

# Teaching About Culture Utilizing Anthropological Thinking and Methods

## 1. What is anthropology?

## 2. What is culture?

**CULTURE:** Used in a variety of ways: Over 300 different definitions.

Old View: Culture taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. There is no overall consensus as to its precise meaning.

An autonomous population unit defined by distinctive cultural characteristics or shared tradition. Problem: It is extremely difficult to define the boundaries of such population unite, and an arbitrary division may divert the anthropologist from investigation important relationships, which crosscut such boundaries. It may also refer to a system of values, ideas and behaviors which may be associated with one or more than one social or national group (e.g. "black American culture", 'Western culture', and so on). Similar problems arise when an anthropologist refers to a sub-culture, or personal culture of a single individual.

Culture is a survival mechanism developed by humans to create order out of chaos. Culture tells us how to survive. It is blueprint of our customs and ideas of living. Every culture represents a distinct solution to the problems of survival. There is infinite variation in cultural expression but each meets certain needs, food, shelter, solace, self-expression, the curing of illness, to resolve conflict, to develop substitutes for deadly conflict.

- Culture is learned, absorbed, transmitted, and internalized.
- It is packaged and delivered by symbols.
- It is intangible and exists in our knowledge and expression.
- It is pervasive - we are often unaware but it surrounds and envelops us.
- Items and ideas meld together and make sense.
- It is amazingly intricate.

Every culture is at risk from threats to the environment. Many cultures are already extinct. The ability to change and adapt is an important quality of culture. (i.e. Navajo) Because of ethnocentrism many cultures have disappeared, an incalculable loss. Never have we so needed to understand the way in which other people lived to learn of the broad range of human culture...to comprehend others minds, values, and cultures.

## 3. How do anthropologists study culture?

### Participant Observation [a.k.a. ethnography]

A large part of the study of culture is concerned with "participant observation". That is, not only do anthropologists observe the culture they are studying and talk to natives of that culture, they also become a temporary active member of that society for awhile. They actually participate in that culture by conducting fieldwork or ethnographic studies. Anthropologists actually go to the site that they are studying (whether it is a Beverly Hills mansion, a city slum or an Indonesian village) and, with the inhabitants' permission, live there as if they were natives of that area. This helps the individual develop a fuller understanding and appreciation for that society. This can easily be understood by imagining a young person learning to hit a baseball. You can read every book ever written and even talk to major league players but only by getting up and physically trying to hit the baseball can you really understand what you need to do. In the same way, only by going out in the field can we truly come to understand a people and their culture.

Just as it may be possible to talk about one subfield of anthropology from the other three, it is also possible to single out one aspect of a culture for study. However in both cases it is impossible to completely separate the parts from their larger components. What this means is that while a researcher can choose to focus on one particular aspect of a culture she cannot ignore other parts of that culture. Such a total separation is impossible. Just like with a jigsaw puzzle or mosaic one must have all of the pieces in order to complete the picture.

#### **4. What are students learning when we use the terms primitive, savage, developed, civilized, and race?**

##### **PRIMITIVE:**

The term primitive replaced the earlier term savage which was employed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century social science to refer to less technologically developed cultures. (Charles Darwin on seeing the South American Indians said that the difference between savage and civilized men is greater than the difference between a wild and domesticated animal) One of the principal criticisms of the use of the term primitive is that it implies that the peoples so designated represent an earlier or older stage of development and should naturally evolve to become industrialized and modern. This thinking creates a dichotomy which implicitly or explicitly contrasts people seen as civilized with those seen as uncivilized. Substituting primitive with terms like simple, tribal or non-literate does not resolve the problem. The solution is not to seek a word but to undertake instead an anthropological study, which explores and demonstrates the historical development of given human groups and their relationship to other groups with different technological levels and modes of production.

Until the 1960s anthropology was identified as the study of 'primitive peoples', and that is what distinguished it from sociology, political science, etc. In the 60' & 70s most practitioners abandoned the term and searched for a term that would avoid the pejorative connotation of the label 'primitive'. Also, most anthropologists no longer define their field of study as limited to simple societies, they have broadened their field of study to include industrial societies as well.

##### **DEVELOPMENT:**

The notion of development, which in its broadest sense includes both economic development and the social and cultural changes which accompany it, is closely linked to certain ideologies or theories of international relations and of world history. Economic development is conceived of as the process of transition from one type of economic system to another, implying both economic growth (increased production and increased per capita income) and sociocultural change. Implicit in the idea of development as it has been traditionally formulated is the notion that societies or nations may be placed on an evolutionary scale, with the Western or 'developed' nations as the most advanced and the 'developing' nations as those that have not yet undergone the necessary transformations towards prosperity and economic growth. Studies focus on the manner in which Third World nations may effect the transition towards, for example, more efficient agricultural methods, industrialization, urbanization, and so forth.

Implicit in the development concept is the evolutionary notion of societies which 'progress' and 'improve' which are more or less advanced along the path of development. It is illusory to study a Third World nation as an independently evolving unit: instead, we must consider the Third World and its 'underdevelopment' as a byproduct of the expansion of a capitalistic world system of colonial dominance (a predatory relationship).

Urbanization or industrialization, for example, are by no means always indicators of increasing well being or progress in third World nations, and must be carefully examined in each context for their social, political and economic consequences. It is more realistic to examine critically who benefits from the development process, and whether technological economic 'advances' signify any overall improvement for the whole population, or merely increased profit for a national and/or foreign elite. It may be argued that the most appropriate technology at the community level is often that which can be built and maintained locally at low cost. Technology which is directed towards resolving basic community problems and needs is beneficial to the progress of a group, rather than imported high technology which is only available to wealthy elites and which will ultimately serve to increase the gap between rich and poor.

## **RACE**

### **Classification of Races**

The common use of the word in English is to refer to a group of persons who share common physical characteristics and form a discrete and separable population unit has no scientific validity. Evolutionary theory and physical anthropology have long since demonstrated that there are no fixed or discrete racial groups in human populations. Instead, human groups constantly change and interact, to such an extent that modern population genetics focuses on clines or patterns of the distribution of specific genes rather than on artificially created racial categories.

### **Race as a Folk Concept**

As a folk concept in Western and Non-Western societies the concept of race is a powerful and important one, which is employed in order to classify and systematically exclude members of given groups from full participation in the social system controlled by the dominant group. As a folk concept, race is employed to attribute not only physical characteristics but also psychological and moral ones to members of given categories, thus justifying or naturalizing a discriminatory social system.

### **Adaptations to Environment**

Although the concept of genetic adaptation is still debated, it seems likely that human beings may adapt biologically to the different environments in which the ancestors of the present individuals lived for many generations. Thus, temperature, altitude, prevalent diseases, and dietary resources may influence prevailing traits among groups and directly influence the physical characteristics of humans, i.e. racial characteristics.

### **Geographic Distribution**

The people of Europe are sometimes said to be of Caucasian race because of a now-discredited theory that all peoples of the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe (as well as those of European descent elsewhere) originated in the Caucasus Mountains. European peoples range in skin color from dark to pale and in hair color from black to blond, but they are generally lighter in pigment than any other peoples of the world. Generally stature is greatest in northern Europe, and hair color is darkest in the southern parts of Europe.

East Asians constitute the largest human racial group and include Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Philippines, Indonesians, Malaysians, and Thais. East Asians have straight, black hair and generally a wide, flat face with such features as sparse beard and mustache and a fold of skin (epicanthic fold) that covers at least the inner corner of the eye and gives it an almond-shaped appearance. Most East Asians share these features, but the peoples of Southeast Asia are generally smaller, darker, and more slender than those farther north. Throughout history the peoples of the region have migrated and intermixed, so national boundaries do not coincide with separate subraces in modern Asia.

The Native Americans and the Inuit and Aleut people of the northern coasts of the Americas also almost always have straight, black hair and large faces. Native Americans differ in various parts of the Americas, and they differ also from East Asians in generally having more prominent noses and eyes that lack the epicanthic fold.

Although the term Negro has been used for African peoples and their descendants in other countries, it has come to have a pejorative meaning. In the United States, at least, such people today prefer to be called blacks. The peoples of West Africa generally have deeply pigmented skin, hair, and eyes; coarse, tightly curled hair; broad noses; prominent front teeth; and thick lips. In southern Africa, many people are short and not very dark-skinned. Blacks of North and South America are of mixed origin, about four-fifths African and the rest usually mostly European, but often partly Native American.

The people of the Indian subcontinent fit most closely with those of Europe and the Mediterranean basin, but many of them are dark-skinned and also distinct in other ways. The Aborigines of Australia are another dark-skinned group, but no satisfactory evidence

exists for relationships to other groups. The islands of the Pacific have a wide variety of peoples: Melanesians, on and near New Guinea; Micronesians to the north; and Polynesians in the outer reaches. The origins of all these peoples remain in some doubt.

### **Genetic Determinants**

Racial classification may be better attempted through genetic studies than through traits that are modifiable by the environment. The first useful genetic traits for racial classification to be discovered were the human blood groups. However, even with all of this knowledge, little can be learned of the genetic traits of past generations. Additionally, there is difficulty assessing the relative roles of diverse geographic origins, past interbreeding, and evolutionary changes in genetic constitution.

The question remains as to the benefit of classifying people into racial groups. The concept of race is of limited usefulness in explaining resistance to disease or other biological traits. In addition, the genetic constitution of a group changes over time, both through mating between groups and through response to the environment. A strong argument against classifying people into races is that people in various cultures have often mistakenly acted as if one race were superior to another.

**ETHNOCENTRISM:** refers to the habit or tendency to judge or interpret other cultures according to the criteria of one's own culture. It is a universal tendency, though in different ethnographic and historical contexts we may observe greater and lesser degrees of tolerance or attitudes towards other ethnic groups. One of the main concerns of anthropology is to examine and set aside conscious and unconscious ethnocentrism in the study of human cultures, and anthropology has an important potential influence on public opinion in the sense that it can relativize assumptions and the value of other cultures.

**CULTURAL RELATIVISM:** Developed as a reaction to 19<sup>th</sup> century evolutionist theory. Anthropologists assumed the defense of indigenous and peasant peoples against the ethnocentric and racist assumptions of the period and assumed it under the banner of cultural relativism, arguing that culture or each society possessed its own rationality and coherence and should be studied in relation to that rationality and coherence.

**Problems:** It is an ethically unacceptable position, taken to its logical extreme, it would imply the impossibility of any form of moral judgement or ethical standpoint of the anthropologist who analyses the situation of subordinate or exploited peoples

It implies that cultures or societies are closed and self-contained systems within which a separate reality is created. Self contained and bounded sociocultural systems, unchanging through time, have never existed. The ethnographic world is in fact made up of communities and cultures in constant contact and change, where models of reality are not perfect or coherent, but provisional and transitory.

Once we accept that human beings and human groups are engaged in a constant process of confrontation between models, values and reality and that cultural systems themselves are subject to constant transformation, the issue of cultural relativism evaporates.