



Culture, the Individual, and Identity

Chapter Outline

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 - Sexuality, Gender, and Identity
 - Cross-cultural Approaches to Sexuality
- Individual Psychology and Context

Key Points

1. Anthropologists have long been interested in the many ways individuals engage in cultural learning and how that learning is shaped by differences in status and experience. They have tried to find out what all members of our species have in common, what features are limited to specific groups of humans, and how individual uniqueness might be understood. In order to try and understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their world, researchers have incorporated psychological theories into their studies. Anthropologists have tested universal assumptions about human psychology in different cultural settings and many have found them to be problematic.
2. The field of psychological anthropology is complex and difficult to summarize, but it can be grouped into four basic areas of human experience: **perception**, **cognition**, **emotion**, and **motivation**. Research overwhelmingly sustains the view that human psychological processes

are open to a wide variety of influences. Psychological anthropologists typically concentrate on areas where it is possible to identify relationships between biological (internal) and cultural (external) influences. One of the most promising approaches has come from developmental biology: developmental systems theory (DST), which focuses on genetics as well as environmental contributions to an organism's development.

3. Human psychological perception always takes place in a cultural context. Researchers use concepts such as **schemas**, **prototypes**, and shared, patterned, and easily understood experiences to describe some of the ways in which meaning is mapped onto our experience. Classic research on cross-cultural variations in perception showed that different responses to psychological tests depended on the meanings that subjects brought to the testing situation. Alternative understandings are possible because of the ambiguity of many perceptual signals, a phenomenon that is illustrated in the study of visual illusions. As illustrated in Susan Vogel's study of the Baule people of the Ivory Coast, looking and seeing are culturally learned modes of sensory perception. She refers to this interpretive process as **visuality**.
4. Human beings are active meaning-makers, striving to make sense of experiences; these processes are a focus of anthropological studies of cognition. In early academic research, the cognitive capacities of people were often tested in order to elucidate how people receive information from the outside world and how they interpret that information in a way that makes an appropriate action possible. Anthropologists, however, have been critical of so-called intelligence tests, as studies have demonstrated that the tests are not useful when given to people who have a different cultural background than the researcher. Today, it is unclear exactly what the results of intelligence tests represent. Consequently, research has shifted its focus to cognitive processes and the way they are organized into culturally shaped functional systems.
5. Some anthropologists argue that people in different cultures have different **cognitive styles** that can be located on a continuum ranging from **global style** to **articulated style**. Research suggests that the same individual may use a global style (viewing the world holistically as a large bundle of relationships) for some tasks and an articulated style (seeing the world as broken up into smaller pieces) for others. In everyday situations, the goal of cognition is not to solve a problem by finding the single correct answer. Instead, people try to resolve dilemmas in a way that allows them to get on with life.
6. Researchers have made several attempts to measure the levels of rational thinking in non-Western populations, often by testing individuals using logical problems in syllogistic form. **Syllogistic reasoning** in Western culture is considered to be the perfect example of rational thought. It is important to keep in mind that rational thinking is not the same as logic. Formal Western logic is better understood as a learned **reasoning style** characteristic of Western culture. Rules of Western logic can be useful, but other logics may be equally valid in other societies—or on other occasions in Western societies—when contextual factors are vital and must be taken into consideration.
7. Emotions, like our thoughts, are not just something we have; they are culturally constructed from our state of mind, our cultural interpretations, and our levels of bodily arousal. Different cultures recognize different domains of experience and different categories of feeling as being appropriate to these domains. Context and the subsequent interpretation of context are cultural-

ly influenced and strongly influence emotional experiences. For this reason, it is often difficult to translate the language of emotion from one culture to another.

8. Our efforts to set and achieve goals are driven by our motivations. Anthropological approaches to motivation have always embedded the sources of motivation within an ideal cultural matrix. Finding the notion of “instinct” to be unhelpful, anthropologists have had greater success in studying the culturally defined goals that people pursue in different societies.
9. The mainsprings of motivation are to be uncovered in the study of **socialization** and **enculturation**. Humans must learn to pattern and adapt behaviour and ways of thinking and feeling to the standards considered appropriate in their respective cultures. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky was interested in the wider social, cultural, and historical context in which face-to-face interaction is embedded. Vygotsky’s concept of the **zone of proximal development** stresses that cognitive development results from a dialogue. Children progress through that process at different rates and in distinctive directions, depending on the amount and kind of coaching they receive from others. This concept makes it possible to explain why people in different cultural subgroups are socialized and enculturated in different ways.
10. Many Western psychologists and psychological anthropologists assumed that the mature **self** was an independent entity with a clear sense of identity that persisted through time. Anthropologists working in non-Western societies, however, found that many cultures do not promote the development of the self in the same way, preferring to speak of how in some cultures, individual **personality** is integrated within a sociocultural matrix.
11. Different cultures conceptualize sex and gender roles differently. **Sex** is the conventional biological distinction made between male and female based on observable sex characteristics, and **gender** is the culturally constructed beliefs and behaviours considered culturally appropriate for each sex. These roles greatly influence how individuals see themselves, how they define their place within a social group, and how they are perceived by others. Individuals’ sexual practices vary greatly—both within a single culture and between different cultures. Despite the development of more inclusive conceptions of **sexuality**, which draws attention to the wide range of possible identities, the ideology of heteronormativity is still pervasive. **Heteronormativity** is an ideal that divides “appropriate” behaviour based in the narrow culturally defined categories of “male” and “female,” “masculine” and “feminine.” Modern anthropological perspectives make restrictive ideals, such as this, problematic.
12. The importance of context is central to understanding individual psychology. Not just the immediate perceptible context, but also any displaced context of culture or history that may not be visible, yet is still present in people’s habits of thought and feeling.

Key Terms

Agency An individual’s ability to make choices and to effect change through her or his actions.

Articulated style A field-independent way of viewing the world that breaks it up into small pieces, which can then be organized into larger chunks.

Bisexuality Sexual attraction to both males and females.

Cognition (1) The mental process by which human beings gain knowledge, and (2) the “nexus of relations between the mind at work and the world in which it works.”

Cognitive style Recurring patterns of cognitive activity that characterize an individual’s perceptual and intellectual activities.

Cultural persona The presentation of self in compliance with specific cultural models or patterns of values and meanings.

Cultural synaesthesia A culturally shared response to a sense other than the one being stimulated (e.g., hearing a sound and seeing it as a colour).

Elementary cognitive processes Mental tasks common to all humans without intellectual cognitive impairment.

Emotion The product of entanglements connecting bodily arousal and cognitive interpretation.

Enculturation The process by which human beings living with one another must learn to come to terms with the ways of thinking and feeling that are considered appropriate in their respective cultures.

Functional cognitive systems Culturally linked sets of cognitive processes that guide perception, conception, reason, and emotion.

Gay A self-designation for many individuals whose sexual orientation is toward members of the same sex.

Gender The culturally constructed beliefs and behaviours considered appropriate for each sex.

Gender roles Sets of behaviours that are commonly perceived as masculine or feminine within a specific culture.

Global style A field-dependent way of viewing the world that first sees it as a bundle of relationships and only later sees the bits and pieces involved in these relationships.

Heteronormativity An ideology that promotes heterosexuality as the social ideal, supported by the cultural definition of “appropriate” behaviour based on culturally defined categories of “male” and “female,” “masculine” and “feminine.”

Homosexuality A term used to label individuals whose sexual orientation is toward members of the same-sex as themselves.

Lesbian A term used to describe women whose sexual orientation is toward other women.

Motivation The inner impulse to set (or accept) and accomplish goals.

Naturalizing discourses The deliberate representation of particular identities (e.g., caste, class, race, ethnicity, and nationality) as if they were a result of biology or nature rather than history or culture, making them appear external and unchanging.

Norms Rules (usually unwritten) for behaviour assumed to be typical within a specific social or cultural group.

Perception The processes by which people organize and experience information that is primarily of sensory origin.

Personality The relative integration of an individual's perceptions, motives, cognitions, and behaviours within a sociocultural matrix.

Prototypes Examples of a typical instance, element, relation, or experience within a culture.

Queer A self-identification claimed by some persons whose gender identities or sexual practices fall outside of the range defined by the heterosexual – homosexual continuum.

Reasoning style Culture- and context-dependent ways in which we appraise, come to understand, and think about a cognitive task.

Schemas Patterned, repetitive experiences that are shared and easily understood by members of a particular culture.

Self The result of the process of socialization and enculturation for an individual.

Sex The conventional biological distinction between male and female based on *morphological sex* (the appearance of external genitalia and observable secondary sex characteristics), *gonadal sex* (ovaries in females; testes in males), and chromosomal sex (XX chromosomes or XY chromosomes).

Sexuality An individual's sense of his or her own sexual orientation and preferences.

Socialization The process by which human beings learn to become members of a group, both by interacting appropriately with others and by coping with the behavioural rules established by the group.

Subject position An individual's unique position in the world, which is shaped by social variables, such as class, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Subjectivity An individual's awareness of his or her own agency and position as a subject.

Syllogism A series of three statements on which the final statement (the conclusion) must follow logically from the first two statements (the premise).

Syllogistic reasoning A form of reasoning based on the syllogism.

Taxonomies Hierarchical systems that sort groups of things that share at least one quality (e.g., dogs) into subgroups that share a greater number of qualities (e.g., poodles, collies, boxers).

Thinking The active cognitive process of “going beyond the information given.”

Transgender One classification of individuals who, in one way or another, seem dissatisfied with the sex and gender assignments they had received at birth.

Values Specific culturally defined principles of behavior.

Visuality The ways that individuals from different societies learn to interpret what they see and to construct mental pictures using the visual practices that their own cultural system favours.

Zone of proximal development (ZPD) The difference between what an individual can achieve on his or her own and what he or she can achieve under the guidance of more experienced individuals.

Review Questions

1. What is the relationship between culture and perception? How does this relate to the chapter on language?
2. What is the relationship between culture and cognition? Is there a relationship between cognition and perception? Between cognition and language?
3. How do anthropologists study psychological states? Are there any problems with this type of anthropological inquiry? Why or why not?
4. Do some research and find out about the difference between a sociocentric view of self and an egocentric view of self. In what type of culture or society are you most likely to find one or the other? Which one do you identify with?
5. What is the nature/nurture debate? How does research on gender contribute to this debate?
6. What is the relationship between culture and sexuality? What does this suggest about human beings?
7. Do you think people in every culture would recognize the anthropological distinction between sex and gender?
8. Are mental health and mental illness classifications culturally variable or uniform?
9. What is the value of psychological anthropology? Are there some concerns about it?
10. What are the different types of cognitive styles?

11. What is the value of Vogel's ideas about "visuality"?
12. Are there different ways of thinking about "seeing" in Canadian culture?
13. Think of an example of how the expression of emotion might differ in two distinct cultures.

Additional Resources

Films

- *Discovering Psychology*, "Past, Present, and Promise." Directed by Ann Strunk and Kim Storey. PBS. 1990.

This first episode of the *Discovering Psychology* documentary series gives an overview and introduction to the field of psychology.

<http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/discovering-psychology/>

- *Discovering Psychology*, "Sensation and Perception." Directed by Ann Strunk and Kim Storey. PBS. 1990.

This episode looks at the biology of perception and how the brain processes visual information.

<http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/discovering-psychology/>

Annotated Video Links

- The anthropology of the brain: Roger Bartra author of anthropology of the brain summarizes his work that brings together findings from anthropology and cognitive science offering an original vision of the continuity between the brain and its symbolic environment.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1lx4IpKQmM>
- Gender and Sex: An Introduction A short clear introduction that covers how the concepts of sex and gender are used by most anthropologists.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R40AMbxJsGM>
- Thailand Sex Tourism An interesting short film featuring good ethnographic content about the nature of sex tourism in Thailand and its impact on women in that country.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEsoMj5AGfo>
- Third Gender Examples A brief look at societies that acknowledge three or more gender categories as legitimate social positions.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Fxc-G9VKiY>

Websites

- *Culture and Personality School*, Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama
Background information on the Culture and Personality School, which emphasizes the cultural moulding of the personality and focuses on the development of the individual.
<http://anthropology.ua.edu/cultures/cultures.php?culture=Culture%20and%20Personality>
- *Cognitive Anthropology*, Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama
An overview of cognitive anthropology, the study of the relation between human culture and human thought.
<http://anthropology.ua.edu/cultures/cultures.php?version=2&culture=Cognitive%20Anthropology>
- The Cultural Cognition Project at Yale Law School
This group conducts research on how “cultural values shape public risk perceptions and related policy beliefs.”
<http://www.culturalcognition.net/>
- Trauma and Global Health Program at McGill University
This international program conducts research into social violence and trauma and aims to provide relief and foster healing in communities struggling to cope with trauma. Reports, notes from the field, and additional resources are available on the site.
<http://www.mcgill.ca/trauma-globalhealth/>

A Critical Look

BY ROBERTA ROBIN DODS

Malinowski and *The Sexual Lives of Savages*

In 1929, Bronislaw Malinowski's *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* was published. For its day, it was a rather startling book, even within the field of anthropology. Academics and general readers alike considered the book's detailed discussion of sexuality to be quite racy. However, a close read of this ethnography gives us keen insights about the ways in which sex is embedded in the culture of the Trobriand Islanders. Throughout the work, Malinowski's commitment to holism shines forth.

In the preface to the book, anthropologist Havelock Ellis notes that sex as an anthropological subject has “always been veiled in mystery” (Malinowski 1929: vii). Ethnographic research on this topic, he continues, could proceed only because sex taboos had lost some of their “stringency” at the start of the twentieth century (x). Further, this sort of work required, in Ellis's view, “a rare combination of qualifications,” including:

1. access to scientific equipment,
2. familiarity with various new theories on the subject matter,
3. “long and intimate knowledge” of the people at the centre of the study,
4. “facility in the language,” and
5. openness toward behaviours and expressions that might seem strange to most Westerners (ix).

Ellis saw that Malinowski had not only these qualities, in a “rare degree,” but also patience in observation and sympathetic insight. Here, then, we have an excellent list of the requirements for the field anthropologist—background knowledge of the discipline and the peoples involved, ability to learn foreign languages, openness and lack of ethnocentrism, patience, and sympathy.

In many ways, Malinowski was ahead of his time. After all, he was writing about sex more than twenty years before Alfred Kinsey released his groundbreaking works *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953). Malinowski also emphasized Trobriand women’s social power and equality in family life long before most Westerners wanted to become aware of issues of women’s equality. Further, he approached two topics that remain somewhat taboo for us still—sexuality in childhood, and sexuality in the later years of life.

Perhaps Malinowski’s most progressive—and at the time most controversial—contribution came from his observations on the sexuality of children and adolescents. To begin with, he notes that Trobriand parents allow their children freedom to engage with one another sexually. Indeed, childhood play is often replaced by amorous adventures that are serious but do not necessarily lead to permanent marriage arrangements. Children are emancipated from direct parental control at an early age, at which time they move away from their families to form their own communities. In these communities, they have plenty of opportunities “to receive instruction in erotic matters from their companions” (55). Further, children often “hear of and witness much of the sexual life of their elders” (54), making sex far less secretive and taboo than it is considered to be in Western cultures. At the same time, “there is no interference by older persons in the sexual life of children,” as it is “considered both improper and silly for an older man or woman to have sexual dealings with a child” (59).

Malinowski’s attention to the sexuality of older members of societies was also quite progressive

for its time. He describes the Trobrianders as considering sex to be a natural part of later life. Sadly, anthropologists' and other Westerners' attention to older individuals' experiences of sex and sexuality remains largely inadequate. This is surprising if we consider how commonly sexual matters are discussed in today's media. Little of this discussion represents the sex life of the aging and the elderly. When the topic is approached, it is often from a medical perspective, as is the case with advertisements for erectile dysfunction drugs, personal lubricants, and sex-hormone replacement therapy. Thus, once again we find that we can learn much from an open anthropological perspective, and from the world views of people from cultures different from our own.