

## 9 CULTURE: DEFINITIONS

Read: Eriksen, The social organisation of cultural distinctiveness, 43-69  
Nagel, Constructing culture, 43-54; Deconstructing ethnicity, 60-72  
Richard Handler, 1985. On having a culture: nationalism and the preservation of  
Quebec's patrimoine

### Definitions

- A. As is the case for most of our other analytic terms, "culture" is polysemic
1. It has multiple, related meanings
    - a. Think of the various concepts of culture offered in the pieces by Eriksen, Nagel, and Handler
  2. Related to the "culture" in agriculture; also, think of "culturing" microbes in a petri dish
    - a. The piece we'll read by Malkki later on discusses agricultural metaphors, for example, a culture is "rooted" in a place
    - b. Nagel says that one image of Native Americans is that they're "rooted."
  3. **DISCUSS:** Your definition of culture?
    - a. Connections between earlier meaning and your definition?
- B. One definition: culture is beliefs and practices shared by a group
1. Very common definition
    - a. Culture is clearly not the idiosyncratic beliefs and behavior peculiar to one person
  2. Nagel (p. 43): "Those ideational and material aspects of social life—language, religion, ceremony, myth, belief, values....are the substance of a people."
  3. **DISCUSS:** possible problems with this definition?
    - a. First, like "nation" and "ethnicity," what/who are the "people" who share this culture is difficult to specify

- b. Not self-evident, even though you may think it is
- c. Second, all cultural systems to some degree depend on their members *not* sharing the same knowledge or beliefs
  - 1) For example, even in very small-scale, seemingly homogeneous societies
    - a) Men and women will not share the same cultural knowledge—and this non-sharing will be built in, not accidental
  - 2) In modern societies
    - a) The management, foreman, and workers in a factory will not share the same understandings of the institution they all work in
    - b) This non-sharing also is built in—it’s necessary for the proper function of the factory
    - c) **DISCUSS:** MIT examples
- 4. Definition can’t handle change very well
  - a. All those examples in Eriksen of people leaving one culture for another (Fur, Bagara in Darfur, studied by Haaland)
- 5. Nor can it handle complex ethnic interactions, in which all actors share the rules for interaction, even though they belong to different “cultures”
- C. Another definition: high culture: literature, ballet, opera, poetry: **Culture**
- D. Another: the notion of *a* culture: Eskimo culture, Polynesian culture, African-American culture, Norwegian culture
  - 1. Note that only one of these examples of “culture” is coterminous with a nation-state
  - 2. But three are located in space—the exception is African-American culture
    - a. Anthropologists (and others) traditionally saw several kinds of divisions between cultures

- 1) The world's cultures were seen to live in distinct geographical territories
  - a) Culture made places out of spaces
- 2) Although some members might have left: for example, "overseas Chinese"
- b. An isomorphism of *place* and *culture* was assumed
3. What are the problems we encounter if we link culture with place?
  - a. The Hue: how does a space achieve a distinctive *identity* as a "Hue" place?
  - b. What is "the real England," and what relationship does it have to a particular bounded place?
    - 1) By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century England is more an imagined state of being or moral location than an actual place
  - c. Related problematic concepts: "native land," "homeland," "real American," "American culture" ("America" is a place)
4. This definition (**a** culture) also highlights the fact that culture, like ethnicity, is *relational*: it exists because there is something not-it: it can be compared to something
  - a. This is the idea behind saying "it's a difference of culture"
  - b. We can say "MIT culture" and people know we're talking about MIT, as opposed to Harvard or BU culture
  - c. This relational feature is especially important to keep in mind
    - 1) First, because of the importance of inter-cultural (inter-ethnic, inter-national, etc.) relations in the real world
      - a) Ethnic conflict, for instance
    - 2) Second, because understanding that **a** culture always exists in relation to **other** cultures often allows us to uncover sites of power—asymmetrical relations involving dominance and subordination, etc.

- d. Nagel, Handler and other authors we've read (e.g., Harrison) illustrate the important role power differentials can play
  - 1) And how important it is to analyze the images one culture has of another
  - 2) The native art markets mentioned by Nagel, and the tourism

E. Another idea of culture: as **adaptation**

- 1. This concept of culture-as-adaptation seeks to explain why culture exists in the first place and why it changes
- 2. Helps us understand the cultural evolution that has occurred during *homo sapiens*' history on the planet
- 3. Previous lecture mentioning different subsistence modes—Hunting/gathering, horticulture, nomadic pastoralists, agrarian states
  - a. These are *adaptations*—cultural adaptations—to a specific environment
    - 1) Interactions between environment and culture that are adaptive enough to allow the group to survive
      - a) Technology is an aspect of culture in this definition
      - b) Such cultural evolution brought us to our glorious position at present—we are able to live in many environments, some of them quite inhospitable
      - c) And we've gained enough power over the environment to turn it into a cinder
    - 2) The emergence of a technology that permitted horticulture—producing (growing) one's food rather than gathering it
      - a) Is an example of cultural evolution
      - b) We can see it as adaptive because it allowed more food to be produced, allowed a more secure food supply, etc.
- 4. Keep in mind when using this culture-as-adaptation definition:

- a. That what's good for a group as a whole—what enhances its probability of survival—doesn't always mean good for all of the individuals within the group
  - b. There's a constant tension, as a matter of fact
  - c. Poor people don't benefit from being members of a given culture the way rich people do
    - 1) Example: producing food introduces a much higher possibility of plagues of insects, famines, etc., than is the case for hunter-gatherer-foragers
    - 2) People will starve even though food is available because certain cultural understandings and power relations withhold it from them
5. Remember: “adaptive” is always a relative term: Adaptive for what? For whom? Over what time span? In what kind of environment?
6. **DISCUSS:** Other examples of authorized cultural practices not in the best interest of certain sectors or individuals?
- a. Mandated suicide
    - 1) Kamikaze pilots
  - b. Although we say that mandated suicide is unfortunate for the individual; perhaps we say it shouldn't have to happen
    - 1) This probably *isn't* the viewpoint of the individual
  - c. Other examples of cultural practices arguably not in the best interest of the individual practitioners?
    - 1) Fasting, going to the wilderness and eating honey and locusts, Plains Indians participating in the Sun Dance, breast implants, foot binding, high heels, infibulation, botox injections
      - a) Tatoeing?
    - 2) People outside the culture will probably see these practices, and the ideology supporting them, as unhealthy, unnecessary, morally wrong, etc.

3) People inside the culture will defend them

7. When using this definition remember that cultures are never perfectly adaptive and adapted
  - a. And that a given culture may in fact be very *maladaptive* at a particular point in time due to changing conditions, ecological or social
8. Nagel's book has many examples of the adaptability of culture
  - a. A given case might illustrate the process of assimilation, or show a successful way to resist assimilation pressures

F. Another definition of culture: "that which is taught"

1. Not simply "that which is learned"
  - a. Many animals learn all sorts of things, but we wouldn't say they have culture
  - b. A child will learn that fire is hot and painful, but this lesson is not provided by the child's culture if the learning comes from touching the stove flame and being burned
2. The notion of culture-as-teaching conveys the idea of intentional transmission
  - a. But we can argue that a lot of culture is not deliberately taught
3. In fact, much of the culture one learns is embodied, and learned half-consciously or unconsciously
  - a. This is Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, described by Nagel, also mentioned by Eriksen
  - b. A set of assumptions, dispositions, and orientations that shape human thought and action, visions of the possible, the perceived choices
  - c. This is why if you've learned one culture, it's hard to adjust to a new one

G. The question of Free Will

1. A member of a culture might even be aware that part of their culture is not in their best interests
  - a. But they might very well keep on doing/thinking/believing whatever it is
2. What role does individual human agency play?
3. We aren't automatons
4. But neither are we free agents always able to know what's in our best interest and freely carry it out
  - a. We're not "Little monads guided solely by internal reasons" (Bourdieu and Wacquant<sup>1</sup>)
5. Nagel puts the difference this way:
  - a. Culture as structure (a system that defines and shapes human thought and action)
  - b. And cultural construction (a process by which culture is defined and shaped by human thought and action)
6. **DISCUSS:** something you continue to do even though you know it's not in your best interest?
  - a. Is this entrenched cultural habit or neurosis?

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 135.

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