

## **Culture as meaning and culture shock: Constructs that affect us profoundly**

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- Culture as meaning
  - As we discussed last time, one view of culture is that it is a learned system of meanings attached to objects and actions
    - we learn what things mean
    - and then respond to as much, or more, to those meanings than we do to the objects or actions themselves
  - These meanings are socially constructed (again, as we saw last time)
    - I called them “a sort of unplanned consensus”
- I illustrated this concept of meanings using a “Stingray” bicycle
  - which had certain meanings to me
    - youth, rebelliousness, modernity, etc.
  - but completely different meanings to a dignified older gentleman riding one in a highland Peruvian town in the 1980s
    - who probably saw it as a practical tool for transportation,
      - maybe socially appropriate because it was imported and cost more money than many people would have
      - but without any meanings about youth, transgression, etc.
  - But these bikes are an even richer example than that
    - they are also the basis of a new cultural construct: the “scraper bike”
- Background
  - the style of bike I illustrated was made by Schwinn and marketed as a “Stingray” or “chopper” bike starting in 1963
    - they were inspired by customized “chopper” motorcycles
      - the bike referred to, reminded you of, or “meant” a chopper motorcycle
    - the *meaning* of Stingray bikes came from that association: youth, rebelliousness, modernity
    - the concept of the Stingray or chopper bike was spread by advertising and customized bikes that appeared in the TV show “The Munsters”
      - both aimed at young people, especially boys
    - this is the meaning that I learned as a kid
  - “scraper” bikes as a category of bicycle did not exist until around 2005
    - they were inspired by “scraper” cars
      - which are older American large cars, now inexpensive, tricked out with oversize rims, a bright paint job, and loud sound systems
      - probably called “scrapers” because the oversize wheels scrape inside the fenders
    - many scraper bikes are made from old Stingray or chopper bikes,
      - but the key features are the decorated wheels, paintjobs, etc.
    - the meaning involves youth, urban and African-American identity, being creative and stylish by repurposing old, available resources, etc.

- in 2007, some guys in Oakland formed a rap group called the Trunk Boiz and posted a rap video on YouTube about scraper bikes
  - the video “went viral”, and has been viewed over 3 million times now
- what does this show?
  - culture is *symbolic*: a system of *meanings*
    - we react to the meanings as much as to the things themselves
    - scraper bikes are much more than just tools for transportation
    - it is the meaning that we read into them that matters
  - that culture is *integrated*, in that it is a system of meanings that fit together coherently
    - both the “Stingray” and the “scraper bike” concepts drew on existing meanings attached to other objects
      - and extended them in ways that made sense to people in the culture
    - both express a general theme in American culture: the high value we place on individualism and resourcefulness
  - that culture is *arbitrary* and *learned*
    - these meanings are layered onto the bicycles by people, not somehow inherent in them
    - the meanings would seem random or crazy to someone not familiar with the culture
    - you have to *learn* that scraper bikes signify
      - urban, mostly male, mostly African-American youth,
      - rather than, say,
        - something funny
        - or the fashionable way for rural girls to ride to church
      - because there is nothing about the bicycle itself that indicates what sort of person would ride it or what we should think of it
  - that culture is *socially constructed*, a set of *cultural constructs*
    - Stingrays and scraper bikes are culturally constructed categories of things: the category is a **cultural construct**
      - we learn to recognize what is a scraper bike and what is not
      - if you asked someone in another culture to sort a bunch of bicycles into groups, they might divide them up differently
        - they would not know that there was a category of “scraper bike”
        - they might divide the bikes by size, or color, or number of speeds, or type of brakes
        - all equally valid, but not the culturally constructed categories that we would use
      - the category or idea of a “scraper bike” did not even exist until just a few years ago
      - yet now “scraper bike” is a clear concept (or “construct”), shared by many people, that they use to understand the world and express themselves
      - the “construct” of “the scraper bike” was built by specific people in the minds of many others by means of social interactions
        - or virtual social interactions through YouTube
    - that cultures may exist as *subdivisions* of larger cultures
      - so educated, middle-class, white people my age in the US share a culture that involves Stingray bikes and the meanings associated with them
      - while at least some younger, urban people in the US share a culture that involves scraper bikes and the meanings associated with them

- both can be seen as variants or expressions of broader US culture in general
- but they can also be seen as distinctly different cultures
- where we draw the boundaries depends on what we want to discuss and understand
- that culture *changes* (it is constructed and re-constructed) in different ways, for various reasons, which anthropologists seek to understand
- “chopper” motorcycles originated with people expressing their creativity and craftsmanship
  - the fashion spread from person to person
- “Stingray” bikes originated in a corporation, as a carefully designed product to be sold for profit
  - based on the existing fashion in motorcycles
  - the idea of Stingray bikes was spread through advertising and television
  - this social construction of “the Stingray bike” was done intentionally, in order to make money
    - through sales of bikes (by Schwinn)
    - and sales of TV advertising time (by CBS Television, airing “The Munsters”)
  - a different origin and process, but same result: the concept was learned and shared by many people
- scraper cars were, like chopper motorcycles, invented by creative individuals in order to express themselves
  - and again, the concept spread through personal contact
- scraper bikes started the same way
  - but the spread of the concept was not only person to person by direct contact
  - it was also accelerated nationally and globally by the internet
  - mostly in an unplanned way, as people viewed and shared the YouTube video
  - and now one of the originators is also selling scraper bikes
  - and promoting them as a socially constructive alternative to identifying with gangs
  - so the idea is also being spread for motives of profit and a social action agenda
- other examples of cultures as systems of meanings: different meanings about food
  - again, I gave a bunch of food examples last time
    - One more: 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 pp. 9-25 (Chapter 1: Culture Shock)
  - Middleton’s definition of culture shock: “individual maladaptive behavior emerging under the stress of coping with a foreign way of life.” p. 10
  - A clearer definition:
    - 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
  - incomprehensible language
  - inexplicable strange behavior
    - like the Tongan official wiggling his eyebrows
    - the cues you expect to use to understand others and gauge how they are reacting to you are missing, or don't work
    - the people have different values or interpretations of things that seem to make no sense
- The characteristic symptoms include:
  - anxiety, frustration, irritability, anger, hostility, depression
    - from unease, to bursting into tears, to unjustifiable rages
  - constant complaining about the people, food, customs, etc.
    - and an idealized memory of the home culture
  - paranoia
    - excessive fear of being cheated, robbed, taken advantage of
    - because you so often don't really understand what is going on
  - withdrawal from social contact
    - spending lots of time hiding in your room, avoiding contact
  - seeking the familiar
    - seeking compatriots
      - Saturday night poker games in Pueblo Nuevo
    - seeking familiar foods - even ones we don't normally want
      - peanut butter
      - the volunteer in Ilo, Peru who had to have Tang, not fresh orange juice
  - focusing on returning home
    - making, rechecking, confirming travel arrangements, etc.
- More about stresses that contribute to culture shock – and what we can learn by noticing and thinking about them (Middleton calls them “shocks to the system”)
  - A stress that contributes 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 negatively to body odor in part because we associate it with bad hygiene and thus moral weakness

- Tswana see body odor as a sign of normal, responsibly frugal use of water
  - bathing would waste precious water
  - and selfishly make unnecessary work for whoever had to fetch it
- ex: the “Sonoma aroma”
  - newcomers are disgusted
  - locals don’t mind, or even respond to it as a sign of prosperous agriculture, productive activity, a thriving local society and economy...
- 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
- Another stress that contributes to culture shock: difficulty in communicating
  - basic understanding: you don’t understand them correctly, they don’t understand what you mean
    - false cognates, like "estoy muy embarazada"
    - or different body language
      - "come here" in Peru vs. US
      - "OK" in US and Peru
  - what we learn
    - in general: words and gestures are arbitrary
- different cultures use different 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
    - different metaphors or figures of speech suggest that people actually think differently about things
    - 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.
- different cultures, languages, and styles of speaking force users to notice and respond differently to social relationships and social context
  - when to use informal "tu" and when to use formal "Ud." in Spanish
    - or "du" vs. "Sie" in German, etc.
  - 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..."
    - Just as Elizabeth Fernea initially would not compromise her principles to wear an abaya, I initially resisted writing letters like this
- what we learn:
  - which 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
- More stresses that contributes to culture shock: gender roles, rules of morality, and many other things
- 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
  - we learn some specific differences 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 (Ju'/hoansi) reading spoor
      - and make us look anew at aspects of our own culture
        - what we don't pay attention to, or what we do focus on that they don't...
- 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
- 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 or BaMbuti) 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 many traditional South African Zulus
          - due to living in world in which inside and outside corners of rectangular buildings are almost never seen?
      - horizontal/vertical length illusion
        - perceived strongly by those who live in open, flat environments, less strongly 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” tests of geometric reasoning using the same geometric figures, but expressing them with clay, wire, or drawing on paper with a 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
        - which depends on their experiences in their culture
      - Poitn: Culture affects even 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 mental skills they have developed
- 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
- *Guests of the Sheik*, chapters 4-5
- Chapter 4: Women of the Town
  - a classic example of unintended consequences of development, and the interconnectedness of culture
    - Old pontoon bridge at mosque replaced with a new, modern one by an American “Point Four” engineer
    - “Point Four” was a foreign technical assistance program run by the US during the 1950s to encourage less developed countries to side with the US and not with the USSR
    - cement bridge - hard to get onto from dirt road
    - old bridge was in a back-street location
    - new one was built at village center, joining taxi stand and coffee shops
    - now women can’t cross without being observed
      - crossing to the suq or to visit each other is now a major foray
    - result: women now went out much less
  - yet another aspect of the roles of women: education is a route to respect
    - Aliyah started a school for girls, won trust, got good enrollment
    - She is called Sitt Aliyah: Sitt is a term of respect for educated woman
      - notice that there is a specific term for this
      - “respectable educated woman” is a recognized category, not a special case
  - illustration of how hard it can be to violate cultural norms
    - Abu Saad (mayor of El Nahra) is an educated, rational, modern man, but can’t overcome family history and allow his wife Um Saad to go out without the abayah
  - Fernea summarizes the ideals of women’s behavior:
    - A good woman, in tribe or town:
      - has an irreproachable reputation for fidelity
      - is hard-working
      - is a devoted wife and mother
      - is a good cook and housekeeper
      - is a quiet, obedient companion to her husband
  - yet women still influenced men a lot
    - they influence husbands’s decisions
    - they especially influence sons
      - women affect who sons and daughters marry
      - and whether they go to school or university