

Culture and Its Components

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I. INTRODUCTION

Historians use 'culture' to refer to the so-called 'higher' achievements of group life or of a period of history - specifically art, music, literature, philosophy, religion and science. But in sociology and anthropology 'culture' means neither the *refinement of a person* nor the *refinements of society*. E.B.Tylor, an English anthropologist defined culture as "*that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.*" Two contemporary anthropologists defined culture as those historically created selective processes which channel men's reactions both to internal and external stimuli.

Culture has many synonymous expressions such as

1. Learned Ways of Behaviour: Culture is not behaviour but the 'grooves' or 'channels' in which human behaviour proceeds. Culture is transmitted not through the germplasm but only through learning, and learning requires social interaction. No one can acquire culture without association with human beings, and once acquired, it can gradually be lost deprivation of this association. So in short, culture is learned.

2. Social Heritage: Culture or the social heritage, is the memory of the human race. Each generation contributes something to this stream, but in each generation, too, something is left behind, some 'sediment' drops to the bottom and is lost to society. For the most part, what is lost is no longer required; it disappeared because it became obsolete. *Language* is the most important of all vehicles for the transmission of culture. Without language, culture cannot accumulate. Culture is also something that is *shared*, not something that one person alone can possess. It is always something adopted, used, believed, practiced, or possessed by more than one person. It depends on group life for its existence.

3. The Superorganic: Culture, from one point of view, has a certain degree of independence from inorganic and organic factors, and in this reference, it is referred to as '*the superorganic*'. The word '*superorganic*' is useful when it implies that what may be the same phenomenon from a physical or biological point of view may be quite a different phenomenon from a cultural point of view. But unfortunate when it implies that '*what is cultural is not natural*' or 'culture' is somehow superior to '*nature*'.

4. Design For Living: Sometimes culture means simply the '*way of life*' of people or their '*design for living*'. Kulckholm and Kelly define it as follows: "*A culture is a historically derived system of explicit and implicit designs for living, which tends to be shared by all or specially designated members of a group*". This concept of culture is particularly useful in distinguishing one society or group from another. It suggests that culture varies from one society or group to another, in different places at the same time and in the same place at different times. Cultures do not necessarily coincide with the political boundaries of national states or with the eras of historical times.

COMPONENTS

Many sociologists have classified the content of culture into two large components: **Material culture** and **Non- Material culture**. "*Everything that is not material*", however, may include items of several fundamentally different kinds, and this tendency to obscure significant distinctions is a logical weakness of residual categories. Therefore, Robert Bierstedt in '*The Social Order*' adopted a threefold classification of the content of culture. According to him, the three main components of culture are **Ideas, Norms and Things**.

IDEAS

It represents the *thinking* part of the culture. In literate societies, ideas are recorded and written down and stored in books and libraries. Ideas thus make up the *literature* of the society in the broadest possible sense of that word. In non-literate societies, they constitute the *lore* and *legends* of the tribe. The sociologist is not interested in the truth or falsity of the notions that prevail in various societies but only in the fact that some notions do *prevail* and help to determine the unique character of the lives that people live in these societies. Men and societies are sustained by false notions and true notions alike, and what may seem true in one society may seem false in another, and the other way around.

We can generally say that there are three classes of ideas - *those which are true, those which are false, and those whose truth and falsity have not yet been determined*. Like cribs in which we are placed at birth, they

are ready for us when we enter our society, and we accept a very large number of them, as we do the cribs, without *criticism* and without *conscious deliberation*. Ideas can be of many types such as *Scientific truths, Religious beliefs, Myths, Legends, Literature, Superstitions, Proverbs, Folklore, Aphorisms etc.*

NORMS

Norms refer to the *ways of doing*. Most of the things we do as members of society and most of the things we refrain from doing are *cultural* in character. As sociologists, we are interested in the type of behaviour that is considered socially acceptable or unacceptable. *Behaviour* may be a mere impulse or response; *conduct*, on the other hand, implies the presence of norms, which are cultural. Our conduct conforms to certain standards that are appropriate in the society in which we live. These *standards* and *rules* and *expectations* are what we call norms. Without norms, social life would be impossible and there would be no order in society. Norms are a general guide to conduct. Whatever we do, whenever and wherever we do it, falls into a certain pattern that is set for us by our society. The norms of one society are *different* from the norms of another. For example, some people use water for drinking, others only for washing. In some societies, we greet a person by shaking hands, in some by rubbing noses. The rules of grammar in different languages, similarly are norms. There are norms for meeting, eating, drinking, working, communicating and so on.

II. MATERIAL

This component consists of things; it is the *material culture*. It includes all of the material items that the members of a society have and use. Norms and ideas, to some extent at least, can be inferred from the material remains and archaeologists can reconstruct the life of these societies. It indicates that there is a close connection between material and the other parts of culture. If however, we cannot evaluate societies in terms of their material culture, we can at least compare them and differentiate them on this basis.

It is necessary to notice that the material culture of a society precedes the birth of a given individual in that society and to that material culture he must adjust his life. For example, in our societies, children learn to ride scooters, and bicycles and later drive automobiles because these vehicles are presented to them by their society and are part of their culture. The size of the house in which we live, and the arrangement of its room affect our patterns of daily living. Similar *material arrangements* as these influence our behaviour and determine our conduct in both general and specific situations.

Material culture, in some sense at least, is more rigid and unyielding than ideas and norms. Material may include: *machines, tools, utensils, buildings, roads, artifacts, clothing, furniture, foodstuffs, medicines, vehicles, bridges etc.*

IDEOLOGIES

Ideology is an *idea supported by a norm*. We are encouraged to believe it, not because it is true, but because such belief is regarded as *right and proper* in our society.

The ideas contained in the whole of mathematics, various sciences, and those to be found in almanacs, telephone, directions, catalogues, and historical records may be true or false, but not good or bad, proper or improper; they are not ideologies and we gain no moral approbation by accepting or rejecting them. Whereas, ideologies are the ideas that we have a social obligation to believe, the ideas that we are required to believe if we wish to remain in good standing in our social groups. All societies exert *pressure* upon their members to adhere to some beliefs and reject others. *Propositions* asserting, for example, that there is only one God, that the human soul is immortal, that anarchists are dangerous -all these and hundreds, like them, are ideologies.

Each society regards its central ideologies as sacred and tolerates no *skepticism* with respect to them. Indeed, it is a significant sociological fact that the pressure to believe them is frequently stronger than the pressure to conform to the norms of conduct to which they are related. In all religions, sinners may sometimes be '*saved*', but unbelievers never. Thus, it is pardonable to violate the norms if only one accepts the ideology. It is unpardonable, on the other hand, to reject the ideology no matter how closely one conforms to the norms. Skepticism, in short, is more serious than '*sin*'. It indicates the very great importance of ideologies in the social life of man.

TECHNOLOGIES

Technologies are also referred to as technical norms or, more simply, as techniques. They are a combination of norms and material components of culture.

One may have an automobile and not know how to drive it. Similarly, there are norms for using tools. It is considered inappropriate, and indeed it is usually inefficient, to use a chisel as a screwdriver or a screwdriver as a chisel. To do violates a technical norm. The new bride, for example, may have all of the ingredients for baking a cake, but unless she puts them together in accordance with the norms specified in the recipe, the result may not be satisfactory.

Technologies, of course, differ from society to society, and societies may accordingly be compared with respect to their levels of technological achievement. Some sociologists regard technology as the most important constituent of culture and make it a prime factor in the explanation of social change.

SUBSIDIARY CULTURE CONCEPTS

There are various subsidiary concepts of culture which are an essential part of it and need to be defined.

CULTURE TRAIT AND CULTURE ITEM

This term refers to a *small bit of culture* in any one of the three components ie. Ideas, Norms and Material. We should be inclined to use the word 'item' when referring to material, either 'item' or 'trait' when referring to an idea, and probably, the word 'trait' when referring to a norm. For example, a spark plug is an item of material culture etc.

CULTURE COMPLEX

Items combine with item and trait with trait to form culture complexes. In other words, it is a *combination of culture items or culture traits*. Thus, for example, handshaking may be considered only one practice in a culture complex of meeting and greeting practices that include polite forms of address and so on.

CULTURE PATTERN AND CULTURE CONFIGURATION

Combinations of culture traits and culture items - culture complexes- themselves combine with other combinations and give us culture patterns or culture configurations. Sometimes 'pattern' is the larger term and sometimes 'configuration' but they both refer, despite imprecise usage, to the major constellations of culture that appear in all societies and that distinguish one society from another. They designate combinations not only of ideas or norms or material but of all three together. For example, all kinds of polite practices combine to make up the distinctive cultural patterns of etiquette or the configurations of hospitality that characterize various societies.

ACCULTURATION

The process of *acquiring* the culture of a different society from one's own is called acculturation. It occurs on a large scale when one society is invaded by another. Acculturation is inevitable when people meet. Sometimes, of course, the traits of one culture do not harmonize well with those of another and their transmission is resisted. Acculturation, like education, is a *constant process* in society. It is the result of the *contact* of cultures.

CULTURE DIFFUSION

It refers to the *spread or diffusion* of culture from one society to another by various means, such as; modern means of communications and transportation, soldiers and settlers, missionaries and migrant workers and more. None of the complex societies to be found on earth today created more than a very few of the total number of cultural elements to be found in it. All of them have '*borrowed*' elements from other societies. Indeed, Ralph Linton has estimated that in no case does the number of indigenous or native elements exceed *10 per cent* of the total culture.

CULTURAL LAG

Cultural lag, a concept introduced by William F. Ogburn, refers to a situation in which one part or phase of culture lags behind another and causes imbalance or disharmony in society. For example, political arrangements generally lag behind technological, demographic, and other kinds of changes. The law in general is frequently laggard, and in many instances does not change quickly enough to meet social requirements.

CULTURAL SURVIVAL

Sometimes, cultural traits, items, or complexes survive in a society long after their original function has disappeared and sometimes even after the initial reason for their establishment has been forgotten. For example, military drill, once important as a means of moving a body of foot soldiers from one place to another in the shortest possible time, is merely a cultural survival in an age of rockets and jets, and atoms.

CULTURAL CONFLICT

The term culture conflict is an ellipsis; that is, it is people, groups or societies who are in conflict with one another, not cultures. Their contention, however, usually has a cultural base. For example, the religious wars, and the conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the U.S.A .

IDEAL CULTURE AND REAL CULTURE

The *ideal* culture of a society is the culture its members *think they have*; the *real* culture is the culture they *actually have*. This difference is expressed by some anthropologists in terms of *overt* culture and *covert* culture, or *explicit* culture and *implicit* culture. Sociologist Robert K. Merton has emphasized this through *manifest* and *latent* functions.

CULTURE RELATIVITY

It is difficult, if not indeed impossible, to find absolute standards in human societies. Standards are *relatives* to the culture in which they appear. This is the *principle* of cultural relativity. In its simplest terms, it means that actions that are moral in some societies are immoral in others, that propositions considered true in some are false in others, and that conduct that is approved and even required in some is disapproved and even forbidden in others.

ETHNOCENTRISM

It is a corollary of the principle of cultural relativity. It means the ethnic-centred tendency to evaluate other cultures in terms of our own. It means that the ways of thinking and the ways of doing that we observe in other societies are measured and judged in terms of the ideas and norms prevailing in the society with which we are most familiar. It is the name of the tendency to believe that only other people are foreigners, never ourselves.

TEMPOROCENTRISM

It is the temporal equivalent of ethnocentrism. It has been defined as "*the unexamined and largely unconscious acceptance of one's own century, one's own era, one's own lifetime, as the center of sociological significance, as the focus to which all other periods of historical time are related, and as the criterion by which they are judged.*" We believe that what we do, here and now in our own century, will have an overwhelming impact on the centuries of future time. Temporoctrism, in short, results from a lack of historical perspective.

III. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, "*Culture is the complex whole that consists of everything we think and do and have as members of society.*" Its components have been discussed which clearly signifies the importance of culture in defining our world. What an individual contributes to his culture is small indeed; what he takes from it is beyond all possibility of measurement. It is the culture that distinguishes us as a species from other animals. It is the culture that makes us human.

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