

The concept of culture

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Culture is a term used in many ways. Some definitions take into account physical aspects as others see culture as a symbolic system.

The anthropological definition was coined by Geertz (1973):

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. That's why the science concerning culture should be interpretative quest of cultural meanings in social space of culture perceived as forms of Being-in-the-world. Geertz see culture as system of communication because it is the web of significance.

Most convenient for educational purpose is one that was defined by Keesing (1974):

Culture conceived as a system of competence shared in its broad design and deeper principles, and varying between individuals in its specificities, is then not all what an individual knows and thinks and feels about his [or her] world. It is his [or her] theory of what his [or her] fellows know, believe, and mean, his [or her] theory of code being followed, the game being played, in the society into which he [or she] was born... It is this theory to which a native actor [or actress] refers in interpreting the unfamiliar or the ambiguous, in interacting with strangers (or supernaturals), and in other settings peripheral to the familiarity of mundane everyday life space; and with which he [or she] creates the stage on which the games of life are played... But note that the actor's [or actress'] "theory" of his [or her] culture, like his [or her] theory of his [or her] language may be in large measure unconscious. Actors [or actresses] follow rules of which they are not consciously aware, and assume a world to be "out there" that they have

in fact created with culturally shaped and shaded patterns of mind. We can recognize that not every individual shares precisely the same theory of the cultural code, that not every individual knows all the sectors of the culture... even though no one native actor [or actress] knows all the culture, and each has a variant version of the code. Culture in this view is ordered not simply as a collection of symbols fitted together by the analyst but as a system of knowledge, shaped and constrained by the way the human brain acquires, organizes, and processes information and creates "internal model of reality" (p.89) Keesing emphasizes the aspect of knowledge ("theory") that is a gift of our culture of which we take advantage. That is why we can communicate with others and interpret their behavior. The important feature of this system of knowledge is that it is shared by large group of people. Sometimes those groups live in the same country when boundaries between culture coincide with political boundaries. There is a strong connection between culture and communication: both of them influence each other. That's why we have to be aware of our cultural background in communicating with other people.

Cultural influences on communication

Hofstede's dimensions of cultural variability:

1. individualism – collectivism explain largest differences in communication situations. People in individualistic cultures tend to be universalistic and apply the same value standards to all. People in collectivistic cultures, in contrast, tend to be particularistic and, therefore apply different value standards for members of their ingroups and outgroups. (Gudykunst & Yun Kim, p. 47)
2. Uncertainty avoidance – results from the degree of social uncertainty

that are effect of unclear situations. Uncertainty leads to avoidance. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures aggressive behavior occurs much frequently because deviant behavior is not acceptable.

- one should repay debts, favors, compliment no matter how small (Gudykunst & Yun Kim, p. 57)

3. Power distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede & Bond 1984, p. 419) individuals from high power distance societies perceive power as a basic fact in society and i.e. parents in high power distance culture value obedience in their children.

4. Masculinity – Femininity – high masculinity cultural system give importance to things, power, and assertiveness. High femininity cultural systems feature differentiated sexroles, performance, ambition, and independence

Cultural norms and rules

Norms are “socially shared guidelines for expected and accepted behaviors, violation of which leads to some form of sanction. The sanctions can vary from a disapproving look to ostracism from the group to death” (Gudykunst & Yun Kim, p. 57) We, as a members of our culture, are aware of some norms and in the same time unaware of others that although control some of our behavior. We submit to some rules and norms even though we are not able to articulate them. Despite the fact that there is a huge verity of rules and cultural norms some researches claims that some are universal.

According to Argyle and Henderson there are six universal rules in personal relationship:

- one should respect the other’s privacy
- one should look the other person in the eye during conversation
- one should or should not discuss that which is said in confidence with the other person
- one should or should not indulge in sexual activity with the other person
- one should not criticize the other person in public