [4]. The paper argues that human cognitive and communicative processes are highly attuned to the retention of cultural information beneficial for individuals' survival and the coordination for collective action in their cultural niche [5].

### Production

In production, cultural information remembered by a sender is translated into some form that is transmissible to a receiver. Cultural information is more likely produced if it is seen to be veridical and informative [6], morally relevant [7], positive or socially desirable [8–10], culturally widespread and prominent [11], more likely accepted and endorsed by the receiver [12,13], widely endorsed within the cultural community [12], or socially beneficial for the ingroup and ingroup solidarity [14]. Arguably, these factors all lower the social risk of production within one's cultural ingroup. Cultural information similar to other prevalent cultural information is also more likely to be produced [15], suggesting that cultural production has spill over effects.

In addition, emotive information is more likely to be produced than nonemotive information. Rimé [16••] reviewed a sizable literature on social sharing of emotion, which shows that the more emotion arousing are experiences (e.g., horrific accident), the more likely they are to be communicated. Heath *et al.* [17] found that the more disgusting urban legends are (e.g., animal parts in a popular fast food restaurant), the more likely they are to be produced, and consequently, the more widespread across internet websites. Berger [also see 9, 18] showed that it is the level of arousal *per se* that is important in the production of emotive cultural information. This may be because when a sender's arousal is high, the social cost of rejection is irrelevant for the sender. In addition, the

Figure 1



Mechanisms of human cultural dynamics. *Note:* The double arrows imply that the subprocesses can have bidirectional effects. In production, cultural information in a sender's memory is translated into some form that is transmissible to a receiver; in grounding, a mutual understanding about the produced cultural information is established between the sender and receiver; in interpretation, the receiver interprets the grounded cultural information and translates it into a form that can be remembered; and in memory, the interpreted information is remembered for later use and production. Artefacts are carriers of cultural information.

psychological benefit of producing emotive information is potentially large, whether the sender is aware of it or not, because social sharing of emotion can facilitate the formation of a social bond between the sender and receiver, thus potentially increasing the ingroup solidarity [16,19] (also see the section on grounding).

### Grounding

Grounding is the process by which a mutual understanding about the produced cultural information is established between the sender and receiver [20,21]. This means that both the senders and receivers accept the produced information and believe, or take for granted, that the others also accept the information. Although mutual knowledge (or common knowledge [22]) in the strict sense involves an infinite regress (i.e., I believe that you believe that I believe that...), perfect mutuality does not occur in practice; it is enough for both parties to believe that it is mutually shared for the current purpose. Mutuality is achieved when the receiver explicitly accepts the information the sender has produced and communicates it to the sender, but also often taken for granted when the sender and receiver are perceived to share the same culture [23]. Grounding is crucial for human cultural evolution [24] (this echoes Tomasello, this special issue).

When cultural information is grounded and mutually shared, the feeling of 'shared reality' may be experienced [25], which consolidates the memory of the produced information in the sender [13]. This may arise from the social benefits of mutually shared cultural information. For instance, when cultural information is mutually

shared (versus not shared), it induces stronger emotions [19,26] and motivations [27–29], strengthens the sense of connection [19,30], and enables better coordination of actions [31,32\*] between the senders and the receivers. Likewise, there are a number of psychological benefits of shared attention [33]. In total, they are likely to enable better-coordinated collective action.

### Interpretation

The receiver interprets the grounded cultural information and translates it into a form that can be retained in memory. Although cultural information is sometimes seen to be simply 'copied,' there is a long history of psychological research that regards the acquisition of cultural information as involving the receiver's active interpretation (e.g., [34,35]). For instance, Grusec and Goodnow's [36] model suggests that parents' views are transmitted in two-steps: children's accurate perceptions and acceptance of their parents' views. Research into parents' and children's endorsement of cultural ideals and values has provided evidence for this model [37,38]. This body of work underlines the reconstructive nature of cultural transmission.

Implicit attitudes provide a case in point about the role of active reconstruction in cultural transmission. Weisbuch, Ambady, and their colleagues [39,40\*] showed that people who repeatedly observe others' nonverbal behaviours directed towards a target group (African Americans, different body sizes) show implicit attitudes towards the target group in line with the nonverbal behaviours. So, when people view silent video clips of TV programmes that show negative nonverbal behaviours to African Americans, they later showed more negative implicit attitudes towards Blacks. Kashima *et al.* [41] findings suggest that a cultural model's nonverbal behaviours typically elicited imitative behaviours by a cultural newcomer, but it was the newcomer's inferences about the oldtimer's attitudes that formed the basis of their implicit attitudes.

### Memory

The interpreted information is remembered for later use and production. Humans appear to be good at remembering certain types of information more than others, thus more likely 'selecting in' some cultural information than others. Nairne and Pandeirada [42,43] argued that the human memory system evolved in adaptation to the 'stone-age' hunter-gatherer economic environment. Consistent with this argument, people tend to recall information better when it is encoded in terms of its relevance for survival in a hunter-gatherer setting such as foraging than when encoded for its relevance for scavenging (as opposed to foraging) [44], for their self-concepts [45], or for other contemporary life tasks such as moving houses [46\*].

Humans appear to be particularly attuned to information about *agency* and *sociality*. On the one hand, people recall words for animate beings (e.g., baby, bee, engineer)

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