

2. SYMBOL AND CULTURE (2/09)

Today just lecture. You won't have finished first reading until next time. Also, since there are no prereqs for this course, I need to cover some basic anthropological ideas, as background to any course. Most basic of all, **culture**. Fundamental to anthropology.

We used to have more trouble introducing the concept, because of other meaning of culture, high culture, esp. art & music

But today the anthro meaning is pervasive. Used to explain everything:

-What was the problem with shuttle disaster? Culture at NASA What problem with rapes at air force academy—culture there. What cause of sex abuse by priests; culture among priests & bishops. You hear of corporate culture, academic culture, everything culture.

But it wasn't always so. Culture concept arose, mostly in 19th century, as way to talk about systematic nature of human thought and action.

Previously, many explanations of human actions and thought in terms of **environmental determinism**. Why do people in Alps believe in witches?---thin mountain air. Why are people in Latin America or Indonesia inferior to us Europeans? Hot, unchanging climate. Climate doesn't challenge them like our temperate climate

Montesquieu said Northerners were brave, vigorous, insensitive to pain, weakly sexed, intelligent, and drunkards.

Another Frenchman of the Enlightenment said Northerners faithful, loyal to government, cruel, undersexed. Southerners malicious, crafty, wise, expert in science but bad in government. Another said northern languages have lots of consonants, because people afraid to open mouths and let in cold air.

Sounds silly now, but was very common, still pops up.

At other extreme, many things explained in terms of some basic traits common to all humans, so-called human nature, or else by traits thought to vary biologically from one population to another. Something innate. With development of racial and biological thinking was thought to be in our blood or genes.

So caught between external nature, environment, or internal nature, heredity

There was a vague sense that there was something in the middle, neither biologically nor environmentally determined, called custom / tradition / lifeway / mentality / habit / usos y costumbres. But vague.

Then, 19th century, word culture adopted. Borrowed from art/music, expanded to encompass everything. Most often associated with early British anthro, Edward Tylor. Was a complex whole that humans carried with them and passed on non-biologically.

Learned, not biologically programmed.

Varies independently of biology. People who look very different but share same culture, and vice-versa.

Carried on by a chain of learning, though doesn't mean that consciously taught.

Shared: has to be group, small or large.

But carried on by individuals, in their heads. Wholly or partly mental.

Includes ideas, values, assumptions, procedures, practices.

This does not mean that the environment and our biological natures are thus irrelevant. They may affect culture in all sorts of ways. Been suggested that all herding peoples, because of way must care for, move, guard animals, value independent personalities, aren't big believers in witchcraft but often warlike, etc.

Similarly, though people in two different societies may make facial expressions differently, there are pan-human constants in expressions, so how one smiles probably combination of "human nature" and cultural peculiarities.

Still many debates on relative importance of different factors. But neither the environment nor biology works by itself, with nothing in between. Cultures are systems with integrity of own, those other factors are inputs into system.

One way to talk about culture is by analogy. **Culture is like a game.**

A game has a set of rules, procedures, assumptions: what is the prize? what are the moves? how do you win?

But also many procedures etc. that not in rule book. Even things that against rules.

-Pitcher learns how to dust off aggressive batters, may also learn to throw spitball.

-Boxer learns how to go into clinch with opponent to get breather

Even rules saying how bad different kinds of cheating are: Dusting off batters is resented but expected. Many famous pitchers, e.g. Roger Clemens, known to do. But spitballs really bad.

Even procedures for dealing with other people's cheating: soccer, when fouled, writhe on ground, great show of pain.

Culture like that, many rules, only some moralistic. We have rules about violence: It's wrong, but you can't be a man if not ready to fight, or can't be *real* man until killed someone. Understandings about when violence Ok or expected, procedures for acting tough but not actually having to fight.

Another thing about games is that they create whole world, which seems natural, inevitable. But actually artificial, arbitrary. Historical accidents. Only realize when e.g. explain punting as metaphor in life to foreign colleague, or infield fly rule.

Another analogy: **Culture is like grammar.**

Modern linguistics shows that everyone has grammar. Not something that consciously taught. Learn by growing up in language community, learning to speak.

Most people can't explain difference between voiced and unvoiced consonants, but we use the distinction all the time, both in speaking and in listening.
We all produce a puff of air with an initial P, but not in Spanish.
So we learn very complex set of rules without knowing we know them.
So culture may be seen as a kind of grammar, even more complex, for action and thought
From this perspective, a chair is not culture, but rules for making chairs are. Ditto ideas about how to sit in them, when to sit, when to stand, what are good chairs, how much a leather chair should cost, etc. etc.
When the Japanese first encountered the West, they were appalled by chairs. Thought they were uncomfortable and realigned internal organs in bad way

Notice that grammar does not determine what you say, just gives you rules for producing utterance that someone else can understand and respond to. If a couple parts in doorway:
Man can say: Goodnight, or I love you, or I hope your earache gets better.
Woman can respond: I love you too; Don't you think it's a little early to talk of love; I'm not attracted to men; Get lost, creep!
With a flag, we can't predict absolutely what one person will do, but if he burns it, we have good sense of how others will respond.
Also, culture like grammar in that can't just get someone to give you rules. You depend on them to help you find the rules, but it's not just a matter of telling you.

So culture is the total set of understandings---assumptions, recipes, values, procedures, ideas, etc. associated with a particular group of people. Very messy concept, we may have chance to see some of its inherent problems, but also very fruitful.

General assumption that cultures very complex, full of all sorts of stuff, packed full, and by no means consistent or all in agreement, but that there are areas of significant agreement.

Culture is ubiquitous

Everything we do is affected by cultural assumptions and understandings.
It affects how we hold our bodies, how close or far we keep from others, whether we can touch them or not.
We generally don't touch people we are not intimate with, but we have subtle rules about quick touches to e.g. say one is sorry for small fault.
One way we discover how much this is controlled by culture is thru encountering difference. What one culture considers too far away, stand-offish, rude, cold, another thinks much too close, presumptuous. How much eye contact, how much breath on each other.

Other rules of interaction, what can talk about. One Korean immigrant noticed that Americans talked about the most amazingly intimate things with strangers on airplanes but took great offense if you asked them about how much money they earned.

Behavior in public bathrooms. One student in 1970s, Vince Stanton, wrote great paper on male bathroom behavior at MIT. Rules: don't look at others. At urinals, always leave empty one in between unless no choice. May talk with friends but look away. Rules concerned with modesty but also fears of homosexuality or being mistaken for gay. Movie, "Star Man" alien doesn't know rules, gets punched out.

Every possible area of life is at least partly governed by cultural understandings. Ubiquitous.

Biological and Cultural Adaptation.

We are of course still animals, still biological creatures.

There are many ways we are biologically adapted to our environments.

Some are merely matters of acclimatization: When I return to tropics, takes about a week to adjust. Known precisely how many days takes normal lungs to adjust to high altitudes.

Some are lifelong and much more permanent than mere acclimatization. Dory fishermen had hands in Atlantic all day, much more inured to cold. But not permanent adaptation that could pass on biologically to children. Fisherman's hands like everyone else's.

But some adaptation permanently changes genetic composition of population. Most famous example sickle-cell disease. Incidence much higher in tropical Africa and around Mediterranean---hundreds of years of selective pressure, because people with one gene for sickle cell condition are much more resistant to malaria.

Adaptation most noticeable in extreme environments. Adaptations to cold of e.g. Inuit (Eskimo) and Australian aborigines probably include genetic component. Ditto ability of Inuit to survive on high-fat diets.

Undoubtedly less obvious selection in less extreme environments.

But even in most extreme environments, cultural adaptation is crucial.

Inuit diet: eat the seaweed in seal's stomachs to get missing vitamins. Inuit and cold: clothing marvelously adapted, crucial that it lets heat out when hot as well as holds in when cold. Sweating in arctic can be fatal.

Australian aborigines and cold, traditionally no clothes. But fires of course and dogs. Old Rock Group, 3 Dog Night, was supposedly rating of how cold night was, one that took 3 dogs was really cold.

So we are completely dependent on culture.

Culture in human evolution

Likely to have been the case from very early in human evolution

First looked for tool use as key aspect of culture

Some non-human examples

Sea otters lie on backs, hit clams on rocks.

But rare.

Famous chimp named Sultan, learned to put two sticks together to reach banana, though he had lots of help.

Lab chimps also had some shared culture. Among other things, taught each other how to spit.

But then since 50s, many studies of primates in wild.

Studies of rhesus macaques on islands near Japan, fed every day

One young monkey learned to wash potatoes to get sand off. Others eventually learned on same island but not other islands. Later similar technique, throw grain on water, grit sinks, scoop up grain

Then famous studies of chimps in wild.

Found them making sticks to poke in holes to get termites. Also breaking off leaves to collect termites and ants

Undoubtedly our half-human ancestors were at least semi-cultural.

Symbolism and humanity

Along with tool use, theorists concerned with symbols as basis of culture.

Animals have communication systems, but it was thought that they were:

1. much much simpler than ours
2. completely controlled by biology (All robins call the same way), which also means can't be changed or modified
3. tied to immediate situation---called indexical. Can't signal about something far away or in past.
4. often modeled on what signal about, called iconic. Baboons show who is the boss by one briefly mounting other

All of these ideas have been modified though not overturned completely.

Many animal signaling systems amazingly complex.

When humans teach them, chimps, gorillas and others can learn language almost as well as humans, though no reason to think that do so on own.

We know that e.g. wolves signal about things that far away and out of sight

But human language still huge change.

Tremendous number of units (sounds, words, etc.), and relationship between sound and thing it represents is not fixed, not by biology, not by anything else.

So language and ability to symbolize crucial to complete humanity.

Do not at this point want to get into a lot of definitions, technical language.

Symbols are variously defined as things that seen as typifying or representing something or standing for it. Various ways of expressing it, but it is a relationship between two things in which one stands for or represents or calls to mind other.

Famous philosopher Whitehead said “The human mind is functioning symbolically when some components of its experience elicits consciousness, beliefs, emotions and usages respecting other components of its experience.”

Definition I like very much, from Clifford Geertz, says a symbols is a “vehicle for conception.” Still idea in Geertz’s definition of mental linkage: Geertz’s conception---ideas, emotions, values, etc.---are carried by the vehicle, the image or word or sound or whatever. One evokes the other.

But in this broad sense, symbolism is a huge topic, much huger than we can tackle in this subject in one semester.

Would include everything in human language, which one monstrous elaboration of symbolism.

This is not a class in linguistics.

We are going to be looking at symbols of a more restricted sort.

Set apart from mere words.

First by number of levels or dimensions. The relationship between sound or written word *goat* and idea of a goat is first-order symbolic. But if we say our friend Fred is a goat, more symbolic complexity, more levels. If we find culture where the deity is a goat, ditto.

Second differentiate the symbols we interested in by importance and emotion that symbol arouses. As famous linguist, Edward Sapir, put it, when “its actual significance is all out of proportion to the apparent triviality of its mere form.” With visual symbols, mere form of cross or swastika trivial, but meanings and emotion far from it.

So we are going to look at symbols where more complexity and layers and dimensions than just word and referent, and symbols that seem full of meaning and emotion and value. Seems very characteristic of humans that make this sort of symbolism as well as garden variety reference to one thing by another.

But these are not absolute distinctions by any means: they don’t offer us a clear dividing line, just point us in certain directions.