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HOW CAN PEOPLE BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS THAT ARE DIFFERENT FROM THEIR OWN?

# Culture and Meaning

## Chapter 1



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### QUESTIONS

In examining this problem, we will consider the following questions:

- 1.1 Why do human beings differ in their beliefs and behaviors?
- 1.2 Why do people judge the beliefs and behaviors of others?
- 1.3 Is it possible to see the world through the eyes of others?
- 1.4 How can the meanings that others find in experience be interpreted and described?
- 1.5 What can learning about other people tell Americans about themselves?

\* \* \*

*Jonathan Culler*

We have come to think of our social and cultural world as a series of sign systems, comparable to languages. What we live among and relate to are not physical objects and events; they are objects and events with meaning; not just complicated wooden constructions but chairs and tables; not just physical gestures but acts of courtesy or hostility. If we are able to understand our social and cultural world, we must think not of independent objects but of symbolic structures, systems of relations which by enabling objects and actions to have meaning, create a human universe.





## INTRODUCTION

# The World behind Everyday Appearances

**I**n **cultural anthropology**, as in every science, we strive to look beyond the world of everyday experiences to discover the patterns and meanings that lie behind that world. Take, for example, the typical classroom chair with attached desk.

In our taken-for-granted, everyday world, this piece of furniture is a utilitarian object—something to sit on, write on, or even put our feet on. But for the cultural anthropologist, the classroom chair tells some interesting tales and poses some interesting questions. For example, why do we have chairs at all? Many societies don't; people sit or squat on the ground or sit on stools or benches. Historically, the chair probably first appeared in Europe or the Near East, but it wasn't even common in Europe until the eighteenth century. Why does the classroom chair take the form it does? Why don't we sit on stools? One feature of the classroom chair and desk that anthropologists might explore as they try to decipher its meaning is the erect position into which it forces the body, compelling it, in effect, to "pay attention." We might take a clue from the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who refers to the shaping of the human body as "political anatomy," a way that people's bodies are controlled by others to operate with the necessary speed and efficiency.

An anthropologist might suggest that the classroom chair and desk are part of the political



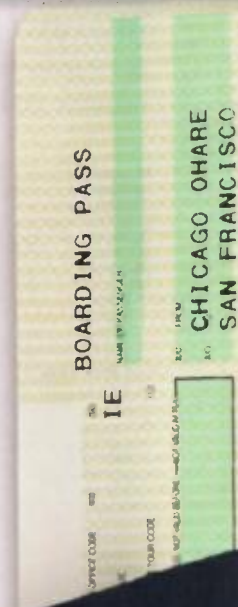
*"For the cultural anthropologist, the classroom chair tells some interesting tales and poses some interesting questions."*

anatomy of educational settings, part of the system of relations that gives meaning to the classroom. This piece of furniture forms the body into a shape that prepares it (or forces it) to attend to a teacher and not to others in the same room. Moreover, it is appropriate to its unique setting in the classroom, as are other objects of furniture. Imagine, for example, replacing classroom chairs with bar stools, whose main purpose is to promote mobility and conversation with others.

Once alert to the idea that the classroom chair might serve as an instrument of control, we might notice other ways in which classroom design serves as a mode of discipline. The distribution of people in space, with each person in a particular "spot" in neat, ordered rows, serves to discipline people to "pay attention" to the classroom center and not to others around them. We might also notice the distinctive ordering of time and the use of clocks, bells, and whistles to control the movement and activities of people in school settings. We can take our analysis a step further and examine the



**cultural anthropology**  
an examination of the world of everyday experiences to discover the patterns and meanings that lie behind that world



discipline of the school setting sequentially, from kindergarten through high school. Contrast, for example, the wide-open space of the kindergarten classroom with its open, movable chairs and tables and teacher's desk set off to the side with the enclosed, partitioned space of a second- or third-grade classroom with its neatly arranged desks facing the centered desk of the teacher. This is the evolution of classroom discipline.

Students, of course, do not always obey the subtle commands that direct their bodies to do certain things at certain times. Simply examine the strange bodily contortions of students as they resist the form into which the classroom chair tries to force them. They also try, occasionally, to resist the isolation imposed by the arrangement of classroom furniture or the timetables set by clocks, bells, and whistles.

The way that specific societies order behavior through the arrangement of space and time is just one area examined by cultural anthropology, but it serves as an example of how, from an anthropological perspective, we cannot take anything about our beliefs and behavior for granted, let alone the behavior and beliefs of those whose backgrounds and histories differ from our own. This book is about how cultural anthropology can help us see beyond our taken-for-granted world. We will examine how cultural anthropology helps us to understand others and, in the process, to better understand ourselves. In addition, each chapter contains case studies that illustrate how the concepts and perspectives discussed in the chapter can be applied in various career paths to solve real-life problems, such as preventing HIV/AIDS, designing public policy, designing shopping environments, and helping adolescent girls deal with negative body images.

Because any area of inquiry always begins with certain basic issues or questions, this book is organized around eight general problems that arise from the human condition, problems such as how to understand people with different beliefs and behaviors, reasons why ways of life change, how people justify violence, and whether there is any solution to problems of social inequality. These are problems that concern everyone, not just cultural anthropologists. None of these problems has a definitive answer. The best we can do is reach a greater understanding of why the problem exists and what we might do about it. There are some specific questions, however, that we can ask concerning these problems for which anthropologists have sought answers. We will focus on these questions. At various points we will ask you to supply your own answers to questions and, perhaps, to discuss your solutions to these questions with others. Understanding others requires you to recognize that your behaviors and beliefs, as well as those of people in other societies, are socially patterned and constructed. For that reason, you will find many comparisons between American life and life in other societies.

In considering the principal problem of how we can begin to understand beliefs and behaviors that are different from our own, in this first chapter we explore five questions.

The first and most basic question is why human beings differ in their beliefs and behaviors; that is, what is it about human nature that produces such a variety of ways of believing and behaving? The second question involves values. More often than not, people react to different ways of life with shock, scorn, or disapproval. Are such reactions warranted, and if they aren't, how

## QUESTIONS

- 1.1 Why do human beings differ in their beliefs and behaviors?
- 1.2 Why do people judge the beliefs and behaviors of others?
- 1.3 Is it possible to see the world through the eyes of others?
- 1.4 How can the meanings that others find in experience be interpreted and described?
- 1.5 What can learning about other people tell Americans about themselves?

do we judge the beliefs and behaviors of others? The third question is critical to anthropological inquiry: Is it possible to set aside the meanings that we ascribe to experience and see the world through the eyes of others? Fourth, assuming that it is possible to come to some understanding of how others see the world, how can the meanings that others find in experience be interpreted and described? The fifth question concerns what learning about other people can tell us about ourselves.



### QUESTION 1.1

*Why do human beings differ in their beliefs and behaviors?*

## Differences in Beliefs and Behaviors

From an anthropological perspective, members of a society view the world in a similar way because they share the same **culture**; people differ in how they view the world because their cultures differ. A good place to start to understand the concept of culture is with the fact that members of all human societies experience specific life events, such as birth, death, and the quest for food, water, and shelter. But from society to society, the meanings people give to such events differ.

Attitudes toward death provide one example. For some people, death marks the passage of a person from one world to another. For others, death is an ending, the final event of a life span, whereas still others consider death a part of a never-ending cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Members of some societies accept death as a natural and inevitable occurrence, whereas others always attribute death to the malevolent act of some person, often through sorcery. In these societies, every death elicits suspicion and a demand for vengeance. Along with differing views on why people die, different cultures have different ways of grieving for the dead.

The Kwakiutl of British Columbia, for example, believe that when a person dies the soul leaves the body

and enters the body of a salmon. When a salmon is caught and eaten, a soul is released and is free to enter the body of another person. In traditional China, the dead were to be revered. Each household contained a shrine to family ancestors, and before any major family decision could be made, the head of the household addressed the shrine to ask the ancestors' advice, thus making the dead a part of the world of the living. In southern Italy, funeral customs are designed to discourage the dead from returning to the world of the living. Relatives place useful objects such as matches and small change near the body of the deceased in order to placate the soul and ensure that it does not disturb the living.

The Dani of New Guinea require a close female relative of a recently deceased person to sacrifice a part of a finger. It was the practice of the Wari of western Brazil, when they still lived independent of Western civilization, to dispose of the bodies of their dead by eating the roasted flesh, certain internal organs, and sometimes the ground bones. They ate the dead out of respect and compassion for the dead person and the dead person's family, not because they needed the meat or because they liked the taste of human flesh. In southern Europe, widows were required to shave their heads, whereas in traditional India, widows threw themselves on top of their deceased husband's funeral pyre. In the United States, survivors of the deceased are expected to restrain their grief almost as if it were a contagious disease. To Americans, the sight of Indian women throwing themselves on a fire, or the Wari eating their deceased is just as bewildering as their own restraint of grief would be to Indians or the Wari.

Food is one of the best illustrations of the differences between cultures. No society accepts all items in their edible universe as "good to eat." Insects such as grubs, beetles, and ants are acceptable fare in some societies, whereas others regard eating insects with horror. Americans generally do not define insects as food (although federal regulations do allow a certain percentage of insect matter to be included in processed food). Most Americans like and are encouraged to drink milk, although some people in China consider milk undrinkable. On the other hand, the Chinese practice of raising dogs for meat is repulsive to most Americans. Many American tastes in food originate in biblical definitions of what is considered edible and

**culture** the meaning that people give to things, events, activities, and people

inedible. Thus, of edible land animals, the book of Leviticus says that they must chew their cud and have split hoofs, consequently eliminating not only the pig but camel and rock badger as well. Of animals of the water, edible things must have scales and fins, removing clams, lobster, and sea urchins. And of animals of the air, only things that have wings and fly are legitimate dining fare, eliminating the penguin, ostrich, and cassowary. Thus, human beings create and define for

themselves what they may eat and what they may not eat independent of what is or is not truly edible.

Of all the nearly two million species of living organisms that inhabit the earth, only humans dwell in worlds that they themselves create by giving meanings to things, events, activities and people. This creation is what anthropologists mean by the term *culture*. Human beings are cultural animals; they ascribe meanings of their own creation to objects, persons, behaviors, emo-

## WOULD YOU EAT?

Food is a cultural creation—people define what is and what is not food. Consider the items listed below, all of which serve as food for one group of people or another. Which of these would you eat, and which would you not eat? If there are any you would not eat, explain why.

Yes, please!

No way!

- |                          |                             |                          |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | eel                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | kangaroo tail               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | dog                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | guinea pig                  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> | monkey brains               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | grubs                       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | opossum                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> | dolphin                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | pickled pig's feet          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | haggis (stuffed intestines) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | cow brains                  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | blood sausage               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | raw steak                   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | rotten meat                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | armadillo                   | <input type="checkbox"/> |



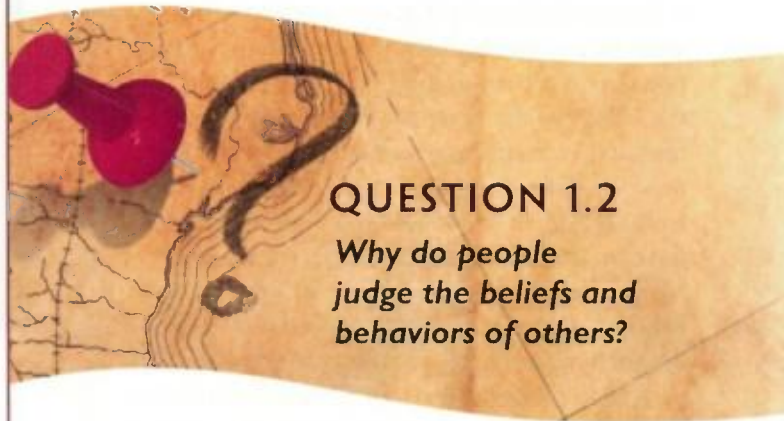
tions, and events and then act as though those meanings are real. All facets of their lives—death, birth, courtship, mating, food acquisition and consumption—are suffused with meaning.

Clifford Geertz suggests that human beings are compelled to impose meaning on their experiences because without these meanings to help them comprehend experience and impose order on the universe, the world would seem a jumble, “a chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions.” Geertz says that human beings are “incomplete or unfinished animals who complete themselves through culture—not culture in general, but specific forms of it: Balinese, Italian, Ilongot, Chinese, Kwakiutl, American, and so on.” (1973, 49) When people share the meanings they give to experiences, they share and participate in the same culture.

Differences in culture arise in part from the fact that different groups of human beings, for various reasons, create, share, and participate in different realities, assigning different meanings to death, birth, marriage, and food. Objects, persons, behaviors, emotions, and events in a human world have meanings ascribed to them by those who share, use, or experience them. The clothes people wear, the way they wear them, the food they eat (or refuse to eat), and even their gender are defined through the meanings that different groups of people give them.

One of the problems that cultural anthropologists address is understanding why different groups of human beings have different cultures. Why does one group assign one set of meanings to what they experience, whereas another group assigns it another set of meanings? Many of the questions to be addressed in later chapters concern how these differences can be explained. We may be able to overcome our initial shock or bewilderment upon confronting different cultures if we understand something of why cultural differences exist. But how should we react if the meanings that others

ascribe to experiences differ from our own? It is difficult enough to look beyond everyday appearances at our own beliefs and behaviors, but it is far more difficult when we confront beliefs and behaviors of others that we initially consider wrong, horrible, or bizarre.



## QUESTION 1.2

*Why do people judge the beliefs and behaviors of others?*

## Judging Others' Beliefs and Behaviors

Richard Scaglione is fond of telling the story of his friend, a member of the Abelam tribe of Papua New Guinea, who was looking through an issue of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. The friend, dressed in full ceremonial regalia with a feather through his nose, was laughing uncontrollably at a woman shown in a liquor advertisement. When he managed to stop laughing long enough to explain what he thought was so funny, he said, “This

white woman has made holes in her ears and stuck things in them.” When Scaglione pointed out that his friend had an ornament in his nose, the reply was, “That’s different. That’s for beauty and has ceremonial significance. But I didn’t know that white people mutilated themselves.”

Scaglione’s friend confronted a problem that many people have when they encounter behavior or beliefs that seem to differ from their own, and his response was not unusual. He was both shocked and mystified at the strange behavior. And this poses a dilemma: Because there are so many versions of what the world is like, how do we try to



*An Abelam tribesman, in full ceremonial regalia, was laughing uncontrollably at a woman shown in an American liquor advertisement.*

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understand each of them without making positive or negative judgments? Which version is correct? Are there any we can reject or condemn? Can we say, as so many have, that one culture is superior to another?

In the catalog of human behaviors and beliefs, it is not difficult to find practices or ideas that may seem bizarre or shocking, even to trained anthropologists. Cultural anthropologists have described the beliefs of the Ilongots of the Philippines, who must kill an enemy to obtain a head they can throw away in order to diminish the grief and rage they feel at the death of a kinsman or kinswoman. They have studied the historical records of the Aztecs of Mexico, who, when contacted by Cortes in 1519, believed that the universe underwent periodic destruction and that the only way to ward off disaster was to pluck hearts from live sacrificial victims to offer to the gods. They have reported on the circumcision practices of the people in the Nile Valley of the Sudan, who, in order to ensure a young girl's chastity and virginity, mutilate her genitalia to close the vaginal opening so completely that additional surgery is often required to allow intercourse and childbirth later in life. They have also studied modern states that routinely engage in or sanction torture, terror, and genocide. The question is, how should we react to practices and beliefs such as these?

## The Ethnocentric Fallacy and the Relativist Fallacy

If we condemn or reject the beliefs or behaviors of others, we may be committing the **ethnocentric fallacy**—the idea that our beliefs and behaviors are right and true, whereas those of other peoples are wrong or misguided. Cultural anthropologists have long fought against ethnocentrism.

**ethnocentric fallacy**  
a group's belief that their beliefs and behavior are right and true, whereas those of other groups are wrong

**relativism** the thought that no behavior or belief can be judged to be odd or wrong because it is different

They try to show that what often appears on the surface to be an odd belief or a bizarre bit of behavior is functional and logical in the context of a particular culture. They find the ethnocentric fallacy *intellectually* intolerable; if all people everywhere think that they are right and others must be wrong, they



The Aztecs believed that the universe underwent periodic destruction and that the only way to ward off disaster was to pluck the hearts from live sacrificial victims to offer to the gods.

can only reach an intellectual and social dead end. Furthermore, if we assume that we have all the right answers, our study of other cultures becomes simply the study of other people's mistakes.

Because of the intellectual implications of ethnocentrism, cultural anthropologists emphatically reject this position. But the alternative to ethnocentrism, **relativism**, is equally problematic. Relativism, simply stated, holds that no behavior or belief can be judged to be odd or wrong simply because it is different from our own. Instead, we must try to understand a culture in its own terms and to understand behaviors or beliefs in terms of the purpose, function, or meaning they have for people in the societies in which we find them. In other words, relativism holds that a specific belief or behavior can be understood only in relation to the culture—the system of meanings—in which it is embedded.

For example, according to Renato Rosaldo, the ceremonies and rituals accompanying a successful headhunting expedition psychologically help the Ilongot manage their grief over the death of a kinsperson. Rose Oldfield-Hayes explains that the genital mutilation of young girls makes perfect sense to the women of the northern Sudan. Because family honor is determined in part by the sexual modesty of female family

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members, the operation, by preventing intercourse, protects the honor of the family, protects girls from sexual assault, and protects the honor and reputation of the girl herself.

However, relativism poses a *moral* predicament. We may concede that it is permissible to rip hearts out of living human beings, provided you believe this is necessary in order to save the world, or that it is permissible to subject young girls to painful mutilation to protect family reputations or control population growth. But this quickly leads us into the **relativistic fallacy**—the idea that it is impossible to make moral judgments about the beliefs and behaviors of others. This, of course, seems morally intolerable because it implies that there is no belief or behavior that can be condemned as wrong. So we are left with two untenable positions: the ethnocentric alternative, which is intellectually unsatisfactory, and the relativist alternative, which is morally unsatisfactory. How do we solve this problem?

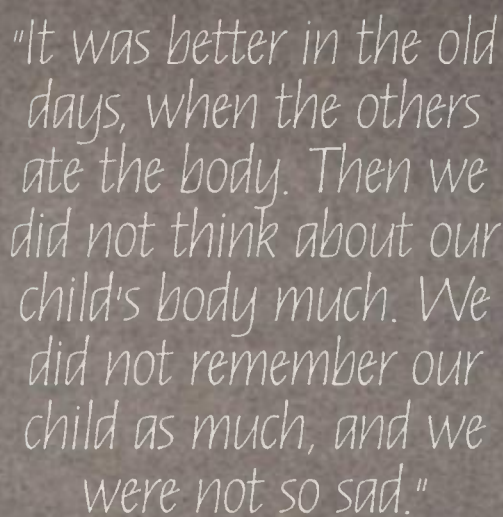
## The Wari and Cannibalism

To illustrate the dilemma of relativism and the difficulty of appreciating the cultures of others without making moral judgments, let's consider the Wari practice of eating the dead. As Beth Conklin points out in *Consuming Grief*, cannibalism pushes the limits of cultural relativism, guaranteeing reactions of revulsion and fascination. But in addition to the emotional reactions, it has political implications as well. For centuries, cannibalism was the ultimate smear tactic; the accusation of cannibalism was the ultimate justification for conquest, domination, and exploitation. In 1503, Queen Isabella of Spain decreed that Spaniards could legally enslave Native Americans who were cannibals. Pope Innocent IV, in 1510, ruled that Christians could punish, by force of arms, the sin of cannibalism. By claiming moral superiority, they were claiming the right to decide ultimately what is right and what is wrong. Armed with that kind of power, they felt justified in imposing their own views and way of life. What Queen Isabella and Pope Innocent the IV conveniently overlooked, however, was the fact that Europeans themselves practiced cannibalism. As Conklin notes, medicinal cannibalism, the consumption of human

body parts for curing purposes, had a long tradition in Europe. Up until two centuries ago, European physicians prescribed the consumption of human flesh, heart, bones and other body parts as cures for such afflictions as arthritis, reproductive disorders, sciatica, warts, and skin blemishes. Human blood was thought to be a cure for epilepsy; physicians recommending that it be drunk immediately after the supplier died. Physicians also thought that the blood of someone who died violently was particularly effective. Thus in Denmark epileptics would stand around the scaffolds, cups in hand, waiting to catch the blood of executed criminals.

In their ethnocentric justifications for conquest and racism, people of medieval Europe managed to accept in their own lives the same types of practices they condemned in others. Furthermore, they failed to understand those practices from the point of view of the others. The Wari ate their dead because they believed it was the compassionate thing to do. As Conklin puts it, "More painful than having the corpse eaten would have been to have it *not* eaten." For the Wari, a corpse left intact was a painful reminder of the deceased; people unrelated to the deceased ate the corpse, in spite of the fact that sometimes the smell or taste repulsed them, because it was believed it would help family members come to terms with their loss. Furthermore, the Western

**relativistic fallacy** the idea that it is impossible to make moral judgments about the beliefs and behaviors of others



"It was better in the old days, when the others ate the body. Then we did not think about our child's body much. We did not remember our child as much, and we were not so sad."

—Berakel Wari father

practice of burying the dead (which missionaries and government officials forced the Wari to do after contact) was almost as horrific to the Wari as their cannibalism might have been for us. "It's cold in the earth," a father who had recently lost a 2-year-old son explained to Conklin. "We keep remembering our child, lying there, cold. We remember and we are sad. It was better in the old days, when the others ate the body. Then we did not think about our child's body much. We did not remember our child as much, and we were not so sad."

By consuming the dead, the Wari are trying to obliterate the painful memories of their loss. But equally painful as the memory of the body are the material objects associated with the deceased and even the mention of the deceased's name. Thus, they not only consume the body, they also burn the house and personal possessions of the deceased. For months, they also make trips into the forest to find places associated with the person, such as a place where a hunter made a kill or a woman felled a fruit tree, cut the vegetation around it, and after it has dried, burn the spot, changing the appearance of the last earthly places to which memories of the deceased might

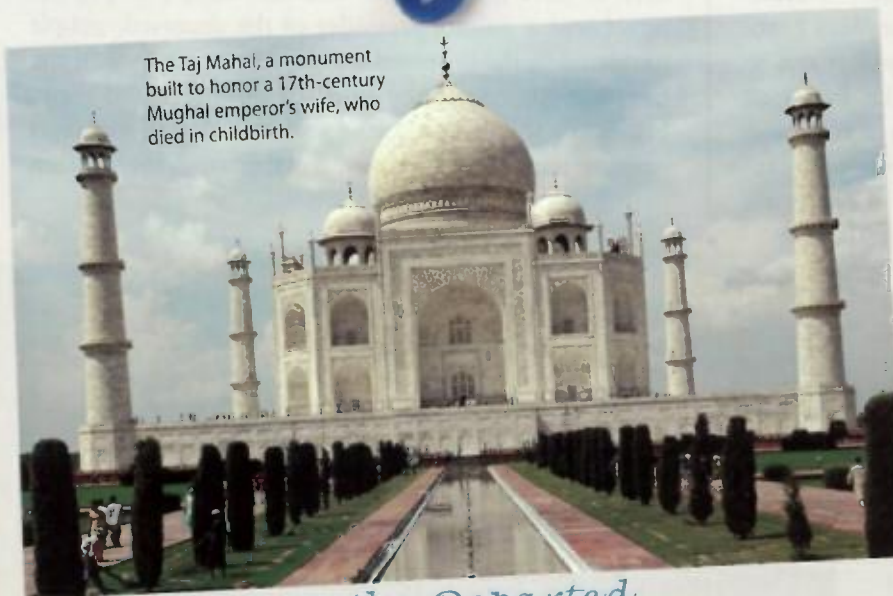
cling. As they "sweep," as the Wari call it, they cry over the memories. Once done, however, "it is different . . . there is not much sadness there."

In American culture, a dead body is only a shell, missing its soul or spiritual essence. Thus we often prepare the dead to look as they did in life and think of them buried that way with comfort. In contrast, the Wari, as well as other groups, want to separate the dead from the living, and cannibalism is an important way in which they obliterate the painful memories of the deceased. If we did not have a deeper understanding of Wari culture, we would not know how consuming the dead fits in with dealing with their emotions and with the meaning that they impose on their world. By imposing the meanings we have adopted for something such as cannibalism and failing to see it as others may, we miss the point. But does this mean that any practice or belief, once we understand it from "the native's point of view," is acceptable? Does understanding the cultures of others require that we accept and justify all beliefs and practices?

## Objectivity and Morality

The conflict between ethnocentrism and relativism is not just a theoretical one for anthropologists. In their choice of research subject, anthropologists may face the dilemma of either maintaining a "moral distance" from the objects of their studies and remaining "objective" or becoming actively involved in criticizing behavior or beliefs they encounter (such as genital mutilation).

The contradiction between "objective" anthropology and a politically committed anthropology became apparent to Nancy Scheper-Hughes when she returned as an anthropologist to a shantytown in Brazil where she had previously worked as a community organizer. The women with whom she worked became angry, asking why, when as a community organizer she had helped them fight for clean



The Taj Mahal, a monument built to honor a 17th-century Mughal emperor's wife, who died in childbirth.

### *Remembering the Departed*

The Wari attempt to obliterate the memory of the dead in their funeral practices, as do many other societies. Others, however, such as ours, memorialize the dead; forgetting them would be an act of disrespect. Try to list the ways that we try to keep the memory of deceased persons alive, and speculate why we emphasize remembering them, rather than trying to forget them.

## VIRGINITY TESTING IN TURKEY

Traditionally, young women in Turkey, as in some other cultures, are expected to avoid sexual relations prior to marriage, although the same rule does not apply to men. The morning after the wedding, the bride's virginity is revealed by displaying the sheet that was spread on the couple's wedding bed with the telltale hymeneal blood stain. An American human rights group condemned this practice, as well as reports of forced virginity tests on hospital patients, students and applicants for government jobs. Here is the question: Is the human rights group being ethnocentric in judging Turkish customs by American cultural norms, or is it correctly identifying abuses of women that must be corrected? And does it help if we further understand the so-called logic behind the belief?

Anthropologist Carol Delaney, in her book on Turkish village society, *The Seed and the Soil*, describes how virginity testing is related to the way that Turkish villagers conceptualize and explain the reproductive process. They see reproduction as analogous to the planting and growing of crops; the man provides the "seed" with his semen, and the woman serves as the "soil" in which the seed germinates and grows. As a metaphor for reproduction, the idea of the seed and the soil provides villagers with a way of thinking about and understanding reproduction. However the metaphor of seed and soil has at least one very important implication. Because seeds do not have a limited life span, villagers believe that once planted, the seed (semen) may grow at any time. Consequently, if a woman has had sexual relations with a man other than her husband at any time prior to her marriage, the paternity of the child will be in doubt. And because descent in traditional Turkish villages is closely tied to many things, including property rights, uncertainty about the identity of the true father can have major implications. Thus, in the context of Turkish beliefs about procreation, virginity testing may make sense. Furthermore, Turkish beliefs about conception are not that far removed from our own, since our language draws from the same agricultural metaphors as that of Turkish villagers to explain reproduction. We talk about women being "fertile" or "barren" and semen "fertilizing" "eggs." "Sowing one's oats" as an expression of sexual activity is still heard in parts of the United States and Canada. Furthermore, these views are reinforced by religious proscription, legitimized in the Koran and the Old Testament. Thus, before we either condemn or accept the Turkish villagers for their treatment of women, we need to examine what their beliefs tell us about our own, which may be equally problematic.

water, decent wages, and protection from police brutality, was she now, as an anthropologist, so passive, so indifferent to the destruction around her? She tried to explain that as an anthropologist her work was different, that she was now there to observe, document, and write about their lives as truthfully as she could. The women refused to accept that and insisted that if they were to work with her, she had to also work with them to fight for better lives. "What," they said, "is anthropology to us?"

As a consequence of her experience, Scheper-Hughes argues for a politically committed, morally engaged, and ethically grounded anthropology. "Those of us who make our living observing and recording the misery of the world," she says, "have a particular obligation to reflect critically on the impact of the harsh images of human suffering that we foist upon the public." (1995, 416)

Scheper-Hughes proposes a more humanitarian anthropology, one that is concerned with how people

treat one another. Moral relativism, she says, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live, and anthropology, if it is to be worth anything at all, must be, as she puts it, "critically grounded." Anthropologists cannot ignore the massacres and disappearances of vulnerable people that often occur in communities in which anthropologists work. Anthropologists must, she insists, serve as witnesses and reporters of human rights abuses and the suffering of the poor and the oppressed.

But even serving as a witness for the poor and oppressed can lead to still other moral dilemmas for the anthropologist when the people with whom the anthropologist works engage in behavior that may appear morally questionable. Scheper-Hughes confronted this question when she discovered and reported that impoverished women in the Brazilian shantytowns would sometimes allow their starving infants to die in the belief that they were doomed anyway. When Philippe Bourgois studied the world of crack dealers on the upper east side of New York City, he worried about the negative images he would convey if he reported the personal violence, sexual abuse, addiction, and alienation he witnessed. He recalled the advice of anthropologist Laura Nader, who advised others not to study the poor and powerless, because whatever one says will be used against them.

Human rights activists, particularly, are skeptical about the idea of cultural relativity. If, they say, we must tolerate the beliefs and practices of other cultures because to do otherwise would be ethnocentric, how can we ever criticize what seem to be violations of basic human rights, such as the right to bodily integrity or the right to be free from torture, arbitrary imprisonment, slavery, or genocide? Cultural relativism, say human rights advocates, makes arguments about human rights meaningless by legitimizing almost any behavior.

Consider the Indian practice of *sati*, the burning of a widow on her deceased husband's funeral pyre. Though it has been formally outlawed, and criticized by numerous women's rights groups, many are still in favor of the practice, describing it as a revered Hindu custom. Further, they accuse protesters of being Western imperialists imposing their own cultural standards. Does it matter if the widows committed *sati* voluntarily? What would happen if she objected? Does it matter that it is only women who are burned? Is *sati* a practice to deny a widow the inheritance of her husband's family's land?



The Indian practice of *sati*, the burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, has been formally outlawed, but many Hindus still revere the custom.

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## WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

You have been doing anthropological research in the United States with a group of people who believe they must live life as described in the Bible, particularly the book of Acts. They live communally, sharing all property; they believe that women should be subservient to their husbands; they enforce rules against drinking alcoholic beverages and smoking. The group has lately come under attack in the local community as being a "dangerous cult." Although their beliefs and practices differ from those of the larger society around them, you know that they are not dangerous and in fact lead lives of harmony. They have asked you to speak in their defense.

Can you do this without sacrificing your objectivity?

© TYNDYRA/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM Elizabeth Zechenter, who makes the argument for the establishment of some universal principles for human rights, says that cultural relativists are right to claim that the endorsement or rejection of some foreign custom risks imposing one's own cultural prejudices on others. But the idea that we can make no judgments without being ethnocentric is illusory:

One simply cannot avoid making judgments when faced with oppression and brutality masquerading under the guise of cultural tradition. Such a nonjudgmental tolerance of brutality is actually an ultimate form of ethnocentrism, if not an outright ethical surrender. (Zechenter 1997, 336)

There is obviously no easy answer to the question of when or if it is proper to judge the beliefs and practices of others to be right or wrong or when to

actively work to change behaviors or beliefs judged to be wrong. Ideally, our attempts to understand what at first seems puzzling in some cultures and our arrival at some solution to that puzzle should result in questioning what it was about us that made the behavior or belief seem puzzling in the first place. In addition, we need to understand that if each culture orders the world in a certain way for its members, it also blocks off or masks other ways of viewing things. We need to appreciate that there are perspectives different from our own and that our ethnocentric biases may blind us to those alternatives. In other words, although culture provides us with certain meanings to give to objects, persons, behaviors, emotions, and events, it also shields us from alternative meanings. What our culture hides from us may be more important than what it reveals.



## QUESTION 1.3

*Is it possible to see the world through the eyes of others?*

## Translating Cultural Meaning

This question lies at the heart of the anthropological enterprise. The anthropologist must be able to look beyond everyday appearances to decipher the often hidden meanings of beliefs, objects, and behaviors, while at the same time setting aside preconceptions of what is normal or proper. The anthropologist must also learn one culture and then relate that learning to members of another culture by translating the meanings of one world into the meanings of another.

Anthropologists, as other social scientists, use surveys, written documents, historical accounts, and questionnaires as part of their research toolbox. But the unique feature of cultural anthropology is the application of the **ethnographic method**—the immersion of

### **ethnographic method**

the immersion of investigators in the lives of the people they are trying to understand, and through that experience, the attainment of some level of understanding of the meanings those people ascribe to their experience

### **anthropological fieldwork**

firsthand or direct immersion and observation of the people or culture a researcher is trying to understand

### **participant observation**

the active participation of observers in the lives of their subjects

investigators into the lives of the people they are trying to understand and, through that experience, the attainment of some level of understanding of the meanings those people ascribe to their existence. This immersion process utilizes the techniques of **anthropological fieldwork** which requires **participant observation**—the active participation of observers in the lives of their subjects.

The ethnographic method is only part of the anthropological enterprise. The anthropologist also seeks to explain why people view the world as

they do and to contribute to the understanding of human behavior in general. But fieldwork is the beginning of the enterprise. Fieldwork involves the meeting of at least two cultures: that of the researcher and that of the culture the researcher is trying to understand. Anthropological researchers must set aside their own views of things and attempt to see the world in a new way. In many respects they must assume the demeanor and status of children who must be taught by their elders the proper view of the world. And like children making their way in a world they do not fully comprehend, anthropologists often find themselves in awkward, embarrassing, or dangerous situations and must be prepared to learn from these moments.

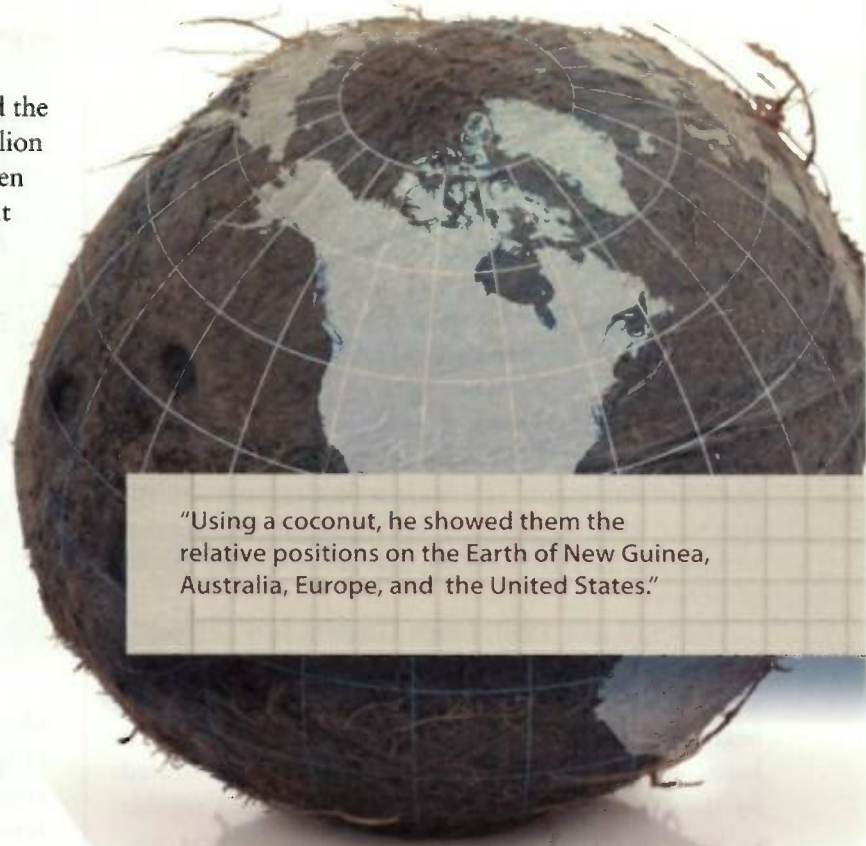
## The Embarrassed Anthropologist

Awkwardness and embarrassment are a part of fieldwork, as well as a part of the process through which the fieldworker learns about another culture. Richard Scaglione spent more than a year with the Abelam of Papua New Guinea. Shortly after he arrived in the field, he observed and photographed an Abelam pig hunt in which the men set out nets and waited while the women and children made lots of noise to drive the pigs into the nets. Soon after, he was invited by the Abelam to participate in a pig hunt, and he took this as a sign of acceptance, that the people “liked him.” He started to go with the men, but they told him they wanted him to go with the women and children to beat the bush, explaining “We’ve never seen anyone who makes as much noise in the jungle as you.” Later, wanting to redeem himself, Scaglione offered to help an Abelam who was planting crops with a digging stick. A crowd gathered to watch as Scaglione used a shovel to try to dig a demonstration hole. After he had struggled for several minutes to get the shovel into the hard-packed soil, someone handed him a digging stick, and he was amazed at how easy it was to use. Later he found out that several Abelam had shovels but rarely used them because they didn’t work well.

After months of answering Scaglione’s questions about their view of the natural world, such as the moon, sun, and stars, an Abelam man asked him about his views of the universe. Feeling on safe ground, he gave the usual grade-school lecture about the shape of the earth, its daily rotation, and its travels around the sun. Using a coconut, he showed them the relative positions

on the Earth of New Guinea, Australia, Europe, and the United States. Everyone listened intently, and Scaglione thought it went well until about a week later, when he overheard some elders wondering how it was that Americans walked upside down!

Beginning again, Scaglione used the coconut to explain how, as the earth rotates, sometimes the United States would be upright and New Guinea would be on the bottom. The Abelam rejected this because they could see that they were *not* upside down, and no one, not even some of the old people in the community, remembered ever having walked upside down. Scaglione began to draw on the physics he had in college, and as he tried to explain Newton's law of gravity (or "grabity," as his friends pronounced it), he suddenly realized that he didn't understand "grabity" either. It was something he had accepted since third grade, a concept that even physicists simply take for granted as a convenient theoretical concept.



"Using a coconut, he showed them the relative positions on the Earth of New Guinea, Australia, Europe, and the United States."

## CONFRONTING WITCHCRAFT IN MEXICO

When Michael Kearney began his work in Santa Catarina Ixtepeji in the valley of Oaxaca, Mexico, he was secure in the scientific view of the world in which he was raised. He was, though, fascinated with the worldview of the locals, who saw mystic notions of fate, malevolent witches and spiritual forces as controlling the world. But instead of just studying this worldview, Kearney experienced it firsthand.

While walking to an appointment, he came upon Doña Delfina, a witch that he had been trying to interview for some time. She explained that her sister-in-law had a "very bad disease in her arms," and she asked for help. At Doña Delfina's house, he found the sister-in-law's arms covered with deep, oozing lesions. They rejected his offer to take the sick woman to a doctor, but allowed him to apply some ointment. Much to Delfina's amazement, her sister-in-law felt better immediately, and was completely healed after two days.

Later that day, a Ixtepejanos friend asked Kearney what he had done, and he proudly explained. The friend replied



that it was not a good thing to do, since the sister-in-law was the victim of black magic. A woman named Gregoria was attacking her with black magic to steal her husband, while Delfina was using her own magic to defend her brother. By intervening, the friend explained, Kearney tipped the balance of power towards Delfina, and made an enemy in Gregoria.

"Maybe you should leave town for a while until Gregoria calms down," the friend suggested.

At first, Kearney did not take the danger seriously, but he soon would. About a week later, Kearney was lying in bed and felt an itch on his arm. He rolled up his sleeves and saw several angry welts that seemed to be growing before his eyes. Immediately his mind turned to the chancrous arms of Delfina's sister-in-law, and the fact that Gregoria lived only 50 yards away, and he thought "**She got me.**" Though this initial terror may have only lasted a few minutes, Kearney came to realize that systems of belief which at first seem so alien are eminently reasonable when we participate in the lives of the people who hold those beliefs.

## The Endangered Anthropologist

The risk of injury, disease, or hostile reactions has always been a feature of anthropological fieldwork. But as anthropologists increasingly work in areas where human rights violations are common, these risks are intensified. When the work of anthropologists threatens the power, authority, or prerogatives of powerful groups, these anthropologists often expose themselves to violent retaliation. The dangers that anthropologists face may serve to provide insights into how the people with whom they are working live with the daily threat of violence.

In 1989 and 1990, Linda Green was doing fieldwork in the Guatemalan community of Xe'caj. As with many similar communities, Xe'caj was only beginning to recover from some 35 years of violence. Beginning with a military coup orchestrated by the CIA in 1954, Guatemala experienced regular violence as the military regime tried to suppress revolutionary movements. The government killed hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans. The late 1970s and early 1980s were a particularly brutal time as the government embarked on a campaign to destroy peasant villages and relocate people to government-controlled towns. In addition, paramilitary groups, largely supplied and supported by the regular military, embarked on campaigns of terror and torture in an attempt to control the peasant population.

The people of Xe'caj lived in a state of constant surveillance from the military encampment located

### A DANGEROUS PROFESSION

Ruth First--killed in 1982 by a mail bomb sent to her office.

Arnold Ap--tortured and killed by Indonesian army in 1984.

David Webster--shot and killed by a pro-apartheid death squad in 1989.

Myrna Mack--killed in 1990 by Guatemalan soldier.

George Aditjondro--expelled from his native Indonesia in 1995 for criticizing the government.

above the town. Many of the residents had husbands, fathers, or sons taken away by the military. There were rumors of death lists. They had difficulty sleeping and reported nightmares of recurring death and violence. Soon, said Green, "I, too, started to experience nighttime hysteria, dreams of death, disappearances, and torture."

Green interviewed women who were widowed by the conflict. Without prompting, the women recounted in vivid detail their stories of horror, the deaths and disappearances of husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers as if they had happened last week or month, not many years ago. Then one day when Green arrived to continue the interviews, the women were anxious and agitated. When she asked what had happened, they told her that the military commissioner was looking for her and that people were saying that she was helping the widows and

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talking against other people in the community. When Green told the women that she was going to go see the commissioner, they pleaded with her not to go, explaining that they knew of people who had gone to the military garrison and never returned. Her visit would provide a vivid experience of the kinds of fears confronted by the villagers. She describes her feelings as she approached the garrison:

I saw several soldiers sitting in a small guardhouse with a machine gun perched on a three-foot stanchion pointed downward and directly at me. The plight of Joseph K. in Kafka's *Trial* flashed through my mind, accused of a crime for which he must defend himself but about which he could get no information. I didn't do anything wrong, I must not look guilty, I repeated to myself like a mantra. I must calm myself, as my stomach churned, my nerves frayed. I arrived breathless and terrified. Immediately I knew I was guilty because I was against the system of violence and terror that surrounded me. (1995, 116)

Fortunately the Commandante said he knew nothing about why she was being harassed and assured her that she could continue with her work. Everything went smoothly from there, but Green gained a fuller understanding of the experiences of people who live under the constant threat of violence.

The experiences of Scaglian, Kearney and Green highlight certain features of the ethnographic method. They especially illustrate the attempt of anthropologists to appreciate the views of others while at the same time questioning their own views of the world. They also illustrate what makes the ethnographic method unique. By participating in the lives of others and in their cultural practices, the anthropologist can take himself or herself as a subject of investigation. If one can succeed in seeing the world as others do, even for a brief moment, then it becomes far easier to understand and describe that world. It also helps the anthropologist to understand how others can believe what they do. Tanya M. Luhrmann learned this when she studied contemporary witchcraft in England. After reading

"Immediately I knew I was guilty because I was against the system of violence and terror that surrounded me."

materials surrounding the practice of contemporary witchcraft and attending ceremonies, she found herself interpreting events in the world in much the same way as the people she was working with. We return to her experiences in a later chapter.

Claude Levi-Strauss, one of the leading anthropologists of the twentieth century, says that fieldwork and the attempts of anthropologists to immerse themselves in the world of others makes them "marginal" men or women. They are never completely native because they cannot totally shed their own cultural perceptions, but they are never the same again after having glimpsed alternative visions of the world. Anthropologists are, as Roger Keesing put it, outsiders who know something of what it is to be insiders.


## QUESTION 1.4

*How can the meanings that others find in experience be interpreted and described?*

## Cultural Texts

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle first introduced his now famous detective hero, Sherlock Holmes, in 1887. In his adventures, Holmes had the unique ability to apply deductive reasoning to solve the most baffling of mysteries. In one story, Dr. Watson, Holmes's assistant, decides to teach the great detective a lesson in humility. He hands Holmes a pocket watch once owned by Watson's late brother and challenges Holmes to infer from it the character of its owner.

What if Sherlock Holmes had been an anthropologist?

A photograph of a group of people, primarily young women, gathered around a tablet computer in what appears to be a retail or mall setting. The tablet screen displays the text 'CASE: Anthropology at the Mall' over a world map background. The people are looking at the screen with interest and some are pointing at it. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and store displays.

## CASE: Anthropology at the Mall

*An anthropological perspective  
can be invaluable in all sorts of career areas.*

Whether it's management, public policy or medicine, various fields involve ways that people give meaning to their experiences, and so, can benefit from anthropological insights. Paco Underhill is a retail anthropologist who studies the way people shop. More specifically, he examines the interaction between people and products and people and spaces. Through his work, he helps businesses identify how people experience the act of shopping.

Underhill's work on retail anthropology is based on William H. Whyte's work on public spaces. Observing people in streets, parks and buildings, Whyte measured nearly everything about how people use space: the ideal width for a ledge for sitting, how weather affected park use, and how a public place's surroundings determined quality of life. By adapting Whyte's methods, Underhill watches people shop, traces the paths they take in stores, and observe how they react to

merchandise. This information then helps retailers design a shopping experience that will cater to customers and increase sales.

According to Underhill, store organization is critical to the shopping experience. He found that when people enter a store, they need a period to adjust. Almost anything near the entrance will go unnoticed, but move them ten feet in, and they catch the shopper's eye. Retailers can also encourage shoppers to traverse the store by putting commonly purchased items in the back.

Underhill also shows patterns of behavior that differentiate male and female shoppers. In a study that Underhill did for Dockers apparel, he found that men generally look for a pair of trousers in their size and head directly for the checkout without looking at anything else. "The time spent in the section," says Underhill, "was roughly identical to what men devote to shopping for beer in convenience stores." Men are

much less likely to ask for help from employees, and if they can't find what they want, they will just leave. They are also less likely to look at price tags (72% of men compared to 86% of women). But, for that reason, men will also spend more. According to Underhill, men act as providers; although shopping is not their thing, paying is. When men and women are together in the supermarket checkout line, the men almost always pay.

As for women, Underhill found that they generally coolly weigh their purchases, consider the pros and cons, and carefully examine the price. He suggests that women demand more of shopping environments: Men want to find what they want and get out fast; women are more patient and inquisitive. He also found that women like space. In what he calls the "butt-brush effect," Underhill found that when women are touched from behind while shopping, they will immediately move away from the merchandise and try to leave



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the store. The narrower the quarters, the less time a woman is likely to spend there. This is the reason why many cosmetics counters have small recesses which allow shoppers to stand clear.

Today, children are a major segment of the consumer market, with some estimating that children 2–14 directly influence \$188 billion of parental spending. Underhill has a number of suggestions for making stores more kid-friendly. Aisles, especially in the children's department, need to be wide enough to accommodate baby strollers and wandering toddlers. Items geared for kids need to be

placed where children can see and reach them. In one study, Underhill found that kids and the elderly most frequently purchased dog snacks, yet these were placed on high, difficult to reach shelves. When they were moved to lower shelves, sales immediately increased.

Underhill notes that retailers must become adept at controlling the experience of time. In study after study, Underhill discovered that the single most important determinant of shoppers' opinions of a shopping experience is waiting time. If they think the wait wasn't too bad, they'll have positive feedback; if they wait too long, they will think that the service was inept. In his work, Underhill discovered that it is possible to make time appear to go faster for

customers. Perceived waiting time goes faster after interaction with an employee, or even other customers. At Disney World, engineers organized lines to wind back and forth, making lines appear shorter, and encouraging people to talk to one another as they wait. Diversions also help time go faster. Almost anything will do—short videos, stacks of stuff, even the sleazy tabloids at supermarket checkout counters.

So where is anthropology at the mall? It's just about everywhere, from the location of the checkout counter, to the selection of inventory, to the employee who greets you as walk in. By looking at how culture influences the meaning people give to things and how they experience events, anthropology helps retailers design an ideal shopping experience.



## Researching a Store

Paco Underhill leads CEOs through a self-exam—for 30 minutes, they observe the store together. Inevitably they see things they never even thought about. In this exercise, you are going to play CEO a retail chain. Pick a local store, and do the following:

1. As you approach the store, what do you see? Do you know from a distance what is sold there?

2. Stand right outside the store. What do you see in the windows?
3. Go into the store. Are there baskets to put things in? Where are they located?
4. What strikes you as you transition into the store? What attracts your attention?
5. What is the register setup? Do people have to wait, and if so, are there any distractions to help time go faster?
6. Are there any opportunities to touch, feel, or try the merchandise?
7. How is the merchandise grouped? Are things arranged so that the sale of one might prompt the sale of the other? Are they arranged in ways that would appeal to women, men, kids, the elderly?
8. How are nonpublic spaces designed? What are the restrooms like? If there are dressing rooms, are they likely to encourage or discourage sales?

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**cultural text** a way of thinking about culture as a text of significant symbols—words, gestures, drawings, natural objects—that carries meaning

Holmes's interpretation: "[Your brother] was a man of untidy habits—very untidy and careless. He was left with good prospects, but he threw away his chances and finally, taking to drink, he died."

Watson, astounded at the accuracy of Holmes's description of his late brother, asks if it was guesswork. "I never guess," replies Holmes:

I began by stating that your brother was careless. When you observe the lower part of the watch case, you notice that it is not only dented in two places, but it is cut and marked all over from the habit of keeping other hard objects, such as coins or keys, in the same pocket. Surely it is no great feat to assume that a man who treats [an expensive] watch so cavalierly must be a careless man. Neither is it a very far-fetched inference that a man who inherits one article of such value is pretty well provided for in other respects.

"But what about his drinking habits?" asks Watson. Holmes responds:

Look at the innerplate which contains the keyhole [where the watch is wound]. Look at the thousands of scratches all around the hole—marks where the key has slipped. What sober man's key could have scored those grooves? But you will never see a drunkard's watch without them. He winds it at night, and he leaves these traces of his unsteady hand. Where is the mystery in all this? (Doyle 1930, 93)

Had Sherlock Holmes been an anthropologist, he might have been tempted also to draw some inferences about the society in which the watch was manufactured, particularly about their conceptions of time. For example, in some societies, time is task oriented, not clock oriented; time might be measured by how long it takes to cook rice, as in Madagascar. In other societies, time patterns depend on natural events, such as the rising of the sun or the ebb and flow of tides. British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, in his classic account of the life of the Nuer of the Sudan, noted:

The Nuer have no expression equivalent to "time" in our language, and they cannot, therefore, as we can, speak of time as though it were something actual, which passes, can be wasted, can be saved, and so forth. I don't think they ever experience the same feeling of fighting against time because their points of reference are mainly the activities themselves, which are generally of a leisurely character. Events follow a logical order, but they are not controlled by an abstract system, there being no autonomous points of reference to which activities have to conform with precision. Nuer are fortunate. (1940, 103)

An anthropologist might also infer that clocks are instruments of discipline; they tell us when to get up, when to go to bed, when to eat, when to start work, when to stop work. Clocks define our work patterns and our wages may depend on the constant repetition over time of a particular task. Historian E. P. Thompson notes that until the institution of modern notions of time and the need to measure it with clocks, work patterns were characterized by alternating bouts of intense labor and idleness, at least whenever people were in control of their own working lives. He even suggests that this pattern persists today, but only among a few self-employed professionals such as artists, writers, small farmers, and, he suggests, college students.

Watson's brother's watch was a product of Western society, part of its culture. Holmes "read" the watch as if it were a collection of symbols or words, a **cultural text** that revealed the character of its owner. He could just as easily have viewed it as a text inscribed with the symbols that revealed the ideas about time and work that characterized the civilization that produced it.

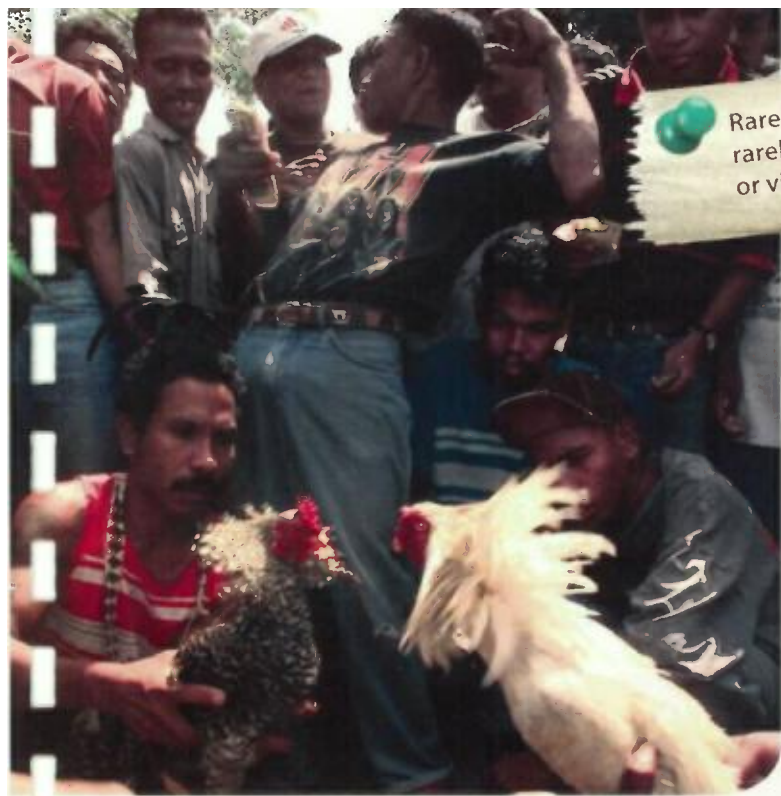
One way to think about culture is as a text of significant symbols: words, gestures, drawings, natural objects—anything, in fact, that carries meaning. To understand another culture, we must be able, as Holmes was with the pocket watch, to decipher the meaning of the symbols that comprise a cultural text. We must be able to interpret the meaning embedded in

the language, objects, gestures, and activities that are shared by members of a society. Fortunately, the ability to decipher a cultural text is part of being human; in our everyday lives, we both read and maintain the text that makes up our own culture. We have learned the



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Rarely is a cockfight without social significance, and rarely do cocks owned by members of the same family or village fight each other.



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meanings behind the symbols that frame our lives, and we share those meanings with others. Our task in understanding another culture is to take the abilities that have enabled us to dwell in our own culture and use them to understand the cultures of others.

## Deciphering the Balinese Cockfight

To illustrate how an anthropologist might decipher a cultural text, imagine yourself coming upon a cockfight on the island of Bali, which Clifford Geertz studied in great detail (1972). You see a ring in which two roosters with sharpened metal spurs attached to their legs are set at each other until one kills the other. Surrounding the fighting cocks are men shouting encouragement to their favorites, each having placed a wager that his favorite will kill its opponent.

What do you make of this? Your first reaction might be shock or disgust at the spectacle of the crowd urging the cocks to bloody combat. After a while you might begin to find similarities to events that are meaningful to you, such as some American sports. But what if, like Sherlock Holmes, you want to understand the meaning of what is happening and what that meaning tells you about how Balinese view their world? If you assume that the cockfight is a feature of Balinese culture, a Balinese text filled with symbols that carry meaning about what it is to be Balinese, how might you read this text?

You might begin by finding out the language the Balinese use to talk about the cockfight. You would no doubt discover that the double entendre of “cock” both as a synonym for rooster and as a euphemism for penis is the same for the Balinese as it is for Americans. The double entendre even produces the same jokes, puns, and obscenities in Bali as it does in the United States. You would discover that *sabung*, the Balinese word for cock, has numerous other meanings and is used metaphorically to mean hero, warrior, champion, political candidate, bachelor, dandy, lady-killer, or tough guy. Court trials, wars, political contests, inheritance disputes, and street arguments are compared with cockfights. Even the island of Bali is thought of as being cock shaped. You would also find that men give their fowls inordinate attention, spending most of their time grooming them and feeding them a special diet. As one of Clifford Geertz’s Balinese informants put it, “We’re all cock crazy.”

Having discovered the importance of cockfights to the Balinese and the connection they make between cocks and men, you next examine the cockfight itself. You learn that cockfights are public events held in arenas from late afternoon until after sundown. Handlers, expert in the task, attach sharp spurs to the cock’s legs; for a cock thought to be superior to an opponent, the spurs are adjusted in a slightly disadvantageous position. The cocks are released in the center of the ring and fly at each other, fighting until one kills the other. The owner of the winning cock takes the carcass of the loser home to eat, and the losing owner is sometimes driven in despair to wreck family shrines. You discover that the Balinese contrast heaven and hell by comparing them to the mood of a man whose cock has just won and the mood of a man whose cock has just lost.

You find out that although the Balinese place odds on cockfights, there are strict social conventions that dictate the wagering. For example, a man will never bet against a cock that is owned by someone of his family group or village or a friend’s family group or village, but he will place large bets against a cock owned by an enemy or the friend of an enemy. Rarely is a cockfight without social significance, and rarely do cocks owned by members of the same family or village fight each other. Moreover, the owners of the cocks, especially in important matches, are usually among the leaders of

their communities. You might learn that cockfights come close to encouraging an open expression of aggression between village and kin group rivals—but not quite, because the cockfight is, as the Balinese put it, “only a cockfight.”

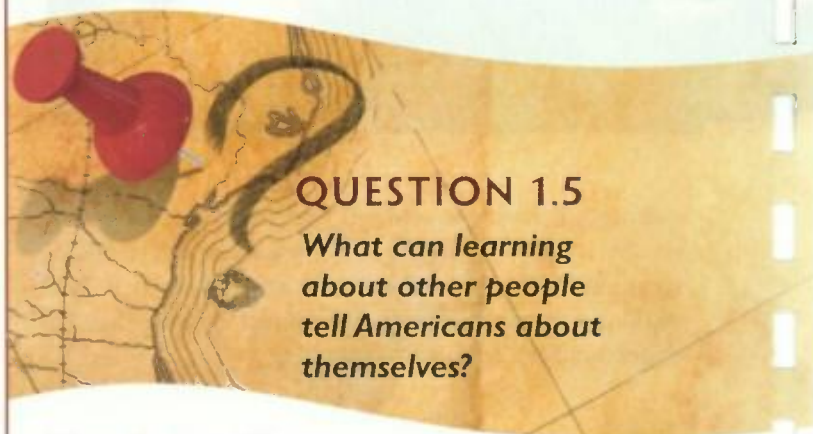
Given the social rules for betting and the ways odds are set, you might reason, as Geertz did, that the Balinese rarely make a profit betting on cockfights. Geertz says, in fact, that most bettors just want to break even. Consequently, the meaning of the cockfight for a Balinese has little to do with economics. The question is, what meaning does the cockfight have for the Balinese? What is the cockfight really about, if it is not about money?

Geertz concludes that the Balinese cockfight is above all about status, about the ranking of people *vis-à-vis* one another. The Balinese cockfight is a text filled with meaning about status as the Balinese see it. Cocks represent men, or, more specifically, their owners. The fate of the cock in the ring is linked, if only temporarily, to the social fate of its owner. Each cock has a following consisting of the owner, the owner’s family, and members of the owner’s village, and these followers “risk” their status by betting on the cockfight. Furthermore, Geertz maintains, the more a match is between near equals, personal enemies, or high-status individuals, the more the match is about status. And the more the match is about status, the closer the identification of cock and man, the finer the cocks, and the more exactly they will be matched. The match will inspire greater emotion and absorption, and the gambling will be more about status and less about economic gain.

For Geertz, the cockfight is like any art form; it takes a highly abstract and difficult concept—status—and depicts it in a way that makes it comprehensible to the participants. The cockfight is meaningful to the Balinese because it tells them something real about their own lives in a way that does not directly affect their lives. They see the struggle for status that is part of everyday life vividly portrayed, even though, in the cockfight itself, no one really gains or loses status in any permanent sense.

A few words of caution are necessary concerning what you might learn about the Balinese from this particular cultural text. First, it would probably be a mistake to assume that the people gain status by being on the winning side or lose it by being on the side of the loser. The status outcomes of the cockfight do not translate into real life any more than the victory of your favorite sports team increases your status. Instead, says Geertz, the cockfight illustrates what status is about for the Balinese. The cockfight is a story the Balinese tell

themselves about themselves. It would also be a mistake to assume that the character of the Balinese could be read directly from the cockfight; a conclusion that the cockfight is indicative of an aggressive, competitive, violent national character would quickly be dispelled. The Balinese are shy about competition and avoid open conflict. The slaughter in the cockfight is not how things are literally, but how they could be. Finally, the cockfight reveals only a segment of the Balinese character, as Watson’s brother’s watch revealed only a segment of its owner’s character. The culture of a people, like the possessions of a person, is an ensemble of texts—collections of symbols and meanings—that must be viewed together to provide a full understanding.



## QUESTION 1.5

*What can learning about other people tell Americans about themselves?*

## Studying Your Own Culture

Anthropologists do not limit themselves to the study of cultures that are different from their own. They often apply concepts and techniques that are useful in understanding and interpreting other cultures to understand and interpret their own. One of the objectives of studying other cultures is to help us recognize the meanings we impose on our experiences. Whether we approach other cultures as anthropologists, as travelers, or as professionals who need to communicate with people of other cultures, the confrontation with other ways of believing and behaving should cause us to reflect on our own way of viewing the world. To illustrate, let us try to step outside ourselves and objectify an experience whose meaning we take for granted. Pretend you are a Balinese anthropologist who suddenly comes upon a spectacle as important to Americans as the cockfight is to the Balinese: a football game.

As a Balinese, your first reaction to this American text might be one of horror and revulsion, as you see men violently attacking one other while thousands

Anthropologists have found that football, like the Balinese cockfight, is carefully controlled by fixed rules so there is only one outcome: almost always there is a winner and a loser.



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cheer them on to even more violent conflict. As you settle in, however, you soon find some obvious similarities between the football game and the more familiar cockfight. Both are competitions in which the spectators sort themselves into supporters of one side or the other. In fact, in football, the sorting is even more carefully arranged, because supporters of one team are seated on one side of the arena and fans of the other team are seated opposite them.

Your next step (as in interpreting the cockfight) is to examine the language Americans use to refer to the football game. You discover that they use similar expressions in talking about football and war: *defensive line*, *blitz*, *bomb*. Coaches talk about getting “revenge” for defeats, as generals might talk about getting revenge on the battlefield. You conclude that Americans seem to feel the same way about football as they do about war.

One of the words Americans use to refer to players is *jock*, a term also applied to an athletic support garment worn by men. Because you see only men attacking

one another, you might assume that the gender meanings of cockfights and football games are also similar. *Cocks* stand for men; football players are men. Moreover, football players dress to emphasize their maleness: large shoulders, narrow hips, big heads, and pronounced genitals. You might test your interpretation with an American spectator, who would argue that football gear is simply protective but, if pressed, would have to admit that it is used offensively as much as defensively. Furthermore, you see young women participating in the spectacle as cheerleaders, dressed to highlight their femininity in the same way the players dress to accent their masculinity. This contrast between male and female in American society leads you to conclude that football is also a story about the meanings that Americans ascribe to gender differences.

You soon discover that winning and losing football games is as important to Americans as winning and losing cockfights is to Balinese. Winners engage in frenzied celebrations called *victory parties*, and losers are often despondent in defeat. As anthropologists know, this is

not always the case in other societies. When the Gahuku-Gama of the Highlands of New Guinea started playing soccer, they always played until a committee of elders decided that the score was tied, and then the match was considered completed. So you speculate that football is also about the meanings that Americans give to the idea of success. You learn that success in America (like status in Bali) is a highly abstract idea; because it is abstract, its meaning is embedded in activities whose meanings are shared by members of the society. You need to find answers to certain questions about the meaning of success in American society: How is success defined? How is it obtained? Why doesn't everyone who follows all the rules for gaining success attain it?

Through your fieldwork, you find that Americans believe that "all men are created equal" and every person has (or at least should have) an equal opportunity to succeed. People compete for success, and they ought to compete on an equal footing, on a "level playing field," as some put it. Success, Americans believe, comes from hard work, sacrifice, and self-denial. But you wonder how Americans know that hard work, sacrifice, and denial bring success. Aren't there instances where they do not? How do Americans explain why women and minorities succeed less often than white males do? And why do some people achieve more success than others? You conclude that it is, in fact, impossible to prove directly in real life the correctness of this American success model, which maintains that hard work and sacrifice lead to success. Faith in the value of work and self-denial must be generated in other ways. As a Balinese anthropologist studying the American custom of football, you conclude, then, that in addition to its meanings relative to war and gender, the meaning of American football also lies in its demonstration of the American success model as it is supposed to work.

Anthropologists have found that football, like the Balinese cockfight, is carefully controlled by fixed rules so there is only one outcome: almost always there is a

winner and a loser. As a text that carries meaning about success, *who* wins is unimportant; it is only important that *someone* wins. ("A tie," it has been said, "is like kissing your sister.") But more than that, football tells Americans what it takes to win or lose. Success in football not only takes hard work and sacrifice, but, as William Arens points out, specialization, mechanization, and submission to a dominant authority—the coach. Two other anthropologists, Susan P. Montague and Robert Morais, note that the football team looks very much like one of the most important settings in which Americans seek success—business corporations. Both football teams and corporations are compartmentalized, hierarchical, and highly sophisticated in the coordinated application of a differentiated, specialized technology, and they both try to turn out a winning product in a competitive market. Football coaches are sometimes hired to deliver inspirational lectures to corporate groups on "winning"; they may draw analogies between football and corporate life or portray sport as a means of preparing for life in the business world.

Anthropologists therefore can conclude (as did

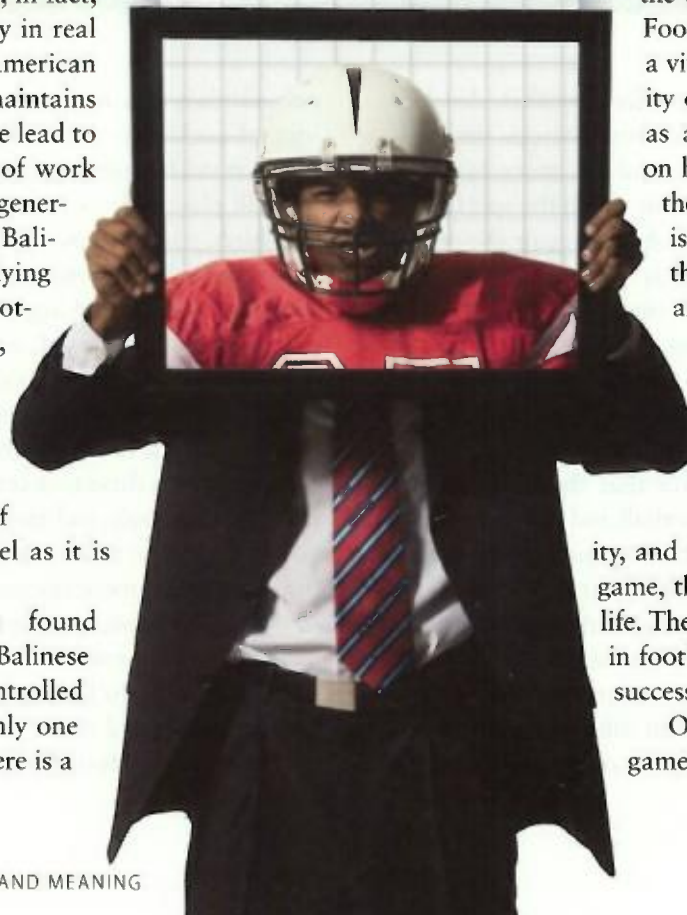
Montague and Morais) that football provides for Americans, as the cockfight does for the Balinese, a small-scale rendering of a concept that is too complex to be directly comprehended.

In the case of the Balinese, it's status; in the case of Americans, it's success. Football is compelling because it is a vivid demonstration of the validity of the value of success, as well as a dramatic set of instructions on how to attain it. Consequently, the audience for a football game is led to believe that if the rules that govern the world of football are equated with those of the business world, then the principles that govern success on the football field must also apply in the world of work.

That is, if hard work, dedication, submission to authority, and teamwork lead to success in a game, they will lead to success in real life. The rules by which success is won in football can also be applied to win success in the real world.

Of course, football is also a game that people enjoy. Analyz-

Both football teams and corporations try to turn out a winning product in a competitive market.



ing it should not reduce our enjoyment of it but rather heighten our fascination with it. By looking at football from the same perspective as Geertz viewed the cockfight, we should gain an understanding of why the meaning carried by the game is important. Although understanding the cockfight heightens our appreciation of the football game, it also helps us to see similarities between Americans and Balinese. If you were shocked by the cockfight, seeing the similarities to football should lessen that shock, while at the same time making football seem just a bit more exotic.

## An Anthropologist Looks at a “Happy Meal”

Nothing is too mundane to provide insights into the culture of which it is a part. Take the kids’ combo meal, variations of which are offered by many fast-food establishments in the United States. It usually consists of a hamburger, French fries, a cola drink, and a plastic toy, often a Barbie doll, a Hot Wheels car, or something related to a popular film. What can we learn about the culture of the United States by looking beyond the “taken-for-granted” quality of this meal? Among other things, we can get some idea of American demographic and ecological patterns, agricultural and industrial history, and gender roles.

Why, for example, is meat the center of the meal? Most cultures have diets centered on some complex carbohydrate—rice, wheat, manioc, yams, taro—or something made from these—bread, pasta, tortillas, and so on. Meat and fish are generally at the edge of the meal. Why is beef the main ingredient, rather than some other meat, such as pork?

Anthropologists Marvin Harris and Eric Ross note that one advantage of beef is its suitability for the outdoor grill, which became more popular as people moved from cities into suburbs. Suburban cooks soon discovered that pork patties crumbled and fell through the grill, whereas beef patties held together better. In addition, to reduce the risk of trichinosis, pork had to be cooked until it was gray, which makes it very tough.


Beef farmers, as well as the farmers who grew the corn fed to cows to achieve a desirable fat content, benefited from the definition of a hamburger set by the United States Department of Agriculture:

“Hamburger” shall consist of chopped fresh and/or frozen beef with or without the addition of beef fat as such and/or seasonings, shall not contain more than 30 percent fat, and shall not contain added water, phosphates, binders, or extenders. Beef cheek (trimmed Beef cheeks) may be used in the preparation of hamburgers only in accordance with the conditions prescribed in paragraph (a) of this section. (quoted in Harris 1987, 125)



As Marvin Harris notes, we can eat ground pork and ground beef, but we can’t combine them and still call it a hamburger. Even when lean, grass-fed beef is used for hamburger and fat must be added as a binder, the fat must come from beef scraps, not from vegetables or a different animal. This definition of the hamburger protects both the beef industry and the corn farmer, whose income is linked to cattle production. Moreover, it helps the fast-food industry, because the definition of hamburger permits the use of inexpensive scraps of fat. Thus an international beef patty was created that overcame what Harris calls the “pig’s natural superiority as a converter of grain to flesh.”

The cola drink that accompanies our hamburger is the second part of the fat- and sugar-centered diet that has come to characterize our culture. People in the United States consume, on average, about 60 pounds of sugar a year. Why so much? Sugar, as anthropologist



Sidney Mintz suggests, has no nutritional properties, but does provide a quick and inexpensive energy boost for hardworking laborers with little time for a more nutritious meal. Sugar also serves as an excellent complement to the fat in hamburgers, because it has what nutritionists call “go-away” qualities that remove the fat coating and the beef aftertaste from the mouth.

We can also learn from the the kids’ meal that the fat and sugar diet is highly environmentally destructive. Raising beef is among the most environmentally inefficient and destructive form of raising food. For example, half the water consumed in the United States is used to grow grain to feed cattle, and the amount of water used to produce ten pounds of steak equals the household consumption of a family for an entire year. Fifteen times more water is needed to produce a pound of beef protein than an equivalent amount of plant protein. Cattle raising plays a major role in the destruction of tropical forests in Brazil, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras, where forests have been leveled to create pasture for cattle. Because burning is used to clear most of the forest, the creation of cattle pasture also creates carbon dioxide and, according to some environmentalists, contributes significantly to global warming.

*People in the United States consume, on average, about 60 pounds of sugar a year.*

Sugar is no less destructive a crop. Forests must be cleared to plant sugar; wood or fossil fuel must be burned in the evaporation process; wastewater is produced in extracting sucrose from the sugarcane; and more fuel is burned in the refining process. Contemporary sugar production in Hawaii not only has destroyed forests, but waste products from processing have severely damaged marine environments. “Big sugar,” as the sugar industry is called in Florida, is largely responsible for the pollution, degradation, and virtual destruction of the Everglades.

Thus one of “texts” anthropologists can read from a Happy Meal relates to the extent to which consumption patterns associated with our culture create waste and environmental damage. Because of these consumption patterns, the average child born in the United States will, in the course of his or her

lifetime, do twice the environmental damage of a Swedish child, 3 times that of an Italian child, 13 times that of a Brazilian child, 35 times that of an Indian child, and 280 times that of a Chadian or Haitian child.

And what of Barbie dolls and Hot Wheels? Clearly there is a message about the definition of gender roles, because girls are expected to choose dolls and boys, cars. But one can deduce, if one looks closely enough, even more about our culture from this meal.

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**E’VE EXAMINED SOME OF THE LESSONS WE CAN LEARN ABOUT OUR CULTURE**

**FROM FAST FOOD MEALS.**

But there are obviously others. See what you might deduce about the following dimensions of life in the United States from the fast food meals.

1. What can you say about gender roles in the United States?
2. What can you deduce about race relations?
3. What can you say about the physical attributes of people favored in the United States?



