

# Nature and Culture

# Nature and culture

- ❖ The **nature–culture** divide refers to a theoretical foundation of contemporary anthropology. occurring in the present  
Early anthropologists sought theoretical insight from the perceived tensions between **nature** and **culture**.

## What is nature?

- ❖ **Nature**, in the broadest sense, is the natural, physical, or material world or universe.  
“**Nature**” can refer to the phenomena of the physical world, and also to life in general. The study of **nature** is a large part of science.

# What is culture?

- ❖ A **culture** is a way of life of a group of people--the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.
- ❖ Culture is what defines a group of people and identifies them as separate, and unique from those around them (language and dress and ritualistic practices as well as story telling myths and certain knowledge that is passed on from generation to generation).
- ❖ **Culture** is symbolic communication



# Nature-culture divide

- ❖ Nature and culture are often seen as opposite ideas: what belongs to nature *cannot* be the result of human intervention and, on the other hand, cultural development is achieved *against* nature.
- ❖ Studies in the evolutionary development of humans suggest that culture is part and parcel of the ecological niche within which our species thrived, thus rendering culture a chapter in the biological development of a species.

# Culture as an ecological niche

An ecological niche is the role of a species in an ecosystem. It describes how a species responds to competition and resource distribution.

- ❖ Culture is part and parcel of the ecological niche within which humans live. (E.g. Snails carry their shell; we bring along our culture).
- ❖ Cultural transmission is also *horizontal*, that is among individuals within the same generation or among individuals belonging to different populations.

# What is the cultural environment?

- ❖ **A cultural environment** is a set of beliefs, practices, customs and behaviors that are found to be common to everyone that is living within a certain population.
- ❖ **Cultural environments** shape the way that every person develops, influencing ideologies and personalities.

# Meaning and Nature of Culture

- ❖ **Culture** is an aggregate of the learned beliefs, attitudes, values, norms and customs of a society. or group of people, shared by them and transmitted from generation to generation within that society.
- ❖ **Culture** too changes with time.



# What is the meaning of **social culture**?

- ❖ A set of beliefs, customs, practices and behavior that exists within a population. International companies often include an examination of the **socio-cultural** environment prior to entering their target markets.



# What are the socio-cultural practices?

- ❖ **Cultural practice** generally refers to the something theoretical made real manifestation of a **culture** or sub-culture, especially in regard to the traditional and customary **practices** of a particular ethnic or other **cultural** group.
- ❖ In the broadest sense, this term can apply to any person manifesting any aspect of any **culture** at any time.

# What is the meaning of symbol in culture?

- ❖ Human **cultures** use **symbols** to express specific ideologies and social structures and to represent aspects of their specific **culture**. Thus, **symbols** carry meanings that depend upon one's **cultural** background; in other words, the meaning of a **symbol** is not inherent in the **symbol** itself but is culturally learned.

# What are the agricultural practices in agriculture?

- ❖ **Cultural** methods are **agriculture practices** used to enhance crop and livestock health and prevent weed, pest or disease problems without the use of chemical substances.

# What is the relationship between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’?

- ❖ How have anthropologists theorized the relationship between “nature” and “culture”? Why has nature/culture been such a central and contested conceptual pair in the discipline?
- ❖ The relationship between nature and culture has been a common and contested theme in the discipline due to the argument of *whether the nature-culture dichotomy is a given universal or a constructed reality relative to one’s own culture.*

Dichotomy: a division or contrast between two things that are or are represented as being opposed or entirely different.



# How does the anthropologists perceive a difference between nature and culture?

- ❖ French anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss was firm in the argument of a divide, writing that there existed “only two true models of concrete diversity: one on the plane of nature, namely that of the diversity of species, and the other on the cultural plane provided by the diversity of functions.” (1962, p. 124)
- ❖ According to Levi-Strauss, “the symmetry postulated between nature and culture involves the assimilation of natural species on the cultural plane.” (1962, p. 124-125)
- ❖ So who is the ‘natural species’ he refers to? It seems that his writing, coming from *The Savage Mind*, reflects the discipline’s expansion of the nature—culture debate in the 1960s and 1970s to include the idea that **women could be symbolized as nature and men as culture.**



- ❖ Describing women as biological individuals was not enough for Levi-Strauss, as he argued they were actually “natural products naturally procreated by other biological individuals.” (1962, p. 123)
- ❖ Continuing his comparison as women to objects, Levi-Strauss differentiated them from ‘goods and services,’ which he described as “manufactured objects (or operations performed by means of techniques and manufactured objects), that is, social products culturally manufactured by technical agents. (1962, p. 123)
- ❖ Levi-Strauss writes of culture’s dominance over nature when he states that nature considers women as homogeneous but culture “asserts them all to be subject to the same type of beliefs and practices since in the eyes of culture, they have the common feature that man has the power to control and increase them.” (1962, p. 125)

# The universal argument

- ❖ In her essay, *Is female to male as nature is to culture?* Sherry Ortner (1972) makes two clear arguments in regards to the relationship between nature and culture. First, she sees **culture as an entity that has the ability to act upon and transform nature**. Second, **she equates the relationship of nature and culture to “the universal devaluation of women.”** (1972, p. 7)
- ❖ Throughout her essay Ortner repeatedly professes bold universals in discussing the dichotomy, which one might argue are generalizations, such as her statement that “in every known culture, woman is considered in some degree inferior to man.” (1972, p. 7)

- ❖ Echoing a Levi-Straussian theory of structuralism, Ortner believes nature and culture are both categories of human thought as “there is no place out in the real world where one could find some actual boundary between the two states or realms of being.” (1972, p. 10)
- ❖ Ortner focuses on the universality of rituals as “an assertion in all human cultures of the specifically human ability to act upon and regulate, rather than passively move with and be moved by, the givens of natural existence.” (1972, p. 10-11)



# What makes culture distinct?

- ❖ She defines culture specifically as this process of **transcendence**, “by means of systems of thought and technology, of the natural givens of existence. At some level every culture incorporates this notion in one form or another, if only through the performance of ritual as an assertion of the human ability to manipulate those givens.” (1972, p. 24)  
a state of being that has overcome the limitations of physical existence and by some definitions has also become independent of it
- ❖ As a result, culture is not only clearly distinct from nature in Ortner’s view but its ability to transform nature actually makes it superior.



- ❖ Culture dominates over nature, according to Ortner, because it is identified nearly everywhere with men, who occupying the higher positions to perform the tasks and rituals to create and sustain culture.
- ❖ Ortner argues that “the universal devaluation of women could be explained by postulating that woman is seen as ‘closer to nature’ than men, men being seen as more unequivocally occupying the high ground of ‘culture.’” (1972, p. 12) In examining women in nearly every society, as Ortner asserts, they are generally viewed as more symbolic of nature than men.

- ❖ Several reasons are given, such as a woman's direct bodily involvement with reproduction or with her assigned, socialized role that leaves her within the confines of the subordinate domestic household.
- ❖ Ortner clarifies that in reality, when examining a woman in a biological sense, she is not closer to nature than man, since both are mortal beings with consciousness. But when examining a woman's less powerful, if even non-existent role in culture's rituals as well as her focus on child-rearing tasks, she appears that way.
- ❖ Women, according to Ortner, are the primary agents of socialization for children, transforming them from "a mere organism to a cultured human, teaching it manners and the proper ways to behave in order to be a bonafide member of the culture." (1972, p. 19)
- ❖ On that function alone, Ortner says women should be seen as a symbol of culture just as equally as men.

- ❖ Ortner writes that a “woman’s dominant psychic modes of relating would incline her to enter into relationships with the world that culture might see as being more ‘like nature,’ <sup>existing or operating within; inherent.</sup> immanent and embedded in things as given, rather than, like culture, transcending and transforming things through the superimposition of abstract categories and transpersonal values.” (1972, p. 22)
- ❖ Ortner finally makes her own views on how women should be viewed in the nature—culture divide. She writes that both man and woman (due to her role of raising and socialising children in her culture) can be seen as active members of culture. Only then will women easily be seen as aligned with culture, in culture’s ongoing dialectic with nature. (1972, p. 28)



# Critiques

- ❖ Marilyn Strathern (1977:64) had noted “that nature and culture have penetrated so deeply into cultural analysis that we regard their opposition as inevitable (‘natural’). (1980, p. 178)
- ❖ In her essay *No nature, no culture: the Hagen case*, Mary Strathern writes that nature and culture are two concepts that are highly relative, whose meaning come from a specific ideology.



- ❖ Strathern states that “**there is no such thing as nature or culture...** no single meaning can in fact be given to nature or culture in western thought; there is no consistent dichotomy, only a matrix of contrasts (cf. Hastrup 1978:63).” (1980, p. 177)
- ❖ She continues by questioning how large the total assembly of all meanings prescribed to the nature—culture divide might be, stating that we “must be able to identify [the meanings] in other cultures to speak with confidence of their having such notions.” (1980, p. 177)

# References

- ❖ Ortner, S.B. (1972) Is Female to Male as Nature Is To Culture? *Feminist Studies*. [Online] Proquest. p. 5-31.
- Maccormack, C. & Strathern, M. (1980) *Nature, Culture and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- ❖ Levi-Strauss, C. (1962) *The Savage Mind*. Paris: Librarie Plon