

Chapter 4



The Idea of Culture



Chapter Outline

- Defining culture
- Culture is made up of Learned Behaviors
- Culture is the Way Humans Use Symbols to Organize and Give Meaning to the World
- Culture is an Integrated System - Or is it?



Chapter Outline

- Culture is a Shared System of Norms and Values - Or is it?
- Culture Is the Way Human Beings Adapt to the World
- Culture Is Constantly Changing
- Rethinking Culture



Characteristics of Culture

1. Cultures are made up of learned behaviors.
2. All cultures involve the use of language and symbols.
3. Cultures are patterned and integrated.



Characteristics of Culture

4. Cultures are shared by members of a group.
5. Cultures are in some way adaptive.
6. Subject to change.



Question

- To be human is to have culture.
 - a) True
 - b) False



Answer: a

- To be human is to have culture.

Anthropological Understandings of Culture

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 19 th century evolutionism | A universal human culture is shared by all societies. |
| Turn of the century sociology | Groups share sets of symbols and practices that bind them into societies. |
| American historical particularism | Cultures are the result of the specific histories of the people who share them. |
| Functionalism | Social practices support society's structure or fill the needs of individuals. |

Anthropological Understandings of Culture

| | |
|---|---|
| Sociobiology | Culture is the visible expression of underlying genetic coding. |
| Cultural ecology and neo-evolutionism | Culture is the way humans adapt to the environment and make their lives secure. |
| Ecological materialism | Physical and economic causes give rise to cultures and explain changes in them. |
| Ethnoscience and cognitive anthropology | Culture is a mental template that determines how members of a society understand their world. |

Anthropological Understandings of Culture

| | |
|--|--|
| Anthropology and gender | Roles of women and ways societies understand sexuality are central to understanding culture. |
| Symbolic and interpretive anthropology | Culture is the way members of a society understand themselves and what gives their lives meaning. |
| Postmodernism | Cultural understanding reflects the observer's biases and can never be completely or accurately described. |

Question

- Perhaps the most difficult aspect of trying to understand the beliefs and practices of another culture is
 - a) determining the meaning of what the anthropologist has observed or experienced for members of the culture.
 - b) Assessing the political impact of a particular event.
 - c) take field notes while being a participant-observer.
 - d) learning their language.
 - e) finding a direct parallel in one's own culture with that of another culture.



Answer: a

- Perhaps the most difficult aspect of trying to understand the beliefs and practices of another culture is **determining the meaning of what the anthropologist has observed or experienced for members of the culture.**



Culture and Personality Theorists

- Anthropologists who examine the theoretical perspective that focuses on culture as the principal force in shaping the personality of a society as well as on the role of personality in the maintenance of cultural institutions.



Cultural Ecology

- Regards cultural patterns as adaptive responses to the problems of human survival and reproduction.



Sociobiology

- Explores the relationship between human cultural behavior and genetics.



Cognitive Anthropology

- Defines culture in terms of the rules and meanings underlying human behavior, rather than behavior itself.



Ethnoscience

- A theoretical approach that focuses on the ways in which members of a culture classify their world and holds that anthropology should be the study of cultural systems of classification.



Ethnobotany

- Describes the ways in which different cultures classify plants.



Ethnomedicine

- An anthropological discipline devoted to describing the medical systems of different cultures.



Structural Anthropology

- A theoretical approach that holds that all cultures reflect similar, underlying patterns and that anthropologists should attempt to decipher these patterns.



Interpretive Anthropology

- Culture is a system of meaning and the aim of cultural anthropology is to interpret the meanings that cultural acts have for their participants.



Functionalism

- Specific cultural institutions function to support the structure of society or serve the needs of individuals in society.



Ecological Functionalism

- Theoretical approach that holds that the ways in which cultural institutions work can best be understood by examining their effects on the environment.



neo-Evolutionism

- Concerned with the historical change of culture from small-scale societies to large-scale societies.



neo-Marxism

- Theoretical perspective concerned with applying the insights of Marxist thought to anthropology; neo-Marxists modify Marxist analysis to make it appropriate to the investigation of small-scale, non-Western societies.



Question

- Which present-day theoretical orientations look at culture as dynamic and unstable, where norms and values are continually being "contested" or reinforced?
 - a) cultural ecology and cultural materialism
 - b) neo-evolutionary
 - c) feminism, postmodernism
 - d) structuralism
 - e) symbolic/interpretive



Answer: c

- **Feminism** and **postmodernism** orientations look at culture as dynamic and unstable, where norms and values are continually being "contested" or reinforced.

Question

- Anthropologists who are primarily concerned with human behavior, especially subsistence technology and its relationship to other aspects of culture, generally adhere to all **except** which one of the following theoretical orientations?
 - a) cultural materialism
 - b) neo-evolutionism
 - c) cultural ecology
 - d) cognitive anthropology



Answer: d

- Anthropologists who are primarily concerned with human behavior, especially subsistence technology and its relationship to other aspects of culture, generally don't adhere to the **cognitive anthropology** theoretical orientation



Is Culture Integrated?

- Holistic perspective understands culture as a system of interrelated parts.
- Functionalism holds that cultural institutions serve the needs of individuals in society.



Cultural Materialism

- Theoretical perspective that holds that the primary task of anthropology is to account for the similarities and differences among cultures.
- This can best be done by studying the material constraints to which human existence is subject.



Culture is Shared?

- Members share ways of thinking and behaving.
- Subcultures have different values than the dominant culture.
- Shared ideas may be the result of human interaction rather than the cause.



Is Culture Shared?

- Some contemporary neo-Marxist, postmodern, and feminist anthropologists hold that culture is a context in which norms and values are contested.
- Rather than assuming a cultural core of shared beliefs and values, these anthropologists try to describe the processes through which norms and values are subverted and maintained.



Norms and Values

- **Norm**
An ideal cultural pattern that influences behavior in a particular society.
- **Value**
A culturally defined idea of what is true, right, and beautiful.



Subculture

- A system of perceptions, values, beliefs, and customs that are significantly different from those of a larger, dominant culture within the same society.



Culture and Adaptation

- Populations **adapt** to the environment so that they can survive and reproduce.
- **Plasticity** is the ability of humans to change their behavior in response to environmental demands.



Question

- An illustration of the plasticity of culture would be the development of a new type of sunscreen to avoid the adverse effects of solar radiation on the human body.
 - a) True
 - b) False



Answer: a

- An illustration of the plasticity of culture would be the development of a new type of sunscreen to avoid the adverse effects of solar radiation on the human body.



Organizing the World

- Culture allows humans to organize their world.
- Culture transforms physical reality into experienced reality.
- Anthropologists study systems of organization used by individual cultures.



Giving Meaning to Lives

- Culture allows people to understand:
 - Who they are.
 - How they should act in the world.
- The symbols of culture are often found in religious rituals.



Cultural Change

- Changes may come from within or outside of a culture.
- Cultural change can result from:
 - Invasions by a foreign culture
 - Revolution
 - Epidemic diseases



Cultural Change

- **Innovation**

A new variation on an existing cultural pattern that is subsequently accepted by other members of the society.

- **Diffusion**

The spread of cultural elements from one culture to another through cultural contact.



Cultural Contact

- No culture is free of outside influences.
- Direct cultural contact can cause far-reaching changes.
- Modern technology has affected almost every culture on earth.




Transculturation

- The transformation of adopted cultural traits, resulting in new cultural forms.

Quick Quiz




- 
1. A culture may be characterized by all **except** which one of the following?
- a) variability among individuals and groups within the culture
 - b) basically a highly integrated, static system
 - c) provides members with a system of classification for understanding the world
 - d) includes norms or guidelines for behavior
 - e) provides a context in which people give meanings to their lives



Answer: b


- A culture may not be characterized by **basically a highly integrated, static system.**

- 
2. Anthropologists often choose to focus on communities or groups who are significantly different from those of the larger, dominant culture within the same society, such as Amish, Hmong, and people who share a similar occupation e.g., firefighters or age e.g., elderly. These groups are referred to as
- a) ethnic groups.
 - b) the socioeconomically disadvantaged.
 - c) minorities.
 - d) subcultures.
 - e) geographical regions.



Answer: d


- Anthropologists often choose to focus on communities or groups who are significantly different from those of the larger, dominant culture within the same society, such as Amish, Hmong, and people who share a similar occupation e.g., firefighters or age e.g., elderly. These groups are referred to as **subcultures**.

- 
3. Anthropologists with training in ethnoscience and/or cognitive anthropology might carry out which of the following research projects?
- a) investigating social networks of single mothers
 - b) eliciting the categories of foods that make up a ceremonial meal
 - c) measurement of rice yield in rural Japanese villages
 - d) cross-cultural survey of the relationship between type of marriage and traditional type of subsistence



Answer: b

- Anthropologists with training in ethnoscience and/or cognitive anthropology might carry out a research projects **eliciting the categories of foods that make up a ceremonial meal.**

- 
4. Which of the following anthropological research projects would be considered a good example of an interpretive/symbolic approach?
- a) an exploration of cricket as a commentary on British culture
 - b) the ecological function of Hindu beliefs regarding not eating beef
 - c) the role of 'homegardens' in household economy
 - d) the social structure of middle-class Brazilian households
 - e) classification of medicinal plants by Samoan elders



Answer: a

- **An exploration of cricket as a commentary on British culture** would be considered a good example of an interpretive/symbolic approach.