

Explaining culture in terms of adaptation, meaning, or system

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- Middleton suggests 3 ways to approach (or explain) other cultures:
 - **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
 - other cultural adaptations:
 - farming
 - social methods for living in large settlements
 - warfare, etc.
 - “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: seeing urban poor subcultures as understandable in terms of people sensibly dealing with problems they face
 - street-corner men have good reasons to turn down work
 - “disorganized families” are really adaptations to sporadic work, frequent jail time, and very scarce resources
 - they create a sharing support network with reciprocal obligations
 - adaptive explanations are often etic, but also frequently emic
 - the outside observer may see a practical reason, while insiders may have a different explanation
 - as in explaining the sacredness of cows to Hindus in terms of the economic importance of cows
 - Hindus would normally not see it that way at all
 - but insiders often are perfectly aware of the practical, “adaptive” function of their behavior
 - as in the adaptive explanation of “street-corner man” culture in “The Flats”
 - they are fully aware of the practical reasons for their behavior
 - **2. culture as 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
- explanations in terms of meaning almost have to be emic
 - explanations in terms of meaning must use the same meanings that members of the culture use
- example: plowing a field
 - 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
 - it is seen as converting land from unproductive wasteland to productive, useful farmland
 - Thus plowing is a straightforward good thing
 - It is a secular (practical, businesslike, not religious) activity with no particular supernatural connotations
 - Farmers just do it as a practical task, and feel a sense of accomplishment about it, with no guilt or spiritual aspect
- In highland Peru
 - The earth and the landscape are home to powerful gods or spirits
 - 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 those who have pleased or displeased them
 - Plowing is a physical violation of the earth, and thus of Pachamama, the spirit of the earth
 - Thus plowing is not just a secular matter, but one with serious supernatural and practical implications
 - so farmers must appease Pachamama 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
- 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.
- explanations in terms of meaning almost have to be emic
 - explanations in terms of meaning must use the same meanings that members of the culture use
- **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...
- May be emic or etic
- 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 economic policies
 - the US and the World Bank offered strong economic incentives for governments to privatize national industries
 - 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
 - the 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.
- example from Lee: Have the San always been foragers?
 - Wilmsen and others think that San foraging arose in response to changes in the larger social system
 - they think the San were originally just the poor among a “Khoi-San” population of pastoralists
 - as peoples' individual fortunes shifted, they shifted between pastoralism and foraging
 - the San were essentially stranded permanently in the bush in the late 1800s when incoming Blacks and Whites in the early days of colonialism took their herds and the good land
 - cutting off the option of returning to pastoralism,
 - and leaving them in permanent poverty, with no alternative but foraging
 - true or not, this is an explanation in terms of system because it emphasizes the impact of the larger social, political, and economic system in which the Ju/'hoansi were embedded
- Middleton gives more examples of explanation in terms of culture as a system, but I will only refer to them briefly here
 - example: how can we explain why women and men have relatively equal status in some societies, while women have lower status in others?
 - The culture-as-system approach says we should consider how the status of both genders is affected by the economic, social, and political systems of their societies:
 - the mode of subsistence (hunting, farming, factory work, professional work...), and the family arrangements that result from that
 - the economy and labor market
 - amount and nature of warfare
 - relative income contributed by each gender
 - degree of separation between public and domestic spheres of activity
 - we will look more at gender roles and these influences on them later in this course
 - example: how can we explain why people sometimes separate themselves into ethnic groups with sharp divisions and tense relationships, and other times do not?
 - the culture-as-system approach says we should consider how ethnic divisions are involved in the larger systems of economics and power (politics)
 - ethnic boundaries often harden in times of hardship and competition, loosen in good times
 - that is, ethnic groupings and identity can be explained in part by looking at the larger system of economics
 - example: anti-immigrant feelings, laws, etc. often rise when unemployment rises, as in reunified Germany, or here recently
 - this approach sees ethnicity as negotiated, historical, dynamic, responding to changes in other aspects of the social system
 - it does NOT see ethnicity and relations between ethnic groups as an essential, almost unchanging feature of people (“ancient rivalries between the X and Y...”)