

Lecture Two : Cultural Elements

1) Components of Culture

In the previous lecture, culture was generally referred to as the beliefs, values, assumptions, behaviors,, etc. shared by a group of people which inform both verbal and non-verbal behavior. It also includes other visible components like artifacts and material objects. That is to say, culture is composed of two different sets of components: material vs. non-material elements; the non-material components can be either cognitive or normative. This lecture represents a non-exhaustive list of the main non-material elements of culture which include: beliefs, values, assumptions and behaviors in addition to other elements shared and identified by members of the same cultural group such as rituals, superstitions, symbols, myths, taboos, stereotypes and prejudices.

2) Elements of Culture

1) Beliefs

A belief is a conviction in the truth of something that one learned by living in a culture. It is the basis of one's actions and values. Beliefs can be experiential derived from a person's experiences, informational in the form of information acquired interpersonally, or inferential derived from observation, logic and thinking.

2) Values

1

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Values are shared standards of acceptable and unacceptable, good and bad, desirable, and undesirable behaviors. They are abstract, very general concepts that are expressed by norms. Values determine how individuals will probably respond in any given circumstances.

3) Assumptions

An assumption is a belief that is not proved. Usually people from the same culture communicate successfully as they share the same assumptions of behaviors. People holding different assumptions about what is right or wrong will have difficulties in communication.

4) Behaviors

Behaviors refer to the way people act and react in different real life contexts based on their shared beliefs, values and assumptions. Behaviors distinguish one cultural group from another in the sense that some behaviors that are inappropriate in one culture may be quite the norm in another.

5) Rituals and Superstitions

Rituals are processes or sets of actions that are repeated in specific circumstances and with a specific meaning. They may be used in rites of passage, such as when someone is promoted or retires. They may include customary ways of behaving like in greetings, farewell...etc. A superstitious behavior is “ a learned habit repeated periodically, often a behavior coincidentally reinforced in association with other rewarded action. (e.g. a person

always bets on gray horses because he once won a large sum of money on one.)” (Cushner and Brislin, qtd in Merouche 2019)

6) Symbols

Every culture is filled with symbols of things that stand for something else, which often suggests various reactions and emotions. Some symbols are actually types of nonverbal communication, while other symbols are, in fact, material objects.

7) Taboos

A taboo is a forbidden, unmentionable or a to-be-avoided behavior as dictated by religion or customs. Some cultures may consider some topics as taboo while other cultures may not.

8) Myths, Legends and Stories

Culture is often embedded and transmitted through stories, whether they are deep and obviously intended as learning devices, or whether they appear more subtly, for example in humor and jokes. Legends and myths are traditional stories which embody a belief regarding some fact or phenomenon of experience.

9) Stereotypes and Prejudices

The concept stereotype used to be employed interchangeably with prejudice, at the beginning, but lately researchers recognized them as different

Gibson (2000) defined a stereotype as “A fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is not true in reality. The word comes from printing, where it was used to describe the printing plate used to produce the same image over and over again” (Gibson, 2000 p. 12)

Prejudice is according to Shaules (2007), in his turn, claimed prejudice to function primarily out of conscious awareness and often result from judging behaviour based on criteria that the sojourner assumes is neutral and absolute, but which is actually based in hidden cultural assumptions. (p. 66)