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The culture of a particular human group largely determines how its members think, act, and feel.

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CULTURE IS A WORD many people use practically every day. For example, you may think that you increase your “appreciation of culture” by going to the symphony or art gallery. Or you may have heard someone in the “cultural elite” complain about the “popular culture” of TV sitcoms, movies, computer games, nose rings, afternoon soap operas, and rap music. Perhaps you even use peoples’ speech style or personal tastes to conclude that some individuals are more “cultured” than others because of their education, social class, or upbringing.

TAKEN IN CONTEXT, these ways of using the word culture are fine. But anthropologists define and use the term in quite a different way, for we want people to appreciate the full significance of culture for our understanding of humanity. In the anthropological conception, the distinction between “high culture” and “low culture” is largely meaningless, and it is

impossible for one group of people to be more “cultured”—to “have more culture”—than others.

IN THIS CHAPTER, we discuss the anthropological conception of culture. After giving the word a fairly precise definition, we cover some of its main elements, introducing some terms along the way. We then discuss why culture is so important to the human species. Finally, we explain the modern anthropological view of how cultural differences and physical/biological differences between human populations are related.

One of the first explicit definitions of culture was given over a century ago by E.B. Tylor, one of the founders of anthropology. In 1871, Tylor defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Notice that this definition is very broad, including almost everything about a people’s overall way of life, from their “knowledge” to their “habits.” Notice also that culture is something individuals acquire as “a member of society,” meaning that people obtain their culture from growing up with and living among a particular group.

Since Tylor’s day, anthropologists have defined *culture* in hundreds of ways, although the main elements of Tylor’s original conception of culture are still valid. (In fact, many modern ethnologists have their own favorite definitions!) Practically all modern definitions share certain key features. Anthropologists say that culture

- is learned from others in the process of growing up in a particular human society or group;
- is widely shared by the members of that society or group;
- is responsible for most of the differences in ways of thinking and behaving that exist between human societies or groups; and
- is so essential in completing the psychological and social development of individuals that a “culture-less” individual would not be considered normal by other people.

Culture, then, is learned, shared, largely responsible for group-level differences, and necessary to make individuals into complete persons.

Cultural anthropologists often use the term *culture* when they want to emphasize the unique or most distinctive aspects of a group of peoples’ customs and beliefs. When we speak of Japanese culture, for example, we usually mean whatever beliefs and customs the Japanese people share that make them different from other people. How the Japanese think and act differs in some ways from how the North Americans, Iranians, Chinese, and Indians think and act, and the phrase *Japanese*

culture concisely emphasizes these differences. So to speak of the culture of a people is to call attention to all the things that make that people distinctive from others and, hence, that make that people unique in some respects.

Notice that there are some things that anthropologists do *not* mean when we use the word *culture*. We do not mean that Japanese culture is better or worse than, say, French or Indian culture. We mean only that the three differ in certain identifiable ways. Anthropologists also do not mean that Japanese, French, or Indian culture is unchanging. We mean only that they remain in some ways distinct despite the changes that have occurred in them over the years. Above all, anthropologists do not mean that Japanese, French, or Indian cultures are different because of the physical (biological) differences between the three peoples. We mean only that Japanese, French, and Indian children are exposed to different ways of thinking and acting as they grow up, so that they *become* Japanese, French, or Indian because of their upbringing in different social environments.

In what kinds of ways do cultures differ? How do cultures vary? As a first look, we can say that cultures vary in their ways of thinking and ways of behaving. *Ways of thinking* means what goes on inside people’s heads: how they perceive the world around them, how they feel, what they desire, what they fear, and so forth. *Ways of behaving* refers to how people commonly act: how they conduct themselves around parents and spouses, how they carry out ceremonies, what they do when they are angry or sad, and so forth. Obviously, thought and behavior are connected. How we act depends, in part, on how and what we think. In turn, the ways we think depend, in part, on how people around us behave.

Although ways of thinking and behaving are interdependent, it is important to distinguish between them. To do so, many anthropologists say that culture consists of *mental* and *behavioral* components.

Culture’s mental components include all the knowledge and information about the world and society that children learn while growing up. These include attitudes about family, friends, enemies, and other people; notions of right and wrong (morality); conceptions about the proper roles of males and females; ideas about appropriate dress, hygiene, and personal ornamentation (etiquette); beliefs about the supernatural; rules about sexual activity; notions about the best or proper way to live (values); and perceptions of the world. The list could, of course, be greatly expanded to include all other knowledge that the members of a society or other group have learned from previous generations. All these kinds of knowledge largely determine how members of a culture think.

In this book, we shall use the phrase **cultural knowledge** to refer to the information, attitudes, ideas, beliefs, conceptions, rules, values, perceptions, and other

mental phenomena that affect people's ways of thinking. To avoid repetition, we shall use the terms *beliefs* and *ideas* as synonyms for *knowledge*.

For now, there are two key points about cultural knowledge. First, ideas and beliefs are learned as a consequence of being born into and growing up among a particular group. This means that any information or knowledge that people genetically inherit (for example, "instincts") is not—by definition—part of culture. Second, cultural knowledge exists in people's heads. Members of any given generation are carriers of cultural ideas, which they have learned from previous generations and will pass along, perhaps with some modifications, to future generations.

The behavioral components of culture include all the things people regularly do, or how they habitually act. As the terms *regularly* and *habitually* imply, members of the same culture generally adopt similar behaviors in similar situations (e.g., in church, on the job, at a wedding or funeral, visiting a friend). Anthropologists tend to be more interested in these regularities and habits—in what most people do most of the time when they are in similar situations—than in the behavior of individuals per se. We are most concerned with **patterns of behavior**. To avoid repetition, we use the terms *behavior(s)* and *action(s)* as synonyms for the patterns that make up a culture's ways of behaving.

Although we distinguish between the mental and the behavioral components of culture, the two are closely related and profoundly affect each other. To emphasize these interconnections, we speak of **cultural integration**, meaning that the various elements of culture fit together in a more or less coherent way. Stated differently, cultural integration means that the parts of culture are mutually interdependent. We use the phrase *cultural system* when we wish to emphasize the integration of culture.

Defining Culture

The concept of culture is so important to cultural anthropologists that it is useful to have a formal definition of the term:

The **culture** of a group consists of shared, socially learned knowledge and patterns of behavior.

For convenience, we discuss each major component of this definition separately.

Shared . . .

By definition, culture is *collective*—it is shared by some group of people. "Shared by some group of people" is deliberately vague, because the "group" that "shares" culture depends on our interests. The people who share a common cultural tradition may be quite numerous and

geographically dispersed, as illustrated by the phrases "Western culture" and "African culture." Although we use such phrases whenever we want to emphasize differences between Africans and Westerners, the peoples to whom they refer are so diverse that the term "group" has little meaning. At the other extreme, the group that shares a common culture may be small. Some Pacific islands or Amazonian tribes, for instance, have only a few hundred members, yet the people speak a unique language and have distinct customs and beliefs.

Despite these and other complexities, when we say people *share culture* we usually mean at least one of two things. First, the people are capable of communicating and interacting with one another without serious misunderstanding and without needing to explain what their behavior means. Second, people share a common **cultural identity**: they recognize themselves and their culture's traditions as distinct from other people and other traditions. Thus, Africans (or Westerners, or Native Americans) do not share culture by the first criterion, although they do by the second.

People who share a common culture often live in the same **society**, or a territorially defined population most of whose members speak the same language and share a sense of common identity relative to other societies. The identification of a cultural tradition with a single society is sometimes convenient because it allows us to use phrases like "American culture" and "Indian culture." Societies and cultures, however, do not always share the same physical territory. For example, we usually think of a modern nation as a single society, yet many cultural groupings, identities, and traditions coexist within the boundaries of most modern nations.

. . . Socially Learned . . .

To say that culture is *socially learned* is to say that individuals acquire it from others in the process of growing up in a society or some other kind of group. The process by which infants and children socially learn the culture of those around them is called **enculturation**. The learning of one's culture, of course, happens as a normal part of peoples' childhood.

To say that culture is *learned* is to deny that culture is transmitted to new generations *genetically*, by biological reproduction. Culture is not part of a particular human group's biological makeup, but is something the people born into that group acquire while growing up among other members. Biological/genetic differences (including "racial" differences) between human populations do not explain the differences in thinking, feeling, and acting between human populations. Africans, East Asians, Europeans, and Native Americans do not differ in their cultures because they differ in their gene frequencies—they



Children acquire culture from social learning, not biological heredity. As they grow up in a community, they learn appropriate ways of feeling, thinking, and acting, a process known as enculturation.

do not differ *culturally* because they differ *biologically*. Any human infant is perfectly capable of learning the culture of any human group or biological population, just as any child can learn the language of whatever group she or he happens to be born into. To state the main point in a few words: *cultural differences and biological differences are largely independent of one another*.

To say that culture is *socially learned* is to say that people do not learn culture primarily by *trial and error learning*. The main way children learn culture is by observation, imitation, communication, and inference, and not by trial and error. One important way in which humans differ in degree, though not in kind, from other primates is the ability to learn by imitating and communicating with other humans. I do not have to learn what is good to eat by trying out a variety of foods, then rejecting those that taste bad or make me sick, and retaining in my diet only those that are tasty, satisfying, and nourishing. Rather, I

can adopt the diet of other members of my family and culture, thus avoiding the costs (and possible danger and pain!) of learning on my own, by trial and error.

Think about the enormous advantages of humans' reliance on social learning rather than trial and error learning. First, anything that one individual learns can be communicated to others in a group, who can take advantage of someone else's experience. Second, the culture that any generation has acquired is passed down to the next generation, which transmits it to the third generation, and so on. Thus, the knowledge and behavior acquired by one generation is potentially available to future generations (some of it is lost or replaced each generation, of course). By this process of social learning, over many generations knowledge can accumulate. Because of this accumulation, people alive today live largely off the knowledge acquired and transmitted by previous generations. Members of new generations socially learn such knowledge through enculturation and, in modern societies, through formal education in schools and colleges.

... Knowledge ...

When anthropologists use the phrase *cultural knowledge*, we do not mean that a people's beliefs, perceptions, rules, standards, and so forth are true, in an objective or absolute sense. In our professional role, anthropologists do not judge the accuracy or worthiness of a group's knowledge. Indeed, we recognize that the knowledge of any cultural group differs to a greater or lesser degree from the knowledge of any other group; in fact, such differences are one of the major things we attempt to describe and understand. What is most important about cultural knowledge is not its Truth Value, but that:

- the members of a culture share enough knowledge to be capable of behaving in ways that are meaningful and acceptable to others, so that they do not constantly misunderstand one another or have to explain what they are doing; and that
- the knowledge leads people to behave in ways that work at least well enough to allow them to survive and reproduce themselves and transmit their culture.

In a few words, cultural knowledge must lead to behavior that is meaningful to others and adaptive to the natural and social environment. We consider some of this knowledge in the next section.

... and Patterns of Behavior.

"Human behavior varies from culture to culture," as you may have heard. But even individuals who are brought

up in the same culture differ in their behaviors. The behavior of individuals varies for several reasons. First, individuals have different *social identities*: males and females, old and young, rich and poor, parents and children, and so forth. Behavior appropriate for people with one identity may not be appropriate for others. Second, individual behavior varies with *context and situation*: A woman acts differently depending on whether she is interacting with her husband, child, priest, or employee. Third, each human individual is in some ways a unique human individual: We all differ in our emotional responses, interpretations of events, reactions to stimuli, and so forth. Finally, cultural standards for and expectations of behavior are not always clear, a point covered in more detail later in this chapter. For these and other reasons, it is a mistake to think of behavior as uniform within the same culture.

Despite such complexities, within a single cultural grouping there are behavioral regularities or patterns. For instance, if you were to visit an Amazonian rain forest people known as the Yānomamö, you might be shocked by some of their behaviors. By most cultures' standards, the Yānomamö are unusually demanding and aggressive. Slight insults often meet with violent responses. Quarreling men may duel one another in a chest-pounding contest, during which they take turns beating one another on the chest, alternating one blow at a time. More serious quarrels sometimes call for clubs, with which men bash one another on the head. A man may shave the top of his head to display proudly the scars he has received from his many club fights. Fathers sometimes encourage their sons to strike them (and anyone else) by teasing and goading, all the while praising the child for his fierceness.

If, on the other hand, you were to visit the Semai, a people of Malaysia, you might be surprised at how seldom they express anger and hostility. Indeed, you might find them *too* docile. One adult should never strike another—"Suppose he hit you back?" they ask. With this attitude toward violence, murder is nonexistent or extremely rare—so rare, in fact, that there are no penalties for it. The Semai seldom hit their children—"How would you feel if he or she died?" they ask. When children misbehave the worst physical punishment they receive is a pinch on the cheek or a pat on the hand. Ethnographer Robert Dentan suggests one reason for the nonviolence of the Semai: Children are so seldom exposed to physical punishment that when they grow up they have an exaggerated impression of the effects of violence.

A Yānomamö and a Semai react to similar situations in different ways, with different behaviors. If one Yānomamö demands something of another—as they often do—and the demand is refused, the asker is likely to fly into a rage and make threats, and may resort to violence.



The behavioral patterns of different human groups are quite variable. The Yānomamö, for instance, are more prone to violence than most other peoples.

If a Semai fails to grant the request of another, the person who is refused may experience a psychological state Semai call *punan*. *Punan* might be translated as “accident proneness” because the Semai think that to make someone unhappy by frustrating their desires increases that person’s chances of having an accident. So (and this is perfectly logical, given their beliefs) if you ask me for something and I refuse your request, I have committed an offense against you that could result in your becoming accidentally injured. You, being the victim of the *punan* caused by my affront, have the right to demand compensation from me.

The contrasting behavioral responses of Yānomamö and Semai people to requests made by others illustrate an important characteristic of most human behavior: its social nature. Humans are supremely social animals. We seldom do anything alone, and even when we are alone we rely unconsciously on our cultural upbringing to provide us with the knowledge of what to do and how to act. Relationships between people are therefore enormously important in all cultures. Anthropologists pay special heed to the regularities and patterning of these social relationships, including such things as how family members interact, how females and males relate to one another, how political leaders deal with subordinates, and so forth.

The concept of **role** is useful to describe and analyze interactions and relationships in the context of a group. Individuals are often said to “have a role” in some group.

Roles usually carry names or labels. Examples are “mother” in a family, “student” in a classroom, “accountant” in a company, and “headman” of a Yānomamö village. Attached to roles are the group’s *expectations* about what people who hold the role should do. Learning to be a member of a group includes learning its expectations. Expectations include rights and duties. The *rights* (or privileges) I have as someone with a role include the benefits I and other group members agree I should receive as a member. My *duties* (or obligations) as the holder of a role include what I am expected to do for other members or for the group as a whole.

Rights and duties are usually *reciprocal*: my right over you is your duty to me, and vice versa. My duties to the group as a whole are the group’s rights over me, and vice versa. If I adequately perform my duties to the group, other members reward me, just as I reward them for their own role performance. By occupying and performing a role in a group, I get some of my own wants and needs fulfilled, and I do so by behaving in ways that others find valuable and satisfying. Conversely, failure to live up to the group’s expectations of role performance is likely to bring some sort of informal or formal punishment. Among Yānomamö, young men who refuse to stand up for themselves by fighting are ridiculed and may never amount to anything.

During enculturation into a particular culture, children learn the kinds of roles that exist and the expectations people have about the rights and duties of those roles. The shared knowledge of roles and expectations is partly responsible for patterns of behavior.

Cultural Knowledge

As we have seen, cultural knowledge includes a people’s beliefs, attitudes, rules, assumptions about the world, and other mental phenomena. In this section we discuss five elements of cultural knowledge: norms, values, symbols, classifications of reality, and world views. These five elements are not necessarily more important than other kinds of cultural knowledge, but they do require some discussion because they are not entirely commonsensical.

Norms

Norms are shared ideals (or rules) about how people ought to act in certain situations, or about how particular people should act toward particular other people. The emphasis here is on the words *ideal*, *rule*, *ought*, and *should*. To say that norms exist does not mean everyone follows them all the time; indeed, some norms are violated with great regularity. *Norm* implies, rather, that (1)

there is widespread agreement that people ought to adhere to certain standards of behavior, (2) other people judge the behavior of a person according to how closely it adheres to those standards, and (3) people who repeatedly fail to follow the standards face some kind of negative reaction from other members of the group. We are able to make collective judgments about someone’s personal morality or character because we share common norms. Shared expectations about how roles should be performed are one kind of norm.

Sometimes people feel that norms are irrational rules that stifle their creativity or keep them from doing what they want for no good reason. People may believe that some norms about proper conduct are confining, such as norms about how to dress correctly for special occasions, or about when and to whom we must give gifts, or about fulfilling familial obligations, or about when to have sex. But in fact, norms are quite useful to us as individuals. It is mainly because we agree on norms that we know how to behave toward others and that we have expectations about how others should act toward us. For example, when you enter a roomful of strangers at a party, you are somewhat uncertain about how to act. But everyone knows how to go about getting acquainted in your cultural tradition, so you soon are introducing yourself, shaking hands, and asking the other guests what they do, what they are studying, and so forth. Here, and in many other cases in everyday life, norms are not experienced as oppressive. They serve as useful instructions on how to do something in such a way that others know what you are doing and accept your actions as—what else?—“normal.”

Values

Values consist of a people’s beliefs about the goals or way of life that is desirable for themselves and their society. Values have profound, although partly unconscious, effects on people’s behavior. The aims we pursue, as well as our more general ideas about “the good life,” are influenced by the values of the culture into which we happen to have been born or raised. Values affect our motivations—why we do what we do. Values also are critical to the maintenance of culture as a whole because they represent the qualities that people believe are essential to continuing their way of life. It is useful to think of values as providing the ultimate standards that people believe must be upheld under practically all circumstances.

An excellent example of how values provide ultimate standards is the American emphasis on certain rights of individuals, as embodied in the Bill of Rights to the Constitution. No matter how much some Americans hate what the press prints, what the right or left wing says, or the pro-life or pro-choice movements, few believe that

unpopular organizations or speech should be suppressed, so long as they do not engage in or advocate violence. Freedom of the press, of speech, and of religion are ultimate standards that take precedence over the opinions and interests of the moment. People may be deeply attached to some of their values and, under certain circumstances, be prepared to sacrifice their lives for them.

Symbols

A **symbol** is an object or behavior that stands for, represents, or calls to mind something else. Just as we learn norms and values during enculturation, so do we learn the meanings that people in our group attach to symbols. And just as norms and values affect the patterns of behavior found in a culture, so do the understandings people share of the meanings of symbols. In fact, unless individuals agree that certain kinds of behavior communicate certain meanings, social interaction would be far more difficult than it usually is. Our common understandings of the meanings of behaviors allow us to interact with one another without the need to explain our intentions, or to state explicitly what we are doing and why.

For the most part, the understandings that the members of a culture share about the meanings of behaviors and objects are unconscious. We can speak to inquiring strangers about our values and explain to them why we believe they are important. But it is nearly impossible to tell someone why a wink, a tone of voice, a way of wearing jewelry, a particular gesture, a way of walking, a style of dress, or a particular facial expression carries the meaning it does, rather than some other meaning. We “just know” as “everyone knows,” for such things are “common knowledge.”

Two important properties of symbols are that their meanings are usually arbitrary and conventional. *Arbitrary* in this context means that there are no inherent qualities in the symbol that leads a human group to attribute one meaning to it rather than some other meaning. Thus, the wink of an eye that often means “just kidding” in some cultures is—literally—meaningless in other cultures. *Conventional* refers to the fact that the meanings exist only because people implicitly agree they exist. Thus, at an intersection, a red light means “stop,” but only because all drivers agree (hopefully!) that it does.

Words provide a familiar example of the arbitrary and conventional nature of symbols. In English the word for a certain kind of large animal is *horse*, but in Spanish the same animal is called *caballo*, in German *pferd*, in Arabic *hisanun*, in French *cheval*, and so on for other languages. There is nothing about the animal itself that makes one of these words better than the others. The meaning “horse” is conveyed equally well by any of the



People often are deeply attached emotionally to the values of their culture, as this outpouring of grief in Britain at the funeral of Princess Diana illustrates.

words, which is another way of saying that the meaning is arbitrary and conventional.

The shared understandings that allow people to correctly interpret the meanings of behaviors is an enormously important part of cultural knowledge. Because you assume that the people you interact with share your understandings, in most situations you know how to act so as not to be misunderstood.

To most North Americans, for example, actions such as nodding the head to show agreement or affirmation, walking hand in hand in public, and embracing a friend or relative seem commonsensical and perhaps “natural.” Yet these and other social behaviors do not mean the same thing in all cultures. An important part of enculturation consists of learning how to interpret the behavior of other people and how to adjust our own behavior in accord with their expectations. Culture, in other words, provides us with the common understanding of how to interact with one another appropriately (that is, according to shared expectations) and meaningfully (that is, in such a way that other people usually are able to interpret our intentions).

Nonverbal communication provides a fine example of these understandings. When you interact with someone face to face, you are engaged in a continual giving and receiving of messages, communicated both by speech and behavior. Spoken messages are intentionally (consciously) sent and received. Other messages—including body language, facial expressions, hand gestures, touching, and the use of physical space—are communicated by nonverbal behavior, much of which is unconscious. Nonverbal messages emphasize, supplement, or complement spoken messages. We are not always conscious of what we are communicating nonverbally, and sometimes our body

language even contradicts what we are saying. (Is this how your mother often could tell when you were lying?)

The general point is that cultural knowledge conditions social behavior in ways people do not always recognize consciously—at least until someone’s behavior violates collective understandings. Furthermore, gestures and other body movements with well-known meanings in one culture have no meaning, or different meanings, in another. On a Micronesian island studied by one of the authors, people may answer “yes” or show agreement by a sharp intake of breath (a “gasp”) or by simply raising the eyebrows. One may also answer “yes” by the grunting sound that carries exactly the opposite meaning to North Americans. Pointing is done with the nose, not the finger. You would signal “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure” by wrinkling your nose, rather than shrugging your shoulders. “Come here” or “come closer” is indicated by moving the arm in the direction of the person you are communicating with; this motion is exactly the same one used by North Americans to mean “move further away.” For two people of the opposite sex, even spouses or engaged couples, to hold hands in public is offensive and bad manners; however, it is perfectly acceptable for two same-sex friends to walk hand in hand. One should never touch the head of someone else, especially if the person is of similar or higher status. It is rude to walk between two people engaged in conversation; if possible, one walks around them; if not, one says the equivalent of “please excuse me,” waits for permission, and then crouches down while passing between them.

Aside from showing the necessity of shared understandings of symbolic behavior, these examples of personal space and gestures show one way misunderstandings occur when individuals with different cultural upbringings interact. Raised in different cultures where spacing and gestures carry different meanings, each individual (mis)interprets the behavior of the other based on their own culture’s understandings, often seeing the other as rude, unfriendly, insensitive, overly familiar, and so forth. Arabs and Iranians often stand “too close” for the Canadian and American comfort zone. Japanese are less likely than North Americans to express definite opinions or preferences, which often comes across as uncertainty or tentativeness. The common American tendency to be informal and friendly is viewed as inappropriate in Japan and many other cultural settings, where feelings of warmth and closeness are confined to narrow circles, or where outward manifestations of emotions are held in check.

Classifications of Reality

The members of a cultural tradition share ideas of what kinds of things and people exist. They have similar

classifications of reality, meaning that the human and natural environments are divided up according to shared criteria.

For example, people everywhere recognize a category of people who are related to them biologically or through adoption—their relatives, we call them. But the principles by which certain kinds of relatives are placed into cultural categories vary between kinship systems. Thus, English speakers think of the sisters of both our mother and our father as a single kind of relative, and we call them by the same kinship term, *aunt*. But there are some cultural traditions in which the sister of one’s mother is considered one kind of relative and the sister of one’s father a different kind, and each is called by a separate kinship term. As we shall see in Chapter 9, these various ways of classifying kin are connected to other characteristics of a people’s kinship system. The general point for now is that people of different cultural traditions have different ideas about social life, and vary in the way they conceive of their societies as divided up into kinds of people.

The same applies to the way people classify their natural environment. Cultural knowledge not only provides the categories by which we classify kinds of people, but also categories by which plants, animals, phases of the moon, seasonal changes, and other natural phenomena are classified into kinds. The way people classify the things in their natural environment both affects and is affected by how they relate to that environment.

For example, on the island of Mindoro in the Philippines lives a people known as the Hanunóo, who grow most of their food by a method called *shifting cultivation*. This method involves farming a plot for one or two years, abandoning it for a number of years until it has recovered its potential to yield a crop, and then replanting it. The Hanunóo judge whether a plot they abandoned some years previously has recovered enough for replanting by the quantity and kind of natural vegetation that has recolonized the plot. The need to assess the degree of readiness of a plot for recultivation has led the Hanunóo to develop an extremely complex classification of the plants found in their habitat. They are able to identify more than 1,600 “kinds” of plants, which exceeds by more than 400 the number of species that a botanist would distinguish.

Which classification is right, that of the Hanunóo or that of the botanist? Both. The point is not that the Hanunóo are right and the botanist wrong, or vice versa. Rather, the botanist uses one set of criteria to decide whether two individual plants belong to the same kind, and these criteria have been adopted because they have proved useful to science. The Hanunóo use a different set of criteria that, over the course of many generations, they have developed for their specific needs. The criteria by which various realms of nature are carved up and

assigned to categories are important components of cultural knowledge because they influence the way a people perceive the natural world.

They also influence how people use the resources in their environments. Plants and animals are classified not just into various kinds but also into various categories of usefulness. Members of different cultural traditions perceive nature in different ways, and what one people consider a resource is not necessarily defined as a resource for another people. For example, Muslims and Orthodox Jews consider pork unclean. Traditional Hindus refuse to consume the flesh of cattle, their sacred animal. The fact that a given animal or plant is edible does not mean that people *consider* it edible (or else more North Americans would eat dogs, as do many east and southeast Asians, and horses, as do many French).

Taking this one step further, people of different cultures differ in their beliefs about the kinds of things that do and do not exist. For instance, some people believe that some individuals (called witches) use malevolent supernatural powers to harm their enemies. Traditional Navajo believe that witches can change themselves into wolves, bears, and other animals. The Tukanos of the Bolivian rain forest think that a spirit of the forest controls the game animals they depend on for meat. So a Tukanos group's shaman periodically makes a supernatural visit to the abode of the forest spirit. He promises to magically kill a certain number of humans and to send their souls to the forest spirit in return for the spirit's releasing the animals so the hunters can find game. In sum, not only do different cultures classify objective reality in different ways, but they differ on what reality *is*; one culture's definition of reality may not be the same as that of another culture.

World Views

The **world view** of a people is the way they interpret reality and events, including their images of themselves and how they relate to the world around them. World views are affected by how people classify the social and natural world, which we have just discussed. But world views include more than just the way society and nature are carved up by a culture. People have opinions about the nature of the cosmos and how they fit into it. All cultures distinguish physical bodies from spiritual souls and have beliefs about what happens to the latter after the former dies. People have ideas about the meaning of human existence: how we were put on earth, who or what put us here, and why. They have notions of what evil is, where it comes from, why it sometimes happens to good people, and how it can be combated. They have beliefs about what supernatural powers or beings are like, what they

can do for (or to!) people, and how people can worship or control them. Everywhere we find myths and legends about the origins of living things, objects, and customs.

These examples of various aspects of world view all come from religion. But it is important not to confuse world view and religion, and especially not to think that religion and world view are synonymous. Although religious beliefs do influence the world view of a people, cultural traditions vary in aspects of world view that we do not ordinarily think of as religious.

For instance, the way people view their place in nature is part of their world view: Do they see themselves as the masters and conquerors of nature, or as living in harmony with natural forces? The way people view themselves and other people is part of their world view. Do they see themselves, as many human groups do, as the only true human beings, and all others as essentially animals? Or do they see their way of life as one among many equally human but different ways of life? Most modern scientists share a similar world view: They believe that all things and events in the universe have natural causes that we can discover through certain formal procedures of observation and experimentation and systematic logic.

A people's conception of time and space is also part of their world view. Westerners are so used to thinking of time in arbitrary units—for our seconds, minutes, and hours are not natural segments of time—that we forget that other people do not always share our ideas of how important these units are. Many North Americans frown on “wasting time” and on not “using time productively.” This view of time as a resource that, like money, can be spent wisely or foolishly is not present in the world view of many other cultures. Similar considerations apply to physical space. In a North American house, unused space—areas in which little activity occurs or that are not used to display or store possessions—is often considered “wasted space.”

To a large extent, such views of time and space are understandable, given other dimensions of the North American way of life. They are connected to values, such as progress and the work ethic. They also are connected to certain economic conditions not found in many other places in the world. We must pay dearly for the space of earth and air enclosed by the walls of our dwellings; in general, the larger the space, the more we pay; so unused space is viewed as wasted space because we have paid for something we are not using. If, on the other hand, spaces of earth are freely available to all who want to use them, the notion that space is a resource that can be wasted is less likely to be strong. The same applies to time. We can waste it because it is possible for us to use every bit of it in some way. Time

not spent sleeping, eating, and maintaining our bodies can be spent earning money or enjoying the things that money allows us to possess or participating in social activities that we “barely can find the time for.” If, on the other hand, we were to stop working whenever we satisfy our bodily needs, as was once common among humanity, we would find ourselves with “time on our hands,” and the view of time as a resource that can be used wisely or foolishly would be less developed.

Culture and Human Life

Anthropologists believe that culture is absolutely essential to humans and to human life as it is usually lived—in association with other people, or in social groups.

Living in social groups certainly does not require culture. Many species of termites, bees, ants, and other social insects live in quite complex groups, yet they have no culture, as we are using the term. Gorillas, chimpanzees, baboons, macaques, and most other primates also live in groups. Research done by primatologists shows that chimpanzees learn to use and make simple tools, share food, communicate well, have intergroup conflicts in which animals are killed, and form relationships in which two individuals who are physically weaker cooperate to overpower a stronger animal. Yet few anthropologists would claim that chimpanzee groups have culture in the same sense as all human groups do. (Some use the term *protoculture* to emphasize that such animal behaviors are learned rather than instinctive.) If other group-living social animals cooperate, communicate, and survive without culture, why do people need culture at all?

The main reason boils down to the following: the culture of the society into which people are born or raised provides the information (“knowledge,” we have called it) they need to survive in their natural environments and to participate in the life of groups. This knowledge, which infants begin to learn soon after birth, is necessary because humans do not come into the world equipped with a *detailed set of behavioral instructions inherited genetically from their parents*. Rather, people are born with a *propensity to learn the knowledge and behaviors of the group they were born into from observation, interaction, and communication with members of that group*. More than any other animal, humans are, as two biologists have put it, “programmed to learn.”

An analogy with language will bring this point home. Humans are exposed to the language of their community almost from the moment of birth. Babies do not inherit genetically a knowledge of the sounds, words, and grammar spoken by their parents. But humans are born

with a propensity to learn the language of their group, which they do quickly, automatically, and nearly perfectly (see Chapter 3).

A similar process applies to culture. As we have seen, culture is transmitted socially, not genetically, meaning that it is passed on to new generations by enculturation, not by biological reproduction. Just as the mastery of language provides people with the information they need to communicate thoughts and complex ideas to one another, so does the mastery of culture provide the knowledge and behaviors that make it possible for them to survive in their environments and live together in groups. Culture is, therefore, necessary for human existence in at least three specific ways:

1. Culture provides the skills needed to adapt to our surroundings. It gives people the knowledge they need to produce the tools, shelter, clothing, and other objects they use to survive in their natural environments. Parents and other adults teach children the techniques they need to acquire food and other essential resources and to protect themselves from nature’s elements. As they grow up, children learn the behaviors useful for tracking game, gathering wild plants, making gardens, herding livestock, or finding a job, depending on how people make their living in a particular society. Since most human populations have lived in the same environment for many generations, if not centuries, the current generation is usually wise to take advantage of the adaptive wisdom learned and passed down by their cultural ancestors.
2. Culture is the basis for human social life. It provides ready-made norms, values, expectations, attitudes, symbols, and other knowledge that allow individuals to communicate, cooperate with one another, live in families and other kinds of groups, relate to members of their own and the opposite sex, and establish political and legal systems. As they grow up, people learn what is and is not acceptable behavior, how to win friends, who relatives are, how and whom to court and marry, whether to show glee or sadness, and so forth.
3. Culture affects our views of reality. It provides the categories and beliefs through which people perceive, interpret, analyze, and explain events in the world around them. The culture we acquire while growing up in a given group provides a filter or screen that affects how we perceive the world through our senses. Some objects “out there” in the world are sensed, others are not. Some events are important, others can be ignored. During enculturation, people socially learn the categories and beliefs that filter their per-

ceptions of reality and give meaning to things and events. Growing up in a given culture thus leads people to develop shared understandings of the world (keep in mind that “shared understandings” do not imply Truth).

In sum, culture is essential to human life as we know it because it provides us with the means to adapt to our surroundings, form relationships in organized groups, and interpret reality. Adaptation, organization, interpretation—these are three of the main reasons culture is essential to a normal human existence. In Part 3 of this book, we look at some of the diverse ways in which various cultures have equipped their members to adapt to their environment, organize their groups, and understand their world.

Cultural Knowledge and Individual Behavior

We have seen that anthropologists distinguish between the mental and behavioral components of culture. Having discussed cultural knowledge, we can now look at how ideas and beliefs are related to behavior.

A simplistic view sees cultural knowledge as providing rules or instructions that tell people how to behave in specific situations, how to perform their roles acceptably, and so forth. For example, there are cultural rules for how to have weddings, how to settle quarrels, and how to act toward one’s mother-in-law. There are always a few individuals who do not follow the rules of their culture, but such “deviants” usually are either brought back into conformity, ostracized, or eliminated. This way of looking at how knowledge and behavior are related emphasizes the norms of culture: norms tell us how to do things; usually we do them in these ways; when we don’t we are punished.

Although the preceding view applies to some behaviors, cultural knowledge consists of far more than just rules or instructions. It consists of values that provide only rough and sometimes conflicting guidelines for behavior. It includes shared classifications of reality and world views, which certainly influence behavior but only indirectly (by affecting how we perceive and interpret the world) rather than directly (as instructions). Finally, cultural knowledge includes attitudes, understandings of symbols, and other kinds of ideas and beliefs that affect how people act, but not in the same way as rules do. The effects on behavior of these and other mental components of culture are too subtle and complex to think of as rules or instructions.

At any rate, even when a culture’s rules provide highly detailed behavioral instructions—and sometimes they do—the actions of individuals are not preprogrammed. People usually have some leeway to choose between alternative courses of action. In their everyday lives most people do not blindly follow their culture’s “dictates.” They plan, calculate, weigh alternatives, and make decisions. They think ahead (sometimes, at least!) and consider the possible benefits and consequences of alternative actions before they act. In deciding how best to approach the relation between knowledge and behavior, we must take into account people’s ability to think ahead, plan, and choose.

One way to do this is to realize that formulating plans and making choices are mental processes, and therefore, they rely on and work within the existing framework of cultural knowledge. Deciding how to behave involves at least the following procedures: deciding on one’s goals (or ends); determining the resources (or means) available to acquire these goals; considering which specific actions are likely to be most effective; calculating the relative costs (in resources) and benefits (rewards) of these alternative actions; and, finally, choosing between these alternative behaviors.

Cultural knowledge affects every step of this choice-making process. Norms force individuals to take into account how others are likely to react to their behavior. Values affect the goals that people have and help prevent them from acting in ways that infringe on the rights of others. Choices are affected by the existing cultural categories of people and things, world views, and the chooser’s anticipation of how others will interpret the meaning of his or her actions. We can see how important cultural knowledge is when people choose between alternative behaviors: It affects goals, perceptions of resources, availability of means, relative weighting of costs and benefits, and so on. So important is the effect of cultural knowledge on individual decisions that one influential anthropologist long ago defined culture itself as “standards for deciding what is, . . . what can be, . . . how one feels about it, . . . what to do about it, . . . and how to go about doing it” (Goodenough 1961, 552).

Following this line of reasoning we can say that the main way in which cultural knowledge affects behavior is by its profound influences on choices about what to do in various situations. Another way of stating the same thing is to say that cultural knowledge supplies “boundaries” for behavior. Speaking metaphorically, culture draws the lines that behavior usually does not cross, meaning that it determines which behaviors are likely to be proper or acceptable or understandable to others. Within these boundaries, people are free to choose between alternative actions. Most people do not violate the boundaries of their

culture because they believe in the moral rightness of norms, because they fear negative reactions from others, or because doing so would involve actions that others might misinterpret.

Once explicitly stated, the aforementioned might seem obvious. After all, many people in the modern world believe in what they call “individual freedom.” But if our culture truly dictates our behavior then our freedom is an illusion, as is our exercise of free will. We only *think* we are free to choose. Culture in fact is pulling our strings. Many anthropologists of the past (and a few in the present) believed that culture is, in effect, all powerful in the lives of individual human beings. They viewed culture as existing independently of individuals, who were treated merely as culture’s “carriers” and “transmitters.” Culture became, as some anthropologists said, a *superorganism*.

Yet, most people do not experience their culture as all powerful. Although it *could* be true that your mind is mainly a vessel of your culture, you probably think there is a lot more to you than that. Indeed, although most of us recognize that our culture imposes boundaries and constraints on our behavior, we nonetheless think that we exercise our free will. But the problem is that, although many people recognize that *they themselves* exercise free will, they think that *members of other cultures* are “prisoners” of their cultures: “the Yanomamö are so aggressive because their culture makes them act this way.”

This is one reason why the distinction between knowledge and behavior is so important. Shared cultural knowledge profoundly affects the behavior of individuals in the ways we have discussed, but it does not determine behavior in detail. This applies to members of other cultures as well as members of your own culture. In fact, shared ideas and beliefs sometimes do not predict behavior very well. We cannot always say what someone will do in a given situation, even though we know what other people want and expect the person to do and even though cultural expectations are fairly clear. There are several major reasons why the behavior of individuals varies, and often departs from expectations.

The most obvious reason is that no two individuals have exactly the same life experiences, even though they are raised and enculturated in the same cultural settings. A related reason is that no two individuals (except identical twins) have the same genetic makeup, and our genes affect how we react to our life experiences. Different life experiences and biological uniqueness make individuals different (to greater or lesser degrees of course) in their behaviors.

Other reasons are more subtle. Norms and values are not always consistent and do not always provide unambiguous guidelines for behavior. Generally, you should not lie, but quite often a small lie is necessary to preserve

a personal relationship or to avoid hurting someone’s feelings. Here small lies are told to avoid greater harms. Often, too, small lies are so useful to achieve our personal goals that our private interests take precedence.

In many situations, pursuing one worthwhile goal or upholding one value conflicts with pursuing another goal or upholding another value, so that people must choose between them. Most North Americans believe in the work ethic, value success and getting ahead on the job, and want to be good mothers and fathers. They hold these beliefs, values, and goals simultaneously. But jobs and career advancement too often detract from the time we devote to the pursuit of “family values,” so we must decide how to allocate our time and energy between activities that are all culturally defined as worthwhile.

People often find ways to justify (both to themselves and others) violations of norms and accepted standards when such norms and standards conflict with their interests. You can rationalize stealing from your employer if you think you are underpaid. Your employer can rationalize working you overtime for not much extra pay because the company must operate in a “highly competitive environment.” Your classmates can rationalize cheating on a test because the instructor is boring, the textbook wordy and unclear, and the information is all B.S. anyway.

Finally, the messages people receive about proper, right, or acceptable behavior are contradictory. Sometimes the models for behavior that most people accept are contradicted by the messages and models people receive from the actions of their parents, relatives, friends, political leaders, and the media. We generally agree that adultery and violence are wrong, but we gain the impression from many sources that they are common and almost to be expected.

The plight in 1998 and 1999 of American President Bill Clinton illustrates many of these conflicts and contradictions. He admitted to an adulterous affair—morally wrong behavior, most agree, but not in itself serious enough to remove him from office, because there is a distinction between a president’s private life and his public duty. He deceived The American People by denying he had sex with “that woman,” but in the process he defined “sex” in such narrow, technical language that his intent to deceive was transparent. But all politicians speak double-talk: When Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde’s extramarital affair became public, Hyde dismissed it as a “youthful indiscretion”—he was in his forties at the time, and the affair lasted five years. President Clinton lied to a grand jury about his affair—a felony crime, clearly, but many citizens reason that the lie was not really an important one, and could have been meant to avoid personal embarrassment, public humiliation, and hurt to his family. Other values are

more important than an understandable lie—how many of us would lie under the same circumstances? Clinton perhaps obstructed justice by encouraging people to withhold evidence. But evidence of what? A sexual relationship that—however loathsome in its salacious details—had little to do with his job performance.

We chose the preceding examples because they are familiar to most readers. But the main point of the examples is this: All cultures have abstract public values and publicly acknowledged norms that distinguish right from wrong, appropriate from inappropriate, and so forth. But all real people recognize that real-world situations are complicated; that real-life individuals have personal goals to pursue and sometimes yield to temptation; that in reality people have to choose between values and norms that at least in some times and circumstances are in conflict; and that—realistically—many members of their group will not behave as they “should.” All human groups periodically must deal with the complicated conflicts between private interests and public duties. The behavior of individuals often is an uneasy compromise between the two. Human behavior is indeed embedded in a context of cultural knowledge, but its relation to this context is complex and variable.

Biology and Cultural Differences

In many ways, humans are like other mammals: We must regulate our body temperatures, balance our energy intakes and expenditures, and so forth. But, as you know by now, anthropologists say that humans are special mammals because we rely so heavily on culture for our survival and sense of well-being. How, then, are biology and culture related?

Although we cannot discuss this issue in depth, it is necessary to address one important dimension of this relationship: that between biological differences and cultural differences. Do biological/genetic/physical differences between groups of people have anything to do with the cultural differences between them? To rephrase the question so that its full implications are apparent: Is there any correlation between cultures and human physical forms, or *rac*es, as they are usually called? (“A Closer Look” shows why most anthropologists think that “race” is a cultural construct, rather than a strictly biological classification of types of people.)



Members of any race can learn any culture, which is part of the evidence that racial and biological differences between populations are not important causes of cultural differences.

Before the twentieth century it was widely thought that the physical differences between populations explained differences in how groups thought, felt, and behaved. That is, many people believed that “racial” differences partly accounted for differences in culture. According to this notion, now called **biological determinism**, cultural differences have a biological basis, meaning that groups of people differ in how they think, feel, and act because they differ in their innate biological makeup.

Biological determinism can be a convenient “theory” of what makes groups of people culturally different from one another, especially if it is combined with ethnocentric attitudes about the superiority of one’s own culture. If French or English culture is superior to African or Native American culture, then it must be because the French or English are innately superior biologically to Africans or Native Americans (it is obvious how so-called inherited differences in intelligence would be brought into such opinions). Colonial rule, the expropriation of land and other resources, slavery, forced labor, mass killing, and other practices could be and were justified by the idea that groups of people differed in their customs and beliefs because of their physical differences.

Almost all modern ethnologists reject biological determinism. We believe that the physical differences between human populations do not cause differences in cultural knowledge and behavior. The diverse cultures of Africa did not and do not differ from the cultures of Europe, Asia, or the Americas because Africans, Europeans, Asians, and Native Americans differ biologically.

A CLOSER LOOK



The cultural construction of race

Race is certainly one of the most explosive topics of our time. Liberal Americans think that affirmative action policies based in part on race are necessary to redress over two centuries of discrimination against “racial minorities.” Conservatives argue that “race-based” hiring and admissions practices deny equal opportunity to qualified white people, many of whom come from socioeconomic backgrounds that are just as deprived as many minorities. Citizens are asked to check off their “racial/ethnic identity” on official census forms. Pollsters often emphasize the “racial divide” that distinguishes “blacks” from “whites” on various social issues.

Most people who debate these and other such public issues assume that race is an objective, natural category into which particular individuals with their visible physical characteristics can be placed. If you don’t know what race you are, it is probably because you are “mixed race.” Races appear to be real. We can actually witness the physical differences between humans by visiting almost any large city in North America, where members of different races mingle. Racial differences are obvious.

Most anthropologists disagree, as do many scholars in other disciplines. They argue that race is not, in fact, an objective and natural category, but a classification of people based on perceptions and distinctions that come far more from culture than from nature. Race, they believe, is a *cultural construct* rather than a *biological reality*. What does this mean, and why do most anthropologists believe it? There are several main reasons.

First, genetic studies show that the genetic variation within a given race far exceeds the variation between races. Two randomly chosen individuals within the same racial category are about as likely

to be as different from one another in their total genetic makeup as are two individuals of different races. So, genetically, races are not discrete populations. This is because fully modern humans—*Homo sapiens sapiens*—evolved only within the last 150,000 or so years, so that significant genetic divergences have not had very long to occur.

Second, most of the differences between individuals that we attribute to their race are only skin deep. We focus on certain readily visible physical traits when we place individuals into racial categories: skin color, shapes of facial features, hair characteristics, and so forth. Were we to look beyond traits that are observable, we would find that if other (“invisible”) traits were used, different racial categories would often result. For example, a racial classification of the world’s people based on blood groups (ABO, rH, and other factors) would yield a different classification than one based on skin color. The same applies to a racial classification based on the shape of teeth or jaws, or on the ability to digest lactose (a milk enzyme). In short, the traits we use to define “races” lead to one kind of racial classification, but a different classification would be made were we to use other traits.

Third, just how many races are there? Most people raised in North America answer “three,” which used to be called “Mongoloid,” “Negroid,” and “Caucasoid.” This threefold classification of humanity is based on the history of contacts between Europeans and certain peoples of Africa and Asia. But why only three? The so-called “pygmies” of central Africa are quite different physically from their Bantu neighbors, as are the once-widespread Khoisan peoples of southern Africa. The indigenous peoples of New

Guinea, Australia, and surrounding islands are quite different not only from many of their neighbors, but from some of the Africans whom they outwardly resemble in their skin coloration. Many people of south Asia have skin as dark as some Africans, although in some other physical characteristics they resemble Europeans. Shall we also call these groups separate races?

Along the same lines, different cultures sometimes develop different racial classifications of people. In the nation of Brazil, several hundred terms refer to people of different physical types. Based on his fieldwork, Conrad Kottak reported that in a single village in northeastern Brazil, forty different terms were used in a racial classification! To non-Japanese, Japan appears to be a “racially homogeneous” country. Yet many Japanese recognize and emphasize the differences between native Japanese and descendants of immigrants from Korea. Many Japanese also discriminate against the *Burakamin*, the modern descendants of groups once engaged in low-level occupations. Yet *Burakamin* are so indistinguishable physically that some Japanese still investigate the past of potential spouses to be sure they are “pure” Japanese.

Racial classifications change over time even within the same cultural tradition. In the Americas, people who are today considered to be indistinguishable racially once were widely viewed as members of different races. When large numbers of Irish immigrated to the Americas after the potato blight struck Ireland in the late nineteenth century, they were considered a “race” by many white Americans whose ancestors had lived here somewhat longer. Jews also were seen by many as a distinct racial group. Yet such distinctions sound silly today—to most North Americans, at any rate! So the dif-

Nor do the cultures of different ethnic groups within a modern nation differ because these ethnic groups differ physically: African-Americans, Euro-Americans, and Asian-Americans do not differ in their beliefs and behaviors because of their different genetic makeup.

To claim that physical differences do not account for cultural differences might seem like a sweeping overgeneralization. Certainly, the claim that “racial,” or other physical differences have little or nothing to do with explaining cultural differences is difficult to prove. But this claim is

difficulty of determining how many races there are, together with the facts that different cultures disagree on the number and definition of races, should make us suspicious that races are objectively definable biological groupings.

Does all this mean that some anthropologists deny that there are important physical differences between populations whose ancestors originated in different continents? No. What they deny is that these differences cluster in such a way that they produce discrete biological categories of people, i.e., “races.” Individual human beings differ from one another physically in a multitude of visible and invisible ways. If races—as North Americans typically define them—are real biological entities, then Africans and people of African ancestry would share a wide variety of traits and Europeans and people of European ancestry would share a wide variety of different traits. But once we add traits that are less visible than skin coloration, hair texture, and the like, we find that the people we identify as “the same race” are less and less like one another and more and more like people we identify as “different races.” Add to this point the fact that the physical features used to identify a person as a representative of some race (e.g., skin coloration) is continuously variable, so that one cannot say where “brown skin” becomes “white skin.” We can see that although physical differences *are* real, our use of physical differences to classify people into races is a *cultural construction*.

For these and other reasons, most anthropologists agree that race is more of a cultural construction than a biological reality. So what? What does it matter? So long as people can—if not today, then someday—avoid viewing some “races” as inferior to others, why is it so important that we recognize that races are culturally constructed?

It might matter a great deal, given the past and current realities of racial divisions. Racial terms (e.g., “black,”

“white”) have connotations, making it very difficult for most people to use such terms in a neutral manner. It is hard to use a racial category in a neutral manner, for stereotypes about various races are deeply embedded in our cultural knowledge. (You don’t believe it? What does the term “welfare queen” call to mind?)

Further, once we have classified people into kinds or types, it is very difficult to avoid ranking the types according to some measure of quality, goodness, or talent. Familiar qualities include intelligence, work ethic, athletic ability, and musical talent. Some people believe that “Asians” are smart and work hard, whereas African-Americans are better natural athletes and more musically talented. From such seemingly innocent stereotypes, we too easily conclude that it is natural talent that puts many Asians near the top of their class, and many African-Americans near the bottom academically. Recent books such as one called *The Bell Curve*, published in 1994, argue that genetically based intellectual abilities explain much of the differential success of different “races” in America today. Such arguments are moot if race is indeed a cultural construction.

There is another reason to view race as culturally constructed: doing so helps to avoid confusing “race” with other kinds of differences that have nothing to do with physical differences. Most North Americans are unable to distinguish—or at least do not consistently distinguish—differences due to race with differences due to language, national origin, or cultural background. The latter differences, of course, are based on culture, not biology, yet the two are not distinguished by a great many people. “Race” is confused with “ethnicity.” For example, “Native American” and “Hispanic” are often viewed as the same kind of identity as is race—even, apparently, on census forms! But “Hispanics” may be black or white, and many people who identify themselves as “Native American” based on

their origins and culture are indistinguishable physically from Americans with European ancestry or African ancestry.

Finally, race is currently a part of the way people identify themselves to one another; it is an important part of an individual’s social identity. Such an identity often carries with it a great degree of “racial pride.” Racial pride is often a positive force in the lives of people who have suffered the effects of prejudice and discrimination, as older African-Americans who were part of the 1960s Black Power movement will appreciate. Yet “racial pride” cuts both ways, as people who are familiar with the beliefs and activities of the Aryan Nation and other such groups dedicated to maintaining “racial purity” know. Although “race” may be a source of “pride,” it also is a major—and perhaps *the* major—source of division in many of the world’s nations. Depending on your own “racial” identity and values, it may be either comforting or disconcerting to realize that race is a division of our own making.

Some readers may draw a political conclusion from the previous argument: If it is true that There Ain’t No Such Thing as Race, then there shouldn’t be any such thing as preferences in hiring, admissions, promotion, and so forth based on race. But past and present discrimination was and is rooted not on the biological reality of race, but on the cultural construction of race. That is, because certain groups defined as “racial” groups historically were victims of discrimination, the legacy of discrimination is still with us. If discriminatory practices of the past and present disadvantaged certain people, then it makes no difference whether the disadvantaged persons belong(ed) to an objective biological category or to a culturally constructed category. They still may be disadvantaged, and a social policy based on notions of social justice may be used to remedy the effects of past and present prejudice and discrimination.

based on good evidence, some of which is familiar to most people. Consider the following three facts.

- Individuals of any physical type are equally capable of learning any culture. For instance, the North

American continent now contains people whose biological ancestors came from all parts of the world. Yet modern-day African-, Chinese-, Indian-, Irish-, Hispanic-, and Italian-Americans have far more in common in their thoughts and actions than any of

them have in common with the peoples of their ancestral homelands. Indeed, many members of these groups have been assimilated and are culturally indistinguishable from other American citizens.

- An enormous range of cultural diversity was and is found on all continents and regions of the world. Despite the physical similarities between them, native Americans were enormously diverse culturally when the people of Europe learned of their existence after 1492. Most West Africans are biologically similar, yet they are divided into dozens of different cultural groupings. The same disjunction between physical characteristics and cultural diversity applies to people of East Asia, South Asia, Europe, and other regions. Far too much diversity occurs within populations who appear to be biologically similar for biological differences to be a significant cause of cultural variation.
- Hugely different cultural systems succeed one another in time within the same biological population and

indeed within the same society. Cultures can and regularly do undergo vast changes within a single human generation; these changes cannot be due to genetic changes in the population, which usually take many generations to be noticeable.

Because of these and other kinds of evidence, most cultural anthropologists feel justified in reaching the following conclusion: Physical (including “racial”) differences between human populations are largely irrelevant in explaining the cultural differences between them. This means that if we want to explain the differences between the Kikuyu culture of East Africa and the Chinese culture of East Asia, we should largely ignore the physical and genetic differences between the Kikuyu and the Chinese. We might argue that differences in the Kikuyu and Chinese natural environment, technology, and history make their cultures different. But for the most part we ignore the physical differences between them.

As one can infer from the preceding discussion, cultural anthropologists strongly oppose biological determinist notions. In fact, in the early decades of the twentieth century some anthropologists, such as Franz Boas, fought such ideas by marshaling evidence that—to state the point simply—culture is not determined by “race.”

This does not mean that biological factors are irrelevant for culture. Human beings have physiological needs and biological imperatives just like other animals. Food, water, shelter, and the like are necessary to sustain life. Sexual activity is pleasurable for its own sake as well as necessary for reproduction. People become sick and may die from disease, so coping with the effects of viruses, bacteria, and other microorganisms is a biological necessity. Finally, no human society will survive unless its members effectively nurture and enculturate their children. To persist over many generations, all groups must develop behavioral means of meeting these biological needs and coping with these environmental problems; those that have failed to do so are no longer around.

Therefore, much behavior in all cultures is oriented around the satisfaction of biological needs for food, shelter, reproduction, disease avoidance, and so forth. Such imperatives must be dealt with in all societies. It is partly because of these universal problems that anthropologists have discovered **cultural universals**, or elements that exist in all known human societies. Some cultural universals are obvious because they are requirements for long-term survival in a species that relies on material technology and lives in highly organized social groups. Such universals include tools, shelter, methods of communication, patterns of cooperation used in acquiring food and other essential resources, ways of teaching children,

Buddhist monks in Nepal play horns during a ritual. Religion and music are two of many cultural universals.



and so forth. There is no great mystery about why all human groups have such things.

Other cultural universals are not so obvious. They do not seem necessary for the survival of individuals or groups, but they are nonetheless present everywhere. Among these are ways of assigning tasks and roles according to age, gender, and skill; prohibitions on sexual relationships (incest taboos) between certain kinds of relatives; organized ways of sharing and exchanging goods; games, sports, or other kinds of recreational activities; beliefs about supernatural powers, and rituals that are used to communicate with and influence them; decorative arts; ways of classifying various kinds of relatives into social categories; customary ways of handling the dead and expressing grief; myths; and rites of passage that ceremonially recognize the movement of people through certain stages of life.

More elements found in all cultures could be listed, but our point is made: All human cultures share certain characteristics whose universal existence cannot be explained simply by the fact that they are necessary for short- or long-term survival. The very existence of such

cultural universals suggests that the human genetic endowment limits the forms that culture can take. It may be impossible for a human culture to exist that has no rules about sexual intercourse with relatives, no religion of any kind, no play or recreation or decorative art, no recognition of kinship ties beyond the immediate family, and no sharing or exchanging of goods.

There may be an inborn genetic or biological basis for sexual rules, religion, play, kinship, and other cultural universals precisely because they *are* universal. Yet the precise forms that these and other universal elements take vary from culture to culture. For instance, all human societies have beliefs about the supernatural (religion), but the nature of these beliefs varies enormously among cultures, as seen in Chapter 13. Likewise, people in all societies keep track of their family and kinship relationships, but they do so in a wide variety of ways, as documented in Chapters 9 and 10. Part 3 describes and analyzes the diverse ways in which cultures meet their material needs, organize their exchanges, trace their relatives, and believe in the supernatural.

Summary

Culture is the key concept of the field of ethnology. The term has been defined in hundreds of ways but usually refers to the whole way of life of some society or group. To describe and analyze culture it is useful to distinguish between its mental and behavioral components, or between cultural knowledge and patterns of behavior. Culture is defined in this book as the shared, socially learned knowledge and behavioral patterns characteristic of some group of people. The term “group” may refer to an entire society, an ethnic group, or a subculture, depending on the context of the discussion.

Culture is socially learned, meaning that it can be transmitted from one group or individual to another. Enculturation is the transmission of culture to new generations. Cultural knowledge is not true in any objective sense, but it must at least allow a society to persist in its environment and must enable people to interact appropriately and meaningfully.

Cultural knowledge has many components, some of which are norms, values, common understandings of the meanings of symbols, classifications of reality, and world views. Because these and other components of cultural knowledge are products of social learning—not inborn—

we must learn them during enculturation, although they may seem natural or commonsensical.

A simplistic view would hold that cultural knowledge determines the behavior of the individuals who share that knowledge. But cultural ideas and beliefs serve as more than just rules or instructions for behavior. A more useful and realistic view sees cultural knowledge as affecting the choices people make about how to act in particular situations. Cultural knowledge limits and influences behavior but does not determine it in great details for peoples’ behavior is not simply programmed by their culture.

Biological determinism is the notion that the culture of a human population derives in part from biological or “racial” factors, so that biological differences help to explain cultural differences between human groups. This idea is rejected by nearly all modern ethnologists, who consider the biological differences between groups largely irrelevant in explaining cultural differences between them. The shared biological endowment of the human species, however, certainly does affect culture, since how people meet their biologically given needs is reflected in their culture. The existence of cultural universals also suggests that the shared genetic heritage of all humanity strongly affects the kinds of cultures that are possible in the human species.

Key Terms

cultural knowledge
patterns of behavior
cultural integration

culture
cultural identity
society
enculturation
roles
norms

values
symbols
classifications of reality
world view
biological determinism
cultural universals

Suggested Readings

Barclay, Harold B. *Culture: The Human Way*. Calgary: Western Publishers, 1986.

- *A brief book about culture, its characteristics, its components, and the forces that change it.*

Barrett, Richard A. *Culture and Conduct*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1984.

- *In addition to serving as a short text, this book summarizes many issues in contemporary anthropology.*

Boyd, Robert, and Peter J. Richerson. *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

- *Viewing culture as a system of inheritance of socially learned traits, the authors use models derived from biological (genetic) evolutionary theory to enlighten cultural evolution. Theoretical and often mathematical, this book is unsurpassed in its creativity and insight on culture.*

Brown, Donald E. *Human Universals*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991.

- *An up-to-date description and analysis of cultural universals.*

Durham, William H. *Coevolution: Genes, Culture, and Human Diversity*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991.

- *Coevolution means that genes and learning interact to produce cultural diversity, each responding to the other. This sophisticated and detailed book explains several cultural patterns in various parts of the world as the outcome of coevolution.*

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic, 1973.

- *Collected articles by a leading American anthropologist. Two articles are especially well known: "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture" and "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man."*

Internet Exercises



Log on to InfoTrac College Edition and try entering the word culture for a search. Click on [view](#) to look at the encyclopedia excerpt for the term culture. How is this definition the same as that given in this chapter? Are there any differences? Go back to the results of the search for the word culture. Notice that there are 110 periodical references, 32 subdivisions, and 25 related subjects. Looking through some of these will give you an idea of how many different things enter into the concept of culture and also of its importance.

The concept of culture is not easy to define, but cultural anthropologists have given us a formal definition that delimits the fundamental aspects of culture. Washington State has a website *What is Culture* (<http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-index.html>). This site examines different definitions of culture and has galleries devoted to the various aspects of culture. Look at the definition of culture given by Clifford Geertz. In Chapter 4 you will be introduced to the materialist and idealist perspectives in anthropology. For now, can you guess which perspective this definition most likely belongs to?