

BEING CULTURAL  
September 14, 2004

The culture concept is fundamental to anthropology  
Years ago, we used to have more trouble introducing the concept, because people tended to think of the other meaning of culture, i.e., high culture, esp. art, music, refinement. But today the anthropological meaning is pervasive. Accepted all over the world  
It is used in the popular media to explain almost everything: What was the problem with shuttle disaster? The culture at NASA. One hears of corporate culture, academic culture, the culture of just about anything.

But it wasn't always so. Culture concept arose, mostly in 19<sup>th</sup> century, as way to talk about systematic nature of human thought and action.

Previously, many explanations of human actions and thought were put in terms of environmental determinism. Why do people in Alps believe in witches?---because of the thin mountain air. Why are people in Latin America or Indonesia inferior to us Europeans? Their hot, unchanging climate doesn't challenge them like our cold winters do.

The famous essayist Montesquieu said Northerners were brave, vigorous, insensitive to pain, weakly sexed, intelligent, and drunkards. Another Frenchman of the Enlightenment said Northerners faithful, loyal to government, cruel, undersexed. Southerners were malicious, crafty, wise, expert in science but bad in government. Another said northern languages have lots of consonants, because people afraid to open mouths and let in cold air. It sounds silly now, but was very common, still pops up today.

At other extreme, many things explained in terms of some basic traits common to all humans, so-called human nature, or else by traits thought to vary biologically from one population to another. Something innate. With development of racial and biological thinking human nature was thought to be in our blood or genes.

So explanations of human action were caught between external nature, the environment, and internal nature, heredity

There was a vague sense that there was something in the middle, neither biologically nor environmentally determined, called custom / tradition / lifeway / mentality / habit / usos y costumbres. But unclear just what this middle area consisted of, how to think about it.

Then, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, word culture adopted. Borrowed from art/music, expanded to encompass everything. Most often associated with early British anthropologist, Edward Tylor. He said it was a complex whole that humans carried with them and passed on non-biologically.

Learned, not biologically programmed.

Culture thus varies independently of biology. People who look very different can share same culture, and vice-versa.

Carried on by a chain of learning, though that doesn't mean that culture must be consciously taught.

It is shared: it has to belong to a group, whether small or large.

But carried on by individuals, in their heads. Wholly or partly mental.

Includes ideas, values, assumptions, procedures, practices.

This does not mean that the environment and our biological natures are thus irrelevant. They may affect culture in all sorts of ways. Been suggested that all herding peoples, because of the way they must care for, move, guard animals, value independent personalities, that they aren't big believers in witchcraft but often warlike, etc. So such explanations assume that the physical environment can affect or shape culture.

Similarly, though people in two different societies may make facial expressions differently, there seem to be pan-human constants in expressions, so how one smiles is probably combination of "human nature" and cultural peculiarities.

There are still many debates about the relative importance of different factors. But neither the environment nor biology works by itself, with nothing in between. Cultures are systems with integrity of own, and those other factors are inputs into cultural system.

One way to talk about culture is by analogy. Culture is like a game.

A game has a set of rules, procedures, assumptions: what is the prize? what are the moves? how do you win?

But also many procedures etc. that not in the rule book. Even things that are against the rules.

-Pitcher learns how to dust off aggressive batters, may also learn to throw a spitball.

-Boxer learns how to go into clinch with opponent to get a breather

There are even rules saying just how bad different kinds of cheating are: Dusting off batters is resented but expected. Many famous pitchers, e.g. Roger Clemens, known to do it regularly . But spitballs are really bad.

Even procedures for dealing with other people's cheating: in soccer, when fouled, writhe on the ground, make a great show of pain.

Culture is like that, many rules, only some moralistic. We have rules about violence: It's wrong, but you can't be a man if not ready to fight, or can't be *real* man until you have killed someone. There are understandings about when violence is OK or expected, procedures for acting tough but not actually having to fight.

Another thing about games is that they create a whole world, which comes to seem natural and inevitable, even though it is actually artificial, even arbitrary even an historical accident. One realizes this only when e.g. explaining punting as metaphor about life to a foreign colleague, or the infield fly rule.

Another analogy: Culture is like grammar.

Modern linguistics shows that everyone has grammar. It is not something that needs to be consciously taught. Learn by growing up in a language community, learning to speak.

Most people can't explain the difference between, e.g., voiced and unvoiced consonants, but we use that distinction all the time, both in speaking and in listening. We know its at some level even if we can't explain it.

In English we all produce a P at the beginning of a word with a puff of air, but not in Spanish.

So we learn very complex set of rules without knowing we know them.

So culture may be seen as a kind of grammar, even more complex, for action and thought.

From this perspective, a chair is not culture, but rules for making chairs are. Ditto ideas about how to sit in them, when to sit, when to stand, what are good chairs, how much a leather chair should cost, etc. etc.

When the Japanese first encountered the West, they were appalled by chairs. They thought they were uncomfortable and that they realigned internal organs in a bad way.

Notice that grammar does not determine what you say, just gives you rules for producing an utterance that someone else can understand and respond to. If a couple parts in a doorway, the man can say: Goodnight, or I love you, or I hope your earache gets better. The woman can respond: I love you too; Don't you think it's a little early to talk of love; I'm not attracted to men; Get lost, creep!

With a flag, we can't predict absolutely what one person will do, but if he burns it, we have a good sense of how others will respond.

Also, culture is like grammar in that you can't just get someone to give you rules. You depend on them to help you find the rules, but it's not just a matter of their telling you. They may not know all the rules consciously.

Culture is ubiquitous

Absolutely everything we do is affected by cultural assumptions and understandings.

It affects how we hold our bodies, how close or far we keep from others, whether we can touch them or not.

We generally don't touch people we are not intimate with, but we have subtle rules about little quick touches to e.g. say one is sorry for some small fault. I didn't even know I was following this rule until I read about it in a book.

One way we discover how much spacing and posture etc. are controlled by culture is through encountering difference. One culture considers a certain distance too far away, stand-offish, rude, cold; another finds the same distance much too close, pushy and presumptuous. Ditto how much eye contact, how much people breath on each other in conversation.

Some rules of interaction one can talk about: One Korean immigrant noticed that Americans talked about the most amazingly intimate things with strangers on airplanes but took great offense if you asked them about how much money they earned.

Culture even shapes how we moved our bodies. Social scientist named Marcel Mauss, early in 20<sup>th</sup> century, observed that the troops of different European countries marched differently, so much so that British regiment could not march to music of a French band.

Behavior in public bathrooms. One student in 1970s, wrote great paper on male bathroom behavior at MIT. He inferred certain rules that everyone followed: don't look at others. At urinals, always leave an empty one in between unless there is no choice. You may talk with friends but look away while you talk. The rules are concerned with modesty but also with fears of homosexuality or being mistaken for gay. In the movie, "Star Man" an alien doesn't know rules and gets punched out.

Similarly, with people I work with in Panama, found complicated set of understandings about modesty. Shocked by tourists in bikinis, but women stripped to waist in plain sight to wash clothes, and men would bathe near house naked. They thought idea of men all naked together in locker room was gross, but I ended up at the end of one ritual naked in front of several hundred people because everyone who had been close to a certain ritual had to bathe.

Every possible area of life is at least partly governed by cultural understandings. Such understandings are ubiquitous.

Cultural Relativism.

People who encounter other cultures must become attuned to differences, to learn not to see them as crucial, also to learn how not to give offense

-A woman I knew whose husband had been in the force occupying Japan after World War II told how shocked she was in a train when Japanese men came out in their pajamas.

-An anthropologist who worked in Japan talked about very friendly encounter with Japanese strangers at a temple; turned sour when he put his hand lightly and very briefly on arm of woman in group picture

-My uncle was in the Foreign Service in Scandinavia: at first he thought women were coming on to him when they proposed one-on-one skoals, toasts, but they really weren't.

But cultural relativism is more fundamental. Includes moral relativism.

Cultures differ widely on fundamental moral issues.

Anthropology asks that one suspend judgments, at least for the moment.

Even if one ultimately makes a moral judgment, one must avoid reflexive ethnocentrism, judging the whole world by our culture's standards

Easy to do in superficial sense. Famous British music hall duo, Flanders & Swann, had very funny song about young cannibal who refuses: "I don't eat people".

But really suspending judgment about something we hate is much harder.

Many people see any form of cultural relativism as terrible. Not just right-wingers, some feminists, philosophers, others.

We will return to this issue later in the semester.

Intellectual problems with the culture concept.

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For the moment, suffice it to say that the concept is messy, and we have to confront that messiness.

If culture is shared, who shares it? Everyone in America? People in one town? in one family? What if they disagree, as people do?

How do we deal with the fact that cultures keep changing?