CULTURES OF THE UNITED STATES

Second Edition

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In researching for this book, we attempted to collect and categorize accounts of diverse practices exhibited by individuals living throughout the United States. The considerable amount of variation in behavioral patterns is broken down by factors which include wealth, region, ethnic background, language, gender, foods, politics, sexual preferences, religions, and actions, just to mention a few categories. While there is certainly great diversity with respect to personal and individual lifestyles, there remains a great deal of uniformity and conformity with regard to public life.

To begin our investigation of American culture, we must identify the varying patterns of learned and shared behaviors. It must also be understood that culture is transmitted socially, from one individual to the next, down through the generations. Culture consists of what we do (behavioral patterns), what we think (ideas, values, and attitudes), and what we make (material objects).

Moreover, cultural anthropology teaches us about other peoples, and in doing so, it teaches us about ourselves. Anthropological methods of investigation are different from those of other social sciences, in that it consists of translating other peoples’ cultural beliefs and practices into something we all can comprehend. Anthropologists also help us to appreciate differing customs and beliefs by revealing the social context in which such actions occur. Finally, the focus of cultural anthropology is the explanation of various life ways, comparing such behavioral patterns between cultures and across generations.
Cultural anthropology is the study of specific contemporary cultures and the more general underlying patterns of human behavior derived through cross-cultural comparison. Before anthropologists can examine cultural similarities and differences, they must first describe observed behaviors in detail. These detailed descriptions are the result of extensive field studies in which the researcher observes, talks to, and lives with the people he or she is studying. Thus, engaging in fieldwork is an essential practice to the cultural anthropologist. Today, anthropologists have studied a multitude of cultures, including their own, in order to gain the anthropological perspective (the investigation of cross-cultural comparisons.)

A distinguishing feature of the discipline is its holistic approach to the study of human groups. In essence, cultural anthropologists study the totality of the human experience. If you look at each chapter of this book, you will notice that each focuses on a distinct subject matter. Yet anthropologists must recognize the interconnections between all of the aspects of our lives, including family structure, marital regulations, means of making a living, conflict resolution, social organization, religious beliefs, and language, in order to understand the depth and richness within each of our lives. Comprehensively, all of these aspects (and many more) comprise the holistic approach to the investigation of culture.

Cultural anthropologists begin their research by collecting data while in the field. Over time, the raw data are transformed into a written document, or ethnography. An ethnography is comprised of the writings of the anthropologist, detailing the life ways of a particular culture, investigated by means of direct fieldwork. The anthropologist thus reports on how the culture being investigated views the world—from an emic (native’s) perspective. Additionally, scientific means of analysis are utilized to grasp the objective view, or the etic (outsider’s), perspective.

Barbara Myerhoff, in her ethnography entitled Number Our Days, analyzed the lives of the elderly Jewish population in Venice Beach, California. She describes anthropological research techniques in the following way:

The anthropologist engages in peculiar work. He or she tries to understand a different culture to the point of finding it to be intelligible, regardless of how strange it seems in comparison with one’s own background. This is accomplished by attempting to experience the new culture from within, living in it for a time as a member, all the while maintaining sufficient detachment to observe and analyze it with some objectivity. This peculiar posture—being inside and outside at
the same time—is called participant-observation. It is a fruitful paradox, one that has allowed anthropologists to find sense and purpose within a society’s seemingly illogical and arbitrary customs and beliefs. This assumption of the native’s viewpoint, so to speak, is a means of knowing others through oneself, a professional technique that can be mastered fairly easily in the study of different peoples. Working with one’s own society, and more specifically, those of one’s own ethnic and familiar heritage, is perilous, and much more difficult. Yet it has a certain level of validity and value not available in other circumstances. Identifying with the “Other”—Indians, Chicanos, if one is Anglo, blacks if one is white, males if one is female—is an act of imagination, a means of discovering what one is not and will never be. Identifying with what one is now and will be someday is quite a different process. (Myerhoff 1978:18)

Why do we conduct field research? That question has various answers depending on the objectives of the individual fieldworker. Some conduct cultural research in order to interpret one culture for persons in another culture. Some researchers engage in cultural research purely for scientific interest. For example, perhaps a fieldworker will seek to understand which gender role differences can be observed universally. Others engage in cultural research for pragmatic reasons. Applied anthropologists utilize cross-cultural studies to help others in need. For instance, as police officers work in increasingly diverse communities, their academies are emphasizing recognition of traditional ethnic practices. Applied anthropologists heighten public awareness and educate people about the various behaviors accepted in differing cultures.

Let’s consider an actual case. Police arrive at a hospital to find an Asian child with bruises on his back and chest. The doctors at the hospital had phoned the police to notify them of potential child abuse. Fortunately, the police officers were led through diversity training and learned about the ancient Asian method for treating a fever, the practice of coining. The practice of lightly rubbing hot coins over the surface of the child’s body is believed to have a medicinal purpose. Yet, to the outsider, attention will be focused on the severity of the lesions that may appear on the child’s body for up to two days. One officer stated that without knowing about this cultural practice, he would have taken the parents to jail for felony child endangerment.

When thirty police officers were initially polled in a diversity training class as to what they would do if faced with such a situation, two-thirds agreed that they would arrest the parents and hold them accountable for child endangerment. After learning about coining as an acceptable Asian practice, some officers still believed that the parents’ actions were not legal. What would you do?

We must ask the following question: As members of a society, are there times when we feel we must judge the actions of others as wrong or as jeopardizing the human rights of another, even if such behaviors are accepted in other cultures?

There are some cultural practices that are simply unaccepted in the United States. For instance, immigrants have been arrested for female circumcision, a ritual practiced in a variety of cultures, yet illegal in the United States. One such case occurred in Massachusetts, where a couple was indicted in June, 1999 on charges of mutilating the genitals of their 3-year-old daughter. However, the couple was practicing their cultural tradition.

In Laos, the Hmong tribal tradition of “marriage by capture” is considered to be an acceptable form of elopement. Yet, in the United States, it is considered kidnapping and rape. The tradition dictates that the Hmong girl feign resistance. If the prospective groom does not transport her to his home and consummate the union, he is considered too weak to be a husband.

In another example, a man was shot and killed by a Thai performer during amateur night in a nightclub in Hollywood, California for putting his shoe on the table. It was later explained to the police that pointing the sole of your foot at someone is a serious insult in Thai culture. The motive was then explained and it became much easier to find the suspect.

How are anthropologists to view such actions? Should anthropologists criticize members of a particular culture for violating basic human rights or accept the behavior as a cultural practice? Should Americans accept that different cultures have varying practices, and thus, should we remain accepting of such actions within our society? (See Chapter 11 for more on Applied Anthropology.)
Cultural anthropologists investigate the variation in such behavioral patterns and participate in the culture being investigated, in order to gather accurate facts for scientific analysis. This is referred to as **participant-observation**. Anthropologists often spend a tremendous amount of time participating with the members of the culture being investigated in order to gather first-hand knowledge and experience in how the culture operates. Anthropologists ideally strive to obtain an **emic** perspective: gaining an understanding and relevance of the worldview as seen by a member of the culture under investigation. This perspective offers a subjective viewpoint of the meaning of the concepts and categories presented to members of this culture. Yet, the anthropologist, as a social scientist, must remain objective. The **etic** perspective uses the concepts and categories designated by the researcher in order to accurately describe observations of behavioral patterns associated with a particular culture, without judgment or bias.

Studies of American culture seem to reveal a considerable consensus on a particular point. Alex Inkeles sampled American adults in the 1970s–1980s and discovered that Americans view themselves as individuals. In his book, entitled *National Character Revisited*, it was demonstrated that Americans perceive themselves as unique individuals, in a sense, “rebels without a cause.” While our media depicts us as remaining true to ourselves, especially when placed in uncooperative settings, does this accurately reflect American culture? Should others correctly label American behavioral patterns as selfish, compassionless, or simply rude? Do Americans label themselves as cooperative and caring? In any case, we must be aware of the dangers associated with “labels” or **stereotyping** behavioral patterns for members of any group. Labels can lead to misrepresentations and negative social actions toward others.

It is true that American culture can be broken down into sub-groupings or **sub-cultures**. These sub-sets reflect diversity in our taste of music, religion, politics, food, and economics, to name a few. Sub-cultures reflect personal choices and decisions. For instance, a cultural anthropologist may investigate the cultural practices associated with funk music. Not only would the researcher need to investigate music choices and entertainment clubs, but the anthropologist should also investigate clothing styles, body ornamentation, age groupings, dialect, geographical locations, social stratification, etc. We all belong to numerous sub-cultures, reflecting the diversity of values and beliefs represented in the United States.

As you will see throughout this book, one of America's greatest strengths is its diverse population. We hope that you view this book as a journey into culture. The goal is to learn about the great diversity in cultures that surround each of us, while simultaneously learning more about ourselves. This book will hopefully answer questions as to why you act, think or use objects the way you do. Most important, this book offers a variety of cultural perspectives from which each of us can choose—creating an individual lifestyle, comfortable yet harmonious for all.
Cultural Event Papers

Assignment

- Cultural similarities and differences take many forms, such as styles and forms of language, food, dress, manners, music, family, and ritual symbols. To increase your awareness and knowledge of these similarities and differences, each student will attend a public cultural event relating to an ethnic group, nationality, or other kind of social group with which you are not yet very knowledgeable. The group you choose should be basically different from your own main group.

- One of the purposes of this exercise is to give you some experience of doing cross-cultural fieldwork and participant-observation. This exercise will introduce you to the practice of observation, a fundamental part of doing anthropology. You will be asked to observe people, take notes on what you observe, and prepare a short paper describing what you observed from an anthropological perspective. You will need to use anthropological concepts and keywords in your paper. You can and should participate in activities that occur at this site and discuss your observations in your paper.

- Examples of appropriate cultural events include: a live cultural event, festival, street fair, or swap meet, visiting a museum or cultural center connected to a specific cultural group, visiting public art/murals, going to an ethnic restaurant, going to a location that has different ethnic music, etc.

A short written proposal for your project which includes (1) the event you are going to attend, and (2) the anthropological concepts and keywords you plan to use prior to you attending your event is required.

After attending your cultural event, you need to write a short paper. As you do your participant observation at the cultural event, you will need to take notes on what you observe. Include any information that will help you answer the questions listed below for your paper. Attach your notes from your observations to your paper.

Each paper should include the following information about the event (in no particular order):

- Describe the cultural event you attend.
- Where and when they are held and/or located?
- Who attended the event? (In general, note ages, sexes, ethnicities, etc.)
- What happened at the event?
- What culture(s) is represented at the event?
- How is the culture(s) represented (art, video, dance, song, speech, decorations, clothing, costumes, music, food, etc.)?
- What is the purpose of the event?
- What is its “message” (if it has one)?
- Who is presenting/organizing the event? Why?
- How is the site perceived from an emic perspective?
- How is the site perceived from an etic perspective?
- How does this event compare to events in your own culture (similarities and differences)?
- What did you learn about the culture(s) while attending this event? (You can also include what you already knew and how this event compared with that knowledge.)
- How does this event tie in with cultural anthropology? (Use relevant terms and definitions.)
- Any additional interesting observations you had while attending the event.

Format of the Paper

4–5 pages in length, one-inch margins, double spaced, 12 point font, notes attached.

Spell and grammar check!

Reference appropriately in your paper and include a references cited page if necessary.

Use the ethnographic present—writing in the present tense as though your audience is actually witnessing events as they unfold.
EXERCISE 1.1: PROUD TO BE YOU AND ME: BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN WHEN WE SAY WE ARE AMERICAN?

Using your own words, explain what is meant by the term “American.”

What physical and cultural traits would you use to differentiate Americans from other people living around the globe?

Review the Table of Contents of this book. How do the chapters presented in your text fit into your definition of an American?

Various authors have written about what they believe it means to be American. Read through the excerpt written by Ralph Linton in 1935. Linton is describing the typical morning of an American. How does this fit in with your daily routines? After reading “One Hundred Per Cent American,” explain if this excerpt strengthens or weakens your personal definition of what it means to be American.
KEY TERMS

Name ________________________________________________

Section ____________________________________________

Date ________________________________________________

Acculturation:

American:

Anthropological perspective:

Applied anthropology:

Assimilation:

Cultural anthropology:

Culture:

Culture shock (and phases):

Emic:

Ethnographic present:
Ethnography:

Etic:

Holistic perspective (holism) or approach:

Nacirema:

Participant observation:

Stereotyping:

Sub-cultures:
Acculturation. The process of acceptance resulting for the contact between two cultures, or an individual interacting in at least two cultures.

Achieved status. Position in a social structure dependent upon personal qualifications and individual ability.

Adaptation. The process in which a population or society alters its culture to better succeed in its total environment. This increases an individual’s ability to reproduce and survive.

Affinal links. Connections between kin groups established by marriage.

African American Vernacular English (AAVE). A form of English commonly spoken among rural and urban African Americans of working-class background.

Age grades. Categories of individuals of the same age that are recognized by being given a name and that crosscut an entire society.

Age sets. A group of individuals of the same age that moves as a unit through successive age grades.

Alliance. A linkage between kin groups established through marriage for the mutual benefit of the two groups.

Ancestor-oriented group. A social unit that traces kin relationships back to a common ancestor.

Animism. A belief in the spiritual or noncorporeal counterparts of human beings.

Anthropological linguistics. The subdiscipline of cultural anthropology that specializes in the study of human languages.

Applied anthropology. The organized interaction between professional anthropologists and policy-making bodies; the application of anthropology to the solution of human problems.

Arranged marriage. The process by which senior family members exercise a great degree of control over the choice of their children’s spouses.

Ascribed status. An inherited position in the social structure.

Authority. An institutionalized position of power.

Avunculocal residence. A form of postmarital residence in which the bride goes to live with her husband after he has moved to live with his mother’s brother.

Balanced reciprocity. An exchange of goods of nearly equal value, with a clear obligation to return them within a specified time limit.

Band organization. A type of social group with a fixed membership that comes together annually for a period to carry out joint ritual and economic activities.
Barter. An immediate exchange of unlike objects, which may involve bargaining.

Big Man structure. An achieved position of leadership in which the group is defined as the Big Man and his followers.

Bilateral cross cousins. Cross cousins through both the mother's and father's side.

Bilateral societies. Societies with kindreds but without unilineal descent groups.

Bilocal residence. A form of postmarital residence in which husband and wife alternate between living with the husband's relatives for a period of time and then with the wife's relatives.

Black English Vernacular (BEV). See African American Vernacular English.

Boundary maintenance mechanisms. The ways in which a social group maintains its individual identity by separating itself from the dominant society.

Bride service. A custom whereby the groom works for the bride's family before marriage.

Bridewealth payments. Payments made by the groom's family to the family of the bride.

Capital. Productive resources that are used with the primary goal of increasing their owner's financial wealth.

Capitalism. An economic system in which people work for wages, land and capital goods are privately owned, and capital is invested for individual profit.

Caste system. Grouping of economically specialized, hierarchically organized, endogamous social units.

Chiefdom. A type of political organization in which fixed positions of centralized leadership are present along with a method for succession to those positions.

Clan. A social group based on common descent of over ten generations.

Clan totem. An animal from which members of a clan believe themselves descended and with whom they have a special relationship that may prohibit the eating of that animal.

Class system. A form of social stratification in which the different strata form a continuum and in which social mobility is possible.

Collateral relative. A relative not in the direct line of descent.

Community. A naturally bounded social unit.

Components. The criteria used to characterize and differentiate any kind of category.

Composite (or compound) family. An aggregate of nuclear families linked by a common spouse.

Conflict theory. A theory of social stratification that holds that the natural condition of society is constant change and conflict. The inequality in systems of social stratification is considered evidence of this conflict.

Corporate descent group. A social group based upon common descent that owns property in common and extends beyond the lifetime of any one individual.

Cosmology. A system of beliefs that deals with fundamental questions in the cosmic and social order.

Cross cousins. Children of one's mother's brother or one's father's sister.

Cultural anthropology. The study of human behavior that is learned rather than genetically transmitted, and that is typical of a particular human group.

Cultural relativism. The emphasis on the unique aspects of each culture, without judgments or categories based on our culture.

Cultural rules. Internalized rules of behavior covering all aspects of life.

Culture. The way of life of a people, including their behavior, the things they make, and their ideas.