Culture Matters: Understanding the impacts of culture on economic development and security in the borderlands
Watching Fargo (1996), one might be forgiven for thinking that casting for the movie had taken place in Winnipeg. Though the characters were clear about living in Minnesota, the clothing, landscape, and diction of the people may as well have been Manitoban. The same pattern holds true across North America. While Canadian, American, and Mexican borders slice across the land and divide it into politically discrete parcels, cultural boundaries ebb and flow across borders and through geographically large “borderlands”. In some parts of the continent, ancient Indigenous cultural boundaries remain important – so much so that international agreements like the Jay Treaty of 1794 recognized the transboundary nature of Indigenous territories and cultures, as well as the importance of cross-border travel in maintaining access to their traditional lands and relations.

In other regions of the world, geopolitical borderlines slice across cultural groups with immediate and significant results. On one side of a new-formed border, a cultural group may find themselves not only isolated, but marginalized – even oppressed – relative to their relations on the other side of the line. The case of North and South Korea illustrates this, as does the case of India and Pakistan, post-partition.

The practical meaning of this is clear: cultural borders exist, and they matter to contemporary politics. Border policy – and policies that involve the border – must acknowledge this fact and incorporate it into their decision-making processes.

**THE RESEARCH**

Mapping cultural boundaries is difficult, but not impossible, and a good place to start is to trace natural distributions of people (and culture) across geography. The Borders in Globalization project (BIG) has produced valuable research that does just that. These natural distributions occur wherever humans have settled, they follow rivers, valleys, and other geographic features that serve as important resource-gathering locales and natural boundary lines.

In the Great Lakes region for example, the Niagara Escarpment, a vast biocultural region, stretches across New York, Ontario, Michigan, and Wisconsin. In the past, as in the present, both Indigenous Peoples and newer settler-colonial populations moved along the escarpment, exchanging goods, and culture as they did. When the border between what is now Canada and the United States was established, these much older patterns of exchange did not disappear; they persisted. Just as water and wildlife continued to cross the dividing line between the two nations, culture moved as well. When border policy ignores this, it does so at a cost.

When the Canada Border Service Agency (CBSA) began to inspect the medicine bags of Mohawk border crossers on the Akwasasne Reserve, it was because...
they had deemed them a “security threat”; private persons carrying bags of unknown materials across national borders. To assess this “risk”, CBSA officials began to inspect the bags, opening them to determine their contents. From a security perspective, this is a rational decision to make, but the meaning of those inspections changes when culture is acknowledged. Medicine bags are objects of great power and significance in Mohawk culture, and each bag can take anywhere from 5-10 years to make. Opening the bag destroys the medicine, rendering that time and energy wasted. For the Mohawk whose medicine was being destroyed in front of them by CBSA agents, this was yet another reason to distrust them and the government they represented. Since that distrust could result in a decrease in cooperation between those who lived on or near the border, and the agents entrusted with its protection, the cost of ignoring culture is obvious.

THE POLICY

Specific policy suggestions around the inclusion of cultural understandings or sensitivities is difficult, given that culture is rooted in region-specific interactions and histories. Yet, certain general policy guidelines can be drawn from the research produced by the Borders in Globalization project.

A critical area of policy that must be examined is that of cross-border Indigenous communities and culture, where the long histories of oppression, abuse and neglect on the part of national governments must be acknowledged. In many cross-border Indigenous communities, such as Akwasasne (though certainly not limited to it), deep suspicions of federal agencies and agents on the part of community members hampers effective cooperation. Understanding cultural sensitivities and accommodating them through the inclusion of Indigenous officials or agents in any inspection of cultural goods or objects is a necessary step in assuranceing Indigenous communities that their values and traditions are being respected.

Along with this, border agencies and policy would be improved by refraining from treating cultural objects like medicine bags as vectors of risk.

Border policy aimed at addressing specific regional issues (such as watershed management or forest and wildfire management) are improved by a) acknowledging the existence of bio-cultural regions that cross national borders and b) empowering regional agencies or organizations to more efficiently manage such areas. Regional organizations are often more capable of recognizing shared biocultural concerns in their areas of operations, and can draw on traditional social, political, and economic networks to assist in achieving their goals. In regions like Cascadia or the Great Lakes, north-south networks of trade and culture existed long before the Canada-US border was drawn to separate them, and similar north-south patterns exist throughout the United States-Mexico borderlands.

Culture is more than a common language or history; it is a shared identity. Even when borders separate traditionally linked communities, as they do in the Great Lakes or the Pacific Northwest (or indeed, in the western Arctic regions), those shared identities, values, and attitudes persist. Border policy is strengthened when it draws on such identities; cooperation feels more natural and therefore, more legitimate.

More information and research can be found by visiting the Borders in Globalization website.

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Map Credit: Map by Meredith Holigroski/Data from the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne