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A Communication Theory of Culture

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Journey Through Chapter 4

Sightseeing: On your journey, you will visit with five concepts of culture and engage in an in- depth discussion of a communication theory of culture. This discussion demonstrates how culture can be viewed as a construction, rather than a representation by introducing a social constructionist dialogic approach applied to inter/cultural communication.

Souvenir: After your journey, you will take away an understanding of how culture is produced in the moments of interaction and how this understanding is distinct from that which the other concepts of culture provide.

The "culture" concept has been adopted by many people, each intent on using it for some purposes rather than for others (Bauman, 1999). This can be a healthy sign of fertile intellectual soil as you seek to understand various circumstances and particular practices among peoples in the world today. Some of the issues addressed in earlier discussions of this concept have included the relationship between languages and cultures, the ways cultures penetrate societies, the role of cultural analyses in historical studies, a robust understanding of inter/cultural encounters, the integration of cultures, interpretations of visual media, dynamics in chat rooms or blogs, relations between nature-environment and peoples' places, as well as the practical activities of everyday living. There is much here to think about.
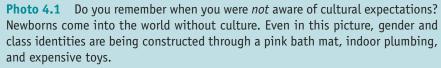
This chapter does three general things. First, following Bauman (1999), it discusses some prominent uses of the culture concept. Second, it introduces a communication theory of culture and uses that theory as a basis for reflecting upon earlier uses of the culture concept. Third, the chapter concludes by briefly summarizing some of the possibilities of this approach for the study of communication and culture. To begin, the following section discusses four ways people have used the concept of culture.

FOUR USES OF THE CULTURE CONCEPT

Generic Concept

People make sense of the cosmos, of beings and things in nature, through ways of speaking that are customary to them. People have "ways" of speaking about human beings and animals. In the process of speaking about these, people learn which are like and which are not like human beings in their appearance or in their activities. How is it, you might ask, that people are different from chimpanzees? Explanations typically involve how people have developed a sophisticated use of language, like these words on this page. Other points are made about refined use of tools like the use of computers. Still others refer to the finer arts of music, painting, and sculpture.

A way of entitling these lines of thought is to say, that humans have developed culture while other animals do not. In this sense, humans are said to be culture-bearers in a way animals are not. To be a culture-bearer is to learn in a specialized way, to act in particular ways, to believe particular things, and to feel certain ways about the world. Culture here

Photo 4.1 Do you remember when you were *not* aware of cultural expectations? Newborns come into the world without culture. Even in this picture, gender and class identities are being constructed through a pink bath mat, indoor plumbing, and expensive toys.

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means things like sophistication in language ability, artistic expression, musical abilities, as well as other qualities that highlight uniquely human accomplishments. When culture is used in this basic way to distinguish the human animal from other animals it takes the form of a generic concept that locates culture within the human species, as a species-wide ability and as a way of viewing humans above and unlike all other species.

Distinctive Concept

As people began traveling beyond their homelands, they noticed that human habits and customs differed. Among one group, people were greeted with a bow, in another by the clasp of the arm, or elsewhere by a kiss. These differences in habits and customs can be described by the idea of culture as a distinctive concept. Here, culture is used as a way to distinguish the habits of one human group from another human group. If a customary postdinner moment in some parts of East Asia includes burping from a guest as a compliment to the host, this can be understood to be distinctive to this group and unlike other groups. This idea of culture helps distinguish the range of customs and habits that are distinctive to one group. It highlights the uniqueness of that cultural group versus another and the exclusiveness of that group from others.

> ### Take a Side Trip:
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> Take a Side Trip: If you would like to read more about related issues, visit Appendix F: Korean Culture Explored Through Survey Research

Exclusiveness used in reference to the distinctive concept of culture means that a cultural group may not welcome intrusion from outside groups. This may be obvious in homogenous cultures in which there is little variability in the cultural makeup of its group members. Some such cultures like Amish, Mormon, or Hasidic Jewish communities require those from outside their group to go through rigorous procedures to be accepted into the culture, if they are accepted at all. Heterogeneous cultures that are comprised of considerable ingroup variability can be exclusive as well. New York, known as the melting pot, is also a notoriously exclusive culture as suggested by the song lyrics "I want to be a part of it, New York, New York." As the generic concept of culture distinguished humans from other species, the distinctive concept distinguishes the unique qualities of a particular human group that set it apart from other groups.

Evaluative Concept

The evaluative concept of culture suggests that within any human group there are values that tend to be championed as good and as higher than the others that are viewed as less good or lower in value (see Table 4.1). Teens might thoroughly enjoy popular music such as rap or rock music, wear their hair in a popular style, and, like other kids, get absorbed in a vibrant youth culture. Many of their parents, in contrast, might not value these to the same extent and may want to be sure to expose their children also to "the finer things in life." These might include attending theatrical performances or orchestral concerts, reading great works of

Table 4.1 Proverbs.

What proverbs do you remember hearing while you were growing up? Cultural group members communicate proverbs to reproduce cultural values for each generation. Adapted from "Cameroon," "Scotland," "United States of America," and "Mexico" Culturegrams by Culturegrams. Available at www.culturegrams.com/.

Country of Origin and Use	Proverb	Cultural Value(s)	Meaning of Proverb
Cameroon	What an old man can see sitting, a young man cannot see standing.	A patriarchal and status-oriented hierarchy.	In contrast to the young, no matter how much effort they exert, elderly, particularly males, are wise because of their age and experience and their viewpoints should be valued and advice heeded.
Mexican	Better to die on your feet than live on your knees.	Machismo, a strong sense of honor, and a cultural history of revolution.	Honor is achieved through acting, or at an extreme, fighting even if it has considerable costs rather than waiting or being subservient to others.
Scottish	Ne'er cast a clout till May be oot.	Realism, reserve, and independence.	Don't put winter clothes away until the flowers bloom; it warns to always be prepared.
U.S. American	Good fences make good neighbors.	Individualistic tendencies and value privacy.	Good relationships are built upon knowing boundaries and distinctions between what is a possession of one person or of another.

literature, as well as attending choral events, all in order to broaden their kids' exposure to the variety of things life offers. Implicit in these parental actions is helping children learn through diverse experiences so their judgments about what is better and lesser in their lives can be informed by a breadth of experiences. Judgments of this type tend to pervade any group, but what constitutes the so-called finer things may vary from one group to the next and can fall along lines of class, race, region, gender, or many other differences within groups.

Applied in this way, the idea of culture as an evaluative concept moves from the distinctive concept, which expresses that there are differences between groups, to a judgment of difference within a group in which some qualities are deemed better than others. As such, it is used to distinguish, for example, the high arts and letters within a group, from the lower and lesser forms. To be cultured, in this sense, is to claim access and appreciation to the best that society has to offer. To lack culture, in this evaluative sense, is to be ignorant, vulgar, or unappreciative of the "finer" arts and aspects of life.

To further illustrate culture as an evaluative concept, consider the case of a doctoral student who, several years ago, proposed a study to his dissertation committee. The study focused upon culture in a U.S. American prime-time television talk show hosted by Phil Donahue. A committee member replied to this proposal with a comment of exasperation:

"Doctoral research typically focuses on important figures like Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, Hans Georg Gadamer, or John Dewey and you're going to study a talk-show host, Phil Donahue?!" The remark presumes a properly cultured person—evidently unlike this doctoral student—knows what is proper for academic study and appreciation. In turn, those less cultured types do not have their proper senses. The society is then stratified between those adhering to the higher and those adhering to the lower values. Within the evaluative concept of culture, high culture is associated with the upper class and the value placed on the fine arts and education and low culture is associated with the lower class, those who are less well educated, and popular culture.

Cognitive Concept

Culture can be understood as a mental or cognitive concept. This usage identifies culture as a kind of collective lens used to perceive the world, a filtered way of sensing, believing, and feeling. Claims within this cognitive concept identify culture within the internal workings of the mind, the templates for thought, routine dispositions, and specific characteristics. Note that culture in the cognitive sense is located inside the person, as a part of the mental makeup a person uses when being-in-the-world. The idea of being-in-the-world draws attention to the particularities of a person's senses about things, beliefs about people or classes of people, and emotions.

An example of culture as a cognitive concept can be seen in an instance when a highly educated government official visited a farmer in India who had been working his land successfully for generations. The official was a specialist in "soil productivity" and the farmer, upon meeting the official, addressed him as "sir" and "your grace." The government official recommended that the farmer use organic fertilizer. The farmer had tried organic fertilizer previously with good yield. Nonetheless,

Photo 4.2   What is the view from your window? How does this filter your identity, perception, and behavior? What we see each day impacts who we are and how we view the world around us, often in unknown ways.

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and as the farmer and others in his community had done repeatedly in conversations with those in higher status, the farmer replied to the official by referring to himself as an "illiterate" and "ignorant fellow." How might you account for this deprecating stance of the farmer? One account is that the collective mind of people in this community not only expect but act upon rigid differences in power. The official is deemed higher in status and the farmer lower, with the higher status person regarded by all, including this farmer, as the knowledgeable person deserving of deference. Presumably, the lens the farmer uses to interact with the official illustrates how culture is used as a filter. His lens guides him to show respect to anyone above a person's own status—even if the person's statements in that moment may not warrant such respect.

REFLECT 4.1: Which concept of culture do you use the most? Why?

A COMMUNICATION THEORY OF CULTURE

The previous conceptions and uses of the culture concept are valuable. There are times when it is useful to distinguish human qualities from the nonhuman, to distinguish one group's features from another's, to understand what is valued more and less, and to think of habits of the collective mind. The current chapter does not seek to dismiss the kinds of claims each of these uses of the culture concept brings with it. Rather, this chapter wants to embrace each by proposing a way of relocating these ideas about culture from the species, groups, classes, and minds into the domain of communication practice. Communication practice is a fifth understanding of culture. Communication practice refers to expressive action performed in specific contexts; that is, how people actually do communication in their specific social scenes. This section addresses this fifth understanding of culture from a communication theory of culture perspective. A communication theory of culture views culture as a social construction produced through communication practices within cultural discourse. Cultural discourse is the "historically transmitted expressive system of communication practices, of acts, events, and styles, which are composed of specific symbols, symbolic forms, norms, and their meanings" (Carbaugh, 2007, p.169).

Rather than locating culture inside a person, groups of people, or within human minds, the remainder of this chapter theorizes culture as an ever-present dimension of communication practices. According to Carbaugh (1996), from a social construction approach any particular identity can be viewed as

a set of communicative practices that is more noticeable or salient in some social scenes than in others. Just as an individual is more adept at some identities (e.g., being a teacher, or an Argentinean) than others (e.g., being a business executive, or a Russian), so too are social scenes designed for some identities more than others. This is a way of . . . moving the site of identity from the individual into actual scenes of communicative action. (p. 25)

In this way, culture is produced in the interactional moment that meaning is given, rather than by virtue of it being reflected in the behavior of a large number of people.

This concept of culture is informed by various field-based studies that have used this approach and resonate with the idea that culture is socially constructed (see Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). For example, some of these studies have carefully examined cultural discourses of gender in Finland (Berry, 1997), hate speech including folk models of the proper person in Hungary (Boromisza-Habashi, 2007), intercultural interactions among U.S. Americans, Finns, Russians, English, and Native Americans (Carbaugh, 2005), meanings of dialogue in several different languages (Carbaugh, Boromisza-Habashi, & Ge, 2006), indigenous and nonindigenous models of rhetoric and consciousness (Carbaugh & Wolf, 1999), cultural notions for expressing interpersonal life in Colombia (Fitch, 1997), Israeli history through its prominent expressive genres (Katriel, 2005), cultural discourses about water (Morgan, 2003, 2007), Finnish cultural speech and language (Poutiainen, 2005), nonverbal ways of communicating with nature (Scollo, 2005), local forms of political praxis in the United States (Townsend, 2006), an optimal form for Finnish public discourse (Wilkins, 2005), and Arab narratives of identity in the United States (Witteborn, 2007). This is not a comprehensive listing but it is a suggestive one that illustrates how the approach has been widely and productively used.

Imagine you are a speaker in a courtroom and you want to persuade a jury and a judge not to develop the area on a mountainside because you view it as an important site of nature. This was the task in a courtroom in Arizona. Some who participated stated an argument about the costs of such development and the resulting destruction to the mountain. For these participants, the practice of arguing in a verbal form was familiar and seemed appropriate to them as a way of stating their case in court. However, for some Native American participants, the best way they knew to honor a natural site such as this mountain—which in this case was a sacred location—was in the use of silence. For these people, silence was appropriately respectful as a way of standing in support of the site because the silence acknowledged from their view that it is presumptuous to put the creator's sacred site into words. In this way, silence was a communication practice designed to express reverence for a spiritual place in the hope of stopping its development. Each communication practice, arguing in words and standing in silence, was used in a courtroom context, yet each used different traditions of expression to express their meaning.

REFLECT 4.2: How do you produce your cultural identity through your verbal and nonverbal behavior? Are you aware of it when you are doing it?

FOUR PROPOSITIONS OF A COMMUNICATION THEORY OF CULTURE

Four central propositions help further explain the value in viewing culture from a communication theory of culture perspective. The first proposition is that communication practice involves a complex system of symbols, symbolic forms, and their meanings.

A Complex System of Symbols, Symbolic Forms, and Their Meanings

As people communicate and engage in the ongoing flow of their everyday social life, they do so through communication practices. As with Native American and non-Native people in the preceding example, these practices not only reveal but create their view of the world. A cultural analyst can gain access to that world by noticing key symbols that are being used, prominent symbolic forms that are being practiced, such as arguing verbally and being silent, and by interpreting the meaningfulness of those symbols and symbolic forms to those who use them. Both symbols and symbolic forms are rich with local meanings, deep in feeling, and broadly accessible to people. As discussed in Chapter 1, symbols are key words, expressions, images, circumstances, actions, or phrases used to conceive of and evaluate parts of a culture that participants deem richly significant and important. For example, the Hebrew symbol, *dugri* or talking "straight" with someone has a local, deep, and broad role in shaping Israeli communication and culture. Similarly, in China the symbol of *Le Feng,* which refers to "learning from Le Feng," plays a rich role in an evolving Chinese culture. Each illustrates how communication practices can involve potent and prominent symbols that are understood deeply by cultural members.

Although similar to symbols, **symbolic forms** are larger units, communication acts within larger sequences of actions. Analysts have explored symbolic forms as ritual, myth, and social drama (Philipsen, 1992) and as key terms and tropes (Carbaugh, 1996). Additionally, native terms can also be used to draw attention to participants' symbolic forms such as *soul talks* in Russia, *tea meetings* in Japan, *services* among Quakers, or *griping sessions* in Israel or Bulgaria. Each of these terms, and innumerable others, help the analyst identify ways in which communication practice is made meaningful and shapes cultural lives. A second proposition central to understanding a communication theory of culture is that communication practices, like those just discussed, are meaningful to participants in a culture.

Photo 4.3 How is your current appearance a carrier of meaning for your culture? Physical appearance in a culture constructs cultural identity.

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Meaningful Practices to Participants

Communication practices involve systems of shared, common, and public meanings. Cultural analysts seek to discover and interpret these systems. Elsewhere, the interpretive aspects of cultural discourse theory, which explores these systems, have been discussed in some detail (Carbaugh, 2005, 2007). This section provides a few observations on this topic.

Communication practices generally, as well as cultural symbols and symbolic forms specifically, are potent carriers of meaning. They can carry great depth of insight and feeling concerning a person's ways of doing things. These meanings are often **taken-for-granted knowledge** in a person's community. That is to say, communication practice is something that typically you do not have to think about; it is just assumed. Practices, symbols, forms, and norms all carry deep meanings for cultural group members. Yet, these may only be made explicit when a cultural analyst articulates them in the form of cultural premises. For example, you might never think that people could be anything other than individuals. Yet, if you were among the Gurung people in Nepal, you might never think people could be anything other than particles of subatomic energy. Taken-for-granted knowledge like this typically takes the form of premises pertaining to (1) beliefs about what exists and (2) beliefs about what is better or worse.

REFLECT 4.3: Can you think of an example of when you have been forced to become aware of taken-for-granted knowledge about your culture? How did it make you feel? What did you realize about your culture?

As you go about your everyday routine, you express yourself culturally. As you greet others, listen to lectures, or attend a movie, you are, perhaps unwittingly, also acting as an agent in producing culture. In this way, and with the help of others, you construct what you think of as your shared lives and in doing so live in ways that are true to your perception of your community and your social scenes. A **community** is an organization of diverse people and practices. A **social scene** is a place people can identify and recognize as significant in their lives such as a church service, a sporting event, a family dinner, or a courtroom. Typically, you do not have to think about your use of culture. But sometimes you do, as when your communication practices reach a boundary. For example, in the courtroom routine mentioned earlier, one group's aggressive behavior might disadvantage others who are standing silent by not allowing their traditional communication practice to be expressed fully as the vocal group minimizes the potential impact of the silent group. Culture, then, is both active in the process of communication and is a product of that communication.

This idea that cultural practices are meaningful to participants in a culture can be summarized in three basic points. First, culture is housed in communication practices. Communication is the place where culture is active, applied, challenged, and changed. As you go about your communicative routines, you are producing your culture.

Second, as you communicate, you are actively producing a particular set of practices, unique to your cultural scenes and community. These particular practices mark you as a member of a specific group and not others with a badge of shared identity that is unlike that

shared by others elsewhere. Gerry Philipsen (1989) has written about this as a process of **membering**. As you use your culture, you identify yourself in membership with some people and not with others. Table 4.2 shows how language can be used for membering. The process whereby you associate yourself with some groups of people and not others is discussed in more depth in Chapter 7.

Third, diversity and plurality is important in the world today. As in the courtroom, social scenes and communities can have active in them multiple practices through many cultural traditions. An understanding of and the ability to act productively within this variety of communication practices is valuable because they are markers of a person's identity. Moreover, multiple cultural identities and diversity in communication practices are active in social scenes and communities.

Prior studies have created a way of interpreting the meaningfulness of communication practices for participants. In short, these studies provide a way of investigating deeply the extent to which people produce culture as they communicate. This depth can be mined by exploring five potential hubs of meaning: (1) being, (2) relating, (3) acting, (4) feeling, and (5) dwelling, with the others radiating (as radiants) from each hub. To explore these an analyst would focus on a specific communication practice of interest, such as a greeting, and ask about it with the following questions:

1. About being: What is presumed about the person (roles, institutions) for this practice to be done in this way?
2. About relating: What is presumed about social relationships (roles, institutions) for this practice to be done in this way?
3. About acting: What is presumed as a model for social action for this practice to be done in this way?
4. About feeling: What emotion is presumed, expressed, or countered for this action to be done in this way?
5. About dwelling: What is presumed about this place, or person's relations to nature, for this action to be done in this way?

This way of interpreting meanings has been shown to be particularly useful in constructing cultural interpretations of activities such as greetings, work meetings, arguing, listening to others, political speeches, and much more. Generally there are two points of interpretation that help to explicate the communication practices participants perform and understand (Carbaugh, 1995, 2005; Philipsen, 1992). First, you would interpret the meaningfulness of a communication practice by formulating premises of belief and value related to each of the five hubs. Second, you would interpret the radiants of meanings that are active in that practice. This approach is particularly valuable because it provides a means through which to expose otherwise taken-for-granted cultural knowledge and construction.

An Expressive System of Culture

A third central proposition of a communication theory of culture is that culture is an expressive system. Culture can be understood as the **practices of people in place**, as something people do with each other, as a system of practices, as a way of organizing ourselves together,

Table 4.2   Hamlet.

Have you read these words before? Cultures develop in response to shared events, interests, language, and so forth. Using the Klingon language would enable you to be identified as a member of a specific community based on a media phenomenon generated by the television program *Star Trek* culture, known as Trekkies.

To Be, Or Not To Be Soliloquy Hamlet: Prince of Denmark Act 3 Scene 1 by William Shakespeare	To Be, Or Not To Be Soliloquy (Klingon Version) The Klingon Hamlet: The Tragedy of Khamlet, Son of the Emperor of Qo'nos Act 3 Scene 1
Hamlet: To be, or not to be: - that is the question: - Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them? - To die: - to sleep; - No more; and by a sleep to say we end The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to, - 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, - to sleep; - To sleep! perchance to dream: - ay, there's the rub; For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause: there's the respect That makes calamity of so long life; For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay, The insolence of office and the spurns That patient merit of the unworthy takes, When he himself might his quietus make With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear, To grunt and sweat under a weary life, But that the dread of something after death, - The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn No traveller returns, - puzzles the will, And makes us rather bear those ills we have Than fly to others that we know not of? Thus conscience does make cowards of us all; And thus the native hue of resolution Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought; And enterprises of great pith and moment. With this regard, their currents turn awry, And lose the name of action.- Soft you now! The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons Be all my sins remember'd.	**Hamlet:** taH pagh taHbe'. DaH mu'tlheghvam vIqelnIS. quv'a', yabDaq San vaQ cha, pu'je SIQDI'? pagh, Seng bIQ'a'Hey SuvmeH nuHmey SuqDI', 'ej, Suvmo', rInmoHDI'? Hegh. Qong-Qong neH- 'ej QongDI', tIq 'oy', wa'SanID Daw''e' je cho'nISbogh porghDaj rInmoHlaH net Har. yIn mevbogh mIwvam'e' wIruchqangbej. Hegh. Qong. QongDI' ehaq naj. toH, waQlaw' ghu'vam! HeghDaq maQongtaHvIS, tugh vay' wInajlaH, volchaHmajvo' jubbe'wI' bep wIwoDDI'; 'e' wIqelDI', maHeDnIS. Qugh DISIQnIS, SIQmoHmo' qechvam. Qugh yIn nI'moH 'oH. reH vaq 'ej qIpqu' bov; mayHa'taH HI'; Dochchu' HemwI'; ruv mImlu'; tIchrup patlh; 'oy'moH muSHa'ghach 'Il vuvHa'lu'bogh; quvwI'pu' tuv quvHa'moH quvHa'wI'pu'; qatlh Hochvam lajqang vay'? wa' taj neH l0'DI', Qu'Daj Qatlh qIllaH ghaH! tep qengqang 'Iv? Doy'moHmo' yInDaj, bepmeH bechqang 'Iv, mISbe'chugh neHtaHghach, ghaH ghIjmo' DuHvam: Hegh tlha' vay': Hegh tlha' qo''e' tu'bogh pagh. not chegh lengwI'ma', qo'vetlh veHmey 'elDI'. vaj Seng DIghajbogh, lajtaHmeH qaq law'; latlh DISovbe'bogh, ghoSchoHmeH qaq puS. vaj nuch DIDa 'e' raDlaw' ghobmaj, qelDI'. 'ej, plvmo', wovqu'taHvIS wuqbogh qab, 'oH ropmoH rIntaH Sotbogh qech ghom Hurgh. 'ej Qu'mey potlh DItulbogh qll je qechvam. vIDHa'choH nab. baQa'! 'ovelya 'IH! toH be', qa''a'pu'vaD bItlhobtaHvIS, jIyempu' 'e' yIQIjehoH je.

and as a way of accounting for that organization. The organization that can be called culture is a practical art, a system for acting that is commonly accessible, mutually intelligible, and deeply felt (Carbaugh 2005). More specifically, the **cultural expressive system** is the life-blood of culture composed of three types of communication practices that are prominently active in social scenes: (1) specific acts, (2) events, and (3) styles of social interaction.

This expressive system is characterized by its **part-whole nature** (see Geertz, 1983, pp. 69–70). In other words, you can understand a part, such as greeting by handshaking and body bumping, only by understanding the larger scene in which it is produced. For example, in Israel, a person will hear acts of "talking straight"' or *dugri* speaking especially among Sabra Jews (Katriel, 2005). These acts do not stand alone but are parts of larger social sequences such as social dramas of living, ritualized forms of action, and an ethos of *gibush* or collective action that is championed and at times cherished. Dugri is also a style of speaking that can be marked as confrontational, plain and direct, and runs counter to other styles, such as *musayara* among Israeli Arabs.

> **Take a Side Trip:**
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> If you would like to read more about related issues, visit Appendix A: Navajo Culture Explored Through Ethnography

The concept of expressive system is used here to make three points. First, culture exists in communication practices of people in places. Second, any one communication practice—as a communication act, event, style—is part of a system of expressive practices. Third, as a result, this system of communication practices is the site of culture because it is through these communication practices that culture is created and expressed and, therefore, is cultivated.

An Expressive System That Is Historically Transmitted

An expressive system has precedents and these can be understood through its history or histories. For example, the *dugri* style of talking straight is designed to counter a past of being silenced, of being not heard from, of being indeed subjects of extermination. Against these forces, it is said, a person's will must be heard, must be heard forcefully, and must speak the truth in a straight manner, even as, or especially as an act of confrontation. Knowing the historical roots of this cultural practice helps enrich a person's sense of the practice and all that it brings with it.

In China, there is a well-known figure, Le Feng. Le Feng was a soldier who gave his life in service to others. During the reign of Mao, a national holiday was established to celebrate the life of Le Feng and the ethic of altruism he represented. Although this ethic was robust during the Mao era, as time has passed the symbol of Le Feng has changed. No longer is the ethic of service to others assumed in an unquestioned way. In China today, especially among members of the younger generation, this symbol and meaning of altruism is questioned, with responses to it asking, what do I get in return? Morphed from its original meaning, the symbol now sounds a cautionary note in response to its past meaning: Don't be a sucker by denying your self-interest.[1]

The example from China helps make the point that communication practices ignite tension between a creative impulse and common practice. These **tensional forces**, which were discussed in Chapter 1 as the hallmark of structuration theory (Giddens, 1993), at once evoke history and create meaning anew (Carbaugh, 1994). Analyzing practices along this dimension helps develop insights about what is being evoked from the past and what is being created in the present. This creative evocativeness provides a tool for understanding culture as an expressive system that is historically transmitted, but also one that can creatively employ or react to that history.

LIVING CULTURE

Latin Dancing?   *By Anonymous*

There are many things in life that a person expects or is aware that they may encounter. Unfortunately stereotypes have become one of those things. We live in a day and age where categorization is a natural response and where we place people in the groups that we believe they should belong. We often generalize people into categories and make assumptions about the kinds of people that belong in a particular group. Naively, I assumed that because I am a member of what is generally the majority, I did not think that stereotypes would ever be a part of my life. However, I came to find out that not only would they be a part of my life, but it would be because I am a member of the majority that stereotypes are so prevalent.

As a competitive ballroom and Latin dancer, I often teach group classes in exchange for lessons or just as favors to people who are interested in learning. Upon request of a friend (Rob), I had agreed to teach his roommate (Bob) to do some mambo and cha-cha. Before meeting, the only information that Bob knew of me was that I was a competitive dancer who knew how to teach the steps; he was told nothing of my appearance. Although he knew nothing about me, I soon came to find out that he had his own preconceived ideas of how I would look.

We met early in the morning at a studio in which I often practiced. He came in the door and I greeted him, "You must be Bob, nice to meet you." He looked almost stunned. He said nothing at first, and then asked, "Yes, hi and umm where could I find Jane?" as he looked past me to the empty wooden floor. "That's me." I responded. He looked perplexed as he asked, "So you're going to teach me Latin dancing?" with an almost sarcastic tone. I responded, "Yep, that's me" trying to avoid the awkwardness. I persisted, "You can change your shoes over there and I'll be right with you." I knew that this might happen. It had happened before, and it was happening again.

(Continued)

LIVING CULTURE

(Continued)

As I walked away, he followed and continued, "I'm sorry, but with all do respect, what could you teach me about Latin dancing?" He was about 5'9", dark skinned, of Puerto Rican decent looking at a fair-skinned, red-haired girl. Feeling offended, I asked him why he thought I could not teach him. He simply responded, "Well look at you . . . you look more Irish than anything!" This was the problem. I did not fit the mold he perceived for a Latin dancer. He expected someone much more like him, someone from his heritage. He wanted to identify himself with me, and with the way I looked he couldn't. I proceeded to explain that I have had many years of training as a dancer, and that one's ethnic background has nothing to do with their ability. However, my explanations did little in the way of persuading him in his beliefs. He said that I could not possibly be able to move like the *other* girls did. It was as if we had hit a roadblock; he did not want me teaching him because "the rhythm was not in my blood." However, I was determined to prove my point. So, we struck a deal; he would wait for my dance partner to come and I would show him that I could dance.

Sure enough, my partner arrived and we danced for Bob. Bob sat in the chair looking on in astonishment. I had become a different person on the floor; I came to life and put in every last ounce of myself so that I could prove that the shade of my skin or my ethnic background has nothing to do with my ability. When we finished, he came over, shook my hand and said, "I stand corrected."

Consider:

1. What is it that the author says she knew might happen? How does she feel about this? Why?

2. What concepts of culture are being referenced in this Living Culture narrative?

3. How is dancing used as a cultural symbol in the narrative? Does the meaning of this symbol change at the end of the narrative? If so, how?

4. How is this conversation an example of a cultural moment?

CULTURAL MOMENTS

Culture is socially constructed through communication practices enacted in cultural moments. Cultural moments are instances in time in which culture is communicated in language and behavior in ways that reveal culture as a social construct despite its usual

taken-for-granted nature. This section provides three examples of cultural moments that have been studied through a communication theory of culture perspective in which the communication of culture, usually taken-for-granted, can be identified.

Carbaugh (2005) provides a transcript from a *60 Minutes* segment in which Morley Safer interviews Finnish author and radio personality Jan Knutas. In the interview, Knutas talks about the discomfort he experiences when pressured by U.S. American social norms of small talk. Carbaugh points out that although Americans may at times feel annoyed when engaging in small talk, Knutas uses the term "horrifying" (p. 48) and invokes of "oh god" (p. 49) to describe his experience with American small talk. Through his communication, Knutas constructs small talk as something distinctly American and taken-for-granted in America as normal, but as a horrifying experience to him as a Finnish man. The example demonstrates the social construction of his cultural identity as a Finnish person with a preference for Finnish norms who will accommodate an U.S. American cultural norm albeit reluctantly. In addition to constructing cultural identity as shown in this example, cultural moments can also invoke cultural identity for practical reasons as shown in the following two examples.

Mokros (2003) used videotaped data from an ethnographic research site to gain insight into "how otherness is employed to resolve practical problems of identity within interaction" (p. 255). He provides an example of a cultural moment in which the communication of identity in the form of a stereotype is used as a conversational tool to accomplish practical goals within a conversation. In this cultural moment, a vendor gets into a physical fight with a customer. After the conflict, the vendor communicates the stereotype that the customer was being stingy or cheap because he is Jewish. In doing so he provides a justification for his behavior, which he viewed as warranted because to him the customer was being too selective in picking out a product. By communicating the stereotype, he constructs the cultural identity of the customer in a way that made the customer look as if he was in the wrong. The stereotype allowed the blame to be shifted to the customer so that the vendor's behavior in the conflict might be justified. This example demonstrates a cultural moment in which culture is invoked and used as a tool to accomplish practical interactional goals.

Hopper (2003) looked at transcripts of interpersonally communicated stereotypes to understand how gendered identity is constructed in communication processes. His examples involve cultural moments in which gender stereotypes are communicated in ways that construct differences between men and women where none may exist. For example, Hopper discussed a heterosexual romantic couple who assign "household chores" according to gender stereotypes (p. 109). Cultural moments in which gender identity is invoked can reinforce gender differences as meaningful symbolic distinctions. In addition and similar to the previous example, cultural moments like these provide practical benefits for those in the interaction. Hopper explains how invoking gender differences in conversation can be used to soften a critique to a romantic partner. Hopper notes that perhaps "it is easier to critique . . . if the critique fits your stereotypes about the way men are" (p. 117).

REFLECT 4.4: When have you recently had a cultural moment? What did you learn in this moment about your culture or someone else's?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Through the topics and examples discussed in this chapter, you can begin to appreciate the varied conceptualizations of the idea of culture, understand better a focus on culture as a communication practice, and appreciate the variety of ways in which culture is actively produced in communication practices. This fifth understanding of the concept of culture as a communication practice can be said to incorporate the four other ways, discussed at the start of the chapter, in which the concept of culture can be viewed in a generic way, in a distinctive way, in an evaluative way, and in a cognitive way. All of these concepts of culture can be explored in an integrative way within a communication view of culture. In other words, the fifth view resituates those earlier concepts of culture from species, groups, classes, and lenses into communication practices. Through your communication of culture in symbols and symbolic forms you express yourself as uniquely human (the generic concept), identify distinct features of groups to distinguish groups from each other (the distinctive concept), make judgments about how one group's ways are typically better than others' (the evaluative concept), and normalize human action within groups in such a way as to create lenses or expectations for behavior (the cognitive concept).

Unlike the four concepts of culture as originally articulated, the fifth concept of culture, incorporating these four, positions you to explore the relationship between languages and cultures, the ways cultures infuse societies, the role of cultural analyses in historical studies, a robust understanding of inter/cultural encounters and hybrid cultures, interpretations of visual media, relations between nature-environment and peoples' places, as well as the practical activities of everyday living. Living and studying with a communicational view of culture, there is much good work to do.

CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY ONLINE

Visit: http://whc.unesco.org/en/list

UNESCO World Heritage List. Take a tour of countries you may otherwise never get a chance to visit in person. Explore the representations of culture in the images and text on the site. Consider the value of this site for preserving, protecting, and constructing "world cultural and natural heritage."

" SAY WHAT?

Say What? provides excerpts from overheard real-life conversations in which people have communicated stereotypes. As you read these conversations, reflect on the following questions.

- Have you been in conversations like this before?
- Is there any one of these conversations that stick out to you more than the others?
- What do you think of this conversation?
- How did the stereotype help or hinder the conversation?
- Was there another way the stereotyper could have communicated to convey the same point?
- How do you feel when you hear this conversation or the specific stereotype?
- Do any of these conversations bother you more than others? Why or why not?
- Do any concepts, issues, or theories discussed in the chapter help explain why?

- **Say What?** We met up with some other friends and all we did was boast about how good [our basketball team was]. Mike asked us what was the big deal about winning 10 games in a row [because the] teams probably sucked. John retaliated by saying that we even beat a team full of African Americans, Mike then stated, "Just cause they're Black doesn't mean they're good." John, after a brief moment of silence, tried to cover up by saying that [opposing] team was pretty good, but I was there and I know that Mike was right. The team with the African Americans wasn't all that great.

- **Say What?** On a very physical play [a] player took the ball in toward the basket and was fouled, the team captain insisted that I was "giving all the calls to the White team." I gave the team captain a technical foul because of the nature of his comment. This incited him further and he had to be taken aside by his teammates to be calmed down. He spat out some further biased comments, but I opted not to throw him out of the game. I did not want him to be able to use "the racist referee" as his excuse for losing the game.

- **Say What?** I was training a new girl at work. Now this girl is a tiny girl so I said to her, "This tray is very heavy; I'll show you an easy way to carry it since you're a little girl. It will be easier to rest in on your shoulder instead of holding it up in the air." This did not go over well with this new girl. She got very offended and grabbed the heavy tray, held it high in the air and said with an attitude, "Even little girls can handle big jobs!"

- **Say What?** I had asked her about possibly going out after work one of these days to grab a bite to eat. She agreed, but she wanted to wait until she got next week's paycheck so that she would have some money. I told her she doesn't need to have money. She responded by asking why. I went on to tell her that I would have to pay because that's just how things are. [S]he quickly became annoyed and told me that I was an idiot for thinking that way. In reality, she did make a lot more money then me and I really didn't have a lot of money to spend. She knew that too.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the first four concepts of culture discussed in the chapter? Define each.

2. What is distinct about the fifth concept of culture from the four previously discussed in this chapter?

3. How does the fifth concept of culture incorporate the previous four concepts of culture discussed? Be specific. Provide examples as appropriate.

4. What is a communication theory of culture, according to the chapter? How does this approach relate to social construction?

5. When do we socially construct our cultural identity, according to the chapter? When don't we?

6. How do people use symbols to construct culture? Based on the chapter discussion, why do you think this process requires collaboration by others?

7. What does the chapter mean when it says that symbols are part of an expressive system?

8. If culture is situated in practices of people in place, what role does our preexisting knowledge about cultures play in this social construction? Incorporate the five hubs of meaning into your answer.

9. How is culture constructed in the three examples of cultural moments provided in the chapter?

10. When you think of culture being constructed through communication, which cultures do you think of as being constructed? Why? If culture is constructed in communication, what limit, if any, is placed on the amount or variety of cultures than can be constructed?

KEY TERMS

being-in-the-world   73

cognitive concept of
    culture   73

communication practice   74

Communication theory of
    culture   74

community   77

cultural discourse   74

cultural expressive system   80

cultural moment   82

culture-bearer   70

distinctive concept of
    culture   71

evaluative concept of
    culture   71

exclusiveness   71

generic concept of
    culture   71

heterogeneous culture   71

high culture   73

homogenous culture   71

lens   73

low culture   73

membering   78

part-whole nature of an
    expressive system   80

practices of people in
    place   78

social scene   77

symbolic forms   76

taken-for-granted
    knowledge   77

tensional force   81

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