

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 3
The concept of culture: Deeper than you think

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- Kluckhohn, Queer Customs
 - comment on the language and assumptions of Kluckhohn’s article
 - written right after WWII, hence references to a Japanese Bansa charge and relocation camps.
 - some aspects of the language are dated and no longer acceptable in current writing
 - but we forgive them here 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
 - ie meanings: interpretations of things, rules, social relations, etc. surrounding the individual
 - “a kind of blueprint for all of life’s activities” p. 6
 - “a people’s design for living” (implied to be culture) 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 out organic heredity” p. 10
 - all humans experience the same general biological facts and events
 - different cultures place different meanings on them
 - and thus 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 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
- adults can learn other cultures too, but they take longer 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**
 - it is essentially about meanings that people place onto or read into the world
 - that is, by placing meanings on things, it turns objects, actions, etc. into symbols of other things
 - for example, a certain item of clothing or a certain car means (stands for, symbolizes) a message or attitude about sex
 - ... much more on this below and throughout the course
- **integrated**
 - that is, its many parts fit together in a generally (not necessarily completely) coherent, logical way
 - changing one aspect generally creates or requires ripples of change through other aspects to accommodate it
- **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.
 - of the emotional or cognitive environment
 - like handling death, unpredictable events, etc.
 - a culture's the ways of dealing with these problems may not always be effective, but they try 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 them
 - people just assume that they are true facts of nature
 - for example:
 - most US women find the notion of polygyny (a husband having multiple wives) obviously, naturally wrong; it would never work
 - Koryak women of Siberia (like some Shiite women of Iraq, some Mormon women of Utah, etc.) feel that polygyny is normal, natural, and good
 - to them, being restricted to *monogamy* would be obviously, naturally wrong
 - each would think the other was mistaken about polygyny
 - Shi'ite women in Iraq in the 1950s (and in a recent BBC report) say of polygyny: "Our way is better" (Fernea, *Guests of the Sheik*)
- Culture is arbitrary
 - not given by 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
- Culture’s influence is profound: even individualists know and mostly follow their culture's prescriptions
 - of dress, eating, behavior, etc.
 - even what they rebel against, they must share enough to understand and manipulate
 - individualistic Goths, bikers, punks, hippies...
 - "How to be a nonconformist like everyone else"
- Kluckhohn points out that culture is not a force - it is an abstraction for the convenience of discussion
 - *culture* doesn't assign meanings; *people* do
 - *culture* does not do things; *people* do
 - be careful not to “**reify**”
 - “to regard an abstraction as a material thing”
 - reification tends to lead to sloppy thinking and meaningless statements
 - ex: “*democracy* is on the march”
 - as if democracy had a will like a person, or had momentum like a physical object
 - ex: “we will defeat *terror*”
 - as if terror was a being that could be injured or put in jail
 - “American culture is taking over the world”
 - no; many people are adopting aspects of American culture
- society vs. culture
 - **society** = “group of people who interact more with each other than they do with other individuals” p. 9
 - **culture** = “the distinctive ways of life of such a group” p. 9
- Background: Culture as meaning
 - 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
 - Peruvian adult riding a “stingray” bicycle with high handlebars and a banana seat - they don't assign the same meanings to them that we would
 - 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
- belief that cultural constructs are real facts of life is called **naïve realism**
 - the assumption that some behavior or concept is so basic that it is universal, that is "real", rather than arbitrary and culturally constructed (p. 17)
 - "English was good enough for Jesus Christ, and it's good enough for the children of Texas." Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, Governor of Texas, 1924
- examples of cultures as systems of meanings: different meanings about food
 - every culture defines different things as edible or not
 - we respond to the meanings, not the actual food
 - as in people who vomit if 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
 - sushi (raw fish)
 - mondongo (beef stomach, or tripe)
 - cuy in Peru
 - pumpkin pie in Peru
 - Leopold Pospisil and Kapauku Papuans: stingless bees vs. honey
 - point: what we consider edible is determined by the meanings placed on the items, not their taste, nutrition, etc.
 - there is nothing inherent in sushi, mondongo, cuy, or bees that makes people sick
 - is it the strength of the culturally constructed meanings that does that
- Middleton 9-25 (Ch 1: Culture Shock)
 - Culture shock: a psychological syndrome or characteristic set of symptoms that result from being immersed in a foreign culture
 - Culture shock: "individual maladaptive behavior emerging under the stress of coping with a foreign way of life." p. 10
 - Typically occurs when one is mostly or entirely immersed in another culture for at least days, if not weeks or longer
 - That is, without much contact with people of one's own culture

- example causes
 - climate
 - food
 - smells and sights
 - sanitation and bathrooms
 - inexplicable strange behavior (the Tongan official wiggling his eyebrows)
 - incomprehensible language
- symptoms
 - anger
 - paranoia
 - withdrawal
 - seeking compatriots (Saturday night poker games in Pueblo Nuevo)
 - seeking familiar foods - even ones we don't normally want (peanut butter)
- more about causes of culture shock – and what we learn by noticing and thinking about these causes (Middleton calls them “shocks to the system”)
- causes of culture shock: differences in 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 they 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
 - Film: Monsieur Ibrahim (w. Omar Sharif): scene where Ibrahim (an older Muslim) and Momo (a Jewish boy learning about Islam) take off their shoes to enter a mosque
 - Momo is disgusted by the smell
 - Ibrahim says it comforts him, reminds him that no one is better than anyone else
 - fiction, but it still illustrates the point...
- what we learn:
 - that our seemingly natural interpretations of sensations are not universal and necessary, but instead are culturally determined
 - we learn some specific aspects about the other culture's values, beliefs, ways of thinking
 - and by contrast, leads us to think about our own responses to those things
- causes of culture shock: differences in communication
 - spoken language
 - basic understanding: you don't understand them correctly, they don't understand what you mean

- false cognates, like "estoy muy embarazada"
- idioms and metaphors: figurative speaking depends on cultural constructs
 - A US archaeologist trying to get a Peruvian assistant to stop digging by saying "baja! baja!"
 - the US archaeologist learned this from hearing Peruvians say "baja" for "stop the bus"
 - literally, "get down from the bus"
- what we learn
 - Peruvians use a different metaphor for stopping a bus
 - Americans emphasize halting the forward motion
 - Peruvians emphasize climbing down from the bus as an object
 - this may be a clue to differences in how the two cultures think about things
 - one emphasizing the motion of the bus
 - the other emphasizing the bus as an object that one rides
 - this could in turn reflect differences in culture history
 - Americans are used to thinking as individuals in control of their travel, who start and stop at will
 - Peruvians, with a long history of colonial oppression and sharp class stratification, are used to thinking of buses as things that they don't own or control themselves, but just get on and off of
 - this kind of thinking exemplifies anthropologists' approach
 - noting differences
 - then seeking to understand them in terms of many different factors: linguistic metaphors, economics, class relations, history, etc.
- need to understand social context for language use
 - "tu" vs. "Ud." in interview with Teodolfo
 - A routine letter to a government office in Peru:
 - "Es grato dirigirme a Ud. para saludarle muy cordialmente, y a la vez por el presente hago de su conocimiento ... ruego a Ud. ... sea propicia la ocasión para reiterarle los sentimientos de mi especial estima y consideración personal..."
 - "It is a pleasure to address you [formal] in order to very cordially greet you, and at the same time by means of the present letter to make you aware of... I implore you [formal] ... the occasion being appropriate to reiterate my feelings of particular esteem and personal appreciation..."
- what we learn:
 - what social contexts are important and always marked in speech
 - in Latin America, relative status and power is explicitly indicated in speech
 - we are forced to learn the subtleties of these social categories
 - and to use them properly
 - otherwise, we are seen as rude and obnoxious, whatever our real intentions are
 - and we don't get the results we want
- body language
 - "come here" in Peru vs. US
 - "OK" in US and Peru

- what we learn
 - in general: gestures are arbitrary
 - for a given culture: the sorts of things that are important to communicate, or are communicated frequently, in the other culture
- also social uses of food, gender roles, rules of morality, and many other things
- dealing with culture shock
 - give it some time
 - become more fluent in the language and the culture
 - make some friends
 - remember that your hosts are adapting to you, too
- what we learn from the existence of culture shock
 - the existence of culture shock 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
 - 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 (*socially constructed*)
 - we learn what specifically is different about the other culture compared to our own
 - the differences we encounter give us insights into the other culture
 - what they perceive well and pay attention to tells us what is important to them, and often why
 - ex: !Kung reading spoor
 - and make us look anew at aspects of our own culture
 - what we don't pay attention to, or what we focus on that they don't...
- Culture affects even our perception and cognition
 - All humans share similar perception and cognition abilities
 - but *interpretation* of perception depends on experience
 - it is learned, shared... cultural
 - Middleton p. 36 ~"all begin with same equipment, but develop specific abilities based on experience, interests, and challenges perceived by those around them"
 - Illustrations:
 - Colin Turnbull: forest pygmies (Mbuti) in the open for the first time thought distant buffalo were insects
 - "optical" illusions don't affect people of all cultures equally
 - arrow length illusion
 - not perceived by traditional S. African Zulus
 - due to living in world in which corners are almost never seen?
 - horiz/vertical length illusion
 - perceived strongly by those who live in open, flat environments, less by others
 - related to seeing roads, rivers, etc. tapering off to the distant horizon?
 - cognitive abilities (many different ones) are also shaped by experience
 - Robert Serpell: "IQ" test of geometric reasoning involving clay, wire, and paper/pencil
 - English children and Zambian children

- Did equally well with clay
- English kids did better than Zambian kids on the pencil and paper version
- Zambian kids did better than English kids on the wire version
- The kids evidently don't differ much in overall geometric reasoning, but do differ in what intellectual metaphors or skills they have most developed according to their experiences in their culture
- Culture affects which kinds or ways of thinking are most developed
- so to understand how people of another culture perceive and think, we must understand
 - the experiences and challenges they face
 - and as a result, what interests them and what they have developed mental skills for
- Point: culture is both
 - arbitrary (socially constructed, rather than part of the real, natural world)
 - and profoundly influential in how people perceive, think about, and behave in the world