

Notes on Sociology and Culture

CULTURE AND SOCIETY

_____ is all the learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects and behavior. That means everything that you know, all the things that you do and how you do it, all the stuff you have is all LEARNED. It is NOT natural.

A _____ is the largest form of human group. The group shares common heritage and culture and language. Members of the group (society) learn this culture and transfer it (teach it) to the next generation and the next. The group preserves their culture through art, literature, video recordings, and others forms of expression.

_____ is a critical element of culture that sets humans apart from other species. Members of a society generally share a common language.

Besides your language, what other aspects of your culture might seem unusual to people in India, Japan or France?

DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE AROUND THE WORLD

Humans have come a long way from our prehistoric times. The human species has produced the iPhone, Tupac Shakur's music, To Kill A Mockingbird and the Internet! We can clone cells, go into outer space, and perform organ transplants. In this way we are different from other animals.

CULTURAL UNIVERSALS

All societies have developed certain common ways of doing things and beliefs. This is called _____. Many cultural universals are adapted to help meet human needs like food, clothing and shelter. Cultural universals are athletic sports, cooking, funeral ceremonies, wedding ceremonies, medicine, marriage, sexual restrictions, art, music, values, education, etc. These practices are universal, meaning all cultures and societies around the world have athletic sports or cooking, but it's done differently. For example, one society may let its members choose their own marriage partners. And another may encourage marriages arranged by parents. But both are marriage.

GLOBALIZATION AND DIFFUSION

Starbucks. Sound familiar? A place where you can order decaf latte and a cinnamon ring. Well, you can find one of these in the middle of an ancient city called the Forbidden City in China. This is where Chinese emperors used to live. China went from having 25 Starbucks to 190 Starbucks in seven

years. Most Chinese people are tea drinkers NOT coffee drinkers, so Starbucks' success in China is remarkable. Finding Starbucks in China is a sign of _____.

While people in Asia, who normally drink tea, are beginning to drink coffee, people in North America are discovering sushi. This spreading of culture is called _____. This can happen in many ways like military conquest, missionary work, Internet, and the airplane.

ELEMENTS OF CULTURE

Each culture considers its own way of doing things as "natural." But in fact, methods of education, marriage ceremonies, religion, and other aspects of culture are learned and transmitted through human interaction within societies. Your parents and especially your mother transfers her culture onto you so that you will continue practicing that culture. In the Jewish faith if two Jews are to get married the mother MUST be Jewish. Why? Because she carries the Jewish culture which she will transmit to her children and the culture/faith will continue generation-after-generation.

The major aspects of culture that shape the way the members of a society live are language, norms, sanctions, and values. These are the basics of culture.

LANGUAGE

Seven thousand languages are spoken in the world today - many more than there are number of countries. In one country there may be one language spoken or there may be several hundred spoken; Papua New Guinea has 820 languages. Language is critical to shared culture.

Language reflects the priorities of the culture. In other words, language reflects what's important in that culture. For example, in American English (remember there's British, Australian, New Zealander, Canadian) there are many words pertaining to war. Americans say they want to "conquer" something, "fight" a "battle," "wage war" on drugs, make a "killing," "bomb" a test or it's "the bomb." A person from a more peaceful culture would immediately notice that the military and war is great importance in the American culture. Similarly, Slave Indians of northern Canada, who live in a frigid climate, have 14 words to describe ice, including 8 for different kinds of "solid ice" and others for "seamed ice," "cracked ice," and floating ice." Obviously ice is very important in this culture since their language is full of different words for ice.

Language is the foundation of every culture. It is an abstract system of word meanings and symbols for all aspects of culture. It includes speech, written characters, numerals, symbols, and nonverbal gestures/expressions.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Language does more than just describe reality; it can also *shape* the reality of a culture. For example, because we don't have 14 different words for ice/snow WE CAN'T SEE IT. It's not a part of our reality. The words and symbols in our language organizes our reality.

Language may color how we see the world. Humans have the physical ability to make millions of color distinctions, yet how many colors a language recognizes differs. The English language distinguishes between yellow and orange, but other languages do not. Yellow and orange are the same color. In the Dugum Dani language of New Guinea's West Highlands, there are only two basic color words, *modla* for "white" and *mili* for "black." By contrast, there are 11 basic words in English. Russian and Hungarian have 12 color words.

Let's use the FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE. Feminists have noticed that language can be gendered especially for occupations (jobs). Each time we use the words *mailman*, *policeman*, or *fireman*, we are implying, especially to young children, that these occupations are only for men. Women can also be *Letter carriers*, *police officers*, and *firefighters*.

Language can also transmit stereotypes related to race. Look up the meanings of the adjective *black* in dictionaries published in the United States. You will find *dismal*, *gloomy*, or *forbidding*, *atrocious*, *evil*, *threatening*, *clouded with anger*. By contrast, dictionaries list *pure* and *innocent* among the meanings of the adjective *white*. Through these meanings we reinforce that *white* (skin color, etc) is positive or good while *black* is negative or bad.

Nonverbal Communication

If you don't like the way a class is going, you might suddenly sit back, fold your arms and turn down the corners of your mouth. When you see a friend in tears, you may give a quick hug. After winning a big game you probably high-five your teammates. These are all examples of *nonverbal communication*, the use of gestures, facial expressions, and other visual images to communicate.

We are not born with these expressions. We learn them. You learn the expression for happiness and sadness and shame and distress. And nonverbal communication is not the same in all cultures. For example, in Saudi Arabia, a middle-aged man may want to hold hands with a business partner after closing a business deal. The gesture, which would shock American businessmen, is considered a compliment in that culture.

NORMS

"Wash your hands before dinner," "Thou shalt not kill," "Respect your elders." All societies have ways of encouraging and enforcing appropriate behaviors while discouraging and punishing improper behavior. _____ are the standards of behavior in a society.

For a norm to become significant, it must be widely shared and understood. For example, in movie theaters in the United States, we typically expect that people will be quiet while the film is showing. In India, people are expected to shout during the film showing.

There are two types of norms, formal and informal. Formal is the obvious: laws that are written. This is government social control. Informal norms are understood by the people in the culture but it's not written down. How people are supposed to dress to certain places is an informal norm (understood

but not written down). Our society has no formal punishment for someone who comes to school in a monkey suit. Making fun of that person is a way to punish that person or to shame them to conform.

SANCTIONS

Suppose a football coach sends a 12th player onto the field. Imagine a college graduate showing up in shorts for a job interview. Or consider a driver who neglects put money in the meter. These people have violated norms. So what happens? In each situation the person will receive _____.

Sanctions are penalties (and rewards) for behavior concerning a social norm. Conformity to a norm can lead to positive sanctions such as a pay raise, a medal, a nice compliment, or a pat on the back or an award. Negative sanctions include fines, threats, imprisonment or stares.

VALUES

Though we each have our own set of personal values or set of standards which might include caring or fitness or social justice or success, we also share a set of values as a society. Cultural _____ are the collective values which is considered desirable, good and proper OR bad, undesirable and improper.

Each year more than 271,441 entering college students at 393 of the nation's four-year colleges fill out a questionnaire about their attitudes. Because this survey focuses on an array of issues, beliefs, and life goals, it is commonly cited as a barometer of the nation's values. The respondents are asked what values are personally important to them. Over the last 39 years, the value of "being very well-off financially" has shown the strongest gain in popularity. In 1967 44% of students said that being well-off is "very important." In 2006 73.4% responded with "very important." This shows a change in values. In contrast, the value that has shown the most decline is "developing a meaningful philosophy of life." In 1967 it was "very important" to 80% of respondents while in 2006 only 46.3% said that it is "very important." Again, a change in values. It also shows that values are not permanent; it changes over time. In 1992 42% of college respondents said that "helping to promote racial understanding" is "very important." In 2006 it fell to 34%.

CULTURE AND DOMINANT IDEOLOGY

Conflict theorists believe that a common culture exists, but they argue that it serves to maintain the privilege of certain groups. Moreover, while protecting their own self-interest, powerful groups may keep others in a subservient position. The *dominant ideology* helps to keep certain people in powerful positions while keeping others in an oppressed or lower position in society.

From a conflict perspective, the dominant ideology has major social significance. Not only do a society's most powerful groups (generally - but not always - white men) control wealth and property; even more important, they control how beliefs and values are produced which is through education, the media, and religion. From the feminist perspective, they see that the men in power control ideas and values, and these ideas and values keep women subservient.

It is not easy to identify a “core culture” in the United States. For support, they point to the lack of consensus on national values, the diffusion of cultural traits, the diversity within our culture and the changing views of young people. Yet there is no way of denying that certain expressions of values have greater influence than others such as freedom.

CULTURAL VARIATION

Each culture has a unique character. Inuit tribes in northern Canada, wrapped in furs and dieting on whale blubber, have little in common with farmers in Southeast Asia, who dress for the heat and subsist mainly on the rice they grow. Cultures are created based on the material world (nature, climate, population, geography). Despite the presence of cultural universals, even within a single nation, certain segments of the populace develop cultural patterns that differ from the patterns of the dominant society.

ASPECTS OF CULTURAL VARIATION

Subcultures

People who choose to dress in all black (“Goths”) or people who listen to hip hop or people who are into Japanese animation are all part of a *subculture*. Their values differ from the larger society. It is a culture within a culture. People of the subculture take part in the dominant society but usually develop their own language.

ATTITUDES TOWARD CULTURAL VARIATION

Ethnocentrism

Many everyday statements reflect our attitude that our own culture is best. We use words like *underdeveloped*, *poor*, *backward*, or *primitive* to refer to other societies. What “we” believe is a religion; what “they” believe is superstition. Ethnocentrism is referring to the tendency to assume that one’s own culture is superior to others. The ethnocentric person sees their own culture at the center while all other cultures are deviations from what is “normal.” Think about all your reactions to using hand and water to wipe after going to the toilet and not using toilet paper. You think that is not “normal” because you are being ethnocentric.

The conflict perspective points out that ethnocentric value judgments serve to devalue groups and to deny equal opportunity. Functionalists believe that ethnocentrism serves to maintain a sense of unity by promoting group pride. See the difference? Same thing, different way of looking at it.

Cultural Relativism

So ethnocentrism judges other cultures based on one’s own culture, *cultural relativism* means prioritizing the acceptance of other cultures rather than dismissing that culture as “strange” or “exotic.” Cultural relativists remain neutral; they try to understand the culture on its own terms. They understand that cultures develop differently based on where people are. However, cultural relativism does NOT mean we should accept every cultural variation. For example, some of you brought in a

current event article about Afghan police or soldiers sexually molesting young boys. I heard many of you say, it's their culture. We can try to understand why it happens but we don't have to accept it. We can try to understand the reason of female genital mutilation or FGM but we don't have to accept it.