

Living in our Globalized World: Notes 3

Culture

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2011

- Today’s material (both the first and second parts of the class) is largely condensed from my Introduction to Cultural Anthropology course
 - apologies to those who have already seen material like this, but I want to get everyone onto the same page with these basic ideas
 - even if it is familiar, everyone explains these things in slightly different ways, so a review from a different point of view can still be useful
- 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
 - please don’t pick up this language yourself!
 - 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
 - emphasizes that culture is all that stuff that we learn from people around us
 - “that part of the environment that is the creation of man” p. 6
 - that is, all those physical things created by people, such as buildings, clothing, tools, etc., plus...
 - the shared ideas that affect how we perceive and interact with our physical and social 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 largely 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
 - we are born with a genetic legacy, including both what we have biologically in common with all humans, and the minor variations that distinguish us as individuals
 - so 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, etc.
- “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
 - the essential feature of ethnocentrism is this negative value judgment of a belief or practice based on using one’s own culture as the frame of reference, rather than the other culture
 - the ethnocentrist is stuck in his or her own culture, even where it is not appropriate
 - example: American tourists’ responses to vertical furrows in the Andean highlands
 - **cultural relativism**

- generally seen as the opposite of ethnocentrism
- 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
- the view 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 even 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
 - it is very sensible to strive to understand Iraqi suicide bombers in the context of their own culture, as a cultural relativist would
 - but that understanding does not imply that the cultural relativist therefore agrees that the practice is morally right
- **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 the thing's 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
 - a responsible adult does not waste water, nor make unnecessary work for whoever has to fetch it
 - an excessively clean, odorless foreigner would be the one judged as morally inferior
- 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