***Components of Culture***

All cultures comprise different components that are necessary for members of society to competently participate in social life and interactions. First, culture provides a stock of knowledge – a cognitive component – that is a basic foundation for social behavior. Culture also comprises elements necessary for the maintenance of integration and conformity in society – a normative component that is, ways of specifying the correct ways of thinking and behaving and of defining morality.

**I. Cognitive culture**

1. Symbols

A symbol is anything that represents something else. It can be either a material object (a flag, a cross) or a non-material element (a sound, a gesture). As members of a culture, we are constantly and thoroughly surrounded by symbols: when we stop at the red light, we obey a symbolic command. Symbols carry shared meanings among people and they can be used to produce loyalty or hostility.

When American students pledge allegiance to the flag, they symbolically display their patriotism. When crowds in parts of the Middle East burn the American flag, they symbolically display their hostility toward the United States. For one category of people, the flag represents national pride and is object of some degree of devotion whereas for other categories of people, it represents evil and imperialism. The fact that symbolic meaning is shared is crucial: when Americans witness Middle Eastern crowds burning the American flag on CNN, they have no difficulty understanding the meaning of such actions. The symbolic meaning is obvious and powerful. In other words, the meaning of a symbol may depend on the users.

Snowman For instance, the picture of the snowman commonly represents Christmas and snowy winters. However, when used by a rapper, the snowman carries a completely different meaning: the snowman becomes a cocaine dealer.

2. Language

A major symbolic system in use in all human societies is language. Other species have linguistic systems but human language is significantly different. For most language-using species, the capacity for language is genetically determined and fixed; linguistic elements are not learned and do not change over time. Uses of language operate on a stimulus-response basis: a given stimulus (food or danger) will trigger a fixed linguistic response (a specific growl or shriek for lions, a specific flying pattern for bees). Human language has to be learned and is variable (thousands of different human languages exist in the world), flexible (there is significant linguistic variation over time) and generative (humans can create linguistic forms, such as sign or computer languages, literature and poetry). Finally, human language does not operate on a stimulus-response model. Human language comprises two basic components: vocabulary (list of all existing words) and grammar (rules of combination). These two components are the basic tools that can then be used by any competent member of society to produce a wide range of expressions.

Without language, there would be no culture. It is through language that we are able to create, share, preserve and transmit cultural meanings such as complex (and uniquely human) patterns of emotion, thought, knowledge and beliefs. In this sense, language gives us a sense of history and contributes to social evolution as each new generation does not have to reinvent the wheel but can count on an already available stock of knowledge and ideas and build on it.

Language is essential to give members of society a sense of identity. For many years, people living in the Canadian province of Quebec have asserted their distinctive national identity through the use of French throughout the province. Linguistic diversity is also considered part of humanity’s heritage. In 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) promulgated a Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity that incorporates the preservation of linguistic diversity in the face of disappearing languages. Half of the world’s 6,000 languages are considered endangered and on an average, one language disappears every two weeks as the numbers of their speakers dwindle and American English becomes a global language. Language disappearance can also be the result of political oppression. In the former USSR, one way of imposing the rule of the central Russian government over the different republics was through a process known as Russification: schools were allowed to teach only and exclusively in Russian, at the expense of the Republics’ native languages. This was done to ensure the new generations’ loyalty to the Soviet state rather than to their own specific culture.

We commonly think of language as a tool through which we communicate but it is more than that. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf (Sapir, 1949; Whorf, 1956), through what became known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, posited the language we speak determines the way we think, perceive and interpret the world around us. We do not use language to think, language shapes the very way and the very concepts we use to think. We would not be able to make sense of all the sensory information (sounds, sights, tastes, etc.) we constantly receive if language didn’t classify that information into concepts and thereby turn it into meaningful information. A classical illustration of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is the fact that the Eskimo have over twenty words for snow but have no strict equivalent of the word “snow” as a general category. These fine distinctions between more than twenty types of snow result from the Eskimo’s environmental conditions in the Arctic region. When snow is such an important part of your natural environment, you learn to distinguish between different types. As a result, Eskimo learn to truly see more than twenty types of snow that a non-native would not be able to discern. Lacking the linguistic categories to do so, non-Eskimo simply do not see twenty types of snow.

**II.** **Normative Culture**

1. Values

Values are general abstract moral principles defining what is right or wrong, good or evil, desirable or undesirable. In other words, values often come in pairs of positive and negative terms: we value freedom and dislike oppression, we value education and dislike ignorance or we value individualism and fear collectivism

Values define general moral qualities of behavior expected from members of society, such as honesty, patriotism, or commitment to freedom. Values are part of the standards we use to evaluate the moral properties of our or other people’s views and actions and they constitute the unspoken background of our moral preferences. Also, we do not treat values as what they are, that is, cultural products of society that we internalized, but rather as strongly-held personal morals.

Because individuals feel strongly about values as define moral behavior through them, we tend to defend them vigorously when confronted with different value systems held by other people. For instance, many observers have defined such value conflict in the United States as culture war. A culture war is an expression used in the mass media to depict the clash between competing systems of values. The competition is over which values should represent society as a whole. It becomes visible, for instance, in the conflict over homosexual rights. One side – the so-called anti-gay camp – defines morality based on a conservative Christian view that they think should define the American society, whereas the other side – the pro gay rights camp – invokes what they see as a basic American right to privacy and civil rights. In general, conservatives tend to think that morality should be based on what they perceive as the Christian roots of America and that deviation from such standards lead to immorality in thought (e.g. secularism) and behavior (e.g. permissiveness). On the other hand, a liberal view is more based on personal choice and recognizes the possibility of change in moral standards.

In other words, complex societies do not necessarily have a consensus in values as different categories of people develop very different experiences that shape their moral standards.

2. Norms, Folkways, Mores

As mentioned before, norms are specific guidelines for behavior based on values. They are rules and instructions specifying what are expected of us in different situations. For instance, the value of honesty implies the norm that students should not cheat on exams or plagiarize papers. Doing so would violate the value of honesty that is characteristic of academic life. Norms can be prescriptive – defining how one ought to behave in given situations – or proscriptive – defining how one ought NOT to behave.

William Graham Sumner (1840-1910) distinguished between two types of norms: folkways and mores. Folkways are conventions of everyday life that members of society are expected to follow but whose violation is not considered serious. If someone picks their nose in public, it is considered impolite and inappropriate behavior but no one gets arrested for this. On the other hand, mores (pronounced mo-RAYS) are norms which reflect strongly-held values and whose violation involves a strong negative societal reaction, such as incarceration or even death.

For instance, in India, patriarchy (men’s social dominance over women) is a common value and it is incarnated in the practice of dowry (wealth that is offered by the bride’s family to the groom’s family). When the dowry is deemed insufficient by the groom’s family, the groom is traditionally entitled to set his bride on fire, a practice known as bride-burning. Every year, Indian police receive more than 2,500 reports of such practices. Because normative expectations are so strong regarding dowry, the societal reaction to what is perceived as a violation is brutal.

In some societies, some norms are considered so important that they are put in writing and some categories of people are put in charge of their enforcement and specific punishment is imposed on violators. Such norms are laws. Laws are sometimes based on traditional mores. For instance, in some parts of the world, the practice of honor killing – the killing of a girl or a woman deemed to have shamed the family’s honor by being raped or unauthorized sexual activity – by a male relative is only mildly punished by the law and is treated as justifiable murder. Other laws can be enacted to protect people against the negative consequences of outdated mores. In the case of bride burning, the Indian government created a special police branch to deal with such crimes against women and the penalties are heavy for the violators, although traditional mores are so strong that these crimes are rarely reported.

3. Enforcing Normative Culture: Sanctions

The previous section makes it clear that normative culture involves social control – the different processes through which society enforces conformity to the norms. Such processes are also called social sanctions, that is, social reactions to either conformity (positive sanctions) or violation (negative sanctions) of the norms. Sanctions can also be informal – administered by any individual in any setting – or formal – specified by some social procedure and administered by specific public officials. Positive sanctions often take the form of rewards. A pat on the back for a good shot at a basketball game is an informal positive sanction. A graduation ceremony is a formal positive sanction. A time-out given to an unruly child is an informal negative sanction whereas a prison sentence for a crime is a formal negative sanction.