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Definition III: The Role of Culture and Ideology in the Family

I. What is culture?

A. In anthropology it has several meanings

1. For the purposes of this course, we'll define it as:

- a. A shared set of beliefs, propositions, values
- b. They are learned, rather than genetically inherited
- c. Some of them consciously *taught*
 - 1) Many animals learn all kinds of stuff
 - 2) But it's difficult to demonstrate that non-human animals are consciously teaching
 - 3) Of course, a lot of culture is learned unconsciously
 - 4) Examples?

B. A frequent assumption is that the group that shares culture is identifiable—an actual population is “a culture”

1. A big assumption and, it turns out, unwarranted

- a. Is the USA a single culture? Very difficult to argue
- b. So we have to use terms like subculture
- c. And acknowledge that a lot of what is shared by most Americans is shared by Canadians and others, etc.
- d. And conclude that the concept of American culture—or American family—is an idea, a powerful idea with significant effects

- e. But, narrowly defined, it doesn't correspond to something on the ground
 - f. We can never discover a population that entirely and exclusively shares a collection of beliefs, propositions, and values
2. The idea of a *country* that shares a single culture is relatively new
- a. No one had such an idea during colonial times, nor back in Europe
 - b. This notion arose out of the nationalism that developed only during the 19th century
 - 1) That said a state—a political unit:
 - 2) Is also a nation: a “people” who share a common culture
 - 3) Very few—certainly not the USA nor China
 - c. The concept of “the American family”
 - 1) Is new
 - 2) And is a concept; does not correspond to reality, which is much more diverse and complex

II. We're trying to understand families living in the USA

- A. As they really are (description and analysis)
- B. As we wish they were (prescription—normative)—shoulds and oughts
- C. As we think they are

1. Based on information we have received from our families, the media, our educational institutions, our professional experts, our politicians, our religious leaders, etc.
 2. Coontz's goal is to show the gap between how we think they are and how they really are
- D. These three notions are related, but by no means are they identical
1. So, if we want to define the American family, we have to specify at the outset *which* notion we're dealing with
 2. Your second assignment will ask you to analyze images of the family in popular culture—not analyze real families

III. *Ideology*

- A. What does this concept share with concept of culture?
1. Both ideology and culture are defined as a shared set of beliefs, propositions, and values
- B. But ideology presupposes a class society, a stratified society
1. We would not use the word “ideology” when speaking about egalitarian societies—societies with no institutionalized ranking
 2. Ideology refers to the fact that in stratified societies the cultural beliefs, propositions, and values—the received wisdom about the world:
 - a. Has the result of benefiting the folks at the top more than the folks at the bottom
 - b. Ideology works to maintain and justify a set of structured, institutionalized relationships
 - c. To analyze ideology we must uncover how the *status quo* provides large advantages to those who already have more power and privilege

- 1) “Status quo” is Latin for “things as they are right now”
- 2) And analyze how everyone is led to believe that the accomplishments, the success, the privileges achieved by those on top result from their inborn superiority
- 3) They belong to a superior sex, ethnicity, race, social class or caste

C. Social systems are always in flux, meeting challenges

1. So those who occupy positions of power are not satisfied with their position unless they can justify it
2. This is the definition of ideology: the set of ideas, propositions and values that justify the status quo

D. The way the dominant classes stay dominant is, for the most part, through ideology, not brute force

1. Sometimes actions involving raw power—coercion—occur
 - a. Examples?
 - b. But a system is crumbling if it needs brute force to accomplish most of what it needs to do
 - c. A social system will be more stable, successful if those in power maintain their position through acts justified by ideology
 - d. Which means they have *authority*—*legitimate* power, not just raw power
 - 1) Examples of raw power?
 - 2) Examples of authority—legitimate power?

- 3) Examples of ideology internalized so that people want to do what they're supposed to do even when it works against their interest?

E. Remember: things are never totally static—the status quo is never completely stable

1. Our current ideology about family, about gender roles, etc., is a good example: it is very dynamic, evolving rapidly, very unstable
2. Where there is ideology, there are always those who dispute it; there is always resistance, even though sometimes it's almost invisible¹
 - a. Although one purpose of ideology is to convince members of a society that the way things are is the way things ought to be, “naturally” should be
3. Things constantly change for 2 reasons
 - a. Societies are always changing; culture is always changing
 - b. And no matter how powerful, how successful an ideology appears to be, there are always those who are challenging it, working to undermine it

F. An example of ideology in operation are the justifications for the practice of female genital operations in Islamic North Africa

1. The *culture* of these societies consists in part of a set of beliefs about what it takes to transform a girl into a proper woman
2. We use the concept of *ideology* when we analyze how such beliefs and practices benefit those in power; here seen to be men and the patriarchal system and its institutions

¹ This is called *counter-hegemony*. See Raymond Williams, *Key Words*. London, 1976.

- a. Who benefits is a question that has to be empirically investigated
3. Notice that women in these societies believe that genital cutting is good and necessary—they are the ones doing the surgeries
4. Don't *ever* think that ideology is subscribed to only by those whom it benefits
 - a. The term loses its meaning when this happens
5. We don't really KNOW what the women think
 - a. What they say is that their daughters would never get married without the operations
 - b. Which is true
- G. The notion of ideology contains the possibility that these systems of belief contain untruths
 1. And that these untruths—myths—as Coontz puts it, “the way we never were”
 - a. Are not accidental
 2. Such untruths support the status quo
 3. Our analyses must avoid giving the impression that the most powerful people meet and conspire how to brainwash people, to silence dissidence so they can remain in power
 - a. It doesn't work this way
 - b. For example, men who recognize that the system gives them special advantages know they didn't create it
 - c. They may profit from it, but they didn't create it

- d. Most often, though, the beneficiaries do not recognize the extent to which ideology influences people
 - 1) The same goes for those who are oppressed by it
 - 2) “A head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love”
 - a) A man or a woman could have written this
 - b) Your reader responses express surprise that women would “betray” their sex; how could they be so stupid, you asked
 - c) In 100 years people will look at us and ask the same questions—how could we have been such dupes, not to see that X and Y are not in our interest?

H. How do we uncover the untruths in an ideology?

- 1. How do we move from our assumptions—our *thinking* about the American family to an understanding of how the American family *really* is?
- 2. How do we unpack all of our “shoulds” and “oughts” about the family and analyze them as ideology?

I. It’s not easy

- 1. One way is to look at other cultures or look at the past: the ideological structures are apparent because we don’t believe in them
 - a. We don’t think genitals have to be cut or feet bound to make a woman marriageable, these aren’t our idea of “shoulds” nor our idea of beauty
 - b. This way we can see the workings of ideology more clearly and apply this understanding to our own society

2. Anthropology not only seeks to make the strange familiar, but to make the familiar strange
 - a. Because, unlike chemistry or physics, we don't have a way to step back adequately enough to observe what we're studying comprehensively and objectively
3. We do what we're doing in this class:
 - a. Learn new facts (Coontz, Hutter)
 - b. Debate among ourselves
 - 1) Which permits us to see the outlines of our ideology through the attempts to resist it and subvert it that we observe in these debates
 - c. And work to learn about ideology itself
 - 1) We look at other cultures and America's own history not just to learn how different people were then, how wrongheaded, but learn about how they came to espouse these beliefs, hold these presuppositions, have these particular values

IV. Final example

- A. Production and maintenance of ideology in medical schools and clinical practice
 1. Gynecology textbooks: 17 analyzed, all published after 1942²
 2. Authors were men seen as knowledgeable scientists whose utmost concern was for their patients because they were clinicians as well

² Diana Scully and Pauline Bart, 1973. "A funny thing happened on the way to the orifice: Women in gynecology textbooks." Pp. 283 in Joan Huber, ed., *Changing Women in a Changing Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press:283-288.

- a. Lots of authority
3. “The fundamental biologic factor in women is the urge of motherhood balanced by the fact that sexual pleasure is entirely secondary or even absent” (1943)
 4. Women “are almost universally generally frigid,” while the male “is created to fertilize as many females as possible and has an infinite appetite and capacity for intercourse” (same text)
 5. Even if she is “truly frigid...the marital relations may proceed without disturbing either partner” (1962)
 6. “It is good advice to recommend to the women the advantage of innocent simulation of sex responsiveness, and as a matter of fact many women in their desire to please their husbands learned the advantage of such innocent deception” (1952)
 7. Belief in two kinds of female orgasms long after Kinsey’s research discredited this idea (published in 1953):
 - a. “The transference of sensations from the clitoris to the vagina is completed only in part and frequently not at all...If there has been much manual stimulation of the clitoris it may be reluctant to abandon control, or the vagina may be unwilling to accept the combined role of arbiter of sensation and vehicle for reproduction” (1962)
 8. “An important feature of sex desire in the man is the urge to dominate the women and subjugate her to his will; in the women acquiescence to the masterful takes a high place” (1967)
 9. “The traits that compose the core of the female personality are feminine narcissism, masochism and passivity (1971)
 10. “The frequency of intercourse depends entirely upon the male sex drive...The bride should be advised to allow her husband’s sex drive to set their pace and she should attempt to gear hers satisfactorily to his. If she finds after several months or years

that this is not possible, she is advised to consult her physician as soon as she realizes there is a real problem.” (1972)

11. “If like all human beings he [the gynecologist] is made in the image of the Almighty, and if he is kind, then his kindness and concern for his patient may provide her with a glimpse of God’s image” (1968)
 - a. If humans are made in the image of the Almighty, why doesn’t she look in a mirror?

B. This is the U.S. not so long ago

1. Not rural China or Taiwan not so long ago, where people did very strange things like sell their daughters, adopt infants as daughters-in-law, or become prostitutes to help their mothers
2. The closer we get to the present the more difficult it is to observe the workings of ideology, but it’s worth the effort