

More Problems With Culture

1. The culture concept has been used and misused
 - a. This notion has traveled around the world. It can be considered one of Anthropology's great successes.
 - b. Culture has also been distorted
 - i. Assumptions that cultures have clear boundaries
 - ii. Assumption that culture is associated with one people
 1. this often leads to re-racializing culture
 - iii. Assumption that culture is somehow timeless and unchanging
 - c. Anthropologists see culture as:
 - i. Moving rapidly across borders
 - ii. Contradictory
 - iii. Messy
 - iv. Involving everything in life
 - d. Previous misconceptions of culture have a bad habit of sticking around
2. Culture and Folklore: Many currents in popular use of the culture concept were anticipated in the 19th century with the study of folklore
 - a. Emerged as a big field of study in 19th century during a wave of nationalism in Europe
 - i. A nation by definition is not an arbitrary unit like a state
 - ii. It assumes an organic unity

- iii. People were looking to solidify their national identity, or justify the formation of a new nation, by gathering folklore or lore
 - b. Folklorists spread out to look for stories, songs, clothing, food and other items that were representative of a cultural tradition, i.e. the Grimm brothers collecting fairytales
 - i. These things were often gathered from peasants
 - ii. Thought they express a unity of the people
 - c. Often, people would put together stories, reconstruct or otherwise assemble artificial versions of their traditions for the folklorists
 - i. I.e. the Tartan patterns on Scottish cloth were solidified into specific patterns for specific clans only in the 19th century, after the Scottish clans had been defeated.
 - ii. In Panama, the traditional female costume is called a Pollera dress. But this dress was only adopted very recently as a national costume. It was previously a dress worn only by peasants.
 - iii. In extreme cases, items were faked, like the work of supposed Celtic poet Ossian
 - d. Much of what happened with folklore is happening with culture

3. Identity Politics

- a. There's a belief that culture is somehow the essence of a people
- b. Culture is often invoked to assert an identity
- c. But there are dangers in these assumptions:
 - i. Cultural fundamentalism

1. A very simplified, essentialized version of a culture
 2. Often adhered to without flexibility
- ii. Many times items perceived as central to cultural identity are actually recent additions and have their origins in an entirely different culture
 - iii. Using the notion of culture to define a people set up a “cultural test”
 1. is the culture “colorful” enough? Feathers? Dances? Food? Songs? Folklore?
 2. In Colombia, the government gave a huge territory to the indigenous people there. Black groups in Columbia started cultural centers in an effort to establish their culture as worthy of some of the land
- d. Indigenous people are supposed to have a very stereotyped kind of culture
 - i. They have to regularly perform this culture so that they don’t lose their validity. The culture must:
 1. Be unchanging, i.e. N. American Indians must prove that their traditions haven’t changed so that they can keep their native status
 2. Be connected to the earth
 3. Have strong familial bond
 4. Be spiritual
 - ii. We think of this as “real” culture

4. There's a danger in using culture to explain behaviors

a. Samuel Huntington – How do we understand the divisions in the world?

Huntington says the world is divided into major “civilizations”, i.e. culture areas:

- i. The West
- ii. Islamic
- iii. Hindu
- iv. Buddhist
- v. Chinese
- vi. Japanese
- vii. Latin American

b. There are so many obvious problems with this system of classification

c. This is an expression of our fears. It is used to blame people

- i. This is just renaming in a crude form
- ii. It is used to answer the big questions of:
 1. Why are they violent?
 2. Why didn't they develop science?
 3. Why are they behind?

iii. It assumes these questions can be answered by examining the value systems of these groups

d. Max Weber gave a famous cultural explanation, but without the use of the term “culture”– explained the rise of capitalism and looked at the relative success for Protestants (Pietistic Calvinism) versus Catholics

- i. Argued that Protestants were better equipped to get ahead in capitalist systems because of their “spirit”, which really meant culture.
 - 1. They could lend money
 - 2. They were very calculating
 - 3. They didn’t need instant gratification and thus could save
 - 4. They worked harder to justify their pre-determined place in heaven (though this is paradoxical)
- ii. His prime example was Benjamin Franklin
- e. But Weber got it wrong – He was attributing qualities to culture that weren’t there
 - i. Ben Franklin didn’t really embody these traits
 - ii. Catholics could calculate just as well as protestants, especially Catholic peasants
 - iii. 19th century Protestants entrepreneurs weren’t all that careful. They were often ambitious and pursued wild business ventures
 - iv. Also, it is unlikely that they turned predestination on its head. More likely that they believed in predestination, but worked hard anyway.
 - v. Weber started a long tradition of this kind of explanation
- f. There are other explanations for why peasants don’t advance
 - i. The main explanation postulates that they don’t take risks

- ii. But when peasants do innovate they are taking very carefully
calculated risks
- iii. When you have more money, you can afford for a risky venture to
fail.