

Approaches to explaining culture, change, and interaction: Culture as adaptation, meaning, or system

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- Middleton suggests three general ways to approach (or explain) cultures, and by implication, change in cultures and interactions between them
 - These are general approaches used by many anthropologists, although they would not all use the same terms to name them
 - each of Middleton’s general approaches includes many specific “isms” and theories that we won’t detail further here
- **1. culture as adaptation**
 - culture is like a biological adaptation
 - in biology, an adaptation is a feature or behavior that helps an organism survive and reproduce
 - like an owl’s big eyes and sharp beak help it to hunt at night, thus survive, thus reproduce
 - in social science, an adaptation is a way of getting by in the given circumstances
 - like making bows and arrows help humans to hunt, thus survive, thus reproduce
 - “adaptive” means “fits the environment” or “produces success”
 - NOT necessarily “flexible”, “changes to fit changing situations”, etc.
 - So, to explain something about a culture, this approach explains
 - how it is an effective way of dealing with the given circumstances
 - looks at culture in terms of perceived needs and problems
 - makes sense of culture as a way of dealing with the situation that the people face
 - examples: explaining aspects of urban poor subcultures by showing how they are sensible responses to the problems the people face
 - in the reading, street-corner men have good reasons to turn down work
 - they are not just pawns in some dysfunctional culture of poverty
- **2. culture as (a system of) meaning**
 - culture is a set of meanings assigned to things, and responses appropriate to those meanings
 - So, to explain something about a culture, this approach explains
 - how it makes sense in terms of the culture’s system of meanings
 - Looks at interpretations of events and things; beliefs, values, attitudes
 - if we understand the meanings, the reactions to the meanings will make sense
 - example: plowing a field in Oklahoma and in the central highlands of Peru
 - you can only understand how American and Peruvian farmers behave at plowing time by understanding the network of meanings that plowing is embedded in
 - In the US
 - plowing is an “improvement” of the land
 - at one time it conferred ownership
 - seen as converting land from unproductive wasteland to productive, useful farmland
 - providing food for those who need it

- even expressing the proper, moral role of people to support themselves through the exertion of effort
- Thus plowing is a straightforward good thing
- Farmers just do it
 - as a secular (practical, businesslike, not religious) task
 - feeling no guilt or spiritual overtones
 - but rather a sense of accomplishment about it
 - even morally good: they are doing something that rightly should and must be done
- In highland Peru
 - The earth and the landscape are home to powerful gods or spirits (“apu”)
 - Some even say that features of the landscape *are* these deities
 - These spirits or deities are powerful and personal, and can bring specific kinds of success or misfortune to the person or community that has pleased or displeased them
 - Plowing is a physical violation of the earth, and thus of Pachamama, spirit of the earth
 - Pachamama supports people with the bounty of the earth
 - yet plowing is an assault on her
 - Thus plowing is not just a secular matter, but one with serious supernatural and practical implications
 - so farmers must appease Pachamama by showing appreciation and respect with apologies and offerings before plowing
- Knowing this, you can understand why
 - American farmers plow their fields with no particular ceremony
 - while traditional Peruvian highland farmers make offerings beforehand
 - and might get angry or worried if someone plowed without the proper offerings
 - might even resist or sabotage efforts of outsiders to bring in modern farming
- example: the same beliefs apply to digging for archaeological reasons
 - so even some young, urban archaeologists in Peru insist on making an offering to Pachamama before starting excavations
 - and if you don’t, they may see misfortunes like injuries, or even just not finding good data, as resulting from disregarding the offering
 - you can only understand why they think and act this way by understanding the meanings they attribute to plowing, the earth, offerings, etc.
- **3. culture as a system** (of interrelated parts)
 - culture is a system of institutions, roles, and relationships that are all interconnected
 - any one aspect of the culture is affected by many others
 - economics interact w. politics, religion, migration, etc.
 - each aspect has gotten to its current state through a history of development and change
 - which helps to explain how it is now
 - a change in one thing affects many others
 - So, to explain something about a culture, this approach looks for
 - How a variety of different institutions and pressures are interconnected and affect it
 - Or sometimes just one institution, belief, etc. that one might not initially think was related

- Highlighting a connection that was not obvious
- expanding the known system in which it is embedded
- Often including a historical viewpoint
 - X change in Y institution led to Z change in W, and why...
- example: say we want to explain why there are so many pay-by-the-hour internet shops (“Cabinas Internet”) in even small Peruvian towns
 - because most people are too poor to afford their own computers and internet access
 - yet Peru has a decent public education system
 - so even poor kids in small towns are reasonably literate
 - so Peru has a big demand for such stores
 - Peru had many government-owned businesses
 - and it had long been customary for politicians to reward even low-level supporters with jobs in these companies
 - so most were bloated with employees who did little or nothing
 - during the late 90’s, there was a conservative swing in US and European economic policies
 - the US and the World Bank offered strong economic incentives for governments to privatize national industries
 - Peru owed big debts to the World Bank, so the Bank could offer to cut deals on the debt in exchange for Peru following its wishes
 - in part because of the US and World Bank’s pressure, the Peruvian government decided to privatize the national telephone company, airline, natural gas company, various mines, etc.
 - to make them more attractive to buyers, they laid off a lot of the excess employees
 - Peruvian labor law required the government to give them balloon payments when they lost their jobs
 - so there were suddenly lots of unemployed people with sizable chunks of money
 - cheap computers were just reaching international markets, and the internet was just picking up steam
 - many invested their termination bonuses in setting up these internet places
 - so far more such businesses sprang up than would have otherwise
 - this is an explanation in terms of culture as a system because it emphasizes the interaction between many different areas
 - Peru’s economic picture
 - Peru’s educational system
 - Peru’s tradition of political patronage
 - US politics
 - the World Bank
 - technological innovations
 - the social phenomenon of the Internet
 - Peru’s labor laws, etc.
- These three approaches are just different ways of looking at a problem
 - for any given issue, one, two, or all three might help us understand how it works
 - it usually helps to look at things from a variety of angles

- no one way is generally more correct or useful, they are just different
- When you work on your Case Team presentations, you might try working out explanations using one, two, or all three of these approaches
 - they are good ways to guide your thinking to figure out important aspects of any real situation
- Chavez 1998 Foreword, Preface and Acknowledgements
 - what is Chavez's personal background?
 - how did it help or hinder him in studying undocumented immigrants in San Diego?
 - What did he start off thinking about them, and they about him?
 - What processes brought, and bring, Mexicans into contact with English speaking US citizens (we will learn about this in much more detail later in the book)?
 - What did Chavez's great-aunt in New Mexico complain about? What is the irony here?