

Unit Three

Human Culture and Ties that Connect Society

3.1. Conceptualizing Culture: What Culture is and What Culture isn't

Definition of Culture

Anthropologists and sociologists define culture in different ways. Some of their definitions have been quoted below:

- ▯ A widely accepted and the more comprehensive definition of culture was provided by the British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor. He defined **culture** as “*a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*”.
- ▯ B. Malinowski has defined **culture** “as cumulative creation of man”. He regarded culture as the handiwork of man and the medium through which he achieves his ends.
- ▯ Robert Bierstedt says, “**Culture** is the complex whole that consists of everything we think and do and have as members of society.”

Combining several of these definitions, we may define *culture* as the common way of life shared by a group of people. It includes all things beyond nature and biology.

Culture, therefore, is moral, intellectual and spiritual discipline for advancement, in accordance with the norms and values based on accumulated heritage. Culture is a system of learned behavior shared by and transmitted among the members of the group.

3.2 Characteristic Features of Culture

a) Culture Is Learned:

Enculturation is specifically defined as the process by which an individual learns the rules and values of one's culture.

b) Culture Is Shared:

For a thing, idea, or behavior pattern to qualify as being “cultural” it must have a shared meaning by at least two people within a society.

Culture Is Symbolic:

Symbolic thought is unique and crucial to humans and to cultural learning. A symbol is something verbal or nonverbal, within a particular language or culture that comes to stand for something else. There would be no obvious, natural, or necessary connection between the symbol and what it symbolizes.

c) Culture Is All-Encompassing

Culture encompasses all aspects, which affect people in their everyday lives. Culture comprises countless material and non-material aspects of human lives.

Culture Is Integrated:

Cultures are not haphazard collections of customs and beliefs. Instead, culture should be thought as of integrated wholes, the parts of which, to some degree, are interconnected with one another.

d) Culture Can Be Adaptive and Maladaptive:

Humans have both biological and cultural ways of coping with environmental stresses. Besides our biological means of adaptation, we also use "cultural adaptive kits," which contain customary activities and tools that help us in managing everyday lives.

e) Culture is Dynamic:

There are no cultures that remain completely static year after year. Culture is changing constantly as new ideas and new techniques are added as time passes modifying or changing the old ways. This is the characteristics of culture that stems from the culture's cumulative quality.

3.3 Aspects/Elements of Culture

Culture is reflected through the various components such as values, norms, languages, myths, customs, rituals and laws. Two of the most basic aspects of culture are material and nonmaterial culture.

2.3.1 Material culture

Material culture consists of human-made objects such as tools, implements, furniture, automobiles, buildings, dams, roads, bridges, and in fact, the physical substance which has been changed and used by man. It is concerned with the external, mechanical and utilitarian objects. It includes technical and material equipment. It is referred to as civilization.

2.3.2 Non - Material Culture

The term 'culture' when used in the ordinary sense, means 'non-material culture'. It is something internal and intrinsically valuable, reflects the inward nature of man.

Non-material culture consists of the words the people use or the language they speak, the beliefs they hold, values and virtues they cherish, habits they follow, rituals and practices that they do and the ceremonies they observe. It also includes our customs and tastes, attitudes and outlook, in brief, our ways of acting, feeling and thinking. Some of the aspects of non-material culture are listed as follows:

Values

Values are the standards by which members of a society define what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Every society develops both values and expectations regarding the right way to reflect them.

Values are a central aspect of the non-material culture of a society and are important because they influence the behavior of the members of a society.

Beliefs

Beliefs are cultural conventions that concern true or false assumptions, specific descriptions of the nature of the universe and humanity's place in

it. Values are generalized notions of what is good and bad; beliefs are more specific and, in form at least, have more content. “Education is good” is a fundamental value in American society, whereas “Grading is the best way to evaluate students” is a belief that reflects assumptions about the most appropriate way to determine educational achievement.

Norms

Norms are shared rules or guidelines that define how people “ought” to behave under certain circumstances. Norms are generally connected to the values, beliefs, and ideologies of a society.

Norms vary in terms of their importance to a culture, these are:

- a) **Folkways:** Norms guiding ordinary usages and conventions of everyday life are known as folkways. Folkways are norms that are not strictly enforced, such as not leaving your seat for an elderly people inside a bus/taxi. They may result in a person getting a bad look.
- b) **Mores:** Mores (pronounced MOR-ays) are much stronger norms than are folkways. Mores are norms that are believed to be essential to core values and we insist on conformity. A person who steals, rapes, and kills has violated some of society’s most important mores.

People who violate mores are usually severely punished, although punishment for the violation of mores varies from society to society. It may take the form of ostracism, vicious gossip, public ridicule, exile, loss of one’s job, physical beating, imprisonment, commitment to a mental asylum, or even execution.

3.4 Cultural Unity and Variations: Universality, Generality and Particularity of Culture

In studying human diversity in time and space, anthropologists distinguish among the universal, the generalized, and the particular.

Certain biological, psychological, social, and cultural features are universal (found in every culture), others are merely generalities (common to several but not all human groups), and other traits are particularities (unique to certain cultural traditions).

1) Universality:

Universals are cultural traits that span across all cultures. Most are biological that distinguish us from other species - long period of infant dependency, year-round sexuality, complex brain that enables use of symbols and use of languages and tools.

Social universals - life in groups - some kind of family organizes on social life and depends on social interactions for expression and continuation of the society. E.g. Incest taboo, exogamy (marriage outside one's group).

A great example of universality is that whether in Africa, Asia, Australia, or Antarctica, people understand the universal concept of family. Anthropologists would argue that it's just what we as humans do - we organize ourselves into families that are based on biology. No matter where you choose to travel and explore, you'll find a family system.

2) Generality

Generalities are cultural traits that occur in many societies but not all of them. Societies can share same beliefs and customs because of borrowing, domination (colonial rule) when customs and procedures are imposed on one culture, or Independent innovation of same cultural trait e.g., farming and nuclear family.

3) Particularity:

Trait of a culture that is not widespread. Cultural particulars include the specific practices that distinguish cultures from one another. For example, all people become hungry but the potential food sources defined as edible vary across cultures, i.e. what is appealing to eat in one society may be considered repulsive or simply unbelievable in another (for example donkey meat in Ethiopia). Particularities are becoming rarer in some ways but also

becoming more obvious. Borrowed cultural traits are modified. E.g. marriage, parenthood, death, puberty, birth all celebrated differently.

3.5. Evaluating Cultural Differences: Ethnocentrism, Cultural Relativism and Human Rights

The concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism occupy key position in anthropology.

A. Ethnocentrism The common response in all societies to other cultures is to judge them in terms of the values and customs of their own familiar culture. Ethnocentrism refers to the tendency to see the behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms of one's own group as the only right way of living and to judge others by those standards.

Being fond of your own way of life and condescending or even being hostile toward other cultures is normal for all people. Because of ethnocentrism, we often operate on the premise that our own society's ways are the correct, normal and better ways for acting, thinking, feeling and behaving. Our own group is the centre or axis of everything, and we scale and rate all others with reference to it. Ethnocentrism is not characteristic only of complex modern societies. People in small, relatively isolated societies are also ethnocentric in their views about outsiders. It is a cultural universal. Alien cultural traits are often viewed as being not just different but inferior, less sensible, and even "unnatural".

Ethnocentrism results in prejudices about people from other cultures and the rejection of their "alien ways." Our ethnocentrism can prevent us from understanding and appreciating another culture. When there is contact with people from other cultures, ethnocentrism can prevent open communication and result in misunderstanding and mistrust. The positive aspect of ethnocentrism has to do with the protection that it can provide for a culture. By causing a rejection of the foods, customs, and perceptions of people in other cultures, it acts as a conservative force in preserving traditions of one's own culture. It can help maintain the separation and uniqueness of cultures.

B. Cultural relativism:

We cannot grasp the behavior of other people if we interpret what they say and do in the light of our values, beliefs, and motives. Instead, we need to examine their behavior as insiders, seeing it within the framework of their values, beliefs and motives. The concept of cultural relativism states that cultures differ, so that a cultural trait, act, or idea has no meaning but its meaning only within its cultural setting.

Cultural relativism suspends judgment and views about the behavior of people from the perspective of their own culture. Every society has its own culture, which is more or less unique. Every culture contains its own unique pattern of behavior which may seem alien to people from other cultural backgrounds. We cannot understand the practices and beliefs separately from the wider culture of which they are part. A culture has to be studied in terms of its own meanings and values. Cultural relativism describes a situation where there is an attitude of respect for cultural differences rather than condemning other people's culture as uncivilized or backward.

Respect for cultural differences involves:

- Appreciating cultural diversity;

Accept. Contributions of Anthropology

Its contributions may be categorized in to the following (World Book Encyclopedia 1994, Vol. 1, Howard and Dunaif-Hattis 1992; Aoyagi, 1999):

1. Anthropology gives us an insight into different ways & modes of life of a given society, to understand the logic behind & justification for human activities and behavior.
2. Anthropology also helps us to understand our own ways of lives. Many aspects of our lives seem to us normal, so we don't know the logic behind. Eating injera, for example, is assumed to be normal to those whose staple (main) food item is injera. By studying anthropology, we look into ourselves through the others' ways of lives. As we study anthropology, we encounter a different way of lives from ourselves, & hence we get opportunity to appreciate and understand ourselves.
3. Anthropology helps us to fight against prejudices & discriminations. It helps us to fight against ethnocentrism; the attitude that one's own culture & one's own way

of life is the center of the world & the best of all. This arises from ignorance about other ethnic groups & their ways of lives.

4. Anthropology is also used as a tool for development. Applied anthropology, here, is the application of anthropological knowledge and research results in the solution of some social problems or in the implementation of project plans.

In addition to the aforementioned points, we may substantiate the contributions of anthropology as follows:

1. Because of its broad scope, anthropology allows us to understand the biological, technological & cultural development of humanity over long period of time in human evolution

2. Because of its comparative approach to humanity, Anthropology allows us to separate what is unique to our way of life from what is general to all people.

3. Because of its relativistic approach, anthropology helps us to be more sensitive and appreciative of Cultural diversity & variability. It helps us to avoid some of the misunderstanding that commonly arises when individuals of different cultural traditions come into contact. Anthropology reduces ethnocentrism by instilling an appreciation of cultural diversity. Anthropology can help us be aware that when we interact with people from other cultural traditions, their actions are not always intended to mean what we take them to mean, & therefore much miscommunication can be avoided.

4. Anthropologists bring a holistic approach to national & international development agencies.

5. Anthropologists use their expertise in particular subjects to formulate practical ways of coping with immediate social problems. Medical anthropologists, for example, investigate the interrelationship between human health, nutrition, & cultural beliefs & practices.

In general, anthropology more than any other sciences, can reveal the alternative ways of living developed by diverse segments of humanity.

- Trying to understand every culture and its elements in terms of its own context and logic;
- Accepting that each body of custom has inherent dignity and meaning as the way of life of one group which has worked out to its environment, to the biological needs of its members, and to the group relationships;
- Knowing that a person's own culture is only one among many; and

- Recognizing that what is immoral, ethical, and acceptable in one culture may not be so in another culture.

C. Human rights:

In today's world, human rights advocates challenge many of the tenets of cultural relativism. Many anthropologists are uncomfortable with the strong form of cultural relativism that suggests that all patterns of culture are equally valid. What if the people practice slavery, violence against women, torture, or genocide?

Human rights: rights based on justice and morality beyond and superior to particular countries, cultures, and religions. The idea of **human rights** challenges cultural relativism by invoking a realm of justice and morality beyond and superior to the laws and customs of particular countries, cultures, and religions.

Anthropologists respect human diversity. Most ethnographers try to be **objective**, **accurate**, and **sensitive** in their accounts of other cultures. However, their **objectivity**, **sensitivity** and a **cross-cultural perspective** got nothing to do with ignoring international standards of justice and morality.

3.6 Culture Change

When you examine the history of a society, it is obvious that its culture has changed over time. Some of the shared behaviors and ideas that were common at one time are modified or replaced at another time.

Culture change can occur as a result of the following Mechanisms:

i. Diffusion The source of new cultural elements in a society may also be another society. The process by which cultural elements are borrowed from another society and incorporated into the culture of the recipient group is called **diffusion**.

- Diffusion is **direct** when two cultures trade with, intermarry among, or wage war on one another.

- Diffusion is **forced** when one culture subjugates another and imposes its customs on the dominated group.
- Diffusion is **indirect** when items or traits move from group A to group C via group B without any firsthand contact between A and C. In this case, group B might consist of traders or merchants who take products from a variety of places to new markets. Or group B might be geographically situated between A and C, so that what it gets from A eventually winds up in C, and vice versa. In today's world, much international diffusion is indirect-culture spread by the mass media and advanced information technology.
- **ii. Acculturation** is the exchange of cultural features that results when groups have continuous firsthand contact.

The cultures of either or both groups may be changed by this contact. This usually happens in situations of trade or colonialism. In situations of continuous contact, cultures have also exchanged and blended foods, recipes, music, dances, clothing, tools, and technologies.

iii. Invention-the process by which humans innovate, creatively finding solutions to problems is a third mechanism of cultural change. Faced with comparable problems and challenges, people in different societies have innovated and changed in similar ways, which is one reason why cultural generalities exist. One example is the independent invention of agriculture in the Middle East and Mexico. Over the course of human history, major innovations have spread at the expense of earlier ones.

vi. Globalization The term globalization encompasses a series of processes, including diffusion and acculturation, working to promote change in a world in which nations and people are increasingly interlinked and mutually dependent. Promoting such linkages are economic and political forces, as well as modern systems of transportation and communication. Due to globalization, long-distance communication is easier, faster, and cheaper than ever, and extends to remote areas. The

mass media help propel a globally spreading culture of consumption. Within nations and across their borders, the media spread information about products, services, rights, institutions, lifestyles, and the perceived costs and benefits of globalization. Emigrants transmit information and resources transnationally, as they maintain their ties with home (phoning, faxing, e-mailing, making visits, and sending money).