

How does Culture Work?

Throughout this class we have gone through numerous texts all in the pursuit of the big overarching question: how does culture work? Culture is hard to define because it is the existence of embeddedness brought on by habitual thought. Culture defines how a society thinks, and how a society finds purpose.

Here is why it is difficult to describe culture. Culture is so encompassing that it acts as a veil on society. It is hard to separate culture from the rest of life because for every line we draw, we get caught up in our own bias, and that line will have had to make compromises in many aspects of life. However, the effort to determine how “culture” works is still a question that deserves an answer.

Fundamentally, culture works due to the existence of reciprocity. Without feelings of reciprocity, culture would not be able to function how it does in any timeframe, in any location. Culture would be synonymous with economics. Without reciprocity, the Kula would not be able to exist, nor would alien survivor support groups, nor the exchange of a post Soviet informal economy. It is clear that reciprocity is crucial to human to human interaction (some would say cultural anthropology is just understanding this on different levels) and without it, complex moral and social behaviors such as honor systems and kinship hierarchies wouldn't exist.

In the *Moonlighting with Strangers* essay, we get a glimpse of the importance of reciprocity for the Russian workers after the fall of the Soviet Union. I not only chose this text because it was one of my favorite in the class, but I think it characterizes the importance of reciprocity out of all the other texts the best. The need to reciprocate was so strong, the need to fit in is so apparent, that people like Grigory can not bring themselves to be referenced as

individual entrepreneurs. Reciprocity converges to societal grouping which translates to the need to belong, the search for purpose.

The difficulty of cultural analysis is that again and again, we run into the problem of self-definement. How do you define something that seems to be paradoxically defined by itself? Small human to human behaviors slowly define societal normalcy which helps define new human to human behaviors. This allows every cultural characterization to have explanations and ramifications at multiple different levels: broadly across society, between two people, or ingrained into one's thought process. In *Moonlighting with Strangers*, the informal economy can be described by the ability to relate to blue collar work, how a society deals with post-socialism, and the longing to fit in. In Malonowski's writing, it is clear that the Kula paved the way for how people harvested/distributed crops, thought about strangerhood, and considered tribal hierarchies. It's hard to see distinct cultural behaviors that **don't** have wider ramifications to the way people perceive one another and themselves, or behave in other aspects of their lives.

Any behavior that has been done over and over again can be normalized. Any behavior that has been normalized lays on a bed of existing mini revolutions that distinguish(or its more accurate to say "doesn't distinguish") it from other behaviors.

Normalization is the most important part about culture. It is hardest to analyze your own culture because you can not easily see where you biases clearly live. The normalization of cultural behaviors defines how anthropologists are able to investigate culture and how a culture can build on itself as time progresses. As certain behaviors and concepts are taken for granted as being "intuitive" and "innate", new behaviors are able to develop as described in the last section. Only within the juxtaposition of other cultures can we identify our own biases that plague our culture. Boas had the intuition to save cultural documents and artifacts, no matter how flawed his

techniques were, because he realized the importance of juxtaposing cultures. For example, an analysis of “sound-blindness” comes from his experience speaking outside the western cultural bubble. Although I do not agree in his objectification of the subjective experiences inherent to artifact collection, I agree with his mission. Culture works by making us blind to the things around us, thus to analyze what we are blind to is to analyze what holds significance.

The building blocks of culture are social and psychological concepts innate to every human. As I mentioned before, one of them is the ability to reciprocate. Boas understood, however, is that there are many things that we believe to be innate that aren’t necessarily innate at all. For example, although we think that language is just a way for different people to express themselves, we realize that different languages have words that aren’t found in other languages and that this is representative of a different categorization of thought. Normalization of behaviors and traditions allow cultures to self-propagate indefinitely. Only once a behavior has been so ingrained in a society, that no one is very conscious that it exists or why it exists, can new behaviors and new cultural developments take place. This way cultures, can slowly “shift the needle” so to speak, when nothing *requires* any sort of thought.

I was very stunned by our readings about language because it echoed these themes so clearly. As I read Boas’s writing, I started to understand that if I don’t have the words for green then green might not exist. I started to understand that this implies the manifestation of certain behaviors instead of others, even though the existence of not having a word to describe green is a manifestation of a certain behavior of itself.

I think back to the Kula examined in Malinowski’s writing. As an outsider, I had a very difficult time understanding the Kula and the value that the Kula brought for the Trobriands. I would continually ask myself about why the existence of shell gifting made any economic sense.

What would you gain from using all of those resources to canoe to another island only to flex that you are very generous(I understand that this is a gross mischaracterization, this was just my initial perception). It seems so counterintuitive because I live in the United States where the American dream idealized individual achievement and the accumulation of wealth. Even though we learned about Malonawski's ethnography at the beginning of the course, I did not have any sort of solid understanding until I could reflect on my own gift giving economy, writing my second essay in the class about eggs.

At the same time, the Trobriands demonstrated that they didn't understand the Kula outside of their local context. They didn't realize the wider structure. However, this can be argued as a product of not needing to question basic principles of society that seem trivial. For example, in terms of my own experience, I don't understand the entire American political process, but I understand the concept of voting and the right to vote, however the right to vote is nontrivial without a concept of democracy. Therefore, similarly, the Kula emphasizes what it means to be enveloped in a culture because I have to think hard about it, while no Trobriand ever does.

In conclusion, although the word "culture" does not have a clear definition, we are still able to understand how culture works by considering different cultures in comparison with one another and understand each step in normalizing certain behaviors that allow the positive reinforcement of new behaviors to achieve normalcy in society. I argue in this essay that this encapsulates how culture works, small behaviors build to create farther reaching levels of normalcy and perception that builds on itself. Of course, to answer a question as loaded as "how culture works" deserves a book, or two, or maybe even an entire library. However, there isn't a feasible way to step around the fact that normalization propagates through culture to dramatically

change(whilst simultaneously reaffirming) different reactions across whatever time horizon.

Thus, although hard to answer, we can still answer the fundamental question of “how culture works” through the analysis of normalization.

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21A.01 How Culture Works
Fall 2019

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