



Webs of Significance

**Part II. Culture &
Enculturation**

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In Part II of this course, we will explore the concepts of Culture and Enculturation, and look at the economic, social, and historical factors that shape human cultures. We will use a simple definition of the complex phenomenon of *culture* that will help us understand the process of enculturation, or social conditioning which shapes our worldview. We will also discuss the role of Language in that process and, while bearing in mind the ‘sameness’ of human nature, will consider the immense diversity of world cultures, dividing them into two broad categories: *high-context* and *low-context*. Here is the ‘skeleton’ of our discussions in the next few weeks:

1. What Is Culture?

- a. Dialectical view of Culture vs. the metaphysical one
- b. Historical development of Culture
- c. The invention of writing and cultural development

2. Enculturation – the Formatting of Our Minds

- a. Sources of Enculturation
- b. Self-Concept - Ego
- c. Culture and Identity: The Force behind Our Thoughts
- d. Human Nature & Maslow’s Pyramid of Human Needs

3. Cultures of the World: ‘High-context’ vs. ‘Low-context’ cultures

- a. Why are some cultures ‘high’ context, and others – ‘low’ context?
- b. Context Is a Relative Metric of Culture
- c. Subcultures (community thinking & behavior)
- d. Why are cultures so different, if the mechanism of human thought and all basic human needs are universal?

4. Language, Race & Culture

- a. Language and Identity: the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis
- b. Theories of Relationship between Race, Culture & Language
- c. Cultural, ethnic and linguistic boundaries are not the same

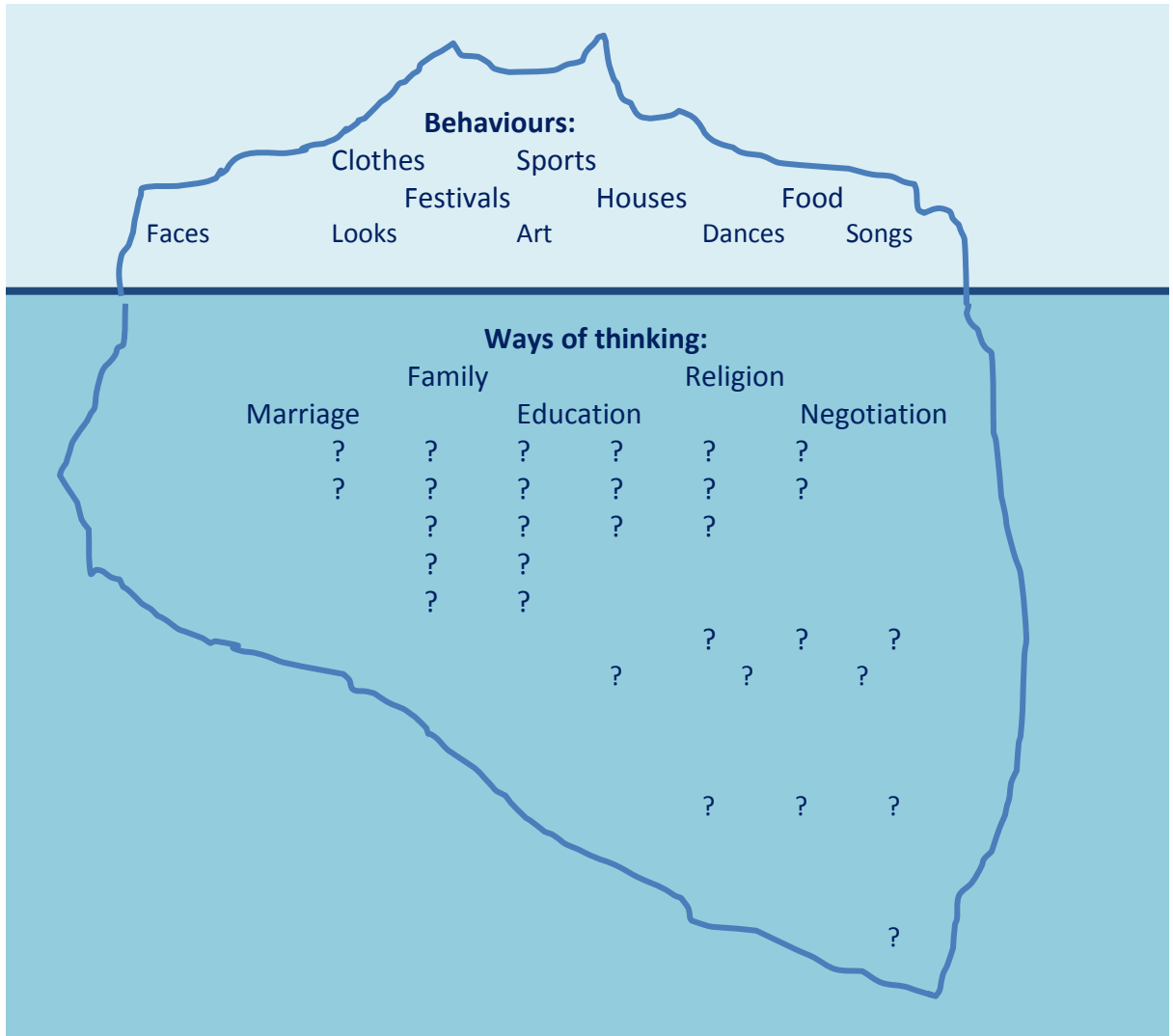
II. 1. What Is Culture?



Cultures are like icebergs; some features are clearly seen, while others are hidden beneath the water, out of sight. ‘Above-the-surface’ features are the observable

behaviours: what and how people eat, dress, walk, talk, relate to one another, conduct themselves during ceremonies to mark births, weddings or funerals, etc. Also included are such things as ‘social distance,’ or degree of socially ‘acceptable’ closeness, etc. Other aspects of culture are below the surface – people’s thoughts and beliefs have no physical substance and are, therefore, not perceivable through our physical senses

What we see in any culture is ‘above the waterline.’ What we cannot see is below the water. What do you think ‘outsiders’ may see and what won’t they see when they meet people from your culture? Write them in the ‘iceberg’ of culture below:



So Culture is both observable behaviours and all the intangible systems of social meaning that exist in people’s minds. Suspended in the webs of significance our societies have spun, we hang on to the ‘familiar,’ often accepting existing social norms without question.

Basically, Culture is

1. **What people think** (ideologies, religion, science, etc.),
2. **What they do** (languages they speak, foods they eat, clothes they wear, their laws, rites and traditions, etc.), and
3. **What they produce** (crops, products, art, architecture, etc.).

There is a dynamic correlation between what we think and what we do, for it is our attitudes and beliefs that drive our behaviour (we tend to do what we want to do or what we feel is right to do).

Language, the social tool for 'spinning' thoughts, enables individuals within societies to continually create and share their mosaics of meaning. Meanings are symbolic – they exist only in the physical forms that our minds create. Culture embodies people's understanding of the world they live in; the accumulated expressions of collective thought, generated by the interaction of group members with the realities they live in, form the 'body-and-soul' of social culture, the union between the 'collective mind' of the society and all the material 'webs of significance' it spins.

Societies are groups of individuals. And, just as individual thoughts and behaviour in physical 'space/time' make up one's personal identity, so also the collective thought and behaviour of a group of people constitute their group identity – their group personality, their *Culture*.

Culture (thought and behaviour patterns in a society) is not inborn – we learn to think symbolically in the process of social interaction with our 'fellow men and women' who teach us language, the social 'thinking tool.' Thus,

Culture (like language) is *learned*; it is not inherited biologically;
Culture is a **social phenomenon** (individual behaviour is not culture).

Culture Is a Purely Human Phenomenon

Symbolic thinking sets Man apart from Animals, however intelligent; people can teach animals to respond to cultural symbols, but animals do not *create* their own symbols. Look, for example, at CNN reports about elephant intelligence which made news in June 2006 - they said, elephants had joined the 'exclusive club' of only three intelligent species (Homo sapiens, Great Apes, and dolphins) that recognize themselves in a mirror! They showed a footage of a female elephant, who, when they installed an 'elephant-sized' mirror in her pen, was at first intrigued, and tried to look behind the mirror, but then realized that it was her own reflection she was looking at!

She started dancing in front of the mirror, obviously admiring her own moves; the researchers then put a big plaster on her cheek, and when she saw it in the mirror, she started trying to remove it with her trunk! Amazingly smart – but not symbolic thinking! Animals do not detach themselves from the situation, they are not consciously aware of it. Human ability to generalize, to create abstract *ideas* of concrete things made us conscious of our own separateness from the physical world and enabled us to invent tools we use to actively impact our environment:

“The spider makes operations resembling the operations of the weaver, and the bee creating its waxen cells disgraces some architects. But from the very beginning, the worst architect differs from the best bee in that before building the cell of wax, he already has built it in his head. The result, which is received at the end of the process of work, already exists in the beginning of this process in an ideal form in a representation of a person. The person does not only change the form given by nature, but in what is given by nature he, at the same time, realises his conscious purpose, which as a law determines the way and character of his actions and to which he must subordinate his will”

K. Marx

“Man wants the stick, the ape wants the fruit. < The ape does not want the tool. It does not prepare it for the future. For the ape, it is a means to satisfy an instinctive wish. >

The tool: The tool requires abstraction from the situation. Tool use requires another type of stimulation and motivation. The tool is connected with **meaning** (of the object)”

Vygotsky: 1934

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1934/problem-consciousness.htm>

We differ from animals not just by a single feature, such as intellect, or free will; the difference between us is in our *relation to reality*. “Man differs from the animal by his **consciousness**” (Vygotsky: 1925). Animals perceive reality only through their physical senses – their behavior is purely **reactive** to the concrete environment/circumstances they are in. Abstract thought gave us the power to rise above the concrete situations we find ourselves in; we can imagine (or ‘abstract’) the consequences of our actions, and so actively influence our environment.

(a) Dialectical view of Culture vs. the metaphysical one

Dialectics is the wide-angle lens of our mind’s eye – it views complex phenomena in their totality, as interconnected, constantly changing and evolving composite wholes. **Metaphysics** is the zoom lens of our mind’s eye – it focuses on parts of the whole and studies them in isolation from the whole. Both dialectic **synthesis** and metaphysical **analysis** are parts of learning, just as inhalation and exhalation are parts of breathing.

Metaphysical view of Culture zooms in on the details – the patterns of social thought and behaviour prevailing at present; typically, it is opposed to change, emphasizing the importance of ‘preserving’ cultures.

Dialectical view of Culture ‘pans out’ to cover cultural change and evolution, viewing it as a living system of meanings and practices, evolving and necessarily changing, along with the society that creates it.

To gain a deeper understanding of what ‘culture’ is in general, as well as what Papua New Guinean culture is, in particular, we will use both ‘lenses’ in our investigations, maintaining nonetheless the dialectical approach to cultural change.

(b) Historical development of Culture

Human behaviour today is the product not only of biological evolution or individual cognitive development; it is also the product of the historical development of our ‘collective’ mind. And yet, ‘much of human behaviour, even today, is that of an animal standing on its hind limbs and talking,’ according to Pavel Blonsky, a prominent Soviet psychologist and educator.

Psychology considers human behaviour as the result of lengthy biological evolution. It probes rudimentary manifestations of the most complex, human behaviour patterns in the simplest single-cell organisms, seeing in their primitive reactions – in their movements “from something and toward something” – the starting points for the understanding of the highest forms of thought and will of modern man.

In the instincts of animals it finds the prototype of human emotions, and in human fear and anger it detects signs of flight and the attacks of predators. In the primary conditioned reflexes studied in laboratories, it sees the foundations from which all of man’s complex activity developed, as the product of the cerebral cortex. ... It tries to encompass in a single law both the motion of plants drawn toward the sunlight, and the calculations whereby Newton discovered the laws of universal gravity, as “separate links in a single chain of the biological adaptation of organisms.” (Vygotsky: 1925).

We have already established that word-meanings develop in the course of individual cognitive development, and historically, in our collective consciousness. Since Culture is the ‘webs of significance’/system of meanings, it follows that cultures also change and evolve in time.

(c) The invention of writing and cultural development

Memory – the ability to connect experiences in memory – is crucial for the development of thought:

By nature, animals are born with the faculty of sensation, and from sensation memory is produced in some of them, though not in others. And therefore the former are more intelligent and apt at learning than those which cannot remember ...

The animals other than man live by appearances and memories, and have but little of **connected experience**; ...from memory, experience is produced in men; for **several memories of the same thing produce finally the capacity for a single experience** (*Aristotle: Metaphysics, Book I*).

Our biological memory, however, is limited – we tend to forget things. That is why the invention of writing (and particularly the Alphabet) is, perhaps, the greatest and most consequential human invention of all time. Writing ‘externalized’ our memory and enabled us to accumulate and share unlimited amounts of information, unimpeded by geographical distances or Time:

“...Transition from the natural development of memory to the development of writing – from *eidetism* (= ‘*vivid recall of visual images*’ – OT) to the use of external systems of signs, from mnema to mnemotechnics – was an absolutely pivotal change, which determined the entire subsequent course of the development of human memory. Internal development had now become external.

Memory is enhanced to the extent that systems of writing and of symbols, together with the methods for using those symbols, are enhanced. This corresponds to what was known in ancient and medieval times as *memoria technica*, or artificial memory. The historical development of human memory essentially consists of the development and enhancement of the auxiliary means elaborated by social man in the process of his cultural life” (Vygotsky: 1930).

‘Memory is enhanced to the extent that systems of writing and of symbols, together with the methods for using those symbols, are enhanced’

Vygotsky: *Primitive Man and His Behaviour* (1930)

The invention of writing marked the qualitative transition from natural to cultural development of memory. The use of mnemotechnics (writing techniques) as opposed to mnema (‘reminders’ in the form of objects) gave us control over our memory; biological or internal form of memory development became historical or external.

The evolution of human memory

Human memory evolved from natural (organic/biological) memory to memorization with the aid of (1) First, objects ('reminders'), addressed first to others, and then to oneself; (2) Then, pictures (pictograms), (3) Then, syllabic writing; and, finally, (4) The Alphabet, where each symbol represents a sound of language.

About 4000 years ago, ancient Egyptians invented the alphabet (the letters looked different then, and they may look different now in many modern languages, but the *principle* of using written symbols to represent individual sounds that combine to make a word is the same). Unlike the earlier, non-alphabetic systems (pictograms, hieroglyphs, etc.), this was the most efficient and 'user-friendly' way of writing down /representing ideas. The Alphabet made it a lot easier to learn how to read and write – instead of cramming thousands of intricate symbols, people needed to learn only 22-24 shapes representing the sounds of their language. This new technology enabled more people to record and share information, thus increasing our collective RAM exponentially. Today,

We Live in an Exponential World!

There are over 2.7 billion searches performed on Google each month... To whom were these questions addressed B.G.? (Before Google)

The number of text messages sent and received every day exceeds the population of the planet.

There are about 540,000 words in the English language . . . About 5 times as many as during Shakespeare's time.

It's estimated that a week's worth of New York Times . . . Contains more information than a person was likely to come across in a *lifetime* in the 18th century.

It's estimated that 40 exabytes¹ of unique new information was generated worldwide in 2006 - more than in the previous 5,000 years. Total of approx. 161 exabytes of data were created in 2006; this is 3 million times the amount of information contained in all the books ever written; the amount of data generated in 2010 is expected to hit 988 exabytes.

¹ 1 EB = 1,000,000,000,000,000,000 B = 10¹⁸ bytes = 1 billion gigabytes = 1 million terabytes

The Alphabet transformed the ancient world: it enabled people to communicate their thoughts /ideas over distance, and through Time! Through writing, our ancestors speak to us directly, communicating to us their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. In fact,

Everything that civilized humanity remembers and knows at present, all the accumulated experience in books, monuments and manuscripts – all this colossal expansion of the human memory, without which there could be no historical and cultural development, is due precisely to external human memorization based on symbols (Vygotsky: 1930).

The better our system of ‘externalized’ memory, the more we can remember; and, the better our memory, the greater is the pool of ideas we can connect, and therefore, the greater our (potential) knowledge.

Further Reading:

Appendix II

Reading 1. David Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature. Book III Of Morals Part I Of Virtue and Vice in General. Section I Moral Distinctions NOT Derived from Reason

References

Vygotsky, Lev. (1934). Consciousness. Retrieved 22/18/2008 from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1934/problem-consciousness.htm>

Vygotsky, Lev. (1930) Primitive Man and His Behaviour

Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, Book I

Hume, David Hume. 1740. Of Human Nature: Of Morals. Retrieved 22/18/2008 from <http://www.mv.helsinki.fi/home/tkannist/E-texts/Hume/HumNature/index.html>