

A Multi-agent System for Knowledge Management based on the Implicit Culture Framework

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Abstract—We present an implementation of a multi-agent system that aims at solving the problem of tacit knowledge transfer by means of experiences sharing. In particular, we consider experiences of use of pieces of information. Each agent incorporates a system for implicit culture support (SICS) whose goal is to realize the acceptance of the suggested information. The SICS permits a transparent (implicit) sharing of the information about the use, e.g., requesting and accepting pieces of information.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Knowledge Management, knowledge is categorized as being either codified (explicit) or tacit (implicit). Knowledge is said being explicit when it is possible to describe and share it among people through documents and/or information bases. Knowledge is said being implicit when it is embodied in the capabilities and abilities of the members of a group of people. Experience can be seen as a way of access and share this kind of knowledge. In [7], knowledge creation processes have been characterized in terms of tacit and explicit knowledge transformation processes, in which, instead of considering new knowledge as something that is added to the previous, they conceive it as something that transforms it. Supporting by means of IT systems the transfer of tacit knowledge, namely experience, among people in organizations represents a challenge whose difficulties are mainly in the need of explicitly representing tacit knowledge.

In [2] we have introduced the notion of Implicit Culture that can be informally defined (see Appendix A for a formal definition) as the relation existing between a set and a group of agents such that the elements of the set behave according to the culture of the group. Systems for Implicit Culture Support (SICS in the following) have the goal of establishing an Implicit Culture phenomenon that is defined as a pair-composed by the set and the group- in Implicit Culture relation. Supporting Implicit Culture is effective in solving the problem of improving the performances of agents acting in an environment where more-skilled agents are active, by means of an implicit transfer of knowledge between the group and the set of agents. In particular, Implicit Culture can be applied successfully in the context of knowledge management. In particular, the idea is to build systems able to capture implicit knowledge that, instead of sharing it among people, change the environment in order to make new people behave

in accordance with this knowledge. As a first step in this direction, we have showed how information retrieval problems can be posed in the implicit culture framework [4]. In this framework, supporting an Implicit Culture phenomenon leads to a solution of the problem of transfer tacit knowledge without the need to explicitly representing the knowledge itself.

Some assumptions underlie the concepts of Implicit Culture, Implicit Culture Phenomenon and SICS. We assume that the agents perform situated actions. Agents perceive and act in an environment composed of objects and other agents. In this perspective, agents are objects that are able to perceive, act and, as a consequence of perception, know. Before executing an action, an agent faces a scene formed by a part of an environment composed of objects and agents. Hence, an agent executes an action in a given situation, namely the agent and the scene at a given time. After a situated action has been executed, the agent faces a new scene. At a given time the new scene depends on the environment and on the situated executed actions. Another assumption is that the expected situated actions of the agents can be described by a cultural constraint theory. The action that an agent executes depends on its private states and, in general, it is not deterministically predictable with the information available externally. Rather, we assume that it can be characterized in terms of probability and expectations. Given a group of agents we suppose that there exists a theory about their expected situated actions. Such a theory can capture knowledge and skills of the agents about the environment and so it can be considered a cultural constraint of the group. Agents and objects, i.e. the environment, are specified for each application.

The goal of a SICS is to establish an implicit culture phenomenon. The general architecture we have proposed in [2] (Figure 1) allows to establish an implicit culture phenomenon by following two basic steps: defining a cultural constraint theory Σ for a group G ; and proposing to a group G' a set of scenes such that the expected situated actions of the set of agents G' satisfies Σ . Both steps are realized by using the information about the situated executed actions of G and G' . An implementation of a SICS has been presented and showed to be effective in [3] and [4].

In this paper, we propose a multi-agent architecture for knowledge management where each agent incorporates a SICS. The multi-agent architecture permits the basic opera-

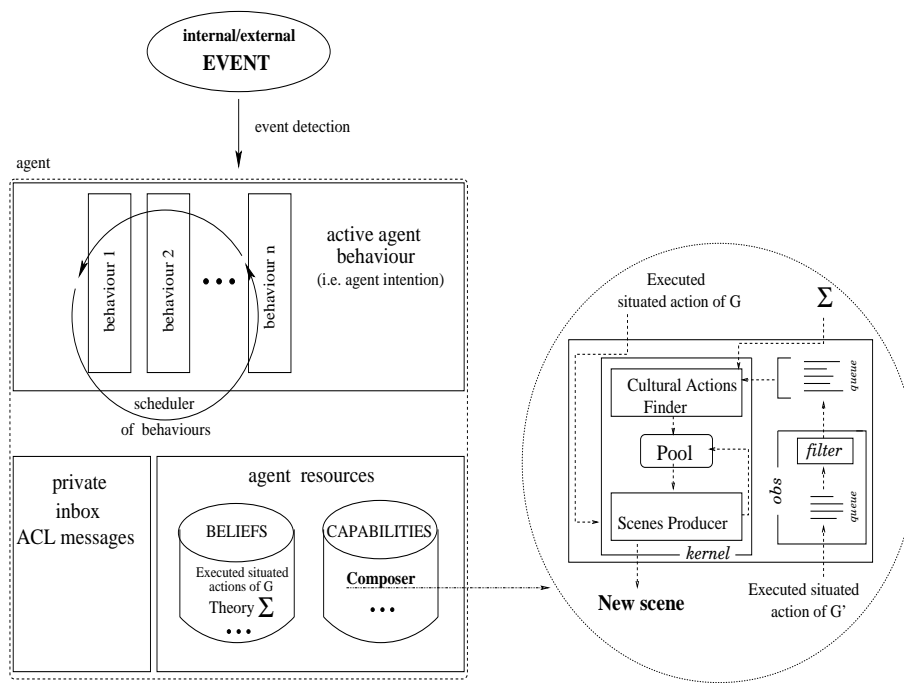


Fig. 2. Internal architecture of a JADE agent implementing a SICS

number, an email address or just the name of the person). The schema is a conceptual representation of how the user organize locally its information and it does not say anything about how this representation matches with those of the other users. The schema is represented in XML (see Figure 3 for an example).

Figure 4 shows the algorithm used by personal agent when it receives a request of information from its user or from some other agent. The global variable `result` contains both links and names of agents of the platform. If the message is a query the SICS behavior is activated and it modifies `result`; if no agents appear in `result` the DF agent is added to it in order to propagate the query in any case; if the sender of the query is the user the link contained in `result` are sent back and a query is sent to all the agents contained in `result`. If the message is a reply from an agent the complete `result` (links and agents) is sent, whereas an incomplete `result` (links only) is sent in the case the reply comes from the user.

The agents interact one another using the FIPA-Iterated-Contract-Net Protocol, that starts with a call for proposal to perform a given action. In particular, we use the call for proposal for checking the availability of an agent to perform a search action. Differently, the user interacts with its personal agent using the the FIPA-Query Protocol. Additionally, we have introduced a third protocol for the propagation of the user feedback about the suggestions provided to him. In particular, the protocol guarantees that the user informs the personal agent about the acceptance of a suggestion, and that the personal agent informs about this the other agents it asked. In practice, the sending of an inform whose content is “accept” is triggered by an action of the user, e.g., following a link, maintaining it implicit.

An example of interaction. Let consider the case in which a user searches information about ‘‘train timetable’’ and asks his personal agent. Let suppose that the SICS suggests an Internet address (www.fs-on-line.it) and another agent, agent-1. The personal agents informs the user about the address www.fs-on-line.it and send a request to agent-1. Supposing that agent-1 replies with another internet address www.trenitalia.it and another agent, agent-2, then the personal agent will send a request to agent-2. When agent-2 replies with th email address info@trenitalia.it, the personal agent informs the user with the results it has collected (namely, ‘‘www.fs-on-line.it’’ + ‘‘www.trenitalia.it’’ + ‘‘info@trenitalia.it’’). Finally, if the user executes an action considered of acceptance for example of ‘‘info@trenitalia.com’’ an inform with that content is sent. The personal-agent informs agent-2 because it has suggested such an address, and agent-1 because it has suggested agent-2. Figure 5 presents the sequence of messages exchanged by the agents.

The example shows how the variant of the FIPA communication protocol permits to the agents to propagate the feedback of the user. In this way, each personal agent has access locally to information about the use of the information done by the requester. The availability of the information permits the agent to observe a wider number of actions permitting the transfer of knowledge between the users. Indeed, if the personal agent would limit its observations only to the actions performed by its user, the effect achieved by the user would be a simple personalization. With the communication protocol we have

```

<?xml version="1.0"?>
<tree name="USER">
  <node name="travels">
    <node name="train timetable">
      <node>
        <name>www.fs-on-line.it< /name>
        <type>http< /type>
      < /node>
      <node>
        <name>info@trenitalia.it< /name>
        <type>mailto< /type>
      < /node>
    < /node>
  < /node>
< /tree>

```

Fig. 3. An example of local schema expressed in XML

```

1  global result
2  for all message in INBOX do
3    if (message.type == 'query') then
4      result := nil
5      SICS-behavior(query.sender,query.content
6                      result.links,result.agents)
7      if (result.agents == nil) then
8        add(DF,result.agents)
9      end if
10     if (query.sender == user) then
11       inform(self,user,result.links)
12       for all result.agent do
13         request(self,result.agent,query.content)
14       end for
15     end if
16   else if (message.type == 'reply') then
17     if (reply.sender == user) then
18       inform(self,user,result.links)
19     else inform(self,message.sender,result)
20     end if
21   end if
22 end for

```

Fig. 4. The algorithm used by the personal agent for processing the messages

```

1) request(user, personal-agent, ``train timetable``)
2) inform(personal-agent, user, ``www.fs-on-line.it``)
3) request(personal-agent, agent-1, ``train timetable``)
4) inform(agent-1, personal-agent, ``www.trenitalia.it``+``agent-2``)
5) request(personal-agent, agent-2, ``train timetable``)
6) inform(agent-2, personal-agent, ``info@trenitalia.it``)
7) inform(personal-agent, user, ``www.trenitalia.it``+``info@trenitalia.it``)
8) inform(user, personal-agent, ``accept(info@trenitalia.it)``)
9) inform(personal-agent, agent-1 ``accept(info@trenitalia.it)``)
10) inform(personal-agent, agent-2, ``accept(info@trenitalia.it)``)

```

Fig. 5. The interaction example

adopted, each SICS can observe also actions done by the users of the personal agents it has been put in contact to. It is worth to note that this is transparent to the user. As a summary, the personal agent act on behalf of the user in a complex way. It uses the observations of the behavior of its user to provide a better service to the user herself (personalization) and to the other users (collaboration). Moreover, with the same goal, it integrates locally the observations of the user with the observations of the other users and contribute to propagate the observations of its own user in order to give feedback to the other agents. In other terms the user delegates to the personal agent the capacity of sharing information about the use of information.

III. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SICS BEHAVIORS AND CAPABILITY

The SICS we have implemented and inserted in the agents as behavior and capability of JADE is a particular case of the general one. Observations are treated as beliefs that are updated depending on the type of messages. Moreover, we do not consider any kind of theory induction over the observations so the cultural constraint theory is completely specified, and the inductive module is omitted (i.e., in Figure 1, $\Sigma \equiv \Sigma_0$). The cultural constraint theory is expressed by a set of rules of the form:

$$A_1 \wedge \dots \wedge A_n \rightarrow C_1 \wedge \dots \wedge C_m$$

in which $A_1 \wedge \dots \wedge A_n$ is referred to as the antecedent and $C_1 \wedge \dots \wedge C_m$ as the consequent. The idea is to express that “if in the past the antecedent has happened, then there exists in the future some scenes in which the consequent will happen”. Hence the consequents has to be interpreted as situated expectations. Antecedent and consequent are conjunctions of atoms, namely two types of predicates: observations on an agent and conditions on times. For instance, $\text{request}(x, y, k, t_1)$ is a predicate of the first type that says that the agent x requests to agent y information relevant to the keyword k at the time t_1 ; while $\text{less}(t_1, t_2)$ is an example of the second type and it simply states that $t_1 < t_2$.

In our application the cultural constraint theory is fixed a priori and very simple. Indeed, we want each personal agent PA to recommend links or agents that satisfy the request, namely that the expected situated action of the user (and

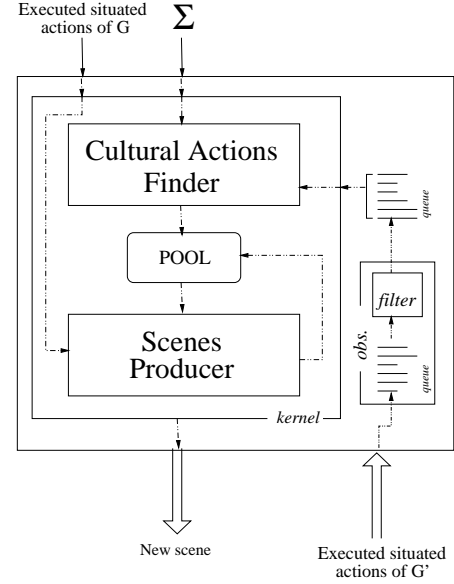


Fig. 6. The composer architecture

consequently of her personal agents in the system) is to accept the recommendation of the agent PA . The following rule is used to express the cultural theory:

$$\text{request}(x, PA, k, t_1) \wedge \text{inform}(PA, x, y, t_2) \wedge \text{less}(t_1, t_2) \rightarrow \text{accept}(x, y, k, t_3) \wedge \text{less}(t_2, t_3) \quad (1)$$

which states that if x (user or agent) asks the PA information relevant to the keyword k , and the PA replies informing x that the agent (or the link) y is relevant, then x will accept from y information as relevant to the keyword k . In other terms, the theory specifies that the agents should accept the information they are offered. Each agent has the goal of having the group of agents and users behaving consistently with the theory. This goal is achieved by using the composer of the SICS architecture.

The goal of the composer is to propose a set of scenes to agents of G' such that the expected situated actions of these agents satisfy the cultural constraint theory Σ for the group G . In our implementation, the composer consists of two main

```

loop
  get the last executed situated action  $\alpha$ 
  for all rule  $r$  of  $\Sigma$  do
    for all atom  $a$  of  $ant(r)$  do
      if  $match(a, \alpha)$  then
        if  $\text{End-set}(ant, \text{past-actions})$  then
           $r' = \text{join}(\text{past-actions}, r)$ 
          return  $cons(r')$ 
        end if
      end if
    end for
  end for
  return false
end loop

```

Fig. 7. The algorithm for the CAF submodule

submodules (Figure 6)¹:

- the *Cultural Actions Finder* (CAF), that takes as inputs the theory Σ and the executed situated actions of G' , and produces as output the cultural actions w.r.t. G (namely, the actions that satisfy Σ).
- the *Scenes Producer* (SP), that takes one of the cultural actions produced by the CAF and, using the executed situated actions of G , produces scenes such the expected situated action is the cultural action.

Cultural Actions Finder

The CAF matches the executed situated actions of G' with the antecedents of the rules of Σ . If it finds an action that satisfies the antecedent of a rule, then it takes the consequent of the rule as a cultural action. Figure III presents the algorithm for the CAF. For each rule r ($ant \rightarrow cons$), the function $match(a, \alpha)$ verifies whether the atom a of $ant = ant(r)$ matches with the executed situated action α ; then the function $\text{End-set}(ant, \text{past-actions})$ finds a set past-actions of past executed situated actions that matches with the set of atoms of ant ; and finally, the function $\text{join}(\text{past-actions}, r)$ joins the variables of r with the situated executed actions in past-actions . The function $cons(r')$ returns the consequent of r' .

Scenes Producer

Given a cultural action α for the agent $x \in G'$ that performed actions on the set of scenes $S(x)$, the algorithm used in the scenes producer consists of three steps:

- 1) Find a set of agents $Q \subseteq G \cup G'$ that performed actions similar to α and the sets of scenes $S(y)$ with $y \in Q$ and in which they performed actions;
- 2) select a set of agents $Q' \subseteq Q$ similar to x ;
- 3) Estimate (using Q') the expected similarity between the expected actions of x in the scenes of the set $S = \bigcup_{y \in Q} S(y)$ and the cultural action α . Return the scene

¹An additional component of the composer is the *Pool*, which manages the cultural actions given as input from the satisfaction submodule. It stores, updates, and retrieves the cultural actions, and solves possible conflicts among them.

```

for all  $y \in G'$ 
  for all situated executed actions  $\beta_y$  of  $y$ 
    if  $\text{sim}(\beta_y, \alpha) > T_{min}$  then {
      if  $y \notin Q$  then  $y \rightarrow Q$ 
       $s \rightarrow S(y)$ 
    }

```

Fig. 8. The algorithm for step 1

that maximizes the expected similarity and propose it to x .

Figure 8 shows the simple algorithm used in step 1. An agent y is added to the set Q if the similarity $\text{sim}(\beta_y, \alpha)$ between at least one of its situated executed actions β_y and α is greater than the minimum similarity threshold T_{min} . The scenes s in which the β_y actions have been executed are added to $S(y)$, that is the set of scenes in which y has performed actions similar to α .

Step 2 selects in Q the k nearest neighbors to x with respect to the agent similarity defined as follows:

$$w_{x,y} = \frac{1}{|S(x) \cap S(y)|} \sum_{\sigma \in S(x) \cap S(y)} \frac{1}{|A_x(\sigma)| |A_y(\sigma)|} \sum_{\beta_x \in A_x(\sigma)} \sum_{\beta_y \in A_y(\sigma)} \text{sim}(\beta_x, \beta_y) \quad (2)$$

where $S(x) \cap S(y)$ is the set of scenes in which both x and y have executed at least an action. $A_x(\sigma)$ and $A_y(\sigma)$ are the set of actions that x and y have respectively performed in the scene σ . Eq. 2 could be replaced by a domain-dependent agent similarity function if needed.

Step 3 selects the scenes in which the cultural action is the expected situated action. To do this, firstly we estimate for any scene $\sigma \in S = \bigcup_{y \in Q} S(y)$ the similarity value between the expected action of x and the cultural action, and then we select the scene with the maximum value. The function to be maximized is the expected value $E(\text{sim}(\beta_x, \alpha) | \sigma)$, where β_x is the action performed by the agent x , α is the cultural action, and $\sigma \in S$ is the scene in which β_x is situated. The following estimate is used:

$$\hat{E}(\text{sim}(\beta_x, \alpha) | \sigma) = \frac{\sum_{u \in Q'} E(\text{sim}(\beta_u, \alpha) | \sigma) * w_{x,u}}{\sum_{u \in Q'} w_{x,u}} \quad (3)$$

that is we calculate the weighted average of the similarity of the expected actions for the neighbor of the scene, the weight $w_{x,u}$ is the similarity between the agent x and the agent u , whereas $E(\text{sim}(\beta_u, \alpha) | \sigma)$ with $u \in Q'$ in Eq. 3 is estimate as follows:

$$\hat{E}(\text{sim}(\beta_u, \alpha) | \sigma) = \frac{1}{|A_u(\sigma)|} \sum_{\beta_u \in A_u(\sigma)} \text{sim}(\beta_u, \alpha) \quad (4)$$

that is the average of $\text{sim}(\beta_u, \alpha)$ over the set of actions $A_u(\sigma)$ performed by u in σ .

The algorithms described above, as well as the multi-agent system presented in the previous section, is fully implemented

in Java using XML for expressing the cultural constraint theory.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

We have presented a multi-agent system that exploits the architecture of the Systems for Implicit Culture Support in order to solve the problem of the tacit knowledge transfer in a knowledge management context. We have argued that the tacit knowledge transfer requires the sharing of experiences and that the main difficulty relies in the need of explicitly representing the tacit knowledge. Our approach aims to bypass the problem of the explicit representation.

The system incorporates a SICS in each personal agent. The SICS is used in order to provide information directly to the user and indirectly also to the other users by means of a communication protocol between the personal agents. The SICS observes the local actions of its own user and, by means of a variant of the FIPA communication protocols, also the actions of the other users. The multi-agent architecture permits the exchange of information about the users actions, improving so the range of the actions that each local SICS can observe. The overall effect is an implicit transfer of information about the use of the suggested items. In other terms, the system supports the sharing of the experience of the use of some pieces of information.

In our opinion the present proposal represents a viable way of supporting the transfer of tacit knowledge between individuals in an organization. Each personal agent contributes locally to a realization of an implicit culture phenomenon. It is important to note that the local perspective of each agent permits the existence of different practices, given the fact that not all the agents will converge to the same set of observations and consequently to the same suggestions.

Further work requires an experimentation on the field, where the notion of implicit culture can be of great help in order to boost acceptance of the transfer of tacit knowledge, namely experience. Indeed, the user can be explicitly asked to participate at the knowledge transfer process without imposing any specific additional activity. On the other hand, accepting to have her own actions partially propagated in the multi-agent system can be facilitate by the idea of contributing to a culture and by the perspective of sharing the advantages.

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APPENDIX A: FORMAL DEFINITION OF IMPLICIT CULTURE

We consider *agents* and *objects* as primitive concepts to which we refer with strings of type *agent_name* and *object_name*, respectively. We define the *set of agents* \mathcal{P} as a set of *agent_name* strings, the *set of objects* \mathcal{O} as a set of *object_name* strings and the *environment* \mathcal{E} as a subset of the union of the set of agents and the set of objects, i.e., $\mathcal{E} \subseteq \mathcal{P} \cup \mathcal{O}$.

Let *action_name* be a type of strings, E be a subset of the environment ($E \subseteq \mathcal{E}$) and s an *action_name*.

Definition 1 (action): An *action* α is the pair $\langle s, E \rangle$, where E is the *argument* of α ($E = \text{arg}(\alpha)$).

Let \mathcal{A} be a set of actions, $A \subseteq \mathcal{A}$ and $B \subseteq \mathcal{E}$.

Definition 2 (scene): A *scene* σ is the pair $\langle B, A \rangle$ where, for any $\alpha \in A$, $\text{arg}(\alpha) \subseteq B$; α is said to be *possible* in σ . The *scene space* $\mathcal{S}_{\mathcal{E}, \mathcal{A}}$ is the set of all scenes.

Let T be a numerable and totally ordered set with the minimum t_0 ; $t \in T$ is said to be a *discrete time*. Let $a \in \mathcal{P}$, α an action and σ a scene.

Definition 3 (situation): A *situation* at the discrete time t is the triple $\langle a, \sigma, t \rangle$. We say that a *faces* the scene σ at time t .

Definition 4 (execution): An *execution* at time t is a triple $\langle a, \alpha, t \rangle$. We say that a *performs* α at time t .

Definition 5 (situated executed action): An action α is a *situated executed action* if there exists a situation $\langle a, \sigma, t \rangle$, where a performs α at the time t and α is possible in σ . We say that a performs α in the scene σ at the time t .

When an agent performs an action in a scene, the environment reacts proposing a new scene to the agent. The relationship between the situated executed action and new scene depends on the characteristics of the environment, and in particular on the laws that describe its dynamics. We suppose that it is possible to describe such relationship by an environment-dependent function defined as follows:

$$F_{\mathcal{E}} : A \times \mathcal{S}_{\mathcal{E}, \mathcal{A}} \times T \rightarrow \mathcal{S}_{\mathcal{E}, \mathcal{A}} \quad (5)$$

Given a situated executed action α_t performed by an agent a in the scene σ_t at the time t , $F_{\mathcal{E}}$ determines the new scene σ_{t+1} ($= F_{\mathcal{E}}(\alpha_t, \sigma_t, t)$) that will be faced at the time $t+1$ by the agent a .

While $F_{\mathcal{E}}$ is supposed to be a deterministic function, the action that an agent a performs at time t is a random variable $h_{a,t}$ that assumes values in \mathcal{A} .

Let $a \in \mathcal{P}$ and $\langle a, \sigma, t \rangle$ be a situation.

Definition 6 (expected action): The *expected action* of the agent a is the expected value of the variable $h_{a,t}$, that is $E(h_{a,t})$.

Definition 7 (expected situated action): The *expected situated action* of the agent a is the expected value of the variable $h_{a,t}$ conditioned by the situation $\langle a, \sigma, t \rangle$, that is $E(h_{a,t} | \langle a, \sigma, t \rangle)$.

Definition 8 (party): A set of agents $G \subseteq \mathcal{P}$ is said to be a *party*.

Let \mathcal{L} be a language used to describe the environment (agents and objects), actions, scenes, situations, situated executed actions and expected situated actions, and G be a party.

Definition 9 (cultural constraint theory): The *Cultural Constraint Theory* for G is a theory expressed in the language \mathcal{L} that predicates on the expected situated actions of the members of G .

Definition 10 (group): A party G is a *group* if exists a cultural constraint theory Σ for G .

Definition 11 (cultural action): Given a group G , an action α is a *Cultural Action* w.r.t. G if there exists an agent $b \in G$ and a situation $\langle b, \sigma, t \rangle$ such that

$$\{E(h_{b,t} | \langle b, \sigma, t \rangle) = \alpha\}, \Sigma \not\models \perp$$

where Σ is a cultural constraint theory for G .

Definition 12 (implicit culture): *Implicit Culture* is a relation \succ between two parties G and G' such that G and G' are in relation $(G \succ G')$ iff G is a group and the expected situated actions of G' are cultural actions w.r.t G .

Definition 13 (implicit culture phenomenon): *Implicit Culture Phenomenon* is a pair of parties G' and G related by the *Implicit Culture*.

We justify the “implicit” term of implicit culture by the fact that its definition makes no reference to the internal states of the agents. In particular, there is no reference to beliefs, desires or intentions and in general to epistemic states or to any knowledge about the cultural constraint theory itself or even to the composition of the two groups. In the general case, the agents do not perform any actions explicitly in order to produce the phenomenon.