

The Concept of Culture

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The term "culture" has entered the common vocabulary, as when we speak of the culture of a corporation or of the culture of members of dissimilar ethnic groups. In this chapter, Carol and Melvin Ember provide a succinct introduction to anthropology's most fundamental concept.

We all consider ourselves to be unique individuals with a set of personal opinions, preferences, habits, and quirks. Indeed, all of us *are* unique individuals, and yet most of us share the feeling that it is wrong to eat dogs, the belief that bacteria or viruses cause illness, the habit of sleeping on a bed. There are many such feelings, beliefs, and habits that we share with most of the people who live in our society. We hardly ever think about the ideas and customs we share, but they constitute what anthropologists refer to as North American "culture."

We tend not to think about our culture because it is so much a part of us that we take it for granted. If and when we become aware that other peoples have different feelings from ours, different beliefs, and different habits, we begin to think of how we share certain ideas and customs. We would never even think of the possibility of eating dog meat if we were not aware that people in some other societies commonly do so. We would not realize that our belief in germs was cultural if we were not aware that people in some societies think that illness is caused by witchcraft or evil spirits. We could not become aware that it is our custom to sleep on beds if we were not aware that people in many societies sleep on the floor or ground. It is only when we compare ourselves with people in other societies that we become aware of cultural differences and similarities. This is, in fact, the way that anthropology as a profession began; when Europeans began to explore and move to faraway places, they were forced to confront the sometimes striking facts of cultural variation.

Attitudes That Hinder the Study of Cultures

Many of the Europeans who first came to those faraway places were revolted or shocked by customs they observed. Such reactions are not surprising. People commonly feel that their own customary behaviors and attitudes are the correct ones, that people who do not share those patterns are immoral

or inferior. But our own customs and ideas may appear bizarre or barbaric to an observer from another society. Hindus in India, for example, would consider our custom of eating beef both primitive and disgusting. In their culture, the cow is a sacred animal and may not be slaughtered for food. Even our most ordinary customs—the daily rituals we take for granted—might seem thoroughly absurd when viewed from the perspective of a foreign culture. A visitor to our society might justifiably take notes on certain strange behaviors that seem quite ordinary to us, as the following extract shows:

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about the care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures. In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a holy-mouth man once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these objects in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy-mouth man opens the client's mouth and, using the above mentioned tools, enlarges any holes which decay may have created in teeth. Magical materials are put into these holes. If there are no naturally occurring holes in the teeth, large sections of one or more teeth are gouged out so that the supernatural substance can be applied. In the client's view, the purpose of these ministrations is to arrest decay and to draw friends. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy-mouth man year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay.¹

We are likely to protest that to understand the behaviors of a particular society—in this case our own—the observer must try to find out more about why the people in that society say they do things. For example, the observer might find out that periodic visits to the “holy-mouth man” are for medical, not magical, purposes. Indeed, the observer, after some questioning, might discover that the “mouth-rite” has no sacred or religious connotations whatsoever. The anthropological attitude that a society's customs and ideas should be described objectively and understood in the context of that society's problems and opportunities is called **cultural relativism**. Because this attitude fosters empathy and understanding, it is humanistic; because it requires impartial observation and involves an attempt to test possible explanations of customs, the attitude of cultural relativism is also scientific.

In general, cultural relativism is impeded by two different but commonly held attitudes. The first is the tendency toward negative evaluation, which usually results from ethnocentrism; the second is the tendency toward positive evaluation, which often takes the form of a naive yearning for the simple life of the “noble savage.”

Ethnocentrism

The person whose vision is limited strictly to his or her own needs and desires is generally ineffective in dealing with other people. We call such an individual egocentric, and we would be sorry to have such a person for a psychiatrist. The person who judges other cultures solely in terms of his or her own culture is **ethnocentric**. (This attitude is called **ethnocentrism**.) Not only are such people ill equipped to do anthropological work, but they may be unable to recognize and deal with social problems in their own society.

For example, an ethnocentric North American would view as barbaric the ceremonies that initiate adolescent boys into manhood in many societies. These ceremonies often involve hazing, difficult tests of courage and endurance, and painful circumcision. The ethnocentric North American would be unable to understand why anyone would willingly endure such hardships merely to be publicly accepted as an adult. However, the same type of ethnocentric thinking would make it difficult for such a person to question the North American custom of confining young children to little cages called cribs and playpens,

a practice that observers from another society might consider cruel. Ethnocentrism, then, hinders our understanding of the customs of other people and, at the same time, keeps us from understanding our own customs. If we think that everything we do is best, we are not likely to ask why we do what we do or why "they" do what "they" do.

The "Noble Savage"

Whenever we are weary of the complexities of civilization, we may long for a way of life that is "closer to nature" or "simpler" than our own. For instance, a young North American whose parent is holding two or three jobs just to provide his or her family with bare necessities might briefly be attracted to the life-style of the !Kung of the Kalahari Desert. The !Kung share their food and therefore are often free to engage in leisure activities during the greater part of the day. They obtain all their food by hunting animals and gathering wild plants. Since they have no facilities for refrigeration, sharing a freshly killed animal is clearly more sensible than hoarding rotten meat. Moreover, as it turns out, the sharing provides a kind of social-security system for the !Kung. If a hunter is unable to catch an animal on a certain day, he can obtain food for himself and his family from someone else in his band. Conversely, at some later date the game he catches will provide food for the family of some other unsuccessful hunter. This system of sharing also ensures that persons too young or too old to help with the collecting of food will still be fed.

However, the food-sharing system of the !Kung is a solution to the problems posed by their special environment and is not necessarily a practical solution to problems in our own society. Moreover, other aspects of !Kung life would not appeal to many North Americans. For example, when the nomadic !Kung decide to move their camps, the women must carry all the family possessions, substantial amounts of food and water, and all young children below age four or five. This is a sizable burden to carry for any distance. And since the !Kung travel about 1500 miles in a single year,² it is unlikely that most North American women would find the !Kung way of life enviable in all respects.

The point is not that we should avoid comparing our culture with others, but that we should not romanticize other cultures. Most of the customs of other societies probably are, or were, appropriate to their environments, just as most of our customs probably are, or were, appropriate to our own environment. Cultural relativism asks that all customs of a society be viewed objectively, not ethnocentrically or romantically.

Does cultural relativism mean that the actions of another society, or of our own, should not be judged? Does our insistence on objectivity mean that anthropologists should not make moral judgments about the cultural phenomena they observe and try to explain? Not really. Anthropologists do make judgments, and some try to change behavior they think is harmful. But judgments need not and should not preclude objectivity. Our goal in research is to strive for accurate description and explanation in spite of any judgments we might have. In the chapter on explanation and evidence, we discuss some procedures that scientists, including anthropologists, employ to minimize the possibility that their own expectations will affect their observations and tests of explanations.

We have tried so far in this chapter to convey intuitively what culture is, and we have discussed attitudes that hinder or bias the study of cultures. Now let us turn to what seem to be the defining features of culture for most anthropologists.

Defining Features of Culture

In everyday usage, the word *culture* refers to a desirable quality we can acquire by attending a sufficient number of plays and concerts and trudging through several miles of art galleries. The anthropologist, however, has a different definition, as Ralph Linton explains:

[*Culture*] refers to the total way of life of any society, not simply to those parts of this way which the society regards as higher or more desirable. Thus culture, when applied to our own way of life, has nothing to do with playing the piano or reading Browning. For the social scientist such activities are simply elements within the totality of our culture. This totality also includes such mundane activities as washing dishes or driving an automobile, and for the purposes of cultural studies these stand quite on a par with "the finer things of life." It follows that for the social scientist there are no uncultured societies or even individuals. Every society has a culture, no matter how simple this culture may be, and every human being is cultured, in the sense of participating in some culture or other.³

Culture, then, refers to innumerable aspects of life. Some anthropologists think of culture as the rules or ideas behind behavior.⁴ Most anthropologists think of culture as including the learned behaviors as well as the beliefs, attitudes, values, and ideals that are characteristic of a particular society or population.

Culture Is Commonly Shared

If only one person thinks or does a certain thing, that thought or action represents a personal habit, not a pattern of culture. For a thought or action to be considered cultural, it must be commonly shared by some population or group of individuals. Even if some behavior is not commonly practiced, it is cultural if most people think it is appropriate. The idea that marriage should involve only one man and only one woman is cultural in our society. Most North Americans share this idea and act accordingly when they marry. The role of president or prime minister is not widely shared—after all, there is only one such person at a time—but the role is cultural because most inhabitants of a country with such a position agree that it should exist, and its occupant is generally expected to exhibit certain behaviors. We usually share many values, beliefs, and behaviors with our families and friends (although anthropologists are not particularly concerned with this type of cultural group). We commonly share cultural characteristics with segments of our population whose ethnic or regional origins, religious affiliations, and occupations are the same as or similar to our own. We have certain practices, beliefs, and feelings in common with most North Americans. And we share certain characteristics with people beyond our society who have similar interests (such as rules for international sporting events) or similar roots (as do the various English-speaking nations).

When we talk about the commonly shared customs of a society, which constitute the central concern of cultural anthropology, we are referring to a *culture*. When we talk about the commonly shared customs of a group within a society, which are a central concern of sociology, we are referring to a *subculture*. And when we study the commonly shared customs of some group that includes different societies, we are talking about a phenomenon for which we do not have a single word (only compound phrases including the word *culture*). So, for example, we refer to *Western culture* (the cultural characteristics of societies in or derived from western Europe) and the *culture of poverty* (the presumed cultural characteristics of poor people the world over).

We must remember that even when anthropologists refer to something as cultural, there is always individual variation, which means that not everyone in a society shares a particular cultural characteristic of the society. For example, it is cultural in our society for adults to live apart from parents. But this does not mean that all adults in our society do so, nor that all adults wish to do so. The custom of living apart from parents is considered cultural because most adults practice that custom. As Edward Sapir noted fifty years ago, in every society studied by anthropologists—in the simplest as well as the most complex—individuals do not all think and act the same.⁵ As we discuss below, individual variation is the source of new culture.⁶

Culture Is Learned

Not all things shared generally by a population are cultural. The typical hair color of a population is not cultural. Nor is eating. For something to be considered cultural, it must be learned as well as shared. A typical hair color (unless dyed) is not cultural because it is genetically determined. Humans eat because they must, but what and when and how they eat is learned and varies from culture to culture. North Americans do not think dogs are edible, and indeed the idea of eating dogs horrifies us. But in China, as in some other societies, dog meat is considered delicious. In our society, many people consider a baked ham to be a holiday dish. However, in several societies of the Middle East, including those of Egypt and Israel, eating the meat of a pig is forbidden by sacred writings.

To some extent, all animals exhibit learned behaviors, some of which may be shared by most individuals in a population and may therefore be considered cultural. However, different animal species vary in the degree to which their shared behaviors are learned or are instinctive. The sociable ants, for instance, despite all their patterned social behavior, do not appear to have much, if any, culture. They divide their labor, construct their nests, form their raiding columns, and carry off their dead, all without having been taught to do so and without imitating the behavior of other ants. In contrast, much of the behavior of humans appears to be culturally patterned.

We are increasingly discovering that our closest biological relatives—the monkeys and the apes—learn a wide variety of behaviors. Some of their learned responses are as basic as those involved in maternal care; others are as frivolous as the taste for candy. Some of these learned behaviors when shared could be described as cultural. For example, as we discuss in more detail in the chapter on language and culture, vervet monkeys learn to use a certain call in the presence of circling eagles, who prey on the monkeys. The call seems to mean “Watch out—there are eagles around!” Its meaning seems to be shared or understood by the group, since they all respond similarly when one individual sounds the call.

The proportion of an animal's life span occupied by childhood seems to reflect the degree to which the animal depends upon learned behavior for survival. Monkeys and apes have relatively long childhoods compared with other animals. Humans have by far the longest childhood of any animal, reflecting our great dependence on learned behavior. Although humans may acquire much learned behavior by trial and error and imitation, as do monkeys and apes, most human learned behavior is probably acquired with the aid of spoken, symbolic language.

Language. All people known to anthropologists, regardless of their kind of society, have had a complex system of spoken, symbolic communication, what we call *language*. Language is *symbolic* in that a word or phrase can represent what it stands for *whether or not that thing is present*.

This symbolic quality of language has tremendous implications for the transmission of culture. It means that a human parent can tell a child that a snake, for example, is dangerous and should be avoided. The parent can then describe the snake in great detail—its length, diameter, color, texture, shape, and means of locomotion. The parent can also predict the kinds of places where the child is likely to encounter snakes and explain how the child can avoid them. Should the child encounter a snake, then, he or she will probably recall the symbolic word for the animal, remember as well the related information, and so avoid danger. If symbolic language did not exist, the parent would have to wait until the child actually saw a snake and then, through example, show the child that such a creature is to be avoided. Without language we could not transmit or receive information symbolically, and thus would not be heir to so rich and varied a culture.

To sum up, we may say that something is cultural if it is a learned behavior, belief, attitude, value, or ideal generally shared by the members of a group. Traditionally, anthropologists have usually been concerned with the cultural characteristics of a **society**, by which they mean a group of people who occupy a particular territory and speak a common language not generally understood by neighboring peoples.⁷

Hence, when an anthropologist speaks about a culture, he or she is usually referring to that set of learned and shared beliefs, values, and behaviors generally characteristic of a particular society. But now that we have defined what is cultural, we must ask a further question: How does an anthropologist go about deciding which particular behaviors, values, and beliefs of individuals are cultural?

Describing a Culture

Individual Variation

Describing a particular culture might seem relatively uncomplicated at first: you simply observe what the people in that society do and then record their behavior. But consider the substantial difficulties you might encounter in doing this. How would you decide which people to observe? And what would you conclude if each of the first dozen people you observed or talked to behaved quite differently in the same situation? Admittedly, you would be unlikely to encounter such extreme divergence of behaviors. Yet there would tend to be significant individual variation in the actual behaviors observed, even when individuals were responding to the same generalized situation and conforming to cultural expectations.

To better understand how an anthropologist might make sense of diverse behaviors, let us examine this diversity as it exists at a professional football game in the United States.

When people attend a football game, various members of the crowd behave differently while "The Star-Spangled Banner" is being played. As they stand and listen, some people remove their hats; a child munches popcorn; a former soldier stands at attention; a teenager searches the crowd for a friend; and the two head coaches take a final opportunity to intone secret chants and spells designed to sap the strength of the opposing team. Yet despite these individual variations, most of the people at the game respond in a basically similar manner: nearly everyone stands silently, facing the flag. Moreover, if you go to a number of football games, you will observe that many aspects of the event are notably similar. Although the plays used will vary from game to game, the rules of the game are never different, and although the colors of the uniforms vary for each team, the players never appear on the field dressed in swimsuits.

Although the variations in individual reactions to a given stimulus are theoretically limitless, in fact they tend to fall within easily recognizable limits. The child listening to the anthem may continue to eat popcorn, but will probably not do a rain dance. Similarly, it is unlikely that the coaches will react to that same stimulus by running onto the field and embracing the singer. Variations in behavior, then, are confined within socially acceptable limits, and it is part of the anthropologist's goal to find out what these limits are. He or she may note, for example, that some limitations on behavior have a practical purpose; a spectator who disrupts the game by wandering onto the field would be required to leave. Other limitations are purely traditional. In our society it is considered proper for a man to remove his overcoat if he becomes overheated, but others would undoubtedly frown upon his removing his trousers even if the weather was quite warm. Using such observations, the anthropologist attempts to discover the customs and the ranges of acceptable behavior that characterize the society under study.

By focusing on the range of customary behavior, discovered by observing or asking about individual variation, the anthropologist is able to describe cultural characteristics of a group. For example, an anthropologist interested in describing courtship and marriage in our society would initially encounter a variety of behaviors. The anthropologist may note that one couple prefers to go to a concert on a first date, whereas another couple chooses to go bowling; some couples have very long engagements and others never become engaged at all; some couples emphasize religious rituals in the marriage ceremony but others are married by civil authorities; and so on. Despite this variability, the anthropologist, after further observation and interviewing, might begin to detect certain regularities in courting practices. Although couples may do many different things on their first and subsequent dates, they nearly always

arrange the dates by themselves, they try to avoid their parents when on dates, they often manage to find themselves alone at the end of a date, they put their lips together frequently, and so forth. After a series of more and more closely spaced encounters, a man and woman may decide to declare themselves publicly as a couple, either by announcing that they are engaged or by revealing that they are living together or intend to do so. Finally, if the two of them decide to marry, they must in some way have their union recorded by the civil authorities.

In our society a person who wishes to marry cannot completely disregard the customary patterns of courtship. If a man saw a woman on the street and decided he wanted to marry her, he could conceivably choose a quicker and more direct form of action than the usual dating procedure. He could get on a horse, ride to the woman's home, snatch her up in his arms, and gallop away with her. In Sicily, until recently such a couple would have been considered legally married, even if the woman had never met the man before or had no intention of marrying. But in our society, any man who acted in such a fashion would be arrested and jailed for kidnapping and would probably have his sanity challenged. Such behavior would not be acceptable in our society. Although individual behaviors may vary, most social behavior falls within culturally acceptable limits.

Cultural Constraints

A primary limit on the range of the individual behavior variations is the culture itself. The noted French sociologist Emile Durkheim stressed that culture is something *outside* us exerting a strong coercive power on us. We do not always feel the constraints of our culture because we generally conform to the types of conduct and thought it requires. Yet when we do try to oppose cultural constraints, their strength becomes apparent.

Cultural constraints are of two basic types, *direct* and *indirect*. Naturally, the direct constraints are the more obvious. For example, if you wear clothing that is atypical of our culture, you will probably be subject to ridicule and a certain amount of social isolation. But if you choose to wear only a scanty loincloth, you will receive a stronger, more direct cultural constraint—arrest for indecent exposure.

Although indirect forms of cultural constraint are less obvious than direct ones, they are no less effective. Durkheim illustrated this point when he wrote, "I am not obliged to speak French with my fellow-countrymen, nor to use the legal currency, but I cannot possibly do otherwise. If I tried to escape this necessity, my attempt would fail miserably."⁸ In other words, if Durkheim had decided he would rather speak Serbo-Croatian than French, nobody would have tried to stop him. But no one would have understood him either. And although he would not have been put into prison for trying to buy groceries with Icelandic money, he would have had difficulty convincing the local merchants to sell him food.

In a series of experiments on conformity, Solomon Asch revealed how strong cultural constraints can be. Asch coached the majority of a group of college students to give deliberately incorrect answers to questions involving visual stimuli. A "critical subject," the one student in the room who was not so coached, had no idea that the other participants would purposely misinterpret the evidence presented to them. Asch found that in one-third of the experiments, the critical subject consistently allowed his own correct perceptions to be distorted by the obviously incorrect statements of the others. And in another 40 percent of the experiments, the critical subject yielded to the opinion of the group some of the time.⁹

The existence of social or cultural constraints, however, is not necessarily incompatible with individuality. Cultural constraints are usually exercised most forcefully around the limits of acceptable behavior. Thus, there is often a broad range of behavior within which individuals can exercise their uniqueness. And individuals do not always give in to the wishes of the majority. In the Asch experiments, many individuals (one-fourth of the critical subjects) consistently retained their independent opinions in the face of complete disagreement with the majority.

Ideal versus Actual Cultural Patterns

Every society has ideas about how people in particular situations ought to behave. In everyday terms we speak of these ideas as *ideals*; in anthropology we refer to them as *ideal cultural patterns*. These patterns tend to be reinforced through cultural constraints. However, we all know that people do not always behave according to the standards they express. If they did, there would be no need for direct or indirect constraints. Some of our ideal patterns differ from actual behavior because the ideal is outmoded—that is, based on the way a society used to be. (Consider the ideal of “free enterprise”—that industry should be totally free of governmental regulation.) Other ideal patterns may never have been actual patterns and may represent merely what people would like to see as correct behavior.

To illustrate the difference between ideal and actual culture, consider the idealized belief, long cherished in North America, that doctors are selfless, friendly people who choose medicine as their profession because they feel a call to serve humanity, and who have little interest in either money or prestige. Of course, many physicians do not measure up to this ideal. Nevertheless, the continued success of television programs that portray the average North American M.D. as a paragon of virtue indicates that the ideal of the noble physician is still very much a part of our culture.

How to Discover Cultural Patterns

There are two basic ways in which an anthropologist can discover cultural patterns. When dealing with customs that are overt or highly visible within a society—for example, our custom of sending children to school—the investigator can determine the existence of such practices and study them with the aid of a few knowledgeable persons. When dealing with a particular sphere of behavior that encompasses many individual variations, or when the people studied are unaware of their pattern of behavior, the anthropologist should collect information from a sample of individuals in order to establish what the cultural pattern is.

One example of a cultural pattern that most people in a society are not aware of is how far apart people stand when they are having a conversation. Yet there is considerable reason to believe that unconscious cultural rules govern such behavior. These rules become obvious when we interact with people who have different rules. We may experience considerable discomfort when another person stands too close (indicating too much intimacy) or too far (indicating unfriendliness). Edward Hall reports that Arabs customarily stand quite close to others—close enough, in fact, to be able to smell the other person. In interactions between Arabs and North Americans, then, the Arabs will move closer at the same time the North Americans back away.¹⁰

If we wanted to arrive at the cultural rule for conversational distance between casual acquaintances, let us say, we could study a sample of individuals from a society and determine the *modal response*, or *mode*. The mode is a statistical term that refers to the most frequently encountered response in a given series of responses. So, for the North American pattern of casual conversational distance, we would plot the actual distance for a number of observed pairs of people. Some pairs may be 2 feet apart, some 2.5, and some 4 feet apart. If the observer counts the number of times every particular distance is observed, these counts provide what we call a *frequency distribution*. The distance with the highest frequency is the modal pattern. Very often the frequency distribution takes the form of a *bell-shaped curve*. There the characteristic measured is plotted on the horizontal axis (in this case, the distance between conversational pairs) and the number of times each distance is observed (its frequency) is plotted on the vertical axis. If we were to plot how a sample of North American casual conversational pairs is distributed, we would probably get a bell-shaped curve that peaks at around 3 feet.¹¹ Is it any wonder, then, that we sometimes speak of keeping others “at arm’s length”?

Frequency distributions may be calculated on the basis of behaviors exhibited or responses given by all the members of a particular population. However, to save time, the anthropologist can rely on data obtained from a representative sample of persons, called a **random sample**. The members of this sample would be selected randomly from the society or community—that is, all individuals would have an equal chance of being chosen. If a sample is random, it will probably include examples of all frequent variations of behavior exhibited within the society or community in roughly the proportions in which they occur.

Since it is relatively easy to make generalizations about public aspects of a culture, such as how football players behave during a game, random sampling is often not necessary. But in dealing with aspects of culture that are private or unconscious, such as how far people stand from each other when talking, the investigator may have to observe or interview a random sample of people if he or she is to generalize correctly about cultural patterns. The reason is that most people are not aware of others' private behavior and thoughts, nor are they aware of unconscious cultural patterns.

Although we may be able to discover by interviews and observation that a behavior, thought, or feeling is widely shared within a society, how do we establish that something commonly shared is learned, so that we can call it cultural? Establishing that something is or is not learned may be difficult. Since children are not reared apart from adult caretakers, the behaviors they exhibit as part of their genetic inheritance are not clearly separated from those they learn from others around them. We suspect that particular behaviors and ideas are learned if they vary from society to society. And we suspect purely genetic determinism when particular behaviors or ideas are found in all societies. For example, as we will see in the chapter on language, children the world over seem to acquire language at about the same time, and the structure of their early utterances seems to be similar. These facts suggest that human children are born with an innate grammar. However, although early-childhood language seems similar the world over, the particular languages spoken by adults in different societies show considerable variability. This variability suggests that particular languages have to be learned. Similarly, if the courtship patterns of one society differ markedly from those of another, we can be fairly certain that those courtship patterns are learned and therefore cultural. Of course, anthropologists may sometimes err in their presumption that a particular behavior, thought, or feeling is cultural.

Some Assumptions About Culture

Culture Is Generally Adaptive

There are some cultural behaviors that, if carried to an extreme, would decrease the chances of survival of a particular society. For example, certain tribes in New Guinea view women as essentially unclean and dangerous individuals with whom physical contact should be as limited as possible. Suppose the men in one such tribe decided to avoid sex with women completely. Clearly, we would not expect such a society to survive for long. Although this example may appear extreme, it indicates that customs that diminish the survival chances of a society are not likely to persist. Either the people clinging to those customs will become extinct, taking the customs with them, or the customs will be replaced, thereby possibly helping the people to survive. By either process, *maladaptive* customs (those that diminish the chances of survival and reproduction) are likely to disappear. Those customs of a society that enhance survival and reproductive chances are adaptive and are likely to persist. Hence, we assume that if a society has survived to be described in the annals of anthropology (the "ethnographic record"), much if not most of its cultural repertoire is adaptive, or was at one time.

When we say that a custom is adaptive, however, we mean it is adaptive only with respect to a specific physical and social environment. What may be adaptive in one environment may not be adaptive in another. Therefore, when we ask why a society may have a particular custom, we are really asking if that custom makes sense as an adaptation to that society's particular environmental conditions.

Many cultural behaviors that would otherwise appear incomprehensible to us may be understandable as a society's response to its environment. For example, we might express surprise at certain societies' postpartum sex taboos that prohibit women from engaging in sexual intercourse until their two-year-olds are ready to be weaned. But in the tropical areas where such taboos exist, they may represent a people's means of adjusting to their physical environment. If there were no such taboo and a mother had another baby soon, she could no longer continue to nurse the older baby. Without its mother's milk, the older child might succumb to *kwashiorkor*, a severe protein-deficiency disease that is common in those tropical areas. The taboo, then, may serve to give infants a better chance to survive.¹² Thus, a long postpartum sex taboo may be an adaptive custom in certain tropical countries. In nontropical areas where *kwashiorkor* is not a problem, the same taboo may not be advantageous.

Just as culture represents an adjustment to the physical environment and to biological demands, it may also represent an adjustment to the social environment—that is, to neighboring peoples. For example, we do not know for sure why the Hopi Indians of what is now the state of Arizona began building their settlements on the tops of mesas. They must have had strong reasons for doing so, because there were many difficulties in building on such sites—the problem of hauling water long distances to the settlements, for instance. It is possible that the Hopi chose to locate their villages on mesa tops for defensive reasons when Athapaskan-speaking groups of Indians (the Navaho and Apache) moved into the Hopi area. In other words, the Hopi may have adjusted their living habits to their social environment.

A given custom represents one society's adaptation to its environment; it does not represent all possible adaptations. Different societies may choose different means of adjusting to the same situation. Thus, among some Native South American Indian societies where people's diets are low in protein, there is no long postpartum sex taboo, but induced abortion is reported to be a common practice. This practice may serve the same function of spacing out live births and thereby preventing too early weaning of children. The Hopi Indians, when suddenly confronted by the Navaho and Apache, clearly had to take some action to protect themselves. But instead of deciding to build their settlements on easily defended mesa tops, they could conceivably have developed a standing army.

Why a society develops a particular response to a problem, rather than some other possible response, always requires explanation. The choice may depend largely on whether a particular response is possible, given the existing cultural repertoire. For example, in the Hopi case a standing army would not have been a likely response to the problem of invaders because the Hopi economy probably could not have supported any large group of full-time specialists such as soldiers. As we shall see later in the chapter on food-getting, full-time specialists have to be fed by the regular production of more food than the people involved in food production generally need, and such a level of food production was not found among the Hopi. The strategy of moving their villages to easily defended mesa tops may have been the easiest option, given the Hopi economy.

Although we may assume that societies surviving long enough to be described have generally had adaptive culture traits, this does not mean that all culture traits are adaptive. Some traits—such as clothing styles and rules of etiquette—may be neutral in terms of adaptation. That is, they may have no direct relationship to biological needs or environmental conditions at the present time. Consider, for example, the buttons and incompletely closed seam at the end of a man's suit-jacket sleeve. This style does not appear to have any adaptive value now. In the past, when there was no central heating in buildings, the style may have been quite adaptive, enabling the wearer to close the sleeves tightly about the wrist. Neutral traits may once have had adaptive consequences, or they may never have had any.

We must remember that a society is not forced to adapt its culture to changing environmental circumstances. First, even in the face of changed circumstances, people may choose not to change their customs. For example, the Tapirapé of central Brazil did not alter their customs limiting the number of births, even though they suffered severe population losses after contact with Europeans and their dis-

eases. The Tapirapé population fell to fewer than 100 people from over 1000. Clearly they were on the way to extinction, yet they continued to value small families. Not only did they believe a woman should have no more than three children, but they took specific steps to achieve this limitation. They practiced infanticide if twins were born, if the third child was of the same sex as the first two children, and if the possible fathers broke certain taboos during pregnancy or in the child's infancy.¹³

Of course, it is also possible that a people will behave maladaptively even if they try to alter their behavior. After all, although people may alter their behavior according to what they perceive will be helpful to them, what they perceive to be helpful may not prove to be adaptive.

Culture Is Mostly Integrated

When we hear of an unfamiliar cultural pattern, our natural response is to try to imagine how that pattern would work in our own society. We might wonder, for example, what would happen if North American women adopted a long postpartum sex taboo—say, one year of abstinence after the birth of a baby. Such a question is purely whimsical, for the customs of one culture cannot easily be grafted onto another culture. A long postpartum sex taboo presupposes a lack of effective birth-control methods, but our society already has many such methods. Moreover, a long postpartum sex taboo could conceivably affect a number of important aspects of our culture, such as the idea that a happy marriage is a sexy one. The point is that with such a taboo imposed on it, our culture would no longer be the same. Too many aspects of the culture would have to be changed to accommodate the new behavior. This is so because our culture is mostly integrated.

In saying that a culture is mostly integrated, we mean that the elements or traits that make up that culture are not just a random assortment of customs but are mostly adjusted to or consistent with one another. One reason anthropologists believe that culture tends to be integrated is that culture is generally adaptive. If certain customs are more adaptive in particular settings, then those “bundles” of traits will generally be found associated under similar conditions. For example, the !Kung, as we have mentioned, subsist by hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants. They are also nomadic, have very small communities, have low population densities, share food within their bands, and have few material possessions. As we will see later, these cultural traits usually occur together when people depend on hunting and gathering for their food.

A culture may also tend to be integrated for psychological reasons. The traits of a culture—attitudes, values, ideals, and rules for behavior—are stored, after all, in the brains of individuals. Research in social psychology has suggested that people tend to modify beliefs or behaviors that are not cognitively or conceptually consistent with other information.¹⁴ We do not expect cultures to be completely integrated, just as we do not expect individuals to be completely consistent. But if a tendency toward cognitive consistency is generally found in humans, we might expect that at least some aspects of a culture would tend to be integrated for this reason.

How this pressure for consistency works is not hard to imagine. Children, for example, seem to be very good at remembering all the things their parents said. If they ask for something and the parents say no, they may say, “But you said I could yesterday.” This pressure for consistency may even make parents change their minds! Of course, not everything one wants to do is consistent with the rest of one's desires, but there surely is pressure from within and without to make it so.

Humans are also capable of rational decision making: they can often, if not usually, figure out that certain things are not easy to do because of other things they do. For example, if society has a long postpartum sex taboo, we might expect that most people in the society could figure out that it would be easier to observe the taboo if husband and wife did not sleep in the same bed. Or, if people drive on the left side of the road (as in England), it is easier and less dangerous to drive a car whose steering wheel

is on the right, because that placement allows you to judge more accurately how close you are to cars coming at you from the opposite direction.

Consistency or integration of culture traits may also be produced by less conscious psychological processes. As we discuss in the chapters on psychology and culture, religion and magic, and the arts, people may generalize (transfer) their experiences from one realm of life to another. For example, where children are taught it is wrong to express anger toward family and friends, it turns out that folktales parallel the child rearing: anger and aggression in the folktales tend to be directed only toward strangers, not toward family and friends. It seems as if the expression of anger is too frightening (or maladaptive) to be expressed close to home, even in folktales.

The tendency for a culture to be integrated, then, may be cognitively and emotionally, as well as adoptively, induced.

Culture Is Always Changing

When you examine the history of a society, it is obvious that its culture has changed over time. Some of the shared behaviors, beliefs, and values that were common at one time are modified or replaced at another time. In North American society, we only have to consider our attitudes toward sex and marriage to realize that a lot of our culture has changed recently. The impetus for change may come from within the society or from without. From within, the unconscious or conscious pressure for consistency will produce culture change if enough people adjust old behavior and thinking to new. Change can also occur if people try to invent better ways of doing things. Michael Chibnik suggests that people who confront a new problem conduct mental or small “experiments” to decide how to behave. These experiments may give rise to new cultural traits.¹⁵

A good deal of culture change may be stimulated by changes in the external environment. For example, if people move into an arid area, they will have to either give up farming or develop a system of irrigation. In the modern world, changes in the social environment are probably more frequent stimuli for culture change than changes in the physical environment. Many North Americans, for example, started to think seriously about conserving energy, and about using sources of energy other than oil, only after oil supplies from the Near East were curtailed in 1973 and 1974. Different societies have often affected each other, and a significant amount of culture change that has occurred in the last few hundred years has been due to the colonial expansion of Western societies into other areas of the world. Native Americans, for instance, were forced to alter their life-styles drastically when they were driven off their lands and confined to reservations. In the chapter on culture change, we discuss the major patterns of culture change in the modern world.

If we assume that cultures are more than random collections of behaviors, beliefs, and values—that they tend to be adaptive, integrated, and changing—than the similarities and differences between them should be understandable. That is, we can expect that similar circumstances within or outside the culture will give rise to, or favor, similar cultural responses. Although we may assume that cultural variation is understandable, the task of discovering which particular circumstances favor which particular patterns is a large and difficult one. In the chapters that follow, we hope to convey the main points of what anthropologists think they know about aspects of cultural variation, and what they do not know. We frequently describe particular cultures to illustrate aspects of cultural variation. When we do so, the reader should understand that the culture described is probably not the same now, since the sources of our material always refer to some previous time.¹⁶

Summary

1. Despite very strong individual differences, the members of a particular society closely agree in their responses to certain phenomena because they share common beliefs, attitudes, values, ideals, and behaviors, which constitute their culture.
2. The anthropological attitude that a society's customs and ideas should be studied objectively and understood in the context of that society's culture is called cultural relativism. In general, cultural relativism is impeded by two different but commonly held attitudes: first, the tendency toward negative evaluation, or ethnocentrism; second, the tendency toward positive evaluation, which often takes the form of a naive yearning for the simple life of the "noble savage."
3. Culture may be defined as the learned behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, values, and ideals generally shared by the members of a group.
4. The size of the group within which cultural traits are shared can vary from the particular society or a segment of that society to a group that transcends national boundaries. When anthropologists refer to a culture, they are usually referring to the cultural patterns of a particular society—that is, a particular territorial population speaking a language not generally understood by neighboring territorial populations.
5. A defining feature of culture is that it is learned. Although other animals exhibit some cultural behavior, humans are unusual in the number and complexity of the learned patterns they transmit to their young. And they have a unique way of transmitting their culture: through spoken, symbolic language.
6. Anthropologists seek to discover the customs and ranges of acceptable behavior that constitute the culture of a society under study. In doing so, they focus on general or shared patterns of behavior rather than on individual variations. When dealing with practices that are highly visible, or with beliefs that are almost unanimous, the investigator can rely on observation or on a few knowledgeable persons. With less obvious behaviors or attitudes, the anthropologist must collect information from a sample of individuals. The mode of a frequency distribution can then be used to express the cultural pattern.
7. Every society develops a series of ideal cultural patterns that represent what most members of the society believe to be the correct behavior in particular situations. A society's ideal cultural patterns, however, do not always agree with its actual cultural patterns.
8. One important factor that limits the range of individual variation is the culture itself, which acts directly or indirectly as a constraint on behavior. The existence of cultural constraints, however, is not necessarily incompatible with individuality.
9. Several assumptions are frequently made about culture. First, culture is generally adaptive to the particular conditions of its physical and social environment. What may be adaptive in one environment may not be adaptive in another. Some cultural traits may be neutral in terms of adaption, some may merely have been adaptive in the past, and still others may be maladaptive. Second, culture is mostly integrated, in that the elements or traits that make up the culture are mostly adjusted to or consistent with one another. Third, culture is always changing.

Notes

1. Horace Miner, "Body Rituals among the Nacirema," *American Anthropologist*, 58 (1956): 504-5 (reproduced by permission of the American Anthropological Association from the *American Anthropologist*, 58: 504-5, 1956).
2. Richard B. Lee, "Population Growth and the Beginnings of Sedentary Life among the !Kung Bushmen," in Brian Spooner, ed., *Population Growth: Anthropological Implications* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1972), pp. 329-42.
3. Ralph Linton, *The Cultural Background of Personality* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1945), p. 30.
4. See, for example, Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn, eds., *Cultural Models in Language and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 4.
5. Edward Sapir, "Why Cultural Anthropology Needs the Psychiatrist," *Psychiatry*, 1 (1938): 7-12; cited by Pertti J. Pelto and Gretel H. Pelto, "Intra-Cultural Diversity: Some Theoretical Issues," *American Ethnologist*, 2 (1975): 1.
6. Pelto and Pelto, "Intra-Cultural Diversity," pp. 14-15.
7. Note that by this definition, societies do not necessarily correspond to nations. There are many nations, particularly the "new" ones, that have within their boundaries different peoples speaking mutually unintelligible languages. By our definition of society, such nations are composed of many different societies and cultures. Also, by our definition of society, some societies may even include more than one nation. For example, we would have to say that Canada and the United States form a single society because both groups generally speak English, live next to each other, and share many common beliefs, values, and practices. That is why we refer to "North American culture" in this chapter. Not everyone would agree Canada and the United States form a single society; some would prefer to consider the United States and Canada two different societies because they are separate political entities.
8. Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 8th ed., trans. Sarah A. Soloway and John H. Mueller, ed. George E. Catlin (New York: Free Press, 1938 [originally published 1895]), p. 3.
9. Solomon Asch, "Studies of Independence and Conformity: A Minority of One against a Unanimous Majority," *Psychological Monographs*, 70 (1956): 1-70.
10. Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 159-60.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
12. John W. M. Whiting, "Effects of Climate on Certain Cultural Practices," in Ward H. Goodenough, ed., *Explorations in Cultural Anthropology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 511-44.
13. Charles Wagley, "Cultural Influences on Population: A Comparison of Two Tupi Tribes," in Patricia J. Lyon, ed., *Native South Americans: Ethnology of the Least Known Continent* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), pp. 377-84.
14. Roger Brown, *Social Psychology* (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 549-609.
15. Michael Chibnik, "The Evolution of Cultural Rules," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 37 (1981): 256-68.
16. Indeed, some of the cultures we refer to may have been quite different before as well as after the time referred to. For example, the !Kung hunter-gatherers of southern Africa probably were not only hunter-gatherers in the past. There is evidence that the !Kung of the Kalahari Desert have switched from hunting and gathering to herding animals, and back again, many times in the past. See Carmel Schrire, "An Inquiry into the Evolutionary Status and Apparent Identity of San Hunter-Gatherers," *Human Ecology*, 8 (1980): 9-32.