The Meaning of Culture

***Culture*** is what members of a certain society share, things like beliefs, values, norms, language, art, music, and even material objects the culture produces. Things like Pepto Bismol, condensers, U-Joints, and antibacterial soap are examples of material objects. Other objects include forklifts, a drill press, anvil, and brussel sprouts. These are things needed by people to sustain their cultures.

Now, ***cultural objects*** and ***artifacts*** develop as a result of a culture using technology. These items fulfill a human purpose. Think about it. Could you and I live without Motrin, pacemakers, or U-Joints? Culture is everything that human beings create together, including their society and the institutions to create social order. How do you like that? Without social order little would be possible. Imagine living in a society with no social order. You could walk into your favorite thrift shop and pick out all the clothes and other hot items you desperately need and not pay for them. Without social order lots would be possible because the norms guiding our behavior are absent. Sociologists call this kind of social condition *anomie.*

How about the shared belief that individuals who jeopardize our safety should be separated from the general population by being incarcerated? Or, that to continue paying rent or mortgage you need to hold a job? Keeping a job is called job stability.

**Language**

A healthy, functioning society emerges when all of its members act on the elements of shared understanding to get on with the day-to-day living. As a result, acceptable patterns of behavior are established. Think of culture as a group of people living in a natural setting, communicating with each other in comprehensible ways. Through ***language*** we create shared symbols, knowledge, and the foundations of a society. Without language none of this would be possible. Animals communicate by certain sounds and gestures, and you and I communicate using symbolic language. The only reason we can communicate with each other is because we speak the same language. We have a shared understanding of our language that enables us to effectively communicate most of the time. Language enables us to communicate our thoughts and feelings.

**Types of Subcultures**

A subculture can arise in a dominant society or culture. A subculture emerges when a group of people agrees to their own set of norms, values and beliefs, which are different from the dominant culture. You see, the subculture still shares certain elements of the dominant culture, but it has its own identity and little community. Religious groups like the Amish can be considered a subculture. The Hare Krishna is another religious subculture quite distinct in the way they dress; wearing robes, beads and shaving their heads. They also don’t eat meat, which isn’t so bad. Adolescents are a subculture because of the unique way they dress, talk, and behave. There are ***deviant subcultures*** such as terrorist groups, criminals and gangs. Obviously these groups’ norms and values are unacceptable to the dominant culture. For starters, these deviant cultures don’t treat all life as sacred.

**Knowledge, Beliefs and Values**

The other elements of a culture are knowledge, beliefs and values. ***Knowledge*** refers to statements or theories that come from empirical evidence. Examples of widely established and commonly accepted statements that represent knowledge would be that there’s gravity on earth or that human beings are mortal. How about that Einstein was a genius? So, cultural knowledge refers to those statements that are well known and shared by most everyone in the culture.

***Beliefs*** are statements that aren’t necessarily verifiable and cannot be proven to be true because they are commonly referred to as conventional wisdom. ***Conventional wisdom*** means that we accept the statement without questioning its truthfulness.

How about the belief that there is an all-loving, merciful, and forgiving G-d that created human beings? Now, I know this is controversial, but I’m only using it as an example of a belief some people espouse. Let’s add that the institution of religion is a belief. So, you should pretty much know by now that beliefs are ideas that are subjective and unverifiable. You like that word unverifiable? It means the belief’s truthfulness can’t be scientifically tested because there hasn’t been a credible sighting of G-d lately. But then again, there are lots of people claiming to have seen and talked to G-d.

***Values*** are very strongly held beliefs that typically originate from morality. Examples of values are justice, fairness, compassion, equality, openness, sharing, cooperation, and respect. The problem with values is that not everyone in a culture agrees on what is and isn’t a value. For example, I know that for some people in our culture, getting ahead is valued. There is nothing wrong with that value. I refer to this value as part of the American dream that promotes and rewards achievement orientation. Interestingly, there are other cultures where competition and achievement orientation is discouraged and not valued. In other cultures, pursuing spiritual enlightenment is valued. Some cultures pursue harmony and balance in nature. I think you’ll agree with me that ending someone’s life against his or her will is immoral because all of us value life. In our mainstream, American culture, life is treated as sacred. However, sadly enough, there’s always a potential for people in the same culture to not honor this value.

In our culture, values are sometimes expressed through proverbs. Here are a few examples of proverbs and the values they’re supposed to reflect: Cleanliness is next to G-dliness (Cleanliness); You’ve made your bed, now lie in it (Responsibility, Personal Choices); Early to bed, early to rise (Diligence, Persistence); It’s not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game (Good sportsmanship).

Now let’s now discuss specific cultural values for the Hispanic, Asian and mainstream Caucasian, American culture. I’ll list the value and how it is treated in each of the cultures.

**Individual versus Family:** In the Asian and Hispanic cultures, the family is emphasized more than the individual. In modern American culture, the individual is often emphasized more than the family. Individualism honors the uniqueness of each individual in his/her search for meaning in life. In contemporary mainstream Caucasian culture, individualism is usually expressed as achievement orientation motivated by self-interest, rather than a desire for collective involvement. Collective involvement is just a fancy way of saying the emphasis is on family and community instead of on the individual.

**Time:** For Asians, time is usually not specific and tends to flow like a stream. In the Hispanic culture time is vague and relative. In contemporary mainstream Caucasian culture time, is usually treated as precise and is divided into chunks, like hour by hour, which represents opportunities to produce something or to earn money. As you know, we thrive on using time efficiently to complete tasks.

**Individualism and Expressive Individualism**

Individualism originated in Western civilization in the 15th century. Individualism holds that life is sacred, and that human beings should be treated with dignity. Individualism also considers human beings as more important than society. Now, expressive individualism refers to the unique expression of an individual’s feelings and thoughts. Expressive individualism most likely had its origins in the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. ***Romanticism*** was a movement that rejected the scientific approach with its focus on reason and scientific inquiry to improve the human condition. The scientific approach generated a body of knowledge, which was used to understand the workings of our world. In other words, science was the primary method for human beings to control their destiny. However, science relied heavily on the use of our intellect and reason to dominate nature, making us overly confident that science was the only acceptable kind of knowledge.

***Expressive individualism*** is about the basic goodness of human beings, and it stresses and emphasizes our emotional life, creativity, and imagination. It’s about trusting your intuition on things in the world. In comparison to science, expressive individualism could lead to intuitive knowledge by de-emphasizing the importance of using our intellect and reason to understand our world. It focuses on how self-reflection can generate self-discovery.

Self-reflection just means sitting and thinking about things. Expressive individualism nurtures self- realization, self-growth, and self-actualization. I wonder if these three concepts mean the same thing? What do you think?

One can argue that our culture focuses too much on how we feel and on nourishing the growth of our true self. I’m not sure about this. I’ve got to think more about it, and I’ll get back to you later. All right, I’ll think and discuss it with you now. Expressive individualism may deceptively encourage human beings to become too self-sufficient and self-reliant. It may encourage a pursuit of too much individual fulfillment and discourage individuals from making more serious connections to others, to society and to social institutions. One final thought for you to ponder. Is it possible for human beings to develop their genuine selves as they distance themselves from their cultural and social connections? By cultural and social connections I mean attachments to cultural and institutional anchors such as churches, synagogues, schools and colleges, museums, and cultural arts centers.

**Why We Need Each Other to Feel Good About Ourselves**

The incredibly important thing to remember as you begin your cultural assessment is that all human beings are valuable. You and I have never been, and will not ever be, culturally or personally superior to any other human being. That’s pretty much it on this matter.

You also need to realize that all human beings deserve to be treated with respect and dignity; regardless of what country they were born in, their race, culture, how they worship and their life ways. In order for you to experience happiness in your life you need others. You’re probably aware that you need others to feel good about yourself.

The last important thing to remember is that your culture is no better or worse than any other culture. To accept this assertion you have to acknowledge that cultural differences are not bad. Remember the term *cultural relativity*? It means that what works for one culture may not work for another. It’s just that we’re so accustomed and culturally programmed to value and reinforce like behavior in our culture. In our culture, there is a phenomenon called ***sameness.*** It means we all like to behave in similar ways and we value sameness in others. This expectation of sameness is a powerful one to break because, in our society, we are constantly being reinforced for achieving similar things, such as earning exceptional grades, promotions, and other achievements. For example, most Americans lead linear lives.