

Living in a Pluralistic World: Class 2
Culture as meaning; Culture shock

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2007

- Kluckhohn, Queer Customs
 - Basically explaining the concept of **culture**
 - What is it?
 - Kluckhohn gives at least 8 definitions or descriptions (more if you count some other descriptions), 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
 - that is, 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 same general biological facts and events
 - different cultures place different meanings on them
 - and thus call for different interpretations and responses
 - hunger
 - puberty
 - sex
 - death
 - “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 Kluckhohn)
 - Culture is:
 - Learned
 - Shared
 - Symbolic
 - Integrated
 - Practical (often put as “adaptive”)
 - Naturalized and unconsidered
 - culture is shared and profound: even individualists mostly follow patterns
 - of dress, eating, behavior, etc.
 - even what they rebel against, they must share the understanding of in order to subvert or manipulate it

- cultural meanings seem natural, normal, inherently human
 - US women find the notion of polygyny obviously, naturally wrong
 - Koryak women of Siberia (also Shiite women of Iraq, some Mormon women of Utah, etc.) find requiring only monogamy is obviously, naturally wrong
 - each would think the other was incomprehensible, maybe deluded
 - anthropology tries to expose these assumptions of naturalness or normalcy for what they are: unconsidered, incorrect interpretations of aspects of one's own culture, since these aspects are actually arbitrary, not part of human nature
 - as in Kluckhohn's example of Native Americans of the same clan being repelled at the idea of physical contact, just as euro-American brothers and sisters would be
 - “equally nonrational responses, culturally standardized unreason” p. 8
- 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”
 - ex: “democracy is on the march”
 - ex: “we will defeat terror”
- 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
- culture is not always biologically adaptive
 - Kluckhohn suggests usually due to holding over from earlier adaptation p. 11
- Two kinds of explanations (or functions, or purposes) of behaviors
 - **manifest function** (obvious, immediate one)
 - vs. **latent function** (such things as maintaining prestige - often at odds with simple “adaptation”)
- **ideal** culture: how people tell you things work, the “official” version, the way things are supposed to be
- **real** culture: what an observer would actually see happening
- comment on the language and assumptions of Kluckhohn's article
 - written in 1949, hence the WWII references
 - 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
 - “primitive tribes” p. 10
- Background
 - we react not to things, but the **meanings** we put on them
 - your response to someone who gets out of a new BMW, vs. someone who gets out of an old Toyota Corolla
 - Peruvian adults riding “stingray” bicycles with high handlebars and banana seats - 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 are shared by members of the culture
 - A sort of unplanned consensus
 - Therefore arbitrary, and variable from culture to culture
- An assumption that cultural constructs are real facts of life is called **naïve realism**
 - assuming 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 its good enough for the children of Texas." Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, Governor of Texas, 1924
 - Assumptions about morality, justice, public figures... Roger “Robines” remaining important in Peruvian archaeology
- Of course, individuals vary, too
 - culture is those meanings that are shared by many individuals
 - but a LOT is shared; even non-conformists share the general concepts that they are rebelling against
 - as opposed to people from a different culture who do not share the culture’s concepts
 - because of that, they would seem just clueless, weird, ignorant, helpless, maybe mentally deficient or insane
 - anthropologists’ experiences of being such outsiders who don’t share most features of the host culture
 - Bill Young among Rashayda Bedouin
 - Alan Johnson among Machiguenga
- One point of anthropology: to show that people’s behavior has consistency, order; is understandable
 - and to do the same for our own culture: to figure out the beliefs, values, and rules of our own culture (which may differ from other cultures) and how they fit together (uniquely to our culture), rather than just assuming that ours is the natural, only way things can be
 - that is, anthropology encourages us to look at our own culture from outside
- Anthropologists ask “why do some groups of people assign certain meanings, and other groups of people assign different ones?”
- Anthropologists ask “why do they do or think THIS way, and not some other way?”
- And then they go on to ask “why do WE do or think THIS way, and not some other way?”
 - When we notice something different about another culture, we learn not only something about that culture
 - But also that there is something in our own culture that is equally worth thinking about

- Looking at other cultures leads us to try to understand aspects of our own that we might never have thought about otherwise
- Examples: 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)
 - cuy
 - Leopold Pospisil and Kapauku Papuans: stingless bees vs. honey
- Middleton 1-7 (Intro)
 - Diversity (differences) is an issue that is unavoidable, must deal with it
 - even cultural differences between men and women of the same society (Deborah Tannen)
 - like Kluckhohn: we must not only look at others, but also look at ourselves in a new light
 - ie. recognize that our way is just one of many, not inherently best
 - Multiculturalism vs. diversity
 - **Multiculturalism**: “a social and political movement advocating the good of having different cultures in the same society” p. 3
 - **Diversity**: biological and cultural variations and their significance
 - Goals of Middleton’s book (and to some extent, this class):
 - to think better about differences and similarities between groups
 - to appreciate risks and rewards of engaging others
 - to understand the need to do so
 - We want to learn how profound cultural differences were formed in the first place, and what maintains them over time
 - Cultural diversity applies not only to different ethnicities or countries, but also genders, disabilities, etc.
 - ie. understanding cultural differences and how to deal with them is practical and necessary even within schools, businesses, governments, etc.
 - Anthro's strategy involves
 - direct contact:
 - **participant observation**: really participating in a culture in order to learn the culture
 - being there, doing that
 - requires good rapport with people
 - in turn, requires respect for them, no matter how foreign their ways may seem at first
 - **informant**: person who teaches an anthropologist about a culture
 - sometimes referred to as a teacher, an assistant, a friend...
 - extended contact: long enough time to really get it, in their language
 - usually over a year, to see all the activities, holidays, seasons, etc. of the yearly cycle
 - usually a bit more than a year, since during the first part of the visit, the anthropologist is probably still missing a lot
 - comparative approach: compare to us and other cases, looking for regularities that might explain or highlight differences and similarities

- Middleton’s example of informant Malik, who becomes uncomfortable as Rabinow asks about totaling wealth
 - he is not used to thinking that way, and doesn’t like what he is discovering
 - his culture emphasizes group success, covers up individual differences so much that he has never considered them carefully
- Point: This is a common anthropological method
 - noticing what makes people uncomfortable to talk about is often a big clue to deeply buried assumptions, ways of thinking, values
 - including what makes *us* uncomfortable
 - in this example, Malik’s discomfort helped Rabinow to recognize the culturally standardized attitude towards the group vs. the individual
 - often indicates a contradiction between ideal culture and real culture
 - or between one belief and others
 - in this case, the contradiction between
 - the assumption that when things were going well for the group, things were going well for all the individuals in it (ideal culture)
 - and the objective evidence that even though the group was doing well, some individuals within it were not (real culture)
 - these contradictions often make assumptions or beliefs easier to see
 - also highlight their arbitrariness
 - Malik might think: “Hmm... there isn’t actually any reason to assume that what is good for the group is good for me... that was just an assumption, not a fact...”
 - applied to our own culture, this seems cynical
 - it may seem that anthropologists are often pointing out hypocrisy
 - but really, they are pointing out disjunctures between ideal and real culture
 - which is a way of discovering assumptions and recognizing them as arbitrary cultural constructions
 - actually, this is a hopeful viewpoint
 - Recognizing beliefs as arbitrary means that they are not immutable facts of life, but can change
 - But we must understand how beliefs function and fit in the culture in order to successfully bring about positive change
- Some key concepts
 - **ethnocentrism**: assumption that our own beliefs and behaviors are natural, normal, true, best, most sensible, morally right
 - while cultures or practices that differ from it are inferior, abnormal, unnatural, irrational, the result of ignorance or superstition
 - problem: means that every culture considers all others wrong; no one can be right
 - problem: means that studying different cultures is just studying others’ mistakes
 - **cultural relativism**: “advocates understanding other ways of life in their contexts” p. 6
 - view that cultures and practices are usually best understood in their own context, in their own terms, from the point of view of the people of that culture and the circumstances they are in
 - Beliefs, behaviors, etc. must be understood *relative to* the culture they are embedded in

- this involves suspending judgment of cultures and practices in order to allow for understanding them in their own context
- **ethical relativism** (sometimes called the **relativistic fallacy**)
 - ethics and morality are completely culturally determined, so there is no basis for judging the morality of a practice other than in the terms of the culture that practices it
 - if a society practices slavery, or murder as a means of conflict resolution, and they think it is moral, it is moral
 - accepting all practices and ethics surrounding them as equally valid
 - right and wrong is relative to the culture; one cannot judge ethics from outside the culture
 - this is obviously an extreme position
- cultural relativism advocates unbiased description, not necessarily ethical relativism or amorality
 - note that ethical relativism is NOT required for cultural relativism, and is a position that many anthropologists would not accept
 - reporting behavior dispassionately is not the same as endorsing it
 - as a cultural relativist, you seek first to understand a practice in its context, and only then to judge once you really have the whole picture (and understand your own biases)
 - you can suspend judgment sufficiently to understand a culture or a practice, yet still find that it is morally unacceptable once you have a full understanding of it
 - the point of cultural relativism is to not cut off understanding by pre-judging without considering all the background and context on the culture and circumstances
 - cultural relativism helps create interactions that are based on reality, not on assumptions, prejudice, ignorance
 - in that sense, cultural relativism is practical
- naive realism vs. ethnocentrism
 - naïve realism is similar to ethnocentrism, but not identical
 - ethnocentrism is more about judgmental attitude
 - naïve realism is more about unrecognized assumptions
- Argument of Middleton's book
 - people all have same capacities (biology)
 - actualized differently by different cultures
 - it is difficult to escape the assumptions of one's own culture, but possible
- 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
 - seek compatriots (Saturday night poker games in Pueblo Nuevo)
 - seek 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”)
- senses: smells, tastes
 - must understand how locals classify them and what they mean to them
 - ex: flies
 - North Americans associate with filth, unhealthy
 - Tswana associate flies with wealth
 - ex: body odor
 - North Americans' reaction 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 and Momo 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
- what we learn:
 - that our seemingly natural interpretations of sensations are not universal and necessary, but culturally determined
 - 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
- communication
 - spoken language
 - basic understanding
 - false cognates, like "estoy muy embarazada"
 - idioms and metaphors
 - "baja! baja!" (US archaeologist taking notes to Peruvian archaeological technician digging)
 - the US archaeologist learned this from hearing Peruvians say it 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
- Could this relate to different ways of thinking about buses, one emphasizing the motion, and the other the thing itself?
- Could that in turn reflect differences in culture history?
 - with Americans used to thinking of individuals being able to move around independently,
 - and Peruvians, with a long history of colonial oppression and sharp class stratification, used to thinking of buses as things that they don't control, but just get on and off of
- this kind of thinking exemplifies anthropologists' approach of noting differences, then seeking to understand them in terms of the systemic interactions of many different areas: 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
 - 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
- handling it
 - give it some time
 - become more fluent in the language
 - make some friends
 - remember that 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 entirely real, objective, and natural
 - but rather are very much culturally determined (*socially constructed*)
- what specifically is different about the other culture from 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...
- What anthropology does:
 - Anthropology “makes the strange familiar, and the familiar, strange” (Spiro 1995, in Kottak 2002)
 - makes other cultures understandable
 - makes us stop taking our own culture for granted, and look into our own beliefs and behaviors more carefully