

# **Webs of Significance**

**Part II.2. Enculturation:  
The 'Formatting' of Our Minds**

## II.2. Enculturation: The 'Formatting' of Our Minds

The way we think forms our identity: we really **are** what we think. Our personalities are shaped mostly by what we 'soak up' up from our social environment, as we grow up.

Imagine if you were born in a different place, and at a different time – would *you* have been *you*? Would your values and beliefs, your likes and dislikes, your preferences and taboos – would they have been different? Would your ways and behaviour be different, if you were born a different sex (gender) from what you are? Most probably, yes! Why? Because of the varying *influences* and *social expectations* that shape us in the process of **enculturation**. Do you know that the physical temperature of the surrounding environment determines the sex of the hatchlings from crocodile eggs? In the same way, environmental influences 'format' people's perceptions and attitudes, shaping their personalities. How and why is our social environment such a big influence on who we become?

In Part I of this course, we learned about how our society makes us human by giving us Language, which teaches us to think symbolically. Through Language, we also learn many other systems of symbolic meaning used in our society, such as traditions, rules of behaviour, practices, etc. – everything that eventually makes us part of the *Symbolic Species*.

However, grammar precedes logic. In early childhood, we look up to the grown-ups for all the answers and readily 'soak up' their views on what is right and what is wrong. By the time we mature, the attitudes, norms and behaviours of our society get embedded in our subconscious mind and become our identity. Cultural influences shape and colour our perceptions, and the attitudes and norms of our society become our subconscious norms and attitudes. It is only if we attain the Formal Operational Stage of our cognitive development that we become capable of sophisticated logical thought, when we stop taking things for granted and begin to think critically, looking for convincing proofs for every proposition (Re: p. 20).

Enculturation is a continuous process – we remain susceptible to environmental and social influences, no matter how old we get. The more enculturated we are, the more we conform to the cultural norms of our society – and the less likely we are to think critically about ideas that conflict with our basic views and attitudes (which ultimately drive our behaviour).

### (a) Sources of Enculturation

Our whole environment is the source of enculturation: our family, relations, friends, social and religious institutions, etc. have certain demands and expectations of us.

That is how we learn our religious beliefs, ethical standards, biases, superstitions, prejudices and subconscious attitudes, behaviours and habits.

***Some common beliefs and attitudes in Port Moresby vs. other cultures:***

- 1. It's okay to kill animals.**
  - a. The Jains of India consider it a sin to kill anything, even insects.
- 2. It's morally wrong to go outside without clothes.**
  - a. Dutch women feel quite comfortable gardening in their backyards topless.
  - b. People walk stark naked on nude beaches in America and Western Europe generally.
  - c. People in distant parts of Africa, and the South Pacific, hardly wear any clothing.
- 3. Jesus is God.**
  - a. People of Jewish, Buddhist or Islamic faith would disagree with this – they have their own ideas about God!
  - b. Atheism views God as an Idea; since ideas exist only in human minds, it follows logically that God exists only in human minds.
- 4. Marriage is (and should be! 😊) between one man and one woman.**
  - a. You must have heard about the legalization of gay and lesbian marriages in North America and parts of Western Europe.
  - b. *Polygamy* is the norm in Muslim societies, where a man can legally have four wives.
  - c. In Tibet, *polyandry* is common, where the wife takes more than one husband.

**(b) Self-Concept: Ego**

Recognizing and evaluating the extent of our own enculturation lessens its effect on our mind and promotes critical thinking. Our self-concept is the way we view ourselves. It may be unhealthy, if it is distorted – for example, if we view ourselves too negatively (as when we think we are ugly, stupid, incapable, etc.) or too positively ('I am a Superman!' or 'I am the unrecognized Genius,' etc.). A healthy self-concept is an accurate, objective assessment of your own qualities and potential.

What goes into our idea of our own identity includes not only our intelligence and physical attractiveness, but many other aspects of our personalities: our political and religious views, our gender and ethnicity, our age and social category, our moral values and professional skills, and so many other things: our possessions, our home, our friends, our belonging to various social groups, etc. Some people's image of themselves is so fused with things like material possessions, social status, etc., that they become overly aggressive when these things are threatened. This aggression

against any perceived threat to their identity (Ego, Self) is often what drives conflict, violence, and even wars (i.e., the Crusades, the present conflict in the Middle East, etc.). Aggression, anger, hatred - any emotional response to a perceived threat to our notion of who we are – paralyze our ability to think critically.

### Your Enculturation Test

Based on Source: Gary R. Kirby and Jeffrey R. Goodpaster (1999) *Thinking* pp. 16-19

- Answer honestly “yes” or “no” to the questions below; this will help you examine the foundations of some of your thinking
- Don't worry whether your answer is right or wrong – ‘*There is nothing that is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*’ ☺

#### 1. Do you believe that the democratic form of government is the best kind of government in the world?

- a. Are you aware of the problems of democracy often cited by sociologists and people from non-democratic countries?
- b. Can you express the basic philosophy of alternative forms of government?
- c. Can you cite any positive aspects of either communism or socialism?

#### 2. Do you believe that abortion is wrong in most or all cases?

- a. Do you have good arguments to support your belief?
- b. Do you know at what moment a human being comes into existence?
- c. Do you know at what moment a developing embryo has human rights?
- d. Do you know at what moment a developing fetus becomes conscious?
- e. Do you know at what moment a developing fetus is capable of experiencing pain?
- f. Can you cite any arguments used by pro-choice advocates to support abortion?
- g. Do you believe that a seed of an apple has the same value as an apple tree?

#### 3. Do you believe that capital punishment is justified for mass murderers?

- a. Do you know that capital punishment is a more expensive way to punish than life imprisonment because of the numerous and very expensive judicial appeals of the former?
- b. Have you seen any statistics that clearly show capital punishment to inhibit murder?
4. Do you believe there is a God?

- a. Have you ever heard of an argument against this idea?
- b. Can you present an argument against this idea?

#### 5. Do you believe that it is moral to use animals for medical experiment to make life better for human beings?

- a. Do you believe that it would be moral for beings on another planet with intelligence superior to ours to use human beings as guinea pigs for the advancement of their alien culture?

- b. Have you ever seen experimental animals suffer in an experimental laboratory?
  - c. Do you know that pigs are blowtorched under anesthesia, bunnies have their eyes sewed shut, and monkeys have their heads smashed to study the effects of burn treatment, cosmetics, and concussion, respectively?
  - d. Have you ever read any argument against the use of animals in a laboratory?
  - e. Can you cite such an argument now?
- 6. Do you believe that Extra-Sensory Perception (ESP) is nonsense?**
- a. Have you read any studies by parapsychologists?
  - b. Do you believe that if we cannot explain something it does not exist?
- 7. Do you believe that humans are the most intelligent life forms in the universe?**
- a. Do you know that there are billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars, so that if just one in 10 billion stars has a planet with life, there would be billions of planets with life?
  - b. Do you know that human life emerged on this planet in about 4.5 billion years and that the universe is old enough for this evolutionary process to have happened three times in succession?
- 8. Do you believe that one racial group is innately superior to another?**
- a. Do you know that Japanese score slightly higher on intelligence tests than whites?
  - b. Do you know the extent to which the environment determines intelligence?
  - c. Do you know the amount of genetic similarity among racial groups?
- 9. Do you believe that America is the best country in the world?**
- a. Do you know that our infant mortality rate is higher than that of many other modern industrial countries?
  - b. Do you know that the United States has one of the highest rates of violent crime in the world?
  - c. Do you know that the top 10 percent of the U.S. population hold more than 67 percent of all wealth in the country, including 90 percent of stocks and bonds?
- 10. Do you believe that humans did not evolve from lower life forms but were created separately?**
- a. Have you ever read a book on the evidence for evolution?
  - b. Have you ever talked to a paleontologist, geologist, biochemist, or zoologist about evolution?
  - c. Are you aware of any of the following?
    - Homologous structures
    - Vestigial traces
    - Fossil discoveries
    - DNA similarities

## How our embryonic ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny

If you answered “yes” to the numbered questions above, but “no” to parts a, b, c, and so on, it *could* be that you have merely adopted your position through an enculturation process, influenced by your peers, parents, religious community, etc., instead of through careful reflection and the gathering of facts. A “yes” response to many of the questions above might be supported by sound reasoning and facts. The point of this test is not to determine what is true or false about the issues but to illustrate the lack of both thinking and knowledge that tends to go into these beliefs.

### (c) Culture & Identity: The Force behind Our Thoughts

Since our emotions are part of our being, they are closely intertwined with our thinking. In fact, it is almost impossible to separate our Thoughts, embodied in Language, from our Emotions. Other intelligent species share with us a lot of human emotions (such as fear, anger, love, jealousy, greed, hatred, etc.) – the only difference is that we learn to become *aware* of them through symbols (both linguistic and cultural). **Herder**, a German philosopher, believed that although humans and other creatures of the physical world share feelings, human *consciousness* (thought) separates us from all other creation, in order to link us again in deliberate use of words to *refer* to reality as it is seen through the prism of our minds. Thus, what we may vaguely sense but not recognize in feeling, finds expression and understanding through language. Herder wrote that feeling and thought interpenetrate each other, and that ‘the word, being at once sound and significance, is the cause of this union.’ Every signification of something, therefore, includes an emotional attitude toward it that reflects the outlook of its users.

### Culture is what a society thinks and does; but what lies *beneath* our thoughts and actions?

1. Our **needs** and **wants** – they often drive our thoughts and actions. Most of the time people “know” what they want (often this *knowing* is a *feeling!*), and then they develop reasons to convince themselves or others that their wants are good.
2. Feelings, in turn, underlie our **values, beliefs, and attitudes**. These assumptions are usually formed early in life, in the course of enculturation, and become firmly fixed in our subconscious mind. Although we can usually give reasons to justify our values, beliefs and attitudes, the *reasons* are not usually *why* we hold onto them – the *feelings* are!

“Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular.

**The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason”** (Hume: 1748).

This is why people are so emotional about their culture: questioning our deepest beliefs, values, ideas, and behaviours forces us out of the ‘comfort zone’ of the familiar and the predictable, and makes us feel insecure.

Yet, in order to succeed in the complex and fast-changing world we live in, we must try to understand our attitudes, values and ways of thinking – it is only then that we will be able to face the new realities of the ‘Global Village’ of the modern world. This is our goal in this course: to learn where we all have come from, understand what we are at this point in time, and decide where we want to go from here.

The Internet has ‘flattened’ our world: our Flat World has no geographical boundaries or time zones. Modern Information Technology has transformed the way we live, conduct business and communicate in the global economy. More than ever, we have come to realize that all people around the world have more in common that unites us than the differences that divide us.

#### **(d) Human Nature & Maslow’s Pyramid of Human Needs**

***‘Mankind are so much the same in all times and places that history informs us of nothing new or strange’***

David Hume (1711–1776)

Indeed, we all laugh and cry in the same way, and mostly for similar reasons ... ☺ The human feelings of love and hate, grief and joy, jealousy and greed, pain and despair are universal. In fact, the only thing that distinguishes the so-called ‘primitive’ from ‘civilised’ societies is the amount of accumulated technical and scientific knowledge.

Despite the sometimes still common racial prejudice and double standards, always rooted in ignorance, fear, or self-interest, all humans share the same Human Nature!

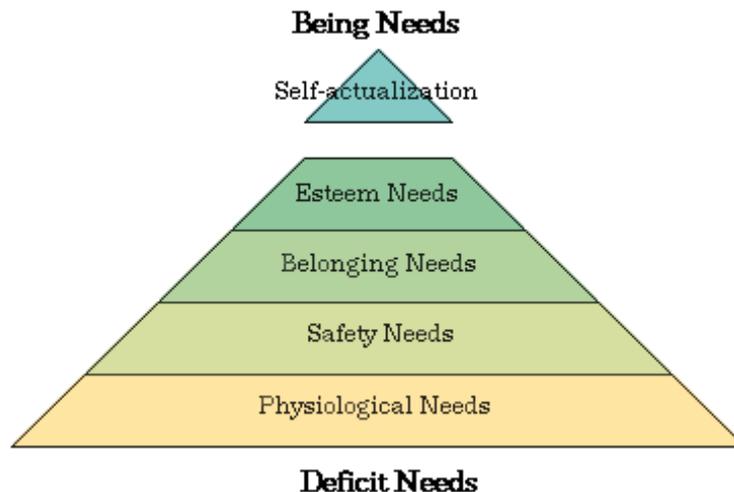


About 60 years ago, the American psychologist **Abraham Maslow (1908 - 1970)** proposed a **theory of human needs and satisfactions**, claiming that the feelings, needs and wants of people around the world are basically the same. He stated that

- Man is a **wanting** being: his needs must be satisfied; once satisfied, they are replaced by further needs;

- Man's needs form a series of progressive levels – in the order of importance.

The hierarchy of needs is usually represented by a pyramid, with the more essential, basic needs overriding the 'higher,' less compelling needs. This suggests that the higher-level needs become relevant only when the 'lower' needs have been satisfied (see diagram below):



Of course, nothing is so simple: in real life, these human needs often overlap. Think, for example, of people risking (or even knowingly sacrificing) their *lives* (physiological /safety needs) for the sake of a loved one, or in the name of a cause they believe in (Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake, for not having gone back on his conviction that the Earth was round).

The 'lower,' basic needs (1-3) are instinctive; humans share them with animals. We also share, to some extent, the 'Esteem' needs – both human and animal behavior is often driven by the desire for recognition by the others in the group. Beyond these basic survival (and recognition) needs, higher levels of needs include human desire for understanding, justice, knowledge, etc.:

- Physiological Needs:** air, water, food, warmth, sleep, etc.
- Safety Needs:** freedom from fear of pain and life-threatening situations, the need to be safe.
- Needs for Love, Friendship, and Sense of Belonging:** When our physical and safety needs are satisfied, we want more: we all need to belong, to feel loved – nobody likes to feel lonely or hated by others!
- Needs for Esteem:** When the first three classes of needs are satisfied, we want power and recognition – the 'esteem' needs, which include the desire for self-respect and for respect from others. When these needs are satisfied, we feel more self-confident and, in a way, 'valuable.' Without respect, we feel weak, inferior, and worthless.

5. **Needs for Self-Actualization:** Maslow described self-actualization as our need to be and do what we have been “born to do”: “A musician must make music, an artist must paint, and a poet must write,” etc.

Driven by universal human needs, wants and feelings, human communities have been, for millennia, suspended in their separate *‘webs of significance’*<sup>1</sup> that each of them spins.

The Internet has flattened our world, generating cultural flows which flushed away a lot of cultural cobwebs, giving rise to multicultural societies.

What are the relationships between Culture, Race, and Language in our Flat World? Read on!

### Summary

1. Culture is what a society thinks and does; it is a system of socially assigned arbitrary meanings.
2. Enculturation is social conditioning we all are shaped by because the ability to think logically and critically is not inborn: Grammar Precedes Logic.
3. Universal human needs, feelings and emotions drive human behavior and, therefore, underlie all human cultures, diverse as they may be.

### References

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<sup>1</sup> Cultures; systems of meaning, etc.