

Some Definitions Of Culture

Language and Culture in the Deaf Community

[C]ulture, that is,... the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives. (Sapir, *Language*, 1921)

An organization of conventional understandings manifest in act and artifact, which, persisting through tradition, characterizes a human group. (Redfield, quoted in Ogburn & Nimkoff, *Sociology*, 1940)

Culture is essentially a construct that describes the total body of belief, behavior, knowledge, sanctions, values, and goals that mark the way of life of any people. That is, though a culture may be treated by the student as capable of objective description, in the final analysis it comprises the things that people have, the things they do, and what they think. (Herskovits, *Man and His Works*, 1948)

[Culture is] the various standards for perceiving, evaluating, believing, and doing that... [a person] attributes to other persons as a result of his experience of their actions and admonitions.... Insofar as a person finds he must attribute different standards to different sets of others, he perceives these sets as having different cultures. (Ward Goodenough, *Culture, Language, and Society*, 1981)

A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members.... Culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them." (Goodenough, *Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics*, 1957)

... the sum of a given society's folk classifications, all of that society's ethnoscience, its particular ways of classifying its material and social universe. Thus, to take an extreme example, the 'ethnopornography' of the Queensland aborigines is what they consider pornographic—if indeed they have such a category—rather than what was considered pornography by the Victorian ethnologist [who studied them]. (Sturtevant, "Studies in Ethnoscience," *American Anthropologist*, 1964)

The culture concept... denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (Geertz, *Religion as a cultural system*, 1966)

It is through culture patterns, ordered clusters of significant symbols, that man makes sense of the events through which he lives. The study of culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns, is thus the study of the machinery individuals and groups of individuals employ to orient themselves in a world otherwise opaque.... Peoples everywhere have developed symbolic structures in terms of

which persons are perceived not baldly as such, as mere unadorned member's of the human race, but as representatives of certain distinct categories of persons, specific sorts of individuals.... The everyday world in which the members of any community move, their takenforgranted field of social action, is populated not by anybodies, faceless men without qualities, but by somebodies, concrete classes of determinate persons positively characterized and appropriately labelled. (Clifford Geertz, *Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali*, 1973)

Culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters— as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions...—for the governing of behavior. (Geertz, *The impact of the concept of culture on the concept of man*, 1966)

Anthropological analysis reduces to the ability to 'see things from the native's point of view'.... To grasp concepts that, for another people, are experientinear, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experiencedistant concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else's skin. The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.... in the country of the blind, who are not as unobservant as they look, the oneeyed is not king, he is spectator. (Geertz, "From *the native's point of view*" *On the nature of anthropological understanding*,

The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong. (Geertz, *Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, 1979)

Some of my work in this area has been guided by an image of a society as an organization for the production of social occasions, or 'scenes,' as I have called them, and of a culture as a script for planning, staging, and performing scenes.... [Culture is] a set of principles for creating dramas, for writing scripts, and, of course, for recruiting players and audiences. Culture provides principles for framing experience as eventful in particular ways, but it does not provide one with a neat set of eventtypes to map onto the world. Culture is not simply a cognitive map that people acquire, in whole or in part, more or less accurately, and then learn to read. People are cast out into the imperfectly charted, continually shifting seas of everyday life. Mapping them out is a constant process resulting not in an individual cognitive map, but in a whole chart case of rough, improvised, continually revised sketch maps. Culture does not provide a cognitive map, but rather a set of principles for mapmaking and navigation. Different cultures are like different schools of navigation designed to cope with different terrains and seas." (Frake, *Plying frames can be dangerous*, 1977)

Culture is, by definition here, a system of symbols and meanings. Culture contrasts with norms in that norms are oriented to patterns for action, whereas culture constitutes a body of definitions, premises, statements, postulates, presumptions, propositions, and perceptions about the nature of

the universe and man's place in it. Where norms tell the actor how to play a scene, culture tells the actor how the scene is set and what it all means. Where norms tell the actor how to behave in the presence of ghosts, gods, and human beings, culture tells the actors what ghosts, gods, and human beings are and what they are all about.... The world at large, nature, the facts of life, whatever they may be, are always part of man's perception of them as that perception is formulated through his culture. The world at large is not, indeed it cannot be, independent of the way in which his culture formulates his vision of what he is seeing.... Reality is itself constructed by the beliefs, understandings, and comprehensions entailed in cultural meanings. (Schneider, Notes toward a theory of culture. In Basso and Selby, *Meaning in anthropology*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976.)

Culture... [is] defined not simply as experiences functioning within the context of historical structures and social formations, but as 'lived antagonistic relations' situated within a complex of sociopolitical institutions and social forms that limit as well as enable human action.... It is a complex realm of antagonistic experiences mediated by power and struggle and rooted in the structural opposition of labor and capital, as one instance, and, in another instance, as the transformative ability of human beings to shape their lives while only being partially constrained by the social, political, and economic determinants that place interventions on their practice.... To rethink the concept of culture is thus to attempt to articulate not only the experiences and practices that are distinctive to a specific group or class, but also to link those experiences to the power exercised by the dominant class and the structural field over which the latter exercises control. (Henry Giroux, *Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling*, 1981)

Culture is constituted by the relations between different classes and groups bounded by structural forces and material conditions and informed by a range of experiences mediated, in part, by the power exercised by a dominant society.... [C]ulture is constituted as a dialectical instance of power and conflict, rooted in the struggle over both material conditions and the form and content of practical activity. (Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition*, 1983)