

Wednesday September 16th, 2015

Culture?

- Complex concept - very hard to precisely define
- Why? refers to many things and can be used in different ways
 - traditions
 - collective classes
 - hockey (canada)
 - newspaper has a culture section for art, fashion, music... etc
 - in one sense, culture can only be defined as what it isn't
- “All the socially transmitted ideas, practices, and material objects that people create to deal with real-life problems” - functional definition of culture (New Society, 29)
 - however there are non-functional ideas of culture as well
 - Sociology doesn't require a narrowed down answer, it's very open
- Culture helps humans “adapt to and thrive in their environments” - does it?
- Components of Culture: abstraction, cooperation, production and language (New Society)
 - these 4 aren't exhaustive but they are 4 different aspects

Components of Culture

1. Abstraction (for ex. symbols): our capacity to use symbols and abstract can impact culture
 - Symbols are culturally created
 - Certain symbols can take on tremendous meaning within a culture or subculture (for ex. a national flag)
 - Every cultural group is symbolically constructed through shared symbols (like the pride flag - LGBTQ)
 - Boundary maintenance - in group and out group (sports events)
 - Emile Durkheim - Collective Representations
 - People do not have to be the same but generally agree upon or identify with these shared symbols
 - Struggle/conflict about the meaning of particular symbols (culture is frequently/often contested and is never accepted by everyone)
 - Culture is contested and shaped through conflict and contestation (you'd never have much of a social change without these conflicts)
 - ex. 1991 Baltej Singh Dhillon - first RCMP officer to wear his Sikh turban and beard in the line of duty
 - he successfully fought the federal government ban prohibiting turbans in the RCMP
2. Cooperation - norms and values that are reproduced over time (for ex. waiting in line for coffee or raising your hand for a question - there are socializing agents for how these are reproduced)
 - Negative sanctions (punishments) and positive sanctions (rewards)

3. Production of material (technology, objects) and non-material culture (norms, spoken language)
4. Language: The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: a person's thoughts and behaviours are determined by the language that person speaks - strong (deterministic) and weak (relative) versions
 - for ex. if you're bilingual...

Ethnocentrism:

- judging other cultures (*exclusively*) through your own cultural values/standards

Sociology and Anthropology:

- to de-center ethnocentrism

Cultural Critique/Analysis

- Culture and Power
- In the 1970s the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences (power, domination, class, nation, gender, race etc)
 - back then, ...
- Can social power operate through the media? (movies, TV shows... etc)
- 'Knowledge' of various groups of people and places is partially gained through cultural representations
 - we can analyze these representations as well (like disney about race, gender... etc)
 - a lot of this knowledge is also from media
 - subliminal messages
- Our identities are partially defined to others through representations
 - for ex. irish and leprechauns
- So even though we live our lives 'in' culture we can also analyze and **step back** from the **cultural products** of societies

Ways of Thinking About Culture

1. Culture as territorialized (geographically related)
 - Canadian culture is in Canada (I am going to Brazil to study Canadian culture does not make sense)
 - So political/state boundaries can related to national boundaries
 - So culture, like ethnicity, can mean something about a specific group of people
2. Culture as a possession or attribute
 - 'cultured'? High brow? Low brow?
 - What does it mean when one says "you're very cultured"
 - Cultural capital - Pierre Bourdieu - 'cultural taste' as something that is acquired/learned
 - Someone who is very cultured, high brow or low brow
 - Culture can exist within a status hierarchy - opera vs pop music, art house cinema vs Hollywood blockbusters

3. Culture is shared, collective and disputed

- There is no culture of 'one'
- Culture is about shared meaning, values and interpretation
- Cultural meaning is contested and complex
- There is no society or culture where everyone agrees on everything

4. Subcultures and countercultures

- There are alternatives to 'the mainstream' - subcultures & countercultures
- Subcultures exist within mainstream culture but do not seek to replace/change the mainstream culture
- Authenticity and Subcultures
- Skateboarding as a subculture?
- Documentary 'Dog Town and Z Boys'

- Countercultures
 - Some aspects of social movements
 - Provide alternative models to mainstream culture
 - Ex. collective v's individualistic forms of ownership, non-hierarchical power structures
 - Values - agricultural sustainability, non-exploitative relationship to animals etc
 - garbage, recycling, compost... etc

5. Culture is something that must be interpreted

- **Culture meaning** is something that is implicit - we learn it 'naturally' when we are socialized
- cultural analysis = to make the implicit explicit
- Are we 'empty vessels' - is culture poured into us? (from parents, institutions, media.. etc)
- Symbolic interactionist approach - people actively create meaning through interaction
 - everyday interactions
 - they would question the meaning of the event and how it was created through the course of interaction
- Who the audience is, matters
 - shouldn't take audiences as like blank slates