

# I. Culture and Society

## A. What is Culture?

Culture is the totality of learned, socially transmitted behavior.

- Culture is all the values, norms, and customs that people share with one another.
- Culture includes language and beliefs
- Culture is all of the material objects such as monuments, three-piece suits, the lottery, fur coats, and fine automobiles.
- Culture is ideas (like the belief in democracy and freedom) found within a society.
- Culture is what individuals think is right and important as they interact (Schaefer, 1992:67).

Culture is a way of life. When people talk about "the way of life" of people with a distinctive life style, whether they live in Appalachia or Norway, they are talking about culture. It defines what is important and unimportant. Culture refers to everything that people create. Values, norms, goals, and culture in general, develop as people interact with one another over time.

Culture accounts, in part, for the unprecedented success of the human species. It allows us to adapt to extreme environments. We could not survive without our culture. In a sense, we create our culture, but our culture, in turn, recreates us (See Robertson, 1989:38-42).

Culture provides the context (back ground) that we use to interact with each other. It defines boundaries that we use to distinguish us from them.

## B. Language

Henslin (2006:38-40) notes that language is the primary way people communicate with one another.

- It's a system of symbols which all us to communicate abstract thought (Henslin, 2004:40).
- It's a perspective which allows culture to exist.
- Language is universal in that all cultures have it, but it is not universal in that people attach different meanings to particular sounds.

### 1. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argues that language provides categories through which social reality is defined and constructed. It argues that thinking and perception are not only expressed through language but also shaped by language.

## C. Perspectives

We need to keep in mind the notion of perspective when talking about culture. A culture is a "shared perspective." It is not absolute truth. Perspectives are limited by their nature. They allow us to see life from only a certain angle. As we interact, we come to share ideas about the way the world is. Perspectives filter what we see (Charon, 1986:199-203).

Example: "The Allegory of the Cave"

#### **D. Ethnocentrism**

Ethnocentrism, according to Farley (1988:16-17), refers to the tendency to view one's own culture as the norm. There is a tendency to assume one's culture is superior to others. "Our" truths and values are so central to whom "we" are that it is difficult to accept the possibility that our culture represents only one of many. A particular culture does not represent universal "TRUTH." This is not to say that to be proud of one's heritage is inappropriate. On the contrary, a little ethnocentrism is beneficial because of its bonding effect. Ethnocentrism becomes a problem when we expect others to become like us.

Example

An American who thinks citizens of another country are barbarian because they like to attend bull fights is an example of ethnocentrism.

#### **E. Cultural Relativism and Verstehen**

To accurately study unfamiliar cultures, sociologists have to be aware of culturally-based biases. Max Weber advocates the use of "value-free" Sociology, which means that one should eliminate, as much as possible, bias and prejudice.

Weber calls attention to the German idea of verstehen to describe the practice of understanding unique culture from the standpoint of others. Cultural relativism refers to the understanding of a culture on its own terms. In essence "you have to be able to stand in the other persons shoes." When you can "see" from the perspective of another, then you can understand that culture.

## **II. Components of Culture**

### **A. Cultural Universals**

Cultural universal refers to a cultural item that exists in all cultures part and present. Items like religion and language are found in every culture. They are examples of cultural universals

### **B. Innovation**

Innovation is the process of introducing an idea or object that is new to culture. There are two forms of innovation: discovery and invention.

### **C. Diffusion**

Sociologists use the term diffusion to refer to the process by which a cultural item is spread from group to group or society to society. Cultures learn from one another.

Diffusion can occur through a variety of means, among them exploration, military conquest, missionary work, etc. (Schaefer & Lamm, 1992: 70).

Henslin (2004:51) contends that when groups make contact with one another, they most often exchange nonmaterial culture.

#### **D. Cultural Leveling**

Henslin (2004:51) uses cultural leveling to describe a situation in which cultures become similar to one another as a result of travel and communication. The fact that one can find a McDonalds or a Coke nearly every where in the world is an example of cultural leveling.

#### **E. Material Vs. Nonmaterial**

##### **1. Material**

Culture is easily divided into material or nonmaterial concepts (See Robertson, 1989:29). Material culture includes:

- weapons
- machines
- eating utensils
- jewelry
- art
- hair styles
- clothing

Anthropologists study material artifacts when exploring cultures which have been extinct for hundreds or thousands of years. All which remains from ancient cultures are artifacts of their material culture.

##### **2. Nonmaterial**

Often Sociologists will investigate nonmaterial aspects. Nonmaterial culture refers to abstract human creations. Included in this category are:

- language
- gestures
- values

- beliefs
- rules (norms)
- philosophies
- customs
- governments
- institutions

### **F. Ideal Culture and Real Culture?**

Appelbaum and Chambliss (1997:42) contend that ideal culture refers to the norms and values that a society professes to hold. Henslin (2004:49-50) ideal culture describes models to emulate and which are worth aspiring to.

Real culture refers to norms and values that are followed in practice.

Example: Henslin (2004:49-50) notes that Americans glorify academic achievement and material success. However, most students do not graduate with honors and most citizens are not wealthy. Thus there is a gap between ideal culture and real culture.

### **G. Culture Lag**

Culture lag refers to the tendency for culture to be slow to adapt to changes in technology. Technological change can happen overnight while sometimes it takes culture a few generations to adapt to changes in technology (Henslin, 2004: 50).

Example: When Napster provided free music exchange, the record producers argued that the practice was unfair, but yet no laws existed which made music sharing illegal. This example highlights the lag between technology and social adaptation.

Henslin (2004:50) calls this the distinction between material and non material culture. Material culture runs ahead of non material culture.

### **H. Culture Shock**

As people grow, they develop a sense of what to expect in their familiar surroundings. "Culture becomes the lens through which we perceive and evaluate what is going on around us" (Henslin, 1999:36). We don't generally question these assumptions. When one travels into a completely different culture, for example, a rural village in Africa, one encounters different assumptions that might violate what we come to expect as normal. An individual suddenly immersed in a unique and unfamiliar setting experiences disorientation. This is known as culture shock (see Henslin, 2004:35).

### Example

A rural individual who is suddenly taken to a large city

## III. Norms and Values

Norms are rules that govern our lives and values are the goal of our lives. Norms are the expectations, or rules of behavior, that develop out of values. Norms are guidelines for our behavior.

Norms may be informal or they may be formalized into laws.

Values are principles, standards, or qualities considered worthwhile or desirable.

Norms are rather specific while values are abstract and general in nature.

### A. Norms

Norms are the shared rules or guidelines that govern our actions in society. Norms can be laws, but they also can be procedures, morals, customs or expectations. Many times, One's position within the social structure determines the definitions of norms. Often norms are outward expressions of a society's deeply held and shared values.

Norms are important for defining boundaries. The text uses gangs as an example again. In order to belong to a gang, a potential gang member has to learn the "norms" of the gang. Norms define us and them.

#### 1. Folkways

Folkways are norms that ordinary people follow in everyday life. Conformity is expected, but not absolutely insisted on. Folkways are not strictly enforced.

Example: "No shirt, no shoes, no service"

#### 2. Mores

Mores are norms are taken more seriously and are strictly enforced. Henslin (1999:44) considers them as "essential to our core values." Henslin suggests that we insist on conformity.

Example: Flag burning, murder

#### 3. Taboo

Taboos approximate super mores. Henslin (1999:44) argues that taboos are so "strongly ingrained that even the thought of its violation is greeted with revulsion."

Examples are Incest and cannibalism.

#### 4. Laws

A law is a norm that is formally enacted by a political authority. The power of the state backs laws.

#### 5. Social Control

Society always establishes a way of ensuring that people "behave in expected and approved ways"

#### 6. Sanctions

Henslin (1999:43) contends that sanctions are positive or negative reactions to the ways in which people follow norms. They can be either positive or negative. Rewards accrue for conformity and punishment for nonconformity. They can be material, such as a fine for not adhering to a norm, but they can also be gestures, "such as frowns, stares, harsh words, or raised fists" (Henslin, 1999:43).

#### B. Values

- Each culture has a general consensus of what is worth working for (ends).
- Values refer to that which we consider important or unimportant, desirable or undesirable, good or bad, and beautiful or ugly.
- They guide most of our actions.
- Values are long range commitments to ends that people share culturally.
- Values are abstract and general.
- Essentially, values describe our "moral" goals in society.
- Values indicate the standards by which people define their ideas about what is desirable in life.

#### IV. Variations Within Cultures:

##### Sub-Cultures and Counter Cultures

Some cultures in the U.S. have remained relatively isolated from the dominant culture. These are subcultures. Charon (1986:199) points out that subcultures have goals, values, and norms that are different from those of the dominant culture. Although their culture differs from the dominant culture, they do not openly oppose the dominant culture. Members of subcultures are usually content to avoid the dominant culture.

Countercultures, on the other hand, like the SDS, Hippies, and the Black Panthers are examples of subcultures that openly oppose the dominant culture. Countercultures actively seek to change the dominant culture.

The following are two examples of subcultures. They are not counter cultures. Neither group seeks to change the status quo.

## **A. The Amish**

The Amish represents a subculture. Hostetler (1980 in Charon, 1986:218) describes the Amish as governed by the teachings of the Bible. There is a strong desire among the Amish to separate themselves from the outside world. They have a dualistic view of the world. They see good and evil, light and darkness, truth and falsehood. The Amish have little interest in improving the material world. Instead they seek salvation.

The goal of the Amish to separate themselves (as much as possible) from the "negative." They define negative as urban and distant from god. They see the city as the "center of leisure," of nonproductivity, and wickedness. To avoid evil, the Amish forbid all intimate contact with outsiders. Contamination by the outside world tempts one away from the kingdom of god. Part of the separation from the outside includes not using electricity, telephones, or automobiles. Married men grow beards, but are not allowed to grow mustaches. They do not encourage formal education past elementary school. The Amish use horses and other nonmechanical equipment for farming.

## **B. The Vice Lords**

The Vice Lords is another subculture. In a book called Vice Lords R. Lincoln Keiser (in Charon, 1987:221-4) discussed four aspects [which Keiser calls ideological sets] that the Vice Lords use to define their world and guide their actions. Keiser defines four ideological sets which he calls Heart ideology, Soul ideology, brotherhood ideology, and game ideology.

### **1. Heart Ideology:**

Heart ideology refers to the displays of courage and daring which are important for the Vice Lords. A member has to show that he's willing to put his personal safety on the line. An individual who talks a lot about fighting, but who doesn't back up his rhetoric is a "punk."

### **2. Soul Ideology:**

Soul for the Vice Lords has the same general connotation as it does for the Black community. Soul refers to ways of conducting ones self that strips away the superficial surface and gets down to the nitty-gritty. Soul is the essence of the Black community. The Vice Lords judge one another in terms of soul.

### **3. Brotherhood Ideology:**

The spirit of brotherhood is also important. Drinking wine is an important shared social experience for the group. Each person contributes what money he has for a "bottle." Each then gets an equal amount regardless of how much money he puts in. Drinking wine reinforces the brotherhood.

### **4. Game Ideology:**

In "game ideology" the gang member attempts to manipulate other gang members by playing games. Manipulating others through games is a significant part of the Vice Lords life. Such games may include hustling money from strangers. A "light weight" game player may simply ask for money. More than likely

he gets turned down. A "heavy" on the other hand may concoct a story that another street gang is going to jump the stranger. There for the stranger should pay protection money to the "lords."

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