

Living in a Pluralistic World: Class 4  
**Using anthropology and looking at US culture**

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- The two readings for today are examples of two different practical uses of the anthropological approach
- E. Liza Cerroni-Long
  - Example of using anthropology, or really ethnography, to learn from culture shock and about host cultures in order to get along successfully
  - Dramatic example of culture shock as she arrives in Japan
    - She comes to realize that misunderstandings are puzzles to solve
    - That the biggest irritations (such as her “apprentice” role in Japan) may actually be the clues to understanding what is going on
  - She finds anthropology to be very practical, an “intellectual life preserver”
    - What does she mean with references to Boas and Benedict on p. 152?
    - Franz Boas
      - Early proponent of the now-standard concept of culture as one of the primary determinants of people’s character, values, and behavior
      - Saw culture as something that just grew up on its own, depending on the specific historical particulars of the group
      - Based on emotion and habit, not reasoned out or planned
      - Understandable only in its own terms
    - Ruth Benedict (a student of Boas)
      - Emphasized “cultural configurations” or “patterns of culture”
      - The idea that different aspects of culture fit together coherently, generally not contradicting each other, according to one or a few general themes specific to that culture
      - She would study a culture, then describe it according to one overall theme or characteristic that supposedly colored everything else
      - She described Zuni Pueblo culture as “Apollonian”
        - meaning that they were moderate in all things, distrusting excess and “orgy”
      - while Plains Indian culture was “Dionysian”
        - meaning that they valued excess and extreme emotions as a way of reaching a higher sort of consciousness beyond the ordinary five senses
      - she saw this contrast in the “cultural configuration” of the two cultures as a key to explaining all sorts of differences between them
  - What does she mean about American (UCLA) culture on 155-7?
    - She got her Ph.D. in 1986
      - I started there in ’84, finished ’93
    - Anti-intellectualism
    - No intellectual conversation: always people, sports, money, sex, jobs, career strategy
    - Felt like anxious times in junior high school
      - I noticed these things too, in contrast to my undergrad experiences at Yale

- Treated impersonally, as just another grad student, not as an experienced anthropologist and teacher
- Problem: she was judging UCLA culture according to her own Italian/Japanese academic norms
  - Because she was failing to treat it as a different culture, towards which one should be a cultural relativist
  - She was assuming that UCLA culture was the same as her own culture, thus was not using anthropological approach to understanding it, thus was taking the “natives” views personally
  - She was treating UCLA emic interpretations of behavior rules as if they were her own etic ones
  - This was not a problem in Japan, because Japanese culture was so obviously foreign that she could easily stand outside it,
    - apply her etic viewpoint
    - and not become emotionally involved
- Solution: become a “professional stranger”
  - Learn to be on “continuous ethnographic alert”
  - Allows her to step back, figure out the host culture dispassionately, and work its system
  - But by developing this observer’s point of view, you can never go home again to a native culture
    - You come to realize how arbitrary and constructed everything about even your own culture is
    - You can’t just take even your own culture at face value anymore
- Her ethnographic observations of American culture
  - American anthro grad students didn’t value studying American culture
    - When she asked them for anthropological insights into American culture, they would get embarrassed
    - Uneasy with someone from another culture coming to study us
  - Americans emphasize “ideational realm” over “behavioral realm”
    - Opposite from Japanese: behavior counts more than ideas
    - “ideas make the person”, and thus people can reinvent themselves
    - thus there is no stable configuration of American culture
  - Americans are masochistic: a “culture of pain”
    - Jockey for position in social conversation
      - We will see this again in an article about language use by Deborah Tannen
      - Sarcastic put-downs are a dominant form of humor
    - Show off, self-promote, undercut others... then burn out from the tension
      - Americans are so used to this that they say you just can’t care too much anyone or you get hurt
  - Americans on the street make eye contact, smile, or greet each other
    - Do you agree? Is this regional, or does it vary by other sub-culture?
    - Emic explanation: being friendly
    - Etic (Cerroni-Long’s) explanation: establish a truce in order to avoid a potential conflict

- Americans suffer from performance anxiety
  - Usually start a speech with a joke to relieve tension and curry favor
- Americans don't believe that their behavior is constrained by society, and thus, that there is no indigenous American culture
  - She says Americans consistently deny that there is an American culture
  - Yet gladly discuss why Americans do this or that
    - That is, cultural rules
    - She uses this to get Americans to look at their own culture through “ethnographic lenses”
- Peggy McIntosh
  - Example of exploring a subject that makes us uncomfortable in order to get an insight into our own culture
  - Specifically, what makes us uncomfortable here (I suggest) is the contradiction between our ideal culture and our real culture
    - One such contradiction between ideal and real culture:
      - Many white people are used to thinking of themselves as not participating in racism
        - In our ideal culture, most whites do not do anything racist
      - Yet we white people clearly do benefit from racism in the US
        - An outside observer would see whites benefiting from blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and others being disadvantaged
    - Another contradiction
      - We tend to think of US culture as being a roughly “level playing field”
      - Yet here we white people are reminded of how the deck is actually stacked in our favor
        - Normally white people don't see this, because they only encounter the beneficial side of the deal
    - A more subtle contradiction is between two different concepts that are part of our ideal culture
      - We tend to think of life as having unlimited opportunity for everyone: you work as hard and as well as you can, and you get appropriately rewarded
      - Yet we also think of life in terms of competition, in which the best win and the others lose
      - These are actually incompatible
        - It cannot be true that everyone can succeed by working hard if there is a limited amount of success that everyone is competing for
      - Seeing that the disadvantage of minorities is actually the advantage of white people reminds us that there is not an infinite amount of success, of which everyone can have as much as they can earn
  - What do we learn from these contradictions?
    - We white people have a conveniently self-serving, narrow definition of racism
      - By limiting the concept to just overt acts of discrimination, we can allow ourselves to ignore the systemic racism that we benefit from
      - Thus it is easy to see why this concept of racism would be widespread among white people:

- it allows us to avoid thinking about an unpleasant subject
- it allows us to not take responsibility for, or action about, systemic racism
- this also helps to explain how the systemic racism can continue, despite claims and ideals that we have (or are moving towards) a racially unbiased culture
- Our ideal concept of a level playing field, equal opportunity, meritocracy, and just rewards is unrealistic
- We may want to ask where these ideals came from
  - Do they have to do with our country's history of expansion into a supposedly unclaimed frontier of free resources?
  - From a reaction against European feudal and class systems?
- Even more importantly, thinking about these contradictions could lead us to ask why these ideals persist, despite evidence to the contrary
  - What psychological needs might they satisfy, and for whom?
  - How do these ideals fit in with other aspects of the culture?
  - If we replaced these ideals of equal opportunity and just rewards with versions that more accurately reflect reality, what contradictions would that cause with other cultural ideals?
- Who sees the evidence, and who benefits from not acknowledging it?
- Could some people who benefit from this inaccurate conception of our economic system be actively trying to keep the idea in general use?
- Thinking about these things might give us a different view of our own culture
  - More like an outsider's etic view
  - More accurately comparable to our etic views of other societies
    - We might be less likely to be ethnocentric
    - And more likely to consider alternative ways of doing things that might produce different results