

## CHAPTER 2: CULTURE

### CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

1. Know the defining dimensions of culture. In particular, understand what it means that culture is learned, symbolic, shared, all-encompassing, and integrated.
2. Consider how people may avoid, subvert, and manipulate particular cultural “rules” and expectations, and know how anthropologists today tend to view and analyze such practices.
3. Understand and be able to provide examples of cultural universalities, generalities, and particularities.
4. Identify the three levels of culture and address why it is important to differentiate among them.
5. Distinguish between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism and consider how both relate to human rights.
6. Identify and understand the mechanisms of cultural change.
7. Know how to define *globalization* and consider how people may affect and be affected by the interrelated forces of globalization.

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

#### I. INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES

- A. Americans are enculturated to view themselves as individuals. In contrast, this chapter views people as members of groups first and individuals second.
  1. For example, different national cultures have their own standards for appropriate physical displays of affection. Consequently, the bodily interaction of a Brazilian and an American might lead one to construct the other as either cold or overbearing.
- B. Thinking that there is only one right or natural way of doing such things is an example of *ethnocentrism*.

#### II. WHAT IS CULTURE?

- A. Edward Tylor defines *culture* as, “That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”
- B. *Enculturation* is the process by which a child learns his or her culture.
- C. **Culture Is Learned**
  1. Cultural learning is unique to humans.
  2. Cultural learning is the accumulation of knowledge about experiences and information not perceived directly by the organism but transmitted to it through symbols.

- a. *Symbols* are signs that have no necessary or natural connection with the things they signify or for which they stand.
- b. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines culture as ideas based on cultural learning and symbols.
- 3. Culture is learned through direct instruction and observation, providing conscious and unconscious means for the acquisition of cultural knowledge.
- 4. Anthropologists accept a doctrine named in the nineteenth century the “psychic unity of man,” which asserts that all human populations share the same capacity for culture.

**D. Culture Is Symbolic**

- 1. The human ability to use symbols is the basis of culture. (A *symbol* is defined as something verbal or nonverbal within a particular language or culture that comes to stand for something else.)
- 2. While human symbol use is usually linguistic, a symbol is anything that is used to represent any other thing, when the relationship between the two is arbitrary and conventional (e.g., a flag).
- 3. Other primates have demonstrated a rudimentary ability to use symbols, but only humans have elaborated cultural abilities such as to learn, to communicate, to store, to process, and to use symbols.

**E. Culture Is Shared**

- 1. Culture is an attribute not of individuals per se but of individuals as members of groups.
- 2. The social transmission of culture tends to unify people by providing them with common experiences.
- 3. Such experiences in turn shape people’s values, memories, and expectations.

**F. Culture and Nature**

- 1. Cultural habits, perceptions, and inventions mold human nature in many directions.
- 2. Our culture and cultural changes affect the ways in which we perceive nature, human nature, and the natural world.

**G. Culture Is All-Encompassing**

- 1. The anthropological concept of culture includes all aspects of human social life.
- 2. Everyone is “cultured,” not just wealthy people with elite educations.

**H. Culture Is Integrated**

- 1. A culture is an integrated, patterned system: Changes in one dimension of culture will likely generate changes in other dimensions.
- 2. Core values are sets of ideas, attitudes, symbols, and judgments that further integrate a particular culture and distinguish it from others.

**I. Culture Is Instrumental, Adaptive, and Maladaptive**

- 1. In addition to biological adaptations, humans rely upon social and cultural means of adaptation.
- 2. Culture is also used as an instrument to fulfill our needs.
  - a. These include our basic biological needs for food, drink, shelter, comfort and reproduction.

- b. They also include our psychological and emotional needs for such things as friendship, companionship and approval.
- 3. Sometimes adaptive behavior that offers short-term benefits to particular individuals may harm the environment and threaten a group's long-term survival, thus making certain cultural traits, patterns, and inventions ultimately maladaptive.

### III. CULTURE'S EVOLUTIONARY BASIS

- A. The human capacity for culture has an evolutionary basis that extends back at least 2.6 million years.
  - 1. Similarities between humans and apes are apparent in anatomy, brain structure, genetics, and biochemistry.
  - 2. We are most closely related to chimpanzees and gorillas.
    - a. *Hominids*: chimps and gorillas
    - b. *Hominins*: a group that leads to humans but *not* chimps and gorillas
  - 3. Many human traits reflect the fact that our ancestors lived in trees, including: grasping, manual dexterity, opposable thumbs, depth and color vision, a large brain, a substantial parental investment in limited offspring, sociality, and cooperation.
  - 4. Manual dexterity and depth perception are essential in manipulating objects and in the human ability to make tools.
  - 5. Brain size among primates exceeds that of most mammals and is the key feature in our capacity to learn.
- B. **What We Share with Other Primates**
  - 1. Learning: the ability to learn from experience and adapt behavior and social patterns when faced with environmental changes
  - 2. Tool use (stones, "termite")
  - 3. The ability to throw objects
  - 4. Hunting: other primates, especially chimpanzees, are avid hunters.
- C. **How We Differ from Other Primates**
  - 1. Cooperation and sharing is much more developed in humans.
  - 2. Human females lack a visible estrus cycle and have concealed ovulation.
  - 3. Marriage leads to exogamy, kinship groups, and lifelong ties with children.

### IV. UNIVERSALITY, GENERALITY, AND PARTICULARITY

- A. Anthropologists distinguish among the universal, the generalized, and the particular in studying human diversity.
  - 1. *Cultural universals* are certain biological, psychological, social, and cultural features that are found in every culture.
  - 2. *Cultural generalities* include features that are common to several but not all human groups.
  - 3. *Cultural particularities* are features that are unique to certain cultural traditions.
- B. **Universals and Generalities**
  - 1. Universals:

- a. Some biologically based universals include a long period of infant dependency, year-round sexuality, and a complex brain that enables us to use symbols, languages, and tools.
- b. Some social universals include life in groups and families of some kind.
- 2. Generalities:
  - a. Generalities occur in certain times and places, but not in all cultures.
  - b. The nuclear family is one cultural generality that is present in many but not all societies. The view of the nuclear family as the “natural” family unit is an ethnocentric one.
  - c. Cultural generalities may arise through cultural borrowing (diffusion), inheritance from a common cultural ancestor, or through domination imposed by one powerful group over another.

**C. Particularity: Patterns of Culture**

- 1. Practices that are unique to a single place, culture, or society are *cultural particulars*.
- 2. Cultures are integrated and patterned differently and display tremendous variation and diversity.

**V. CULTURE AND THE INDIVIDUAL: AGENCY AND PRACTICE**

- A. Humans have the ability to avoid, manipulate, subvert, and change the rules and patterns of their own cultures.
  - 1. Culture is contested, and supposedly common symbols may have radically different meanings to different individuals and groups in the same culture.
  - 2. Some anthropologists find it useful to distinguish between “ideal” culture, or the normative descriptions of a culture given by its people, and “real” culture, or behavior as observed by an anthropologist.
  - 3. Culture may be described as having interrelated public and individual dimensions.
  - 4. Contemporary anthropologists tend to view culture as a process in action, practice, and resistance, rather than as an entity transmitted across generations.
- B. *Agency* is defined as the actions that individuals take, both alone and in groups, in forming and transforming cultural identities.
- C. *Practice theory* is an approach to culture that focuses on how varied individuals, through their ordinary and extraordinary actions and practices, manage to influence, create, and transform the world in which they live.
- D. Levels of Culture**
  - 1. *National culture* refers to the experiences, beliefs, learned behavior patterns, values, and institutions that are shared by citizens of the same nation.
  - 2. *International culture* refers to cultural practices that extend beyond and across national boundaries.
  - 3. *Subcultures* are identifiable cultural patterns and traditions associated with particular groups in the same complex society.
- E. Ethnocentrism, Cultural Relativism, and Human Rights**

1. *Ethnocentrism* is the tendency to view one's own culture as superior and to apply one's own values in judging the behavior and beliefs of people raised in other cultures.
  - a. What may seem alien to us might appear normal, proper, and prized elsewhere.
  - b. The fact of cultural diversity calls ethnocentrism into question.
  - c. What happens when cultural practices, values, and rights come into conflict with human rights?
2. Some cultures in the Middle East and Africa have customs requiring female genital modification. Clitoridectomy and infibulation are two such practices.
3. These procedures are traditional where practiced, but opposed by human rights advocates for infringing on the basic human right to control one's body and sexuality. (Does circumcision of infants in the United States, and other male genital operations, fall into a similar category?)
4. The concept of *cultural relativism* asserts that behavior in one culture should not be judged by the standards of another culture.
5. Cultural relativism is not a moral position in anthropology but a methodological one; in order to understand a culture, we must try to understand how people in that culture see things.
6. The concept of *human rights* invokes the realm of justice and morality superior to countries, cultures, and religions; rights that are vested in the individual.
7. *Cultural rights* are vested not in individuals but in groups and include a group's ability to preserve its cultural traditions.
8. An understanding of cultural relativism and cultural rights does not preclude an anthropologist from making a judgment based on what he refers to as international standards of justice and morality.

## VI. MECHANISMS OF CULTURAL CHANGE

- A. *Diffusion*, defined as the spread of cultural traits through borrowing between cultures, has been a source of cultural change throughout human history.
  1. Diffusion can be direct, when two cultures trade, intermarry, or wage war on one another; or indirect, when cultural practices or traits move from group A to group C via group B without any firsthand contact between groups A and C.
  2. Diffusion can be forced when one culture subjugates another and imposes its customs on the dominated group, as through warfare or colonization.
- B. *Acculturation* is the exchange of cultural features that results when groups come into continuous firsthand contact.
  1. Acculturation may occur in any or all groups engaged in such contact.
  2. Pidgin is an example of acculturation, because it is a language form that develops by blending elements from different languages in order to facilitate communication between the populations in contact such as in trade relationships.

- C. *Independent invention* is the process by which humans innovate, creatively finding solutions to problems.
1. Cultural generalities are partly explained by the independent invention of similar responses to comparable cultural and environmental circumstances.
  2. The independent invention of agriculture in the Middle East and Mexico is an example.

## VII. GLOBALIZATION

- A. *Globalization* encompasses a series of processes that work to promote change in a world in which nations and people are increasingly interlinked and mutually dependent.
1. Promoting such linkages are economic and political forces, along with modern systems of transportation and communication.
  2. Information technologies, in particular the Internet, have been influential in the spread of information, the emergence of a transnational culture of consumption, and the ease with which people can communicate across vast distances.
  3. People must increasingly cope with often unwanted forces generated by progressively larger systems.
  4. New forms of political mobilization and cultural expression are emerging from the interplay of local, regional, national, international, and global cultural forces.

### B. Globalization: Its Meaning and Its Nature

1. There are two meanings of globalization: as fact, and as contested ideology and policy.
2. *Globalization as fact* is the spread and connectedness of production, communication, and technologies across the world. This is the meaning primarily used by this textbook.
  - a. There are three factors contributing to globalization as it exists today: the speed of global communication, the scale of global networks, and the volume of international transactions.
  - b. The modern global economy has three key features (Castells, 2001): it is based on knowledge and information, its networks are transnational, and its core activities can proceed as a unit in real time even if they are dispersed.
3. *Globalization as contested ideology and policy* are the efforts by international financial powers to create a global free market for goods and services.
  - a. This meaning of globalization has generated much opposition by anti-globalization activists who claim that policies of institutions such as the WTO operate at the expense of the workers and the poor.
4. Globalization can lead to unemployment through outsourcing, increased influence by corporations over national economic policies, and an increase in the gap between rich and poor both within and between nations.

5. Globalization is propelled by marketing, which strives to entice people, especially youth, into constructing their social and cultural identities through consumption of brands (such as Nike or Apple).

### **VIII. Features:**

#### **Appreciating Anthropology: Remote and Poked, Anthropology's Dream Tribe**

1. The Ariaal have been studied for decades because of their relative isolation and nomadic-pastoralist economy. Anthropologists from around the world have come to their communities to ask them all manner of questions.
2. The Ariaal have been studying the anthropologists as well. While these people find anthropologists odd, the only real complaint they have about anthropologists is that some of them fail to share the results of their research.

#### **Appreciating Diversity—Culture Clash: Makah Seek Return to Whaling Past**

1. While cultures have never been isolated, local groups have increasingly had to contend with national and international groups having their own sets of customs and beliefs.
2. In the dispute between the Makah and animal rights groups, we see conflicting claims about which rights—animal, cultural, economic, legal, and human—should take precedence.

### **LECTURE TOPICS**

1. Discuss the social history of early definitions of culture, and address how anthropological notions of culture are both similar and different from these.
2. Discuss the deep tenacity of particular social values, illustrating this effect by citing cases in which people have gone to great sacrifices to maintain the value systems of their cultures.
3. Describe the process of enculturation to a subculture with which you are familiar, such as the academic professional subculture.
4. Using one particular cultural practice (e.g., clitoridectomy), discuss the implications of a culturally relativist position. Clarify the difference between moral relativism and cultural relativism, addressing how cultural relativism presents an analytic stance through which to consider the significance of particular cultural practices for the people who experience them.
5. Discuss how cultures have never been completely isolated, bounded geographically, but rather have been characterized by the movement of people, technologies, and goods across social relations and networks.

6. Analyze the different contemporary uses of the term *globalization* among anthropologists and in social discourse. If we agree that such a process exists, is this a new phenomenon? What are the different positions one might take on the manifestations and effects of globalization? Question the students on what they think constitutes globalization and whether they view such processes as largely positive or negative. How is even the discussion of globalization (as in current concerns over global terrorism) a social force with which people must contend in their daily lives?

## SUGGESTED FILMS

### *Cry of the Yurok*

1991; 58 minutes

This film presents the Yurok, California's largest Native American tribe, from their arrival in that area to their struggles with Euro-Americans in the nineteenth century to their contemporary experiences. From Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

### Series: *Our Developing World: Regional Political Geography*

Ten-part series, 30 minutes each

This series investigates global civics in a range of developing nations from all over the world. Some of the themes discussed in the series include human rights, minority rights, health, and economic and environmental challenges and advances. The titles in the series are *Central America: Costa Rica*; *Central America: Cuba*; *South America: Brazil*; *South America: Paraguay*; *Africa: Tunisia, Libya, Egypt*; *Africa: Sierra Leone, Ghana, Kenya*; *Africa: Tanzania, Mozambique, Lesotho*; *Asia: Mongolia, China, Nepal*; *Asia: Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam*; and *South Pacific-Oceania: The Philippines, Kiribati*. From Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

### Series: *Global Issues in Our Developing World*

Four-part series, 30–33 minutes each

This series presents case studies that address problems and issues common to various developing countries around the world. Each film compares a common theme in three different developing countries. Titles in the series are *Ecology and the Environment: Galapagos, Mauritania, Madagascar*; *Economic Development: Colombia, Bolivia, India*; *Human Rights: Haiti, Turkey, Oman*; and *Drugs and Health: Peru, Uganda, Turkey*. From Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

### *Our Identity, Our Land*

1994; 60 minutes

This film depicts the struggle of the Kanaka Maoli, an indigenous community on the Big Island of Hawaii—who lost their traditional land to nonindigenous settlers and had no treaties to protect them—and their attempts to keep their traditional land *kapu* (sacred). From Films for the Humanities and Sciences.