

Reading and Doing Ethnography

Social Anthropology 314

2.1 Culture and culturalism

Culture

*Their culture is the **body of ideas and patterns of behaviour** which come from them, all of which is related to a body of **social structures** which supports them. To this must be added also **technology**, which is essential to the survival of any community, as well as a measure of **feeling**, which gives culture nuances from one people to another.*

— MPLA, "Cultural racism," 140

Culture is a horizon of
significance

Anything can be significant

- >> Art and poetry
- >> The structure of our homes
- >> Rules for making eye contact
- >> Fertility techniques
- >> Spiritual projects
- >> Denim jeans
- >> Forms of power and hierarchy
- >> The stars

Significance isn't inherent;
it comes from acts of recognition.

Culture isn't a thing, it's an
interpretation of things.

It used to get called a
"web of meaning."

#MeetSouthAfrica

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izrRbGl67PQ>

Some notes on culture

- >> South African English is incomprehensible.
- >> Culture is fashion, like hats.
- >> Culture is business.
- >> "South Africans are friendly."
- >> Culture is unique and inspiring.
- >> Culture is great men like Mandela.

Michael Fischer

"Culture and cultural analysis as
experimental systems"

*Culture [is] contested meanings
created, negotiated and performed in
locally polyvocal contexts.*

— Fischer (28)

*It is where meaning is woven and renewed,
often through gaps and silences, and forces
beyond the conscious control of individuals,
and yet serves as the place where individual
and institutional social responsibility and
ethical struggle take place.*

— Fischer (39)

Culture is that relational, complex whole, whose parts cannot be changed without affecting other parts, mediated through powerful and power-laden symbolic forms, whose multiplicities and performatively negotiated character is transformed by alternative positions, organizational forms, and leveraging of symbolic systems, as well as by emergent new technosciences, media, and biotechnical relations.

— Fischer (1)

More straightforward
approaches

Malinowski's data categories

1. The "organisation of the tribe, and the anatomy of its culture"
2. The "imponderabilia of actual life"
3. The "documents of native mentality"

Scales of culture

- >> National culture
- >> Institutional/organizational culture
- >> Subculture (which opposes and is surrounded by a larger culture)
- >> Cultures of class, gender, race (...)
- >> Global culture
- >> Digital culture (or TV, newspaper, etc)

Culture has politics.

Even the *idea* of culture has politics.

To avoid uprisings, the ideal conditions for enslavement had to be created, inbuing the slave with acceptance of his situation... Firearms and the whip could not serve this purpose. There was only one way to proceed: to destroy the colonial's culture and make him either submit or be alienated by the 'superior culture' of his oppressor.

— MPLA, "Cultural racism" (139)

Attacking culture has been the most tragic of colonialism's maneuvers to enslave peoples, since it afflicts men, their institutions, their mode of behaviour and their way of thinking. And its consequences are even more serious in that while it is 'profitable' to the oppressor in the long run, it is also only in the long run that its effects can be rooted out.

— MPLA (139)

No man is an island, and no man has yet been found who is content to create in an ivory tower without thought of his creation ever being brought to the notice of another human being.

— ANC ("Culture in Chains"), 143

*Cultural deprivation cripples the spirit.
Nobody — literally nobody — knows life in
South Africa well enough to describe it
adequately, let alone to tell the truth about it,
the whole truth and nothing but the truth, as
is expected from the artistic as well as the legal
witness.*

— ANC, 145

Culturalism

Risks of cultural analysis

- >> Seeing culture as fixed, ahistorical or primordial.
- >> Mapping cultures as isolated islands.
- >> Making culture into the single explanation of everything.
- >> Assuming that every individual just has one culture.
- >> Ignoring power and politics.
- >> Forgetting the active role of the interpreter.