

## Living in our Globalized World: Notes 3

### Culture

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- If you haven't sent me a photo yet, remember to do so – “a340-11f-1-SimpsonBart.jpg”
- This and parts of the next couple of classes is largely condensed from my Intro to Cultural Anthropology course
  - apologies to those who have already seen this material, but I want to get everyone onto the same page with these basic ideas
- Kluckhohn, Queer Customs
  - the language of Kluckhohn's article is a bit dated
    - written right after WWII, hence references to a Japanese Bansa charge and relocation camps.
    - but we can overlook that because at the time, they were standard
    - "man", "mankind", "he" in every case
    - “primitive tribes” p. 10
  - Basically explaining the concept of **culture**
  - What is culture?
  - Kluckhohn gives at least 8 definitions or descriptions (or more, depending on what you count), plus at least one attributed to someone else (Ruth Benedict)
    - “the total lifeway of people, the social legacy the individual acquires from his group” p. 6
    - “that part of the environment that is the creation of man” p. 6
      - that is, the material culture we surround ourselves with, plus...
      - the shared ideas that affect how we perceive and interact with our environment
        - interpretations of things
        - rules of behavior and social relations, etc.
    - “a kind of blueprint for all of life's activities” p. 6
    - “a people's design for living” p. 7
    - “a way of thinking, feeling, believing. It is the group's knowledge stored up (in memories of men; in books and objects) for future use” p. 9
      - humans are born with less instinctive behavior than other animals, more ability to learn to do different things p. 9
      - learned culture replaces instinct among humans p. 9
    - “the distinctive ways of life of ... a group of people” p. 9
    - “our social legacy, as contrasted with our organic heredity” p. 10
      - all humans experience the same general biological facts and events
      - but different cultures place different meanings on them
      - which then call for different interpretations and responses
        - hunger
        - puberty
        - death
        - sex

- “a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men” p. 11
- “Culture is like a map. ... If you know a culture, you will know your way around in the life of a society” p. 11
- A different approach to defining culture (not from the Kluckhohn article)
- Anthropologists generally agree that culture has the following characteristics: It is...
  - **learned**
    - any normal child learns the culture in which he or she is raised
    - Kluckhohn's example of the child of American missionaries raised in China
      - the child looked Euro-American, but thought and acted like a Chinese person
      - adults can learn other cultures too, but adults take longer to adopt a culture, and may never become fully acculturated
  - **shared**
    - that is, numerous people hold roughly the same set of beliefs, values, etc.
    - if beliefs, etc. are not shared, then they are just individual quirks, not culture
  - **symbolic**
    - symbols are things that refer to other things
      - A red octagon outlined in white refers to the concept “stop”
      - the symbol “means” something else
    - saying that culture is symbolic means that culture is essentially about *meanings* that people place onto, or read into, the world
    - that is, by placing meanings on things, culture turns objects, actions, etc. into symbols of other things or ideas
      - a black and silver sweatshirt with certain designs on it *means* “the wearer is an Oakland Raiders fan, passionate about football, etc.”
      - being male *means* that the male person should act in certain ways, and not in others
    - these meanings, interpretations, or ideas are the essence of culture
  - **integrated**
    - that is, its many parts fit together in a generally (but not necessarily completely) coherent, logical way
    - two senses of integration (at least!)
      - **organizational** integration
        - culture is a system of interconnected parts
        - each affecting, and affected by, many others
          - systems of production, exchange, and consumption
          - systems of social relations, family, marriage, class, etc.
          - systems of religious belief and practices
          - and many others
        - changing one aspect generally creates ripples of change through other aspects
      - **cognitive** integration
        - the different ideas, values, beliefs, etc. of the culture fit together logically
        - they make sense with each other
        - they often share common some broad, common themes, underlying logic, and values and beliefs

- examples:
  - in some cultures, a strong value placed on respect or honor may influence many aspects of the culture
  - or an emphasis on individualism
  - or an emphasis on conformity and the good of the group... etc.
- **practical** (often put as "**adaptive**" in the ecological or evolutionary sense)
  - that is, many aspects of culture are ways of dealing with practical problems
    - of the physical environment
      - like getting food and keeping warm and dry
    - of the social environment
      - like resolving conflicts, forming a family, etc.
  - a culture's the ways of dealing with these problems may not always be effective, but they are meant to be
- **naturalized** and **unconsidered**
  - the meanings that culture places on the world seem natural, normal, inherently human
    - most people do not consciously question or check their cultures values and beliefs
    - people just assume that they are true facts of nature
- In addition, culture is **arbitrary**
  - not established by fixed features of the real world
  - arbitrary ideas that differ from culture to culture
  - as in Kluckhohn's example of Native Americans of the same clan and white US brother and sister both being repelled at physical contact
    - "equally nonrational responses, culturally standardized unreason" p. 8
  - "arbitrary" does not mean "random"
    - arbitrary beliefs or ideas are probably often present for a reason
  - so the question for anthropologists is: why does a given culture have its arbitrary beliefs, and not others, which are equally possible?
    - where did those ideas come from?
    - what function do they serve?
    - who benefits from these ideas, and what do they do to preserve them?
    - why do people continue to believe them, or why do they change?
- Culture's influence is profound: even individualists know and mostly follow their culture's prescriptions
  - of dress, eating, behavior, etc.
  - even what an individualist resists, he or she must share enough to understand and manipulate
- Culture as a system of meanings
  - we react not to things, but the **meanings** we put on them
    - your response to someone who gets out of a BMW, vs. someone who gets out of a Toyota Corolla
  - We also react to **systems** of meanings, or relations between things
    - school desks are appropriate in classrooms, but not in living rooms
    - you would be surprised to come into a classroom and find sofas and lazy-boy recliners

- and your behavior would probably be different as a result
- These meanings, and thus the behaviors that result from them, are **socially constructed**, or **culturally constructed**
  - Not “out there” in the world
  - Rather, created in people’s heads (“constructed”)
  - Through social interactions (“socially”)
  - And to fit with other aspects of the culture (“culturally”)
  - **Social constructs** or **cultural constructs** are shared by members of the culture
  - A sort of unplanned consensus
  - Therefore **arbitrary**, and variable from culture to culture
- One goal of anthropology: to show how given cultures are consistent, ordered, understandable, make sense in their context
- Anthropologists ask “why do some groups of people assign certain meanings to things, and other groups of people assign different ones?”
  - that is, “why do some people see things *this* way, and not some other way?”
  - And then “why do WE see things *this* way, and not some other way?”
    - that is, anthropology encourages us to look at our own culture from outside
- often looking for **unconscious assumptions**
  - discovering assumptions and figuring out how they fit into the rest of the way people think gives a clearer, more complete understanding of the culture - of the meanings that lead people to behave in certain ways
  - by finding OTHERS’ assumptions, we highlight our own, different assumptions about the same things
- one goal in this class: to see how cultures affect how individuals and groups interact, and how cultures are in turn affected by that interaction
  - what are the differing meanings assigned by the different cultures to the same things?
  - why?
  - what effect do these different meanings have on how people act and interact?
- Useful concepts
  - **ethnocentrism**
    - the assumption that one’s own culture is normal, natural, good
      - so practices that differ from those of one’s own culture are misguided, ignorant, backwards, wrong
      - without attempting to understand them in their own context
    - example: American tourists’ responses to vertical furrows in the Andean highlands
  - **cultural relativism**
    - the view that cultures and practices must be understood in their own context
      - assumes that people’s beliefs and actions generally make sense to them in their cultural context and situation
    - that we get the best understanding of people, practices, and beliefs by understanding them relative to their culture and situation
      - not relative to our own culture, as if that were some absolute standard
    - seeks to understand why and how others’ practices make sense to them

- **ethical relativism**
  - the idea that morality (right and wrong) are defined relative to each culture
  - that we cannot judge things to be right or wrong outside of their cultural context
  - this is an extreme position
    - one can be a cultural relativist without being an ethical relativist
    - you can strive to understand the practices of another culture without necessarily approving of them
- **naïve realism:** the assumption that some *arbitrary cultural construct* is actually a universal, real fact of life
  - the assumption that the concept or way of behaving applies to all people, is a feature of the real world
  - rather than being arbitrary and socially constructed
- Examples of cultures as systems of arbitrary meanings: different meanings about food
  - every culture defines different things as edible or not
  - we respond to the meanings our culture teaches us to place on potential foods, not simply to the actual food itself
    - as in people who vomit when they are told they have eaten something they consider inedible, like rattlesnake meat (in Kluckhohn article, p. 7)
  - other examples of responding to culturally constructed meanings
    - cuy (Guinea pig) in Peru
    - pumpkin pie in Peru
  - point: what we consider to be edible is determined by the meanings placed on the items, not their taste, nutrition, etc.
    - there is nothing inherent in rattlesnake, cuy, or pumpkin pie that makes people sick
    - is it only the strength of the culturally constructed meanings that does that
- Another kind of evidence of how strongly we are affected by our culture: the existence of culture shock
  - Culture shock is a psychological syndrome
    - **syndrome:** a characteristic set of specific symptoms
  - caused by the stress of being immersed in a foreign culture
    - it usually takes numerous days, weeks, or longer to develop
    - the stress is strongest when the person has little or no contact with others of his or her own culture
- Many specific aspects of the foreign culture contribute to this stress
  - strange food
  - new sights and smells
    - the pork section of the Orcotuna market
  - incomprehensible language
  - inexplicable strange behavior
    - the Tongan official wiggling his eyebrows
  - and strange responses to your behavior
    - the social cues you expect are missing or don't work
    - the people have different values or interpretations of things

- The characteristic symptoms include:
  - anger, frustration, irritability, anger, hostility, depression
    - for unease to inexplicable rages
  - constant complaining about the people, food customs...
    - and an idealized recollection of how great it is at home
  - paranoia
    - fear of being cheated, robbed, taken advantage of
  - withdrawal
  - seeking the familiar
    - seeking compatriots
    - seeking familiar foods
    - focussing on returning home
- Some examples of the many stresses that contribute to culture shock
  - unfamiliar responses to sensory impressions such as smells, tastes
    - people of other cultures associate different meanings with many smells, tastes, etc
      - the person suffering culture shock is stressed because he or she cannot understand the locals' responses
      - and the local people make it clear that the visitor is responding inappropriately
    - ex: flies
      - North Americans associate with filth, unhealthy conditions
      - Tswana associate flies with wealth
    - ex: body odor
      - North Americans' react to body odor in part because we associate it with bad hygiene and thus moral weakness
      - Tswana don't; bathing would waste water
    - ex: the "Sonoma aroma"
      - when you first get here and smell it, you might be disgusted – we are surrounded by acres of decomposing s\*\*t
      - but people who are used to it perceive agriculture, productive activity, thriving society...
  - what we learn:
    - that our seemingly natural interpretations of basic sensations are not universal and necessary, but instead are culturally determined
    - we learn some specifics about the other culture's values, beliefs, ways of thinking
    - and by contrast, this leads us to think about our own responses to those things
  - many, many others: confusing language, unfamiliar gender roles, different morals, and on and on
- In general, what we learn from culture shock
  - the mere existence of culture shock as a psychological disorder shows how deeply we are shaped by our own culture
  - otherwise we wouldn't have such an extreme response when immersed in a different culture

- we learn that our perceptions, way of speaking, ideas about food, gender roles, morality, and many other things are not simply real, objective, and natural
  - but rather are very much culturally determined: they are arbitrary cultural constructs
  - because other cultures can have such different constructs
- Point: culture is both
  - arbitrary
    - socially constructed, rather than part of the real, natural world
  - and profoundly influential in how people
    - perceive the world
    - think about the world
    - and behave
  - so naturally people of different cultures tend to misunderstand each other
    - naturally they assume that the other is wrong, abnormal, primitive, decadent...
    - getting around this requires learning the other's point of view
      - harder than it sounds, but usually possible