Defining “culture” and cultural anthropology

Howard Culbertson
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• “A few years ago I took a cultural anthropology class at a community college. This class studied people in great detail but never really mentioned what culture was. We assumed we were studying culture, but the [word culture] was never truly defined.”

• A student in Global Evangelism class
Cultural Anthropology -- an academic discipline
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ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

HUMANITIES

SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINES

NATURAL

SOCIAL

SOCIAL STUDIES

BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

ANTHROPOLOGY

PSYCHOLOGY

SOCIOLGY
Cultural Anthropology -- an academic discipline

ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

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ANTHROPOLOGY

PSYCHOLOGY

SOCIOLOGY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL

PHYSICAL

CULTURAL
Culture is what makes you a stranger when you are away from home.
Defining culture

1. Philip Bock – What makes you a stranger when you’re away from home
2. Ruth Benedict – learned patterns
3. Charles Kraft – Complex, integrated coping mechanism
4. Bob Sjogren -- What makes us “us” and them “them”
Viewing culture as successive levels
Diagram by Lloyd Kwast
what is done?

BEHAVIOR
VALUES

BEHAVIOR

what is done
What is done?

What is good or best?

VALUES

BEHAVIOR
What is true?

What is good or best?

What is done?

VALUES

BELIEFS

BEHAVIOR
What is done?
What is good or best?
What is true?
Worldview
Beliefs
Values
Behavior
An iceberg as an analogy of culture
From Gary Weaver in *Culture, Communication and Conflict: Readings in Intercultural Relations*
A "Photographic" vs. a "Functional" Description of Culture

"photographic"

"functional"
Culture is a complex, integrated coping mechanism.

Culture consists of

1. Learned concepts and behavior
2. Underlying perspectives (worldview)
3. Resulting products
   - nonmaterial (customs and rituals)
   - material (artifacts)

– Chuck Kraft’s definition
Scattered thoughts about Cultural Anthropology

• It’s holistic (as opposed to atomistic or narrow)
• It’s comparative
  – Etic (from outsider’s vantage point)
  – Emic (from an insider’s vantage point)
• Perspectives run the gamut from relativism to ethnocentrism
• You will get your hands dirty (fieldwork)
• What makes up a culture?
• What are those learned patterns and behaviors?
Cultural Universals

George Murdock’s 70 cultural universals
| age-grading | ethics | housing |
| athletic sports | ethno-botany | hygiene |
| bodily adornment | etiquette | incest taboos |
| calendar | faith healing | inheritance rules |
| cleanliness | family | joking |
| training | fire-making | kin groups |
| community | folklore | kinship |
| organization | food taboos | nomenclature |
| cooking | funeral rites | language |
| co-operative labor | games | law |
| cooking | gestures | luck / superstitions |
| co-operative labor | gift-giving | magic |
| labor | government | marriage |
| courtship | games | mealtimes |
| dancing | gestures | medicine |
| decorative art | gift-giving | obstetrics |
| divination | government | personal names |
| division of labor | greetings | penal sanctions |
| dream | hair styles | penal sanctions |
| interpretation | hospitality | pet slopes |
| education | |

**Additional Categories:**

- population policy
- postnatal care
- pregnancy usages
- property rights
- propitiation of supernatural beings
- puberty customs
- religious ritual
- residence rules
- sexual restrictions
- soul concepts
- status
- differentiation
- surgery
- tool-making
- trade
- visiting
- weather control
- weaving
9 cultural universals
1. Place and time
2. Family life
3. Economics
4. Food, clothing, shelter and transportation
Note: “Drives” vs. culture

• Hunger is a basic human psycho-biological drive.

• How that hunger is satisfied involves all kinds of cultural things (what is eaten, how it is prepared, how it is eaten . . . ).
5. Communication
6. Government
7. Arts and recreation
8. Education
9. Quest for the supernatural
Sociocultural change
Is it worth my time?

• Question: Why study cultural anthropology?

• Answer: To enrich a college education by giving new insights about ourselves and our own cultural context as well as stretching our imaginations.