SOLUTIONS MANUAL

Cultural Anthropology

TWELFTH EDITION

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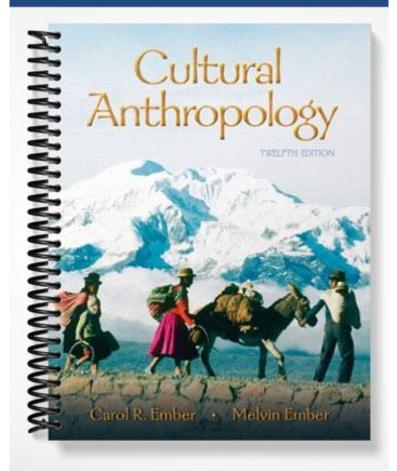
CHAPTER 2: *The Concept of Culture*
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CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Defining Features of Culture
    A. Culture is Commonly Shared
    B. Culture is Learned
        1. Language

II. Attitudes that Hinder the Study of Culture

III. Cultural Relativism

IV. Describing a Culture
    A. Individual Variation
    B. Cultural Constraints
    C. Ideal versus Actual Cultural Patterns
    D. How to Discover Cultural Patterns

 V. Some Assumptions about Culture
    A. Culture is Generally Adaptive
    B. Culture is Mostly Integrated
    C. Culture is Always Changing

Resources for Discussion

Cultural Relativism and Moral Judgments

A dilemma facing many anthropologists is the moral obligation to work for, rather than against, the people they study. The tenets of cultural relativism demand empathy with one's informants and a respect for their culture. Often this presents no dilemma, but there are occasions when one might question particular societal customs. For example, among the Yanomamo of Venezuela, the Siona of Ecuador, the Kayapo of central Brazil, and the Dani of New Guinea, up to one-third of men's deaths is the result of almost constant local warfare. Should an anthropologist simply accept this aspect of these people's cultures? While most anthropologists have little problem critiquing their own culture, they are decidedly uncomfortable with the idea of criticizing the cultural practices of others. Clifford Geertz has dismissed the very notion that we can reasonably evaluate other cultures.[1] According to his view, each culture has its own internal and consistent logic, which cannot be analyzed or judged from an outside perspective.

    This relativistic position, however, can become a problem. For example, does cultural

relativism prohibit judgements about Nazi Germany and its attempts to build an Aryan culture through the domination of Europe and the extermination of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and the infirmed? What of non-European societies that practiced slavery? Or the Gusii of Kenya who have one of the highest incidence rates of rape in the world and believe that sexual intercourse is "an act in which a man overcomes the resistance of a woman and causes her pain"?[2] Or the Sambia of highland New Guinea whose initiation rites force young boys to submit to being beaten, having sharp pieces of bamboo thrust up their noses to induce bleeding, and taking part in ritualized homosexuality with the unmarried young men of the society?[3] Or the societies in Egypt, the Sudan, and other parts of northern Africa which force young girls to submit to "circumcision" and other genital operations?[4]

Anthropologists do not generally speak out against these types of cultural practices even when, as in the case of female circumcision, other behavioral scientists do, because of anthropology's strong belief in cultural relativism, but also because of the widely held assumption that culture is generally adaptive. As discussed in the text, if a society survives long enough to be described in the ethnographic record, it is assumed that its cultural practices are, or have been, adapted to enhance survival in a specific and social environment (and clearly this perspective links strongly to anthropology's unique role as a comparative and *evolutionary* science). This assumption induces anthropologists to make "sense" of cultural practices that from the outsider's perspective are harmful, counterproductive, immoral, or simply bizarre. For example, Marvin Harris wrote a popular book devoted entirely to explaining why cultures have such seemingly odd beliefs and practices as the Hindus' love of cows, the Semitic taboos against eating pork, and the constant warfare of many non-industrial societies.[5] In each of these instances Harris argues for their adaptiveness.

This kind of analysis has its critics. Robert Edgerton, for example, recently argued that the evidence for the general adaptiveness of culture is questionable.[6] In a survey of the ethnographic literature, he found, instead, widespread testimony of the maladaptive nature of human cultural systems: particular cultural beliefs and practices often put people at risk for physical or mental illness, can lead to societal discontent or rebellion, or may result in the disappearance of entire cultures and their languages.

One thing that is important to realize, however, is that while Edgerton argues against the view that culture is always "adaptive," he maintains a strongly relativistic attitude and attempts to understand what role "maladaptive" traits might play in various cultures. Indeed, he suggests that maladaptation *must* exist in all cultures because of such factors as inequality, conflicts of interest, and environmental change.

Cultural Integration

To some extent, the history of anthropology reflects the differing ideas people have held about how culture is integrated. Malinowski stressed the ways customs worked together to satisfy the needs and desires of individuals within the culture. He saw magic, for example, as serving to relieve anxiety in uncontrollable situations. Radcliffe-Brown saw the question of integration somewhat differently. For him, "systems" had to work together in a logistically consistent fashion. For Radcliffe-Brown, it was almost irrelevant whether individuals felt any psychological need for consistency. For example, he saw

Omaha kinship terminology as functioning together with patrilineages. It made no sense to say that Omaha terminology caused patrilineages or vice versa. Anthropologists could point out only that the two worked together as parts of a single logistically consistent kinship system. For Emile Durkheim, a culture's different parts were integrated because they all stemmed from the society's social "solidarity." Religious feelings, for example, were neither more nor less than this feeling of camaraderie. For Ruth Benedict, "integration" had a more psychological ring to it. Cultures had psychological or symbolic patterns that formed the basis of all aspects of the society. Although Margaret Mead talked occasionally about societies that were not fully integrated, her view of culture was generally similar to Benedict's, but she stressed the role of child-rearing techniques in establishing the kind of pattern that characterized a culture. In their emphasis on how cultures change, a few anthropologists have stressed the non-integrated aspects of a culture. Some early evolutionists, like Engels, stressed that it was those aspects of a culture that created conflicts that were the basis of evolutionary change.

Many of these different emphases about cultural integration continue in the different theoretical orientations within anthropology today. Some schools emphasize the logistics of a system; others, symbolic integration, psychological consistencies, or the satisfaction of personal (practical) needs. Many stress the symbolic, psychological, logistic, or practical inconsistencies and conflicts present in the cultures they study. If you have students read supplementary articles or ethnographies, you might identify for them the authors' views of what constitutes "integration" (or its lack).

Informants' Statements About Culture

When asked why a culture has a particular custom, students often respond that you need to ask the informants to tell you. This might well be a good way to begin a search for explanations but it is often not sufficient. There are two problems that depend on an informant's explanations. First, informants may simply not know why they do something. Often they do not have the comparative perspective that the anthropologist is looking for and, instead, they give a more "localized" answer, like "I married my cross-cousin because she was pretty and my parents liked her." This type of answer will not tell us much about why this culture has a general preference for cross-cousin marriage while others do not.

The other problem with informants' responses is that sometimes people tell overt lies to amuse themselves or to deceive the ethnographer for personal gain. One group played an elaborate joke on their ethnographer, claiming belief in a sacred rat. N. Chagnon, while working with the Yanomamo, had difficulty getting the Indians to tell him their real names. The Yanomamo played ribald jokes on Chagnon and on their fellows when they gave Chagnon "names" for their peers—"hairy vagina," "long penis," "feces of the harpy eagle," and "dirty rectum."[7] Sometimes informants withhold information because they are afraid of the consequences if they divulge the real information. People may be reluctant to talk about their extramarital affairs, for fear of problems with their mistress or kin and they may prefer avoiding the subject of murders they are planning to commit. Missionaries working with the Kayapo Indians of central Brazil once noticed that the men were gathering in the men's house with all their guns. It became clear from the context that the Indians were planning a raid on another group of Indians, but when asked

what the men were doing, a little Kayapo girl responded that they were going on a "fishing" trip.[8] One missionary politely responded that, yes, "they must be out of fish-hooks." It is not always easy to get truthful information about a culture.

But while the deliberate attempts to delude anthropologists can be found in the literature, they are perhaps less serious than mistaken statements that result from an informant's lack of full understanding about his or her own culture. In our own society, researchers have attempted to understand just where misunderstandings arise. In one series of studies, psychologists compared people's ideas about the risk of dying from various causes with the actual risks as calculated from death records. They found that people tend to overestimate the risk of dying from relatively rare causes, like botulism. But they usually underestimate deaths resulting from more common causes, like heart disease. In addition, some deaths loom much larger in the public's imagination simply because they are more dramatic. Nuclear power and motor vehicle accidents seem like greater risks to many people than do strokes and stomach cancer. But the actual statistics show strokes and stomach cancer to cause more deaths. Similarly, people rate homicides as more likely causes of death than suicide, when the actual figures show the reverse. It seems that events that are "out of sight" are also "out of mind."[9]

Working through the intentional and unintentional misinformation informants give is an important part of the social scientist's task. Sometimes relying on false information will hurt only the scholarly tasks of social scientists, but in many cases real people may be hurt because they are misrepresented. Consider the case of the development specialist who needs to design programs to help the people in the Third World. If the specialist relies on the statements of urban elites, the rural poor will be seriously neglected. The poor may have interests directly opposed to those of the urbanites.[10] Consider, also, the case of misrepresentation of people in the United States. How much have mistaken or exaggerated stereotypes hurt minority groups like African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans?

Discussion Questions

1. What do anthropologists mean by "cultural relativism"? What does this concept imply about making ethical decisions concerning other cultures?

2. What do anthropologists mean by "ethnocentrism" and "the noble savage"? How might these two attitudes be harmful?

3. What are the defining characteristics of culture?

4. Is the existence of social or cultural constraints incompatible with individuality? What is the possible importance of nonconformist behavior in a culture?

5. Discuss techniques that might help anthropologists distinguish valid statements about a culture from invalid ones. Describe a situation in which a foreigner could easily misinterpret our society. How could the foreigner "get to the truth"?

6. Discuss anthropology's recent turn toward looking at subcultures in the industrial world rather than nonindustrial cultures. Are these subcultures as varied as the cultures before the Industrial Revolution? Is there any justification for the idea that a "global culture" is in creation?

7. What is the significance of intra-cultural variation?

8. What do anthropologists mean when they say cultures are generally adaptive or integrated?

9. Referring to the Current Issues box titled…"Human Rights and Cultural Relativity," what should the United States do about blatant human rights violations around the world?

10. Refer to the Applied Anthropology box titled…"Why the Bedouin Do Not Readily Settle Down." Why do you think that governments view traditional ways of life negatively?

Paper Topics and Research Projects

1. The culture of the United States appears to have changed tremendously over the centuries and changes seem to be occuring ever more rapidly.[10] Are the changes in the culture of the United States major or trivial? How different are we really from what we were in 1776? If the culture of the United States has changed so massively, how have the basic political structures (at least as reflected in the Constitution) remained so stable? Is it possible for some aspects of the culture to have changed radically while others change only superficially? What does this imply about cultural integration?
   Students might use archival data from local historical societies, government records, or accounts from local newspapers, to answer one or more of these questions. A source of possible information that might be of particular interest to some students is your institution's course catalogues or yearbooks.

2. Some anthropologists have portrayed tourism as our secular substitute for the traditional pilgrimage of more religiously-oriented peoples.[11] To what extent is tourism expected to fill the same spiritual need as a religious pilgrimage? Is there something more to the "anthropological curiosity" than a desire to advance the social sciences? How does knowing about other cultures affect our own personal philosophies of the world?
   Students might use contemporary travel guidebooks, brochures, or magazines to answer one or more of these questions.

3. Culture is often thought of as shared behavior and beliefs, but in any society, even the simplest, all individuals don't think and act exactly the same. Students might demonstrate this by surveying their families and friends on topics such as politics, food preferences, movies, sexual behavior, concerns about the future, and so on. Are there any obvious patterns? How does ethnicity, age, gender, or socioeconomic status relate to these

patterns? What beliefs are held more commonly than others? What beliefs demonstrate wide variation? What do these patterns tell us about our society?

Another method of investigating this question would be to observe people's behavior in a public setting. For example, go to a coffee shop, college campus, beach, or city park and simply watch what people are doing. What is the range of activities in each setting? Is there anything that everyone does at the beach? Compare notes with fellow students and attempt to discover patterns and variations in the observed behaviors.

World Wide Web Sites Your Students Can Use!

1. What is Culture?
   (http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-index.html). Give a baseline definition of culture.
2. Culture Quotes
   (http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definitions/whose-text.html) and (http://en.proverbia.net/citasautor.asp?autor=13682&page=2). What is the famous quote about culture by Aldous Huxley?

Supplementary Materials

Films

Faces of Culture, Part 2: The Nature of Culture. 30 min. RMI Media Productions, Inc, 1983. A brief, general introduction to the concept of culture as used by anthropologists.

Sociobiology: The Human Animal. 54 min. WGBH Boston, 1977. Explores and debates the assumptions and ideas of sociobiology, which suggests much of human cultural behavior has a genetic basis.

Reading

B. Low, "Behavioral Ecology, Sociobiology, and Human Behavior," in C.R. Ember, M. Ember and P.N. Peregrine, eds., *Research Frontiers in Anthropology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995).

Notes

1. C. Geertz, "Anti Anti-Relativism," *American Anthropologist.* 86, (1984): 263-78.
2. R. LeVine and B. LeVine, *Nyansango*: *A Gusi Community in Kenya* (Huntington, NY: Robert E. Kreiger Publishers, 1966).
3. G. Herdi, *The Sambi: Ritual and Gender in New Guinea* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1987).
4. D. Gordon, "Female Circumcision and Genital Operations in Egypt and the Sudan: A Dilemma for Medical Anthropology," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly,* 5, (1991):3-14.

5. M. Harris. *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
6. R.B. Edgerton, *Sick Societies* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
7. N. Chagnon. *Yanomamo,* 4th Edition (Fort Worth: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992).
8. Letter by Micky Stout, as published in A. Cowell, *The Tribe That Hides from Man* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1974).
9. Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichenstein, "Risky Assumptions," *Psychology Today,* 14, 1 (1980), see also Starr and Whipple, "Risks of Risk Decisions," *Science,* 208, 4448 (1980).
10. See M. Harris, *America Now: The Anthropology of a Changing Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981).