Lecture 5: Culture

Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to the question of what is culture. Culture is a complicated phenomenon to understand because it is both distinct from but clearly associated with society. Also, different definitions of culture reflect different theories or understandings, making it difficult to pin down exact definitions of the concept.

Generally speaking, the following elements of social life are considered to be representative of human culture: ”stories, beliefs, media, ideas, works of art, religious practices, fashions, rituals, specialized knowledge, and common sense” (Griswold 2004:xvi).

Yet, examples of culture do not, in themselves, present a clear understanding of the concept of culture; culture is more than the object or behavior. Culture also includes norms, values, beliefs, or expressive symbols. Roughly, norms are the way people behave in a given society, values are what they hold dear, beliefs are how they think the universe operates, and expressive symbols are representations, often representations of social norms, values, and beliefs themselves (Griswold 2004:3).

To summarize, culture encompasses objects and symbols, the meaning given to those objects and symbols, and the norms, values, and beliefs that pervade social life.

‘High’ Culture

Many people today use a concept of culture that developed in Europe during the 18th and early 19th centuries. This concept of culture reflected inequalities within European societies and their colonies around the world. It identifies culture with civilization and contrasts both with nature. According to this thinking, some countries are more civilized than others, and some people are more cultured than others. Thus some cultural theorists have actually tried to eliminate popular or mass culture from the definition of culture. Theorists like Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) believed that culture is simply that which is created by “the best that has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold 1960:6). Anything that doesn't fit into this category is labeled as chaos or anarchy. On this account, culture is closely tied to cultivation, which is the progressive refinement of human behaviour.

In practice, culture referred to elite goods and activities such as haute cuisine, high fashion or haute couture, museum-caliber art and classical music, and the word cultured referred to people who knew about, and took part in, these activities. For example, someone who used culture in the sense of cultivation might argue that classical music is more refined than music by working-class people, such as jazz or the indigenous music traditions of aboriginal peoples.

People who use culture in this way tend not to use it in the plural. They believe that there are not distinct cultures, each with their own internal logic and values, but rather only a single standard of refinement to which all groups are held accountable. Thus people who differ from those who believe themselves to be cultured in this sense are not usually understood as having a different culture; they are understood as being uncultured.
The Changing Concept of Culture

Today most social scientists reject the *cultured vs. uncultured* concept of culture and the opposition of culture to human nature. They recognize that non-elites are as cultured as elites (and that non-Westerners are just as civilized); they are just cultured in a different way.

During the Romantic Era, scholars in Germany, especially those concerned with nationalism, developed a more inclusive notion of culture as *worldview*. That is, each ethnic group is characterized by a distinct and incommensurable world view. Although more inclusive, this approach to culture still allowed for distinctions between *civilized* and *primitive* or *tribal* cultures.

By the late 19th century, anthropologists had changed the concept of culture to include a wider variety of societies, ultimately resulting in the concept of culture outlined above – objects and symbols, the meaning given to those objects and symbols, and the norms, values, and beliefs that pervade social life.

This new perspective has also removed the evaluative element of the concept of culture and instead proposes distinctions rather than rankings between different cultures. For instance, the *high* culture of elites is now contrasted with *popular* or *pop culture*. In this sense, *high* culture no longer refers to the idea of being *cultured*, as all people are cultured. *High* culture simply refers to the objects, symbols, norms, values, and beliefs of a particular group of people; *popular* culture does the same.

The Origins of Culture

Attentive to the theory of evolution, anthropologists assumed that all human beings are equally evolved, and the fact that all humans have cultures must in some way be a result of human evolution. They were also wary of using biological evolution to explain differences between specific cultures - an approach that either was a form of, or legitimized forms of, racism. Anthropologists believed biological evolution produced an inclusive notion of culture, a concept that anthropologists could apply equally to non-literate and literate societies, or to nomadic and to sedentary societies. They argued that through the course of their evolution, human beings evolved a universal human capacity to classify experiences, and encode and communicate them symbolically. Since these symbolic systems were learned and taught, they began to develop independently of biological evolution (in other words, one human being can learn a belief, value, or way of doing something from another, even if they are not biologically related). That this capacity for symbolic thinking and social learning is a product of human evolution confounds older arguments about nature versus nurture. Thus, Clifford Geertz (1973: 33) has argued that human physiology and neurology developed in conjunction with the first cultural activities, and Middleton (1990:17 n.27) concluded that human "*instincts* were culturally formed."

This view of culture argues that people living apart from one another develop unique cultures. However, elements of different cultures can easily spread from one group of people to another. Culture is dynamic and can be taught and learned, making it a potentially rapid form of adaptation to change in physical conditions. Anthropologists view culture as not only a product of biological evolution but as a supplement to it; it can be seen as the main means of human adaptation to the natural world.
This view of culture as a symbolic system with adaptive functions, which varies from place to place, led anthropologists to conceive of different cultures as defined by distinct patterns (or structures) of enduring, although arbitrary, conventional sets of meaning, which took concrete form in a variety of artifacts such as myths and rituals, tools, the design of housing, and the planning of villages. Anthropologists thus distinguish between material culture and symbolic culture, not only because each reflects different kinds of human activity, but also because they constitute different kinds of data that require different methodologies to study.

This view of culture, which came to dominate between World War I and World War II, implied that each culture was bounded and had to be understood as a whole, on its own terms. The result is a belief in cultural relativism. We shall discuss it towards the end of this lecture.

**Level of Abstraction**

Another element of culture that is important for a clear understanding of the concept is level of abstraction. Culture ranges from the concrete, cultural object (e.g., the understanding of a work of art) to micro-level interpersonal interactions (e.g., the socialization of a child by her/his parents) to a macro-level influence on entire societies (Wald 2003). It is important when trying to understand the concept of culture to keep in mind that the concept can have multiple levels of meaning.

**The Artificiality of Cultural Categorization**

One of the more important points to understand about culture is that it is an artificial categorization of elements of social life. As Griswold (2004) puts it, ‘There is no such thing as culture or society out there in the real world. There are only people who work, joke, raise children, love, think, worship, fight, and behave in a wide variety of ways.’ To speak of culture as one thing and society as another is to make an analytical distinction between two different aspects of human experience. One way to think of the distinction is that culture designates the expressive aspect of human existence, whereas society designates the relational (and often practical) aspect (Griswold 2004: 4).

In the above quote, Griswold emphasizes that culture is distinct from society but affirms that this distinction is, like all classifications, artificial. Humans do not experience culture in a separate or distinct way from society. Culture and society are truly two-sides of a coin; a coin that makes up social life. Yet the distinction between the two, while artificial, is useful for a number of reasons. For instance, the distinction between culture and society is of particular use when exploring how norms and values are transmitted from generation to generation and answering the question of cultural conflict between people of different cultural backgrounds (say, Indian and Chinese).

In summary, culture is a complex component of social life, distinct from the interactions of society in particular because it adds meanings to relationships. Culture is also multi-leveled in that it can range from concrete cultural objects to broad social norms.
Subcultures and Countercultures

A subculture is a culture shared and actively participated in by a minority of people within a broader culture.

A culture often contains numerous subcultures. Subcultures incorporate large parts of the broader cultures of which they are part, but in specifics they may differ radically. Some subcultures achieve such a status that they acquire a name of their own. Examples of subcultures could include: bikers, military culture, and Star Trek fans (trekkers or trekkies).

A counterculture is a subculture with the addition that some of its beliefs, values, or norms challenge those of the main culture of which it is part. Examples of countercultures could include: the tribal movements in India, the green movement, and feminist groups.

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one’s own culture. Many claim that ethnocentrism occurs in every society; ironically, ethnocentrism may be something that all cultures have in common.

The term was coined by William Graham Sumner, a social evolutionist and professor of Political and Social Science at Yale University. He defined it as the viewpoint that “one’s own group is the center of everything”, against which all other groups are judged. Ethnocentrism often entails the belief that one's own race or ethnic group is the most important and/or that some or all aspects of its culture are superior to those of other groups. Within this ideology, individuals will judge other groups in relation to their own particular ethnic group or culture, especially with concern to language, behaviour, customs, and religion. It also involves an incapacity to acknowledge that cultural differentiation does not imply inferiority of those groups who are ethnically distinct from one’s own.

Cultural relativism is the belief that the concepts and values of a culture cannot be fully translated into, or fully understood in, other languages; that a specific cultural artifact (e.g. a ritual) has to be understood in terms of the larger symbolic system of which it is a part. An example of cultural relativism might include slang words from specific languages (and even from particular dialects within a language). For instance, the word tranquilo in Spanish translates directly to ‘calm’ in English. However, it can be used in many more ways than just as an adjective (e.g., the seas are calm). Tranquilo can be a command or suggestion encouraging another to calm down. It can also be used to ease tensions in an argument (e.g., everyone relax) or to indicate a degree of self-composure (e.g., I am calm). There is not a clear English translation of the word, and in order to fully comprehend its many possible uses a cultural relativist would argue that it would be necessary to fully immerse oneself in cultures where the word is used.

Theories of Culture

While there are numerous theoretical approaches employed to understand ‘culture’, let us use just one model to illustrate how sociologists understand the concept. The model is an integrationist one advocated by Ritzer (Ritzer and Goodman 2004: 357). Ritzer proposes four highly interdependent elements in his sociological model: a macro-objective component (e.g., society, law, bureaucracy), a micro-objective component (e.g., patterns of behavior and
human interaction), a macro-subjective component (e.g., culture, norms, and values), and a micro-subjective component (e.g., perceptions, beliefs). This model is of particular use in understanding the role of culture in sociological research because it presents two axes for understanding culture: one ranging from objective (society) to subjective (culture and cultural interpretation); the other ranging from the macro-level (norms) to the micro-level (individual level beliefs).

**George Ritzer’s macro/micro integration theory of social analysis**

If used for understanding a specific cultural phenomenon, like the displaying of abstract art (Halle 1993), this model depicts how cultural norms can influence individual behavior. This model also posits that individual level values, beliefs, and behaviors can, in turn, influence the macro-level culture. This is, in fact, part of what David Halle finds: while there are certainly cultural differences based on class, they are not unique to class. Displayers of abstract art tend not only to belong to the upper-class, but also are employed in art-production occupations. This would indicate that there are multiple levels of influence involved in art tastes both broad cultural norms and smaller level occupational norms in addition to personal preferences.

**The Function of Culture**

Culture can also be seen to play a specific function in social life. According to Griswold, “The sociological analysis of culture begins at the premise that culture provides orientation, wards off chaos, and directs behavior toward certain lines of action and away from others” (Griswold 2004: 24). Griswold reiterates this point by explaining that, “Groups and societies need collective representations of themselves to inspire sentiments of unity and mutual
support, and culture fulfills this need” (p. 59). In other words, culture can have a certain utilitarian function the maintenance of order as the result of shared understandings and meanings (this understanding of culture is similar to the Symbolic Interactionist understanding of society).

Cultural Change

The belief that culture is symbolically coded and can thus be taught from one person to another means that cultures, although bounded, can change. Cultures are both predisposed to change and resistant to it. Resistance can come from habit, religion, and the integration and interdependence of cultural traits. For example, men and women have complementary roles in many cultures. One sex might desire changes that affect the other, as happened in the second half of the 20th century in western cultures (see women's movement), while the other sex may be resistant to that change (possibly in order to maintain a power imbalance in their favour).

Cultural change can have many causes, including: the environment, inventions, and contact with other cultures. For example, the end of the last ice age helped lead to the invention of agriculture. Some inventions that affected Western culture in the 20th century were the birth control pill, television, and the Internet.

Several understandings of how cultures change come from Anthropology. For instance, in diffusion theory, the form of something moves from one culture to another, but not its meaning. For example, the ankh symbol originated in Egyptian culture but has diffused to numerous cultures. Its original meaning may have been lost, but it is now used by many practitioners of New Age Religion as an arcane symbol of power or life forces. A variant of the diffusion theory, stimulus diffusion, refers to an element of one culture leading to an invention in another.

Contact between cultures can also result in acculturation. Acculturation has different meanings, but in this context refers to replacement of the traits of one culture with those of another, such as what happened with many Native American Indians. Related processes on an individual level are assimilation and transculturation, both of which refer to adoption of a different culture by an individual.

One sociological approach to cultural change has been outlined by Griswold (2004). Griswold points out that it may seem as though culture comes from individuals â€” which, for certain elements of cultural change, is true â€” but there is also the larger, collective, and long-lasting culture that cannot have been the creation of single individuals as it predates and post-dates individual humans and contributors to culture. The author presents a sociological perspective to address this conflict,

Sociology suggests an alternative to both the unsatisfying it has always been that way view at one extreme and the unsociological individual genius view at the other. This alternative posits that culture and cultural works are collective, not individual, creations. We can best understand specific cultural objects... by seeing them not as unique to their creators but as the fruits of collective production, fundamentally social in their genesis. (p. 53)

In short, Griswold argues that culture changes through the contextually dependent and socially situated actions of individuals; macro-level culture influences the individual who, in
turn, can influence that same culture. The logic is a bit circular, but illustrates how culture can change over time yet remain somewhat constant.

It is, of course, important to recognize here that Griswold is talking about cultural change and not the actual origins of culture (as in, “there was no culture and then, suddenly, there was”). Because Griswold does not explicitly distinguish between the origins of cultural change and the origins of culture, it may appear as though Griswold is arguing here for the origins of culture and situating these origins in society. This is neither accurate nor a clear representation of sociological thought on this issue. Culture, just like society, has existed since the beginning of humanity (humans being social and cultural). Society and culture co-exist because humans have social relations and meanings tied to those relations (e.g. brother, lover, friend; see, for instance, Leakey 1994). Culture as a super-phenomenon has no real beginning except in the sense that humans (homo sapiens) have a beginning. This, then, makes the question of the origins of culture moot â€“ it has existed as long as we have, and will likely exist as long as we do. Cultural change, on the other hand, is a matter that can be questioned and researched, as Griswold does.

**Cultural Sociology: Researching Culture**

How do sociologists study culture? One approach to studying culture falls under the label ‘cultural sociology’, which combines the study of culture with cultural understandings of phenomena.

Griswold (2004) explains how cultural sociologists approach their research,

> ...if one were to try to understand a certain group of people, one would look for the expressive forms through which they represent themselves to themselves... The sociologist can come at this collective representation process from the other direction, from the analysis of a particular cultural object, as well; if we were to try to understand a cultural object, we would look for how it is used by some group as representing that group (p. 59).

In other words, because of the perspective of cultural sociologists, their approach to studying culture involves looking for how people make meaning in their lives out of the different cultural elements that surround them.

A particularly clear example of cultural sociology is the study of the Village – Northton by Elijah Anderson (1990). Anderson is interested in a number of things in his book, but two cultural components stand out. First, Anderson is looking at the border of two culturally and socioeconomically distinct neighborhoods. Because these two neighbourhoods are distinct yet share a border, this research site provides numerous opportunities for the exploration of culture. Not surprisingly, cultural conflict is an optimal scenario for the exploration of culture and cultural interaction. Additionally, Anderson is interested in how individuals in these neighbourhoods negotiate interpersonal interactions, especially when individuals from the Village (middle to upper-middle class and predominantly white) are forced to interact with members of the Northton area (lower class and poor blacks).

Anderson’s methodology is a combination of participant observation and interviews. But when viewed in light of the quote above by Griswold, it becomes apparent that Anderson’s focus in these interviews and observations is self-presentation (also see impression
management). Anderson regularly describes the individuals he interviews and observes in light of their clothing, behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions. As he interacts with more and more individuals, patterns begin to develop. Specifically, individuals dressed in certain outfits behave in similar ways. For instance, those dressed in business attire (even when walking their dogs) “the yuppies” have particular perspectives on the future of the Village: they are interested in increasing property values in order to maximize their investment. Another example of cultural significance of clothing is older black men who intentionally wear button-up shirts and ties because of the cultural symbolism of that particular outfit: it signifies to the cultural outsider that the wearer is refined and distinct from the athletic-suit-wearing drug dealers who control numerous Northton corners.

Ultimately, Anderson’s goal is to develop a sort of typology of streetwise individuals: people who can manage awkward and uncomfortable interpersonal interactions on the street in such a fashion that they emerge from the interactions unharmed. While he does develop a loose description of these types of individuals, the important part to understand here is how he explores these aspects of culture. First, he found a cultural border that presented cultural conflict. When individuals have to negotiate meaning publicly, it makes it much easier for the sociologist to tease out culture. Additionally, Anderson observed both the transmission of culture from generation to generation (i.e., socialization, but also the self-representation that is provided by cultural expressions (clothing, behavior, etc). Through years of observation, Anderson gained a familiarity with these elements of culture that allowed him to understand how they interacted.

In summary, cultural sociology (or the study of culture) is performed by examining how individuals express themselves to others and is likely facilitated by finding cultural boundaries where cultural expression is important to successful social functioning.

**Note**

The word ‘culture’ comes from the Latin root *colere* (to inhabit, to cultivate, or to honour).

**References**


**Questions**

1. What is meant by ‘culture’?
2. Explain what is meant by ‘high culture’.
3. Elucidate the transition in understanding of the concept of culture from historical to modern times.
4. What do you understand by ‘subcultures’ and ‘countercultures’?
5. What do you understand by ‘ethnocentrism’ and ‘cultural relativism’?
7. What is meant by cultural sociology? Give examples.