

Culture

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INTRODUCTION

In observing individuals in a social group—whether a nation, a family, a classroom, or whatever—it soon becomes clear that their behaviour is not random and haphazard. Not all possible behaviours actually occur, and if you were to observe the group long enough, you would notice that certain behaviours tend to occur with a great deal of regularity, almost routinely. Obviously, there is something that produces such order in social life.

Much of that “something” is what sociologists call *culture*. The use of this particular word may confuse some of you because culture also has a perfectly legitimate everyday meaning that has nothing to do with the orderliness of social life. In everyday language, people are “cultured” if they have sophisticated or refined tastes. What this usually means in actual practice is that they enjoy those activities favoured by the educated élite but not by the general public. Hence, drinking French wines is a mark of culture, drinking domestic beer is not; watching a ballet is cultured, watching stock-car racing is not; reading complicated Russian novels is cultured, reading comic books is not.

Social scientists, however, use the word culture in quite a different sense. The most common definition found in sociology texts is one constructed by a nineteenth-century anthropologist named Edward Tylor. For Tylor, culture included “knowledge, belief,

art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871: 1). Notice that this definition gives no clue as to what all the things listed (knowledge, belief, art, etc.) have in common. Upon reflection, though, it turns out that each of the items listed by Tylor is something that (1) is shared by all or almost all the members of some social group; (2) the older members of the group try to pass on to the younger members; and (3) shapes behaviour (as in the case of morals, laws, and custom), or at least structures perceptions of the world (as in the case of the other items listed in Tylor’s definition). If we call anything that meets these three criteria a cultural element then we can define the culture of a given group very simply as the sum total of all the cultural elements associated with that group.

Sociologists consider certain elements of culture to be particularly important. They are values, norms, and roles.

SOME BASIC CONCEPTS

Values and norms

Values are shared, relatively general beliefs that define what is desirable and what is undesirable; they specify general preferences. A belief that divorce is only a last resort for troubled marriages and a preference for abstract paintings are both values. Norms,

"Society": Defining an Important Term

Society is probably one of the most commonly used words in all of sociology. Despite that (or more likely because of that) there is no single definition found in all sociology textbooks. Generally, however, sociologists apply the term to any fairly

large group of people who (1) share a common culture, (2) think of themselves as having inherited a common set of historical traditions, (3) interact with other group members frequently, and (4) see themselves as being associated with a particular

geographic area. The term society is often applied to nations (Canadian society, U.S. society). It can, however, be applied to subgroups within nations (French Canadian society) or to groups that cut across national boundaries (Western society).

on the other hand, are relatively precise rules specifying which behaviours are permitted and which prohibited for group members. Note that in everyday usage, norm has quite a different meaning—it means average. Here again sociology has constructed its own vocabulary by attaching a new meaning to a familiar word. When a member of a group breaks a group norm by engaging in a prohibited behaviour, other group members will typically *sanction* the deviant member. To sanction is to communicate, in some way, disapproval to the deviant member (a topic to which we shall return in Chapter 5, Deviance).

When asked to give examples of a norm in our society, most students tend to think of laws, such as those against murder and physical assault. Most laws in a society are indeed social norms. The more important point, however, is that your life is governed by many norms that are not laws.

Consider the following case. You feel very close to people who have given you every reason to believe that they are close friends. You then find out that they have systematically lied to you in order to gain some advantage. How would you feel? Quite hurt, probably, and most of you would also feel that their behaviour was wrong. Why? Because most people in this society believe that close friends should neither deceive nor exploit, and a behavioural norm that flows from this belief is that people claiming to be your friends should not lie to you to gain some advantage. Note that your friends have probably not done anything illegal (that is, no laws have been violated), but a norm—in this case an important one—has clearly not been respected.

You are usually not aware, in any explicit way, of many of the norms that structure your behaviour.

For instance, there is one particular norm that regulates your daily behaviour, and that is so strongly held that for me to even suggest that you might violate it will make most readers of this chapter somewhat ill. Although students can rarely guess what norm I am talking about, it is easy to express: in this culture, there is a strong prohibition against coming into contact with the bodily discharges (a polite term for such things as urine, feces, pus, vomit, and mucus) of other individuals. Consider how many times in a given day you go to great lengths to make it unlikely that others will come into contact with your bodily discharges. Think too of how sick and repulsed you would be if this norm were broken, if you actually did come into contact with the bodily discharges of others.

Most readers would likely justify their strong reaction to contact with the bodily discharges of other people in terms of hygiene; that is, they would see it as a reaction that helps to avoid disease and for that reason would be very sensible. This is actually a fairly typical sort of rationalization, since people in most societies like to believe that their particular norms make "good sense," and that if the norms were violated something bad would happen. It is fairly easy to demonstrate, however, that our norms relating to bodily discharges involve more than just hygiene.

First of all, the aversion to bodily discharges was present in our society long before we became aware that diseases could be transmitted by germs. Second, many nonindustrial societies had the same strong aversion to bodily discharges and yet never developed a germ theory of disease. Third, even now, in our own society, there are patterns which are hard to explain on the basis of hygiene alone.

Clark and Davis (1989), for instance, found that among Canadian university students certain bodily emissions (like vomit, feces, urine) are more repellent than others (like mother's milk and perspiration). Moreover, some patterns are directly the reverse of what a hygiene hypothesis would lead one to expect. Asked what would be more upsetting to find in the bathtub of a newly rented hotel room, hair near the drain or a dirty footprint, most people choose the hair, although washed hair is less likely to contain germs than dirt.

As another example of the implicit norms governing your behaviour, consider the norms regulating sexual behaviour. What exactly are those norms? Don't respond with the norms that you attribute to supposedly unenlightened people (like your parents). What norms govern your sexual behaviour? Some students might hold to the norm that says that sexual intercourse is acceptable only in a marital context, or at least only when marriage is expected to occur in the near future. Most students do not (Hobart, 1993). Certainly one of the minimal conditions you would impose is that to be acceptable, sexual intercourse must occur with the consent of both partners. The vast majority also believe that there must be "informed consent," which in effect means that both parties must be of a certain age and aware of what they are doing. But in this liberal age, are there any other conditions? Yes. One survey, reported in Chapter 9, Families, indicates that many Canadian university students do add another provision: sexual intercourse is most acceptable when there is evidence of strong affection. This is not to say that sexual intercourse without affection does not occur, but that the preferred behaviour for these students is sexual intercourse between consenting individuals who have a strong affection for one another.

These few examples, of course, do not begin to exhaust the list of norms that regulate daily behaviour; undoubtedly readers can think of many norms not mentioned here. But as soon as you begin to list the norms that regulate your behaviour, it becomes clear that some seem more important than others. For sociologists, the crucial difference between important and less-than-important norms lies in the nature of the reaction of group members when the norm is violated by an individual member. Sumner

(1940) long ago introduced two terms, *folkways* and *mores*, to capture this distinction. Folkways are those norms that do not evoke severe moral condemnation when violated. The injunction to wear clothes is probably a folkway for most people. If you saw someone running around campus naked, you might feel embarrassed, amused, or titillated, but not morally outraged. Mores are those norms whose violation does provoke strong moral condemnation. Our strong moral condemnation of sexual assault, arson, and murder, for instance, suggests that the norms prohibiting these behaviours are mores.

It must be emphasized that the difference between mores and folkways lies in the nature of the reaction produced by the violation of the norm, and not in the *content* of the rule. For instance, one of the norms in our society is that dogs should not be eaten, while one of the norms in contemporary Hindu society is that cow beef should not be eaten. These two norms are similar in content but one is a folkway, the other a *mos* (singular of mores). You may be very upset if you hear that someone has eaten a dog, but you are unlikely to be morally outraged. Yet that sense of moral outrage is exactly what would be evoked among Hindus were someone to openly slaughter, cook, and eat a cow. We shall have much more to say about the importance of audience reactions to norm violations in Chapter 5, Deviance.

Social roles

A role is a cluster of behavioural expectations associated with some particular social position within a group or society. For instance, the two social positions of importance in most classroom situations are "teacher" and "student." Most of us expect that a teacher will come to class prepared, will not assign grades arbitrarily, will not show up to class drunk, etc., and so these expectations, taken as a sum, define the teacher role. (As an exercise, you might try to think of the expectations that define the student role.)

A moment's reflection will indicate that one person can occupy several different roles at once. What roles have you occupied during the past week? Brother? Sister? Student? Friend? Enemy? Female? Male? Son? Daughter? This occupation of



A social role is a cluster of expectations about the behaviour that is appropriate for a given individual in a given situation.

multiple roles opens the door to role conflicts, that is, situations in which the behavioural expectations associated with one role are inconsistent with those associated with another concurrent role. Some of the clearest contemporary examples of role conflict involve the parent role. The need to care for children—physically, emotionally, and otherwise, or even to arrange for others to care for them on a regular basis—quite often interferes with the demands of a full-time occupation, especially one in a competitive environment. Thus, there is the potential for conflict between the parent role and the full-time worker role, a role conflict that perhaps falls more frequently upon women. (We shall have more to say on this topic in Chapters 6 and 9, Gender Relations and Families.)

In studying roles we must always keep in mind that, without exception, they are social definitions,

and thus, to a certain extent, they are arbitrary. This means that roles we take for granted in our own culture may not exist in the same form in other cultures. Here the “mother” role is a particularly good example for making the general point.

In our culture, the traditional definition of the mother role suggests that mothers are supposed to provide their children with emotional support, especially when the children are hurt and frightened, to nurse them when they are first born (with either breast or bottle), and to provide them with guidance as they grow. Some members of our society might even regard these behaviours as natural, as resulting from an innate tendency in most women towards mothering. But let us look at some evidence.

In many European societies prior to the nineteenth-century, it was common for biological mothers to send their newborns for care and feeding to a “wet nurse” and her family for a period of one to two years. When these children were returned by the wet nurse, they were often cared for by older siblings or by other relatives, and not by the biological mother. In the case of peasant families, in which the mother had to work alongside the father in the fields, a pattern like this might reflect only economic necessity. It happens, however, that this same pattern was especially strong among the middle and upper classes in traditional Europe. But obviously, if the behaviours that for us are all associated with the single role we think of as “mother” were split up and allocated to a range of different people, then in these societies there was no role that can be said to correspond precisely to the mother role in our own society.

The general point to be made here is that every role is a cluster of expectations about behaviour, but this clustering varies from culture to culture. That our own culture groups together certain behavioural expectations in order to form a particular role does not guarantee that other cultures will group those same expectations together in the same way to form the same role.

Some additional terms

At this point, it will be useful to introduce a few additional terms. The first of these is *subculture*, a group of people within a single society who possess

On Defining the "Mother" Role

Ask yourself the following question: Is the increase in the number of married women with families working outside the home having a harmful effect on family life? The odds are that you have a definite opinion on this subject. When a recent Gallup poll asked a similar question of a national sample of Canadians, 54% said that a woman working outside the home did have a harmful effect on family life, 43% said it did not, and only 1% expressed no opinion at all (Bozinoff and Dunoff, 1993).

Now suppose I asked you a second question: Does the rise in the number of married men with families in the working world have a harmful effect on family life? Likely, you

would be taken aback, and most of you likely will not have thought about the question in any great way. But do not feel bad. The question has rarely asked, even by sociologists. While there have been hundreds, possibly thousands, of studies on the effect of maternal employment outside the home on children, there have been few on the effects of paternal employment outside the home.

But why does changing married women with families not raise the question for one in which you have a firm opinion (one that has been well studied by sociologists) and that is puzzling and about which you do not have a

firm opinion, and which has not been particularly well studied? The answer, presumably, is that you, along with most sociologists, still see the raising of children as being primarily a mother's responsibility, that is, as an expectation that is part of the definition of the mother role.

Consequently, it makes sense to you to think about the possible harmful effects of something like working outside the home that might diminish the amount of time that a mother devotes to her children. Because primary responsibility for raising children is not an expectation that you have for the role father, it does not occur to you to think about the harmful effects of a father working outside the home.

in addition to the cultural elements they share with the other members of their society, certain distinctive cultural elements that set them apart. Thus, Ukrainians, Jews, Italians, or Iranians residing in Canada are often called subcultures because they share among themselves certain religious or ethnic beliefs and customs that are not characteristic of the Canadian population as a whole. Canadian subcultures will be discussed more fully in Chapter 8, Race and Ethnic Relations.

When the members of a society or a subculture agree that a specific set of norms and values should regulate some broad area of social life, such as the economy, family life, religion, or politics, then that set of norms and values is called an institution. Institutions are the subject of later chapters in this text.

The term material culture refers to all the physical objects used and produced by the members of a society or a subculture. Thus, for instance, the material culture of a nonindustrial society would include its pottery, the tools it uses to gather and process food, and its sacred objects, while the ma-

terial culture of our own society would include our televisions, books, automobiles, and houses.

The term popular culture refers to those cultural objects and beliefs that are widely distributed across all the social classes in a society, such as comic books and horror films. Since popular culture is by definition widely distributed, larger societies do not usually develop a popular culture until they develop mass media, including print, radio, and television. Also, since relatively expensive things are not likely to achieve a wide distribution, the elements of popular culture are generally inexpensive. For instance, the fact that comic books are relatively inexpensive compared with other sorts of books undoubtedly accounts in part for their popularity, just as the low cost of the dime novel accounted for its popularity during the nineteenth century.

Although sociologists acknowledge the importance of the mass media in creating popular culture, they increasingly recognize that some elements in popular culture are still brought into being by direct, person-to-person exchanges. Consider the case of urban legends (see Brunvand, 1989). These



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are stories that have the following characteristics: (1) they are passed along mainly by word of mouth; (2) the people who repeat these stories believe them to be literally true; (3) the stories are nearly always situated in the very recent past, and are associated with some nearby geographical location; and, most importantly, (4) the stories are almost always completely false. Some of the best-known urban legends include stories about alligators in the sewers of New York, about snakes found in blankets imported from the Orient, about five-year-old boys who are found castrated in shopping centres, about pets put into microwave ovens, about corpses that are mislaid, about Mexican dogs that turn out to be rats, etc.

The importance of these stories lies in the fact that they can tell us something about the unconscious fears that characterize urban societies. For instance, the story about the young boy found castrated in a shopping centre (which has been recorded at hundreds of locations all over North America, and which has really never occurred at any of them) usually includes racial overtones, with the alleged perpetrator often being black. Attributing

such an act to a minority group is by no means something new. During the Middle Ages, for instance, Jews were regularly accused of the ritualistic castration and killing of Christian boys, just as, during the early days of the Roman Empire, Christians were regularly accused of the same thing. It seems obvious that the popularity of this modern version of the castrated boy story (and it is a story that is certainly well known to my students) says something about the fears of the dominant white population in North America.

Often urban legends reflect more than one cultural attitude simultaneously. For instance, in the past few years there have been a number of urban legends about AIDS. In one of the oldest and more widespread stories, a man meets an attractive woman in a bar, they go to his hotel room, and they have sexual intercourse. The next morning, when he awakes, the man finds the woman gone and a message scrawled in lipstick on the mirror in the bathroom: "Welcome to the wonderful world of AIDS." At one level, the story can be seen as reflecting our very real worries about this current

incurable disease. But notice that in the story the disease is knowingly spread by a woman to a man. While this pattern of transmission is possible, it is far more common—in the real world—for a man to spread the disease to a woman or another man. Furthermore, while there have been people with AIDS who knowingly spread the disease, most have been males, not females. The fact that the urban legend reverses the observed pattern in order to make

a woman the source of danger says something, it has been argued, about prevailing cultural attitudes toward women in our society.

Urban legends are not the only elements of popular culture that can be analyzed in order to investigate prevailing cultural attitudes. Best-selling novels, popular TV shows, jokes, even toys (see the boxed insert on Barbie) can all provide insight into our culture.

More Than Just a Toy: Barbie as Cultural Icon

In Greek mythology Athena sprang fully grown from the head of Zeus and went on to acquire a reputation for cleverness. In 1959, Barbie emerged as a fully formed teenager from somewhere within the Mattel Corporation to become the best-selling toy in the world. Athena was born wearing a suit of armour; Barbie came equipped with a hard plastic body. Athena was virginal but worked with males on a number of difficult tasks; Barbie is virginal (at least semi-virginal) and paired with Ken. But Barbie and Athena differ dramatically in at least two ways: Barbie has lots more stuff and a whole lot more fun!

Barbie's success is phenomenal. In the United States and Canada, the vast majority of girls under the age of twelve have at least one Barbie and it's common for a girl to have several Barbies. What accounts for Barbie's popularity? Partly, it's due to the fact that Barbie and the merchandising package that surrounds her mesh so well with the dominant culture in most capitalistic societies. Barbie, after all, is the quintessential consumer and in the never-ending task of acquiring for Barbie her own special cars, horses, furniture, jewelry, clothing, etc., young girls learn to become the sort of con-

sumer upon whom capitalistic societies depend. Barbie also embodies qualities that have long been favoured in middle-class families: she's pretty, neat, always anxious to have the proper outfit for the proper occasion, and (it goes without saying) intensely heterosexual. Finally, Barbie works to reinforce the traditional gender roles that so many members of the middle class now see as under attack by feminists. She is, after all, concerned with her appearance (her hair in particular), likes nice clothes, and gravitates towards occupations (stewardess, teacher, candy stripper, fashion designer, perfume designer, etc.) traditionally associated with women. True, she does occasionally break away from the traditional gender stereotype. In the early 1970s, for instance, Barbie became a medical doctor. The fact is, however, Dr. Barbie never did sell very well (Urla and Swedlund, 1996: 283).

As a cultural icon, however, Barbie is most distinctive on account of her impossible body. Although she has undergone many transformations over the last few decades, and although there are now a variety of Barbies that differ from one another in regard to skin colour and facial features, two

things have remained constant: her elongated body and her large breasts. Urla and Swedlund (1996) compared the measurements taken from a sample of different Barbies with the measurements of the statistically "average" female in the United States. Needless to say, they discovered that if Barbie were scaled to the height of the average female, and her bodily proportions remained constant, then she would be clinically anorexic to an extreme degree—albeit unusually buxom. These same authors did a similar study with Barbie's friend Ken. They found that Ken's proportions were also unrealistic when compared with the statistically average male, but (and this, they argue, is the important point here) far less so than Barbie's. To the extent that Barbie's body sets a standard that is impossible for real-life girls to meet, she reinforces a cultural climate in which women must inevitably be considered inferior. Moreover, Urla and Swedlund point out, in the midst of the excesses characteristic of capitalistic societies, a slender body is something that can be achieved only through self-discipline and control; Barbie's hyper-slender body therefore suggests that females are in special need of control and discipline and

this too may reinforce male domination or patriarchy (see Chapter 6, Gender Relations).

But nothing is ever simple, and Urla and Swedlund go on to suggest further that we should also pay attention to what Barbie is *not*. For instance, although Barbie has many accessories, a husband and (her own) children are not among them. Barbie is not, in other words, a wife and mother. Nor is she, like so many other dolls, a child to be cared for as a child. On the contrary, Barbie is a strongly

sexualized female who conveys an aura of independence. There is, in short, little about Barbie or Barbie's merchandising that can be seen as socializing young girls for a traditional role as mother and wife. To paraphrase the authors: Barbie owns an expensive car and isn't married; she can't be doing everything wrong!

Finally, we must not fall into the trap of regarding young girls as purely passive consumers of what confronts them. Whatever Mattel may intend Barbie to be, young

girls are capable of associating their Barbie dolls with a range of roles and personalities. What is needed, these authors suggest, is more research into just what these different roles and personalities are.

In the end, then, Barbie turns out to be surrounded by a fairly complex set of cultural values. These values may not all be consistent with one another but they are all very much reflective of the cultural milieu from which Barbie sprang and in which she flourishes.

ASPECTS OF CULTURE

Ever since the nineteenth century, three observations have consistently forced themselves upon virtually every investigator concerned with the study of culture. They are that (1) cultures exhibit enormous variation with regard to their values, norms, and roles; (2) few cultural elements are common to all known societies; and (3) the elements of culture in a given society are often interrelated.

Cultural variation

If we take an overview of the hundreds of societies in the world, past or present, the first thing that strikes us is that there is tremendous variation with regard to the cultural elements found in them. In fact, many societies have values and norms that are directly opposite to those that we might take for granted here.

Some of this cultural variation was apparent in our earlier discussion of the mother role, and other examples of such variation are not difficult to discover. In our society many individuals believe that there exists one god, responsible for all of creation, and they typically describe this god using imagery that is male. Swanson (1960) found that about half the nonindustrial societies in the world also believe in a single god, responsible for creation, although that god is not always seen as a male, or even as

having a human likeness. Among the Iroquois, for instance, god was female, while among the South American Lengua, god is a beetle. But the remaining societies in the world either believe in many gods, no one of which is responsible for all creation, or do not believe in personalized gods of any sort. (Related issues will be considered further in Chapter 10, Religion.)

Documenting cultural variation has always been a special concern of anthropologists, and one of the most famous of all the anthropological studies concerned with cultural variation is still Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935). In this book Mead describes three societies in New Guinea (a large island just to the north of Australia) that she studied in the early 1930s. Mead was concerned most of all with gender roles, and in the first of her societies, the Arapesh; she found that both males and females were cooperative, mild-mannered and gentle, and very much concerned with helping their young. Among the Arapesh, in other words, both males and females seemed to embody the traits that Western societies associate with females. Mead's second society, the Mundugumor, was quite different. Here both males and females were aggressive (and that included being sexually aggressive), uncooperative, jealous, hostile, and relatively unconcerned with parental tasks. To Mead it seemed as if both males and females among the Mundugumor conformed to the