

2.1 What is Culture?

Queer Customs (Kluckhohn)

Why Do People Differ?

- Destined by God or fate to different habits? Because of climate differences? Because of biological differences?
- “because they were brought up that way.”

Key Distinction

- Society: group of people who interact more with each other than with others.
- Culture: Distinctive ways of life of such a group of people.

Kluckhohn on Culture

- Every human being is imbued with culture (“to be human is to be cultured”).
- “The total life way of a people, the social legacy the individual acquires from his group.”
- A way of thinking, feeling, and believing acquired by the individual as a member of a group.
- Culture “constitutes a kind of blueprint for all of life’s activities.”

Kottak: Culture Is . . .

- Traditions and customs that are transmitted through learning and that influence behaviors and beliefs.
- Culture is treated as an environment that influences and is influenced by human action.
- Culture is not static. It is always changing.

Culture is Shared

- Shared beliefs, values, memories, and expectations link people who grow up in the same culture.

Culture Is Symbolic

- **Symbol:** Something verbal or non-verbal, within a particular language or culture, that comes to stand for something else.
- Cultural learning depends on symbols (signs that have no necessary or natural connection to the things they stand for or signify).

Culture is Learned

- **Enculturation:** The social process by which culture is learned and transmitted (within generations, across generations, or across societies).
- **Margaret Mead & Gregory Bateson**
- Studied how kids are raised in other societies. Early theoretical insights on enculturation through cross-cultural comparison.

Enculturation

- The social process by which culture is learned and transmitted (within generations, across generations, or across societies). Direct Transmission and Transmission through Observation

Gender and Enculturation

- How do boys and girls learn what constitutes proper behavior for their respective genders?
- How is gendered behavior instilled through play?

Culture is Integrated

- Cultures are integrated, patterned systems.
- If one part of the system changes, other parts change as well.

Mechanisms of Culture Change

Agency and Practice: Incremental change over time due to the cumulative actions in of individuals within a society.

Culture and the Individual

- Culture regulates our lives – constant pressure to follow certain behaviors.
- Cultural rules are subject to interpretation, manipulation, and contestation.
- Culture influences, **but does not** determine, the behaviors of individuals; most people do not blindly follow cultural norms and rules.
- Culture is used actively and creatively by individuals. Therefore, culture is not static but is constantly changing.

Key Concept: Agency: “the actions that individuals take, both alone and in groups, in forming and transforming cultural identities.” (Kottak) Or, “The capacity of human beings to affect their own life chances and those of others and to play a role in the formation of the social realities in which they participate.”

Practice Theory

- Cultural rules are subject to interpretation, manipulation, and contestation.
- Individuals within every society have different motives and intentions, degrees of power and influence (agency).

Diffusion and Acculturation: Concepts to explain cultural exchanges between societies.

From Universals to Particularities

- Universals: some traits are common to all humans (language, use of symbols, religious beliefs, concept of family).
- Generalities: some traits are widespread but not universal (nuclear family, monotheism).
- Particularities: some traits are confined to a single place, culture, or society.

Diffusion

- Borrowing between cultures either directly or through intermediaries.

Acculturation

- The exchange of cultural features (e.g., language, clothing) that results when groups come into continuous firsthand contact; the original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered, but the groups remain distinct.

Reconfigurations

- Cultures contain complex arrays of beliefs, symbols, practices, traditions, etc.
- Any cultural trait that is borrowed will be adapted and modified to fit the new context.
- What looks similar from the outside can have very different meanings and associations.