

Living in a Pluralistic World: Class 3
Tools: Adaptation, Meaning, System, Emic, Etic

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- A bit more on how profoundly we are formed by our culture
 - 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 Zulu
 - 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?
 - stairs "up"
 - commonly perceived by people in US, maybe because we read from left to right
 - maybe less so by Arabic speakers?
 - 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 version of the test
 - 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 what 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 of those, what interests them and what they have developed skills for
 - do they think more in terms of flat drawings or wire models?
 - Abstract or concrete?
 - The collective group, or the individual?
 - Reading animal tracks or filling in business forms?
 - And countless others...
 - Middleton 47-53, 56-66 (Ch 3: Lived Difference)
 - p. 47, nice: people are shaped by their cultures: by living in their own "neighborhood"

- when we see different behavior in another neighborhood, we naturally try to understand it based on what we know
- but the *assumptions we learned in our neighborhood may be irrelevant*
- **3 ways to approach (or explain) other cultures, as:**
 - **1. adaptation**
 - culture is like a biological adaptation
 - in biology, an adaptation is a feature or behavior that helps an organism survive and reproduce
 - in social science, an adaptation is a way of getting by in the given circumstances
 - "adaptive" means "fits the environment" or "produces success"
 - NOT "flexible", "changes with the circumstances", etc.
 - modern human adaptation includes farming, methods of living in large settlements, war, etc.
 - So, to explain something about a culture, this approach looks for
 - how it might be 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, by creating a sharing support network with reciprocal obligations
 - **2. 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 looks for
 - How it makes sense in terms of the culture's system of meanings
 - Looks at interpretations of events and things; beliefs, values, attitudes
 - example: plowing a field
 - 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
 - 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
- you can only understand how American and Peruvian farmers behave around plowing time by understanding the system of meanings that the plowing is embedded in
- example: the same beliefs apply to digging for archaeological reasons
 - so even many young, urban archaeologists in Peru often 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
- **3. 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.
 - and each has gotten to its current state through a history of development and change
 - which helps to explain how it is now
 - and 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
 - Often including a historical viewpoint
 - X change in Q area led to Y change in the area we are looking at...
 - And how, and why
 - example: building a new road may affect
 - prices of nearby houses
 - language spoken in the neighborhood if prices rise or fall
 - the religion practiced there if different people buy or sell many of the homes
 - the number of liquor stores if the economic status of the residents changes
 - employment opportunities for gardeners if houses are built, improved, or allowed to deteriorate as a result of changing economic status, ethnicity, crime rates...
 - example: (p. 62) gender roles are affected by:
 - the economy and labor market
 - the mode of subsistence (hunting, farming, factory work, professional work...), and thus family arrangements, and thus gender roles
 - amount and nature of warfare
 - relative income contributed by each gender
 - degree of segregation between public and domestic spheres of activity
 - degree of sociocultural complexity

- we will look more at gender roles and these influences on them later in this course
- example: ethnic groups and boundaries seem to be about group identity, but often arise in response to seemingly unrelated changes in other aspects of life
- ethnicity is often about power, wealth, and competition, more than the "essence" of who people are
 - a recently coined term: "idinterest groups": combines senses of ethnic, religious, or other identity with economic or political interest
 - probably most ethnic groups are more realistically seen as "idinterest" groups
- 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 economics
 - this is a culture-as-system kind of explanation
 - example: anti-immigrant feelings, laws, etc. often rise when unemployment rises, as in unified Germany, or here recently
- ethnicity is negotiated, historical, dynamic; NOT essential, self-evident, unchanging, obvious to understand
 - this is a culture-as-system view of ethnicity
- **Emic** vs. **etic** perspective/approach/point of view
 - The terms come from linguistics; don't worry about their origin now
 - Anthropologists use "emic" and "etic" to describe ways of explaining features of cultures
 - insider (member of the culture) vs. outsider viewpoint
 - **emic** (insider or Member; eMic): how members of the culture would explain what they do
 - Uses terms and concepts meaningful to insiders
 - "Christians pray in order to get help from God"
 - An emic approach is used to understand their point of view
 - **etic** (ouTsider; eTic): how an outside observer might explain what they do
 - Uses outsiders' terms and concepts that insiders might not understand or might disagree with
 - "Christians pray because it gives them psychological benefits: verbalizing problems releases tensions, and requesting help gives them a sense of control in their lives"
 - An etic approach is used to explain an aspect of culture in scientific, cross-cultural terms
 - trying to avoid bias of our own culture, of course...
 - Anthropologists use both perspectives
 - Neither is more right or wrong
 - Both can be valid and correct, even when they are very different
 - They simply address different aspects of understanding what is going on