

Culture difference essay



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When you think of the word “ culture”, what enters your mind? Perhaps music, architecture, the arts. Many people associate these areas with culture. Others may think of philosophy, history, and literature. Still others may think of beliefs, customs, values, and worldview.

Perhaps the earliest formal definition of culture, put forward by E. B. Tylor in 1871, is also one of the best known. He conceived of culture as “ 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.” (Tylor, 1871) Since Tylor’s definition, more than 500 different versions have emerged, but still no consensus has been reached up to the present. Defining culture is difficult mainly because scholars have different understandings of it. One definition, for example, treats culture as everything that is human-made. Another scholar, however, has proposed that “ culture is communication and communication is culture” (Hall, 1976).

The authors of this book agree with most anthropologists’ view that culture refers to the total way of living of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people think, say, do, and make. Traditional Chinese medicine, Chinese Gongfu, Peking Opera and Chinese Cuisines are among the most frequently mentioned symbols of Chinese culture. Besides, examples of culture can also be found in every aspect of our life. These include the customs we observe for naming our children, the way we address our family members, our mode of entertaining our guests, the way we spend our money, how we take our vacation, the way we raise our children, as well as the table manners we expect, the clothes we wear, the vehicles we drive,

the utensils we use for meals, and so on. In a word, culture is a whole collection of our living patterns and behaviors.

Metaphors of culture As a large and pervasive concept, culture is often compared to an iceberg, suggesting that only a small part of it is visible while most of it lies concealed. Our customs, habits and the artifacts made and used by humans lie atop the iceberg, easy to discover. The hidden dimension, however, is mainly composed of the underlying worldview, value systems, ways of thinking, national character and any other deep concepts of our mind that serve as the foundation of the visible part and that account for our customs, habits and artifacts. In China, for instance, we often greet each other by asking “Where are you going?” and give a general answer to it when greeted. The strong emphasis on social relationships and the heavy interdependence between Chinese people are some underlying reasons that account for this habit. To an American, this same sentence may be interpreted as an intrusion into one’s privacy. The underlying individual-oriented relationship is the invisible part of the iceberg.

Culture is also compared to the “software of our mind” (Hofstede, 1991) and the grammar of our behavior. Levi Strauss once said, “All societies construct their own realities in accordance with mental or psychological principles... We thus invent the world we inhabit.” (Hawkes, 2003) The society around us is not an entirely objective reality, for every one of us helps to construct our world. Culture is this shared set of mental and psychological principles that exist in people’s minds. This collective agreement then governs people’s behavior and gives people guidelines about what things mean, what is important, and what should or should not be done. Chinese people are well

known for their modesty. Confucian teachings, which originated in the group-oriented cultures, are the guidelines that help shape their behavior.

Another popular metaphor for culture is to compare it to the rules of the game everybody is playing in any particular society although we generally are not highly aware of the rules at any given moment. These shared rules of the game tell us how to communicate with others and how to interpret the behavior of those around us. Egyptians, for instance, tend to use more similes and metaphors in their compliments than Americans. “ He is like a brother to me” is often heard in their conversation. Besides, “ May God protect him” is often addressed to a pregnant woman or a child to protect the individual from bad luck. Americans, on the other hand, seem to compliment more frequently than Egyptians though their compliments are often shorter and include fewer metaphors and similes. Thus, culture is everything an individual needs to acquire in order to be well accepted into a society.

Characteristics of culture However, one does not become a member of a culture by birth. Culture is learned. We learn our culture from those people with whom we interact in our process of socialization: our parents, teachers, friends, and even strangers. A human infant will learn wolf culture if he lives with wolves since his birth. We also learn the expectations others may have for our behavior through our religious institutions and the mass media. Television, for example, not only provides us with views of reality but also teaches us many of the day-to-day norms of our culture.

Another characteristic of culture is that it is transmitted from one generation to another. Culture is passed down from parents or other adults to children, who in turn grow up and teach their own children the culture's customs and expectations. Parents often teach us the norms and rules of our culture by modeling how to behave and correcting us when we violate them. In the US, for example, most children are asked from a very early age to make their own decisions. In many other cultures, a parent seldom or never asks a child what he or she wants to do. Instead, they simply tell the child what to do. Culture can also emerge in groups, as is the case often with younger people, who form their culture apart from parents or other adults.

Culture is also a dynamic system that is changing constantly. The only thing that remains unchanged is the fact of “ change” itself. There are lots of reasons to explain the changing nature of culture: for example, economic development, shifts in political systems, and technological innovations. Consider the example of China. Tremendous changes have taken place in China since the introduction of policies of reform and economic and social opening. Together with these changes are some traditional Chinese values. For example, the idea of saving and thrift was once considered a very important Confucian principle. Now it is a principle seldom observed among the younger generations of China, who are more concerned about enjoying life in the present.

Subculture and coculture It is not true to say that each country has only one culture. In the US, there is not only the so-called “ White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” (WASP) culture, but also African-American culture, Arab-American culture, Asian-American culture, Hispanic-American culture, and

many others, which are labeled as subcultures within the US. This term, however, has connotations that suggest subordination to the larger Euro-american culture. Thus, the term “coculture” is occasionally employed in an effort to avoid the hierarchical implication of this term.

There are also other kinds of subcultures (cocultures). We can, for example, talk about a student subculture, a business subculture, a middle-class subculture, and a southern (or other regional) subculture. Each of these groups shares many common cultural ideas with a larger culture but observes some of its own that are unique.

For communication purposes, however, we usually focus on the dominant cultural patterns. For instance, when we say differences between Chinese and American cultures, we mean differences between the dominant Han culture and the dominant Anglo-Saxon American culture. This will probably change a lot, as minority groups together become the majority in the US. For example, much of American music, such as jazz, is influenced by African-American culture. In addition, we have to remember that individual differences always exist. Within a dominant cultural pattern there are always some people who deviate to varying degrees from the pattern.

Chapter 2 Communication

Defining communication As social animals, humans employ communication in every aspect of daily life. It serves to facilitate human socialization, maintain social relationships, and develop personality. Although experts have not agreed upon precisely one definition, communication generally

refers to the process in which participants create and share information with one another as they move toward reaching mutual understanding.

A model of communication As our understanding of this subject has deepened, the models we use for communication have evolved from the linear to the circular. The following model indicates the transactional view of communication.

Figure 2. 1 A model of communication

Elements of communication As is shown in the above model, there are ten major elements or aspects of communication. The following is a conversation between two colleagues who meet in an elevator on the way to their offices. It serves as a useful example to illustrate these ten elements. Table 2. 1 presents explanations, along with illustrations, for each aspect.