



ECSO4002: Who Are We?: Culture and Identity

Theme 3: Concepts of Culture



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Learning Review

What did we cover in Theme 2?



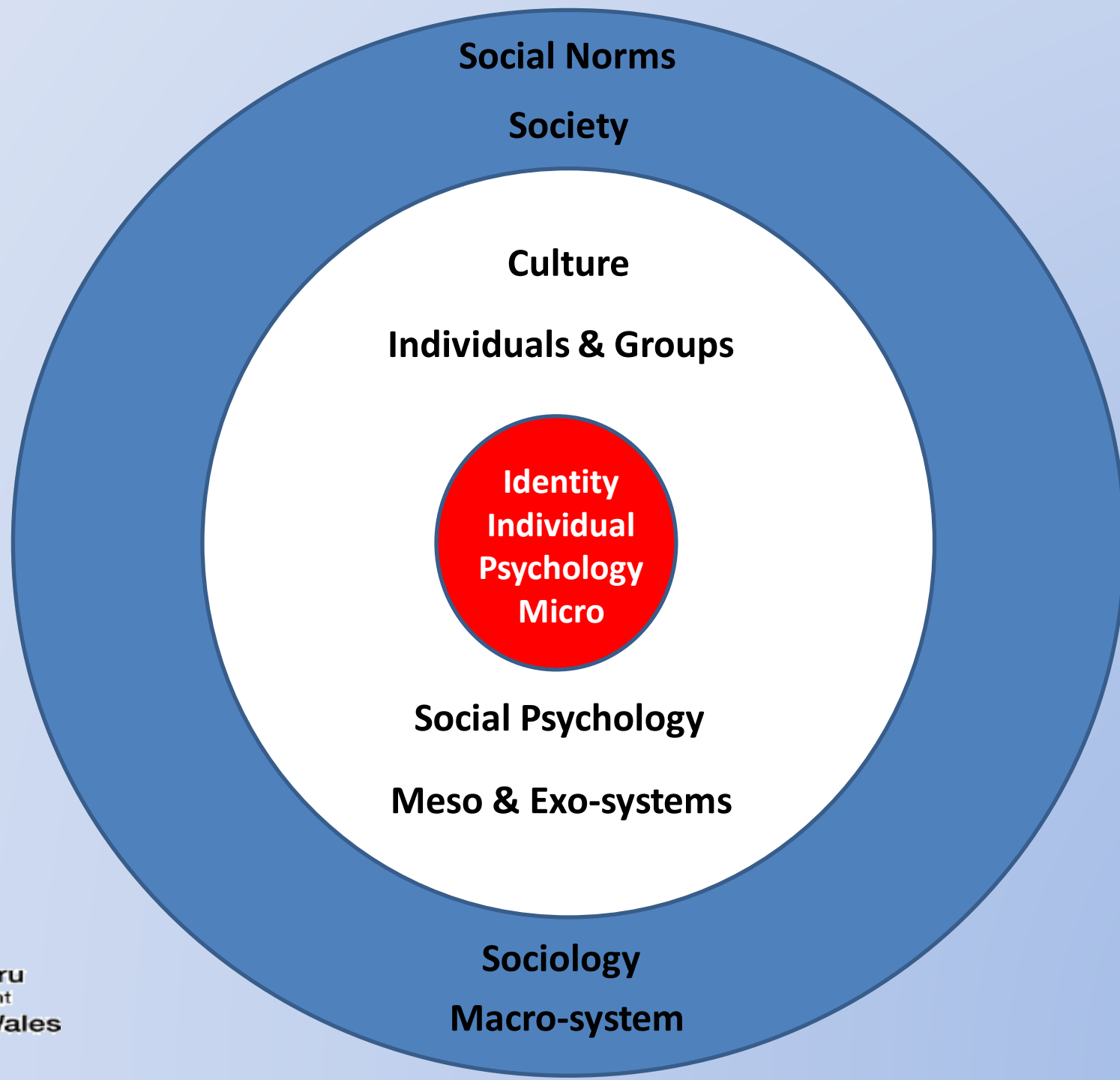
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Social Norms
& Values

Culture



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What is culture?

Revisit your notes from Theme 2 where we initially discussed the concept of culture.

What ideas and concepts did we discuss?

Feedback to your Tutor.



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What is culture?

According to Edward Tylor (1871):

“Culture refers to that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”.

What is culture?

According to Robert Redfield (*cited in Ogburn, 1937, p161*);

“Culture is an organized body of conventional understanding manifest in art and artefacts, which, persisting through tradition, characterizes a human group”.

Types of Culture

Material Culture

- This refers to physical, 'concrete' objects and tangible things created by human activity
- It refers to all objects from a Neolithic stone axe to a smartphone.
- The study of material culture focuses on the object, what it is made of, how it is made and how it is used.
- 'culture and society are seen as being created and reproduced by the ways in which people make, design, and interact with objects'

(Woodward, 2015)

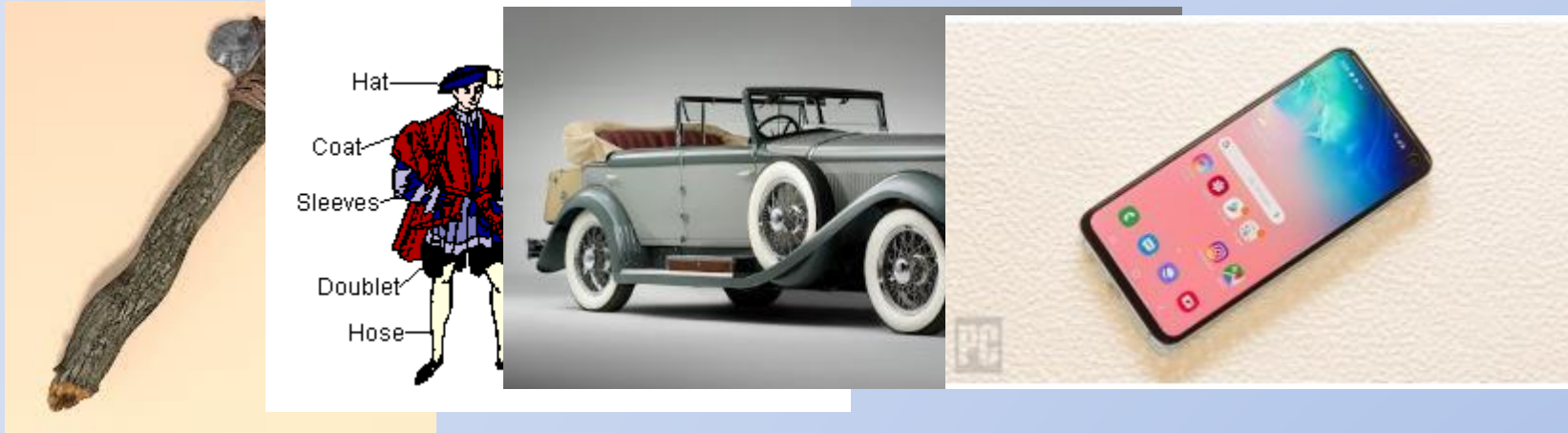
Material Culture

Group Discussion

What examples of material culture can you think of?



Material Culture



Types of Culture

Non-material Culture

- This refers to the language and dialect people use
- It refers to their habits, customs and behaviours (e.g. how they greet each other)
- In its wider sense it also refers to laws, lifestyle and types of knowledge
- It can also refer to ideas, beliefs, myths and legends

Non-material Culture

Group Discussion

What examples of non-material culture can you think of?



Non-material Culture

e.g. Greetings



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Characteristics of Culture

There are a number of characteristics that all cultures are seen to have in common. Discuss each of these with the group and note your own thoughts



Guided Study Activity: Characteristics of Culture

- Culture is learned and acquired.
- Culture is shared and transmitted.
- Culture gratifies human needs.
- Culture is adaptive.
- Culture tends toward integration.
- Culture is cumulative.



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Elements of Culture

Cultures comprise a number of elements which include;

Norms

- Shared guides or models of behaviour
- They let us know what is appropriate and inappropriate
- They are a 'short-hand' for what is wrong or right, e.g.;
 - Laws
 - Moral codes
 - Un-written rules

We will look at 'norms' in more detail in another Theme

Elements of Culture

Cultures comprise a number of elements which include;

Values

- The standards by which we appraise the desirability or worth of something or someone
- They tell us what is important to society, e.g.;
 - a. Achievement & success
 - b. Activity & work
 - c. Moral orientation
 - d. Sanctity of human life
 - e. Efficiency & practicality

Elements of Culture

Cultures comprise a number of elements which include;

Language & Communication

- The vocabulary, grammar, syntax used by a specific group
- The system of words, sounds and gestures used by a specific group
- The meaning of which is arbitrary and specific to that group



Elements of Culture

Can also include

Fashions, fads, crazes and memes

- Often short-lived social norms
- Usually only adhered to by a specific group or sub-group
- There is an element of pressure to comply with these
- We will return to these later.



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Functions of Culture

It is believed by anthropologists that culture performs the following functions in a society or group;

- Culture is way by which we can distinguish between one society and another
- What assumptions might we make about the following;
- Welsh Culture?
- English Culture?
- French Culture?

Functions of Culture contd.

- Culture brings together, contains, and interprets the values of a society in a more or less systematic manner.
- Culture provides one of the most important bases for social solidarity.
- Culture provides a blueprint of, as well as the materials for social structure.
- The culture of any society is largely responsible for producing a social personality.
- The culture of a society provides behavioural patterns.
- Culture provides individuals with the meaning and direction of their existence.

Modes of acquiring Culture

- We have already seen that the process of acquiring a culture is complex
- As individuals we are often not aware that we are acquiring culture
- However, there are times when an individual will consciously seek to acquire a culture
- We will briefly look at three main ways in which individuals acquire their culture

Modes of acquiring Culture

Conditioning

- Refers to the way in which we are 'taught' how to think and behave by the actions and messages of people and organisations in authority.
- It also relates to the way in which an individual is unconsciously 'conditioned' by the material culture around them (e.g. we learn that red means stop and green means go)
- It is 'unconscious' because the individual is immersed in the culture

Modes of acquiring Culture

Imitation

- Refers to the way in which an individual consciously or unconsciously copies the behaviours and language of a group
- Individuals can acquire culture by copying the culture of the 'dominant' group in society
- Or, they may imitate the culture of a peer group or other 'sub-culture' that they want to belong to.

Modes of acquiring Culture

Indoctrination

- Refers to the conscious attempt on the part of groups or individuals to impose values and norms on an individual or groups
- It involves the use of overt (open) or covert (hidden) coercion
- In the past this has mainly been considered to be used in politics or religion, it is also a feature of cults.
- However it has also been argued that this also now applies to advertising and business

What is culture?

- When social scientists use the term culture they tend to be talking about a less restrictive concept than that implied in everyday speech.
- In social science, culture is all that in human society which is socially rather than biologically transmitted, whereas the common-sense usage tends to point only to the arts.
- Culture is thus a general term for the symbolic and learned aspects of human society, although some animal behaviourists now assert that certain primates have at least the capacity for culture.

(Scott, 2014)

So what is a Sub-culture?

- There is a consensus that those with ‘high cultural capital’ (leaders, influencers, media figures etc.) are involved in establishing the ‘norms’ and values of a society
- Most people are socialised to accept these norms but some individuals choose not to or are forced into groups that break these norms
- The groups they form are known as **sub-cultures**

A Sub-Culture is.....

People 'that are in some way represented as non-normative or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it'

Non-Normative?

- Literally means not following the norms of society
- Historically non-normative cultural responses were often seen as the result of a process of marginalisation
- People were placed in sub-cultural groups because of who they were (i.e. not by choice)
- Contemporary studies now see some sub-cultures as non-normative **cultures of choice** rather than sub-cultures into which people are placed

Non-Normative versus Marginalised

Non-normative

- Choices and decisions where the individual / group separate themselves from the mainstream through cultural practices and objects

Marginalised

- Lack of power or choice and separated by society



(Williams, 2011, p.6)

Subcultures Definition 1947

- 'A concept used here to refer to a sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as Class, Status, Ethnic background, Regional and Rural or Urban Residence and religious affiliation,
- Forming in their combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual

Sub-Culture as Problem Solving

Definition 1955

‘All human action . . . is an on-going series of efforts to solve problems’ and ‘that all . . . factors and circumstances that . . . produce a problem come from . . . two sources, the actor’s ‘frame of reference’ and the ‘situation’ he confronts’

(Cohen, 1955, p. 51)

Solving Problems?

- People assume that the dominant culture supports survival needs (e.g. food, shelter and friendship within society)
- Support is not equally spread across the population
- This unequal distribution is a 'problem' for those who are disadvantaged (e.g. young people, the poor, immigrants)
- Thus, particular groups solve these issues through 'abnormal' , 'deviant' or 'delinquent' means
- In doing so they form sub-cultures

Sub-Cultures as a response to problems

- ‘the crucial condition for the emergence of new cultural forms is the existence, in effective interaction with one another, of a number of actors with similar problems’ (Cohen, 1955, p. 51).
- If groups have limited access to ‘life's’ goodies’ from the dominant cultural resources they will then ‘do it for themselves’ and a subculture emerges.

Sub-Culture Definition 1963

- Forming a sub-culture is seen as a Behavioural-Social activity
- Subculture has come to represent groups of individuals who were connected to one another through interaction and shared interest rather than through arbitrary characteristics such as locality or skin colour

(Blackman, 2013)

Shared Interests

- Subcultural members' shared interests also led them to identity themselves as different from the dominant culture
- Usually in some form of antagonistic relationship with normal, 'square' or 'vanilla' society!

Challenges of Theorising Subculture

- How do we construct significant distinctions between the 'normal' and the subcultural?
- How do we conceptualise the relationship between a subculture and the mainstream /dominant culture?

British Tradition of Subculture Studies

- ‘The power of subcultures [in] their capacity to symbolise ‘Otherness’ among an undifferentiated, un-theorised, and contemptible ‘general public’ . . .
- As a result, [subcultural] theory rests upon the consideration of the rest of society as being straight, incorporated in consensus, and willing to scream individually loud in any moral panic’

Normal versus Mainstream

- If normal culture provides young people with an adequate sense of well-being and satisfaction in their everyday lives then subculture is not necessary
- If a process of marginalisation has begun with mainstream cultural members labelling youth as a problems then they are pushed further away from mainstream structures towards developing their own 'subcultural' group
- "If the dominant culture dismisses/looks down on me I'm not wanted or valued then I'll find a cultural group that does"

Resistance & Assimilation

The development of a subculture may involve either an
unwillingness (Non-normativity)

Or

an inability (Marginalisation)

on the part of the people to participate in mainstream culture in the first place

BUT NEITHER

resistance nor assimilation is ever completely achieved

(i.e. most people are never entirely outside of the mainstream nor are they entirely like everyone else)

An Illustration: 20th Century Youth Sub-cultures

A whistle-stop tour

1950s to 2000 (ish)

The Teddy Boy Subculture



The Rocker Subculture



The Mod Subculture



The Hippie Subculture



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The Skinhead Subculture





The Punk Subculture



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The Ska subculture



The New Romantic Subculture



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The Goth Subculture



The Emo Subculture



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The Rave Subculture



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The Contested Nature of Subculture in the 21st Century

Modern researchers suggest that

Contemporary societies are not so much a homogeneous mainstream with subcultural elements

But rather

A pluralistic collection of fragmented social groups that lessen or eliminate the need to talk about subcultures at all

21st Century Sub-cultures?

- Some researchers, such as Rupa Huq, have identified a number of 21st century music sub-cultures
- These are diverse and are disseminated globally by big business
- Because of this it is not possible to give over-arching descriptions of young people such as 'generation-X' or 'millennials'
- Examples include;
 - hip-hop
 - electronic dance music
 - bhangra
 - rap
 - grunge

(Huq, 2006)

In Reality . . .

- Modern life is..... Complex!
- Resistance and assimilation are part of everybody's experience
- For example;
 - Off duty police officers might break the speed limit – **resistance**
 - Goths will spend a fortune on make-up and spend hours preparing their 'look' - **assimilation**

Subculture as a Continuum



Which we all exist on and move along according to circumstance.

Sub-cultural Style

Each sub-culture has its own distinctive style which consists of;

Argot

- How a sub-cultural group speaks

Demeanour

- How a sub-cultural group behaves

Image

- How a sub-cultural group looks

Homology

- This is the idea that, when studying sub-cultures;

‘the object [i.e. the sub-culture] in question must have the
‘objective possibility’ of reflecting the particular values and
concerns of the group’

(Clarke *et al*, 1976, p. 179)

The researcher should identify ‘structural ‘resonances’ [...] between the different elements making up a socio-cultural whole.’

(Middleton 1990, p. 9)

That is to say that the researcher is seeking to identify what members of a potential ‘sub-cultural’ group have in common.

(Willis 1978: 198-201)

For Example:

- Members of a subculture must speak a common language.
- And if a style is really to catch on, it if is to become genuinely popular [within the subculture], it must say the right things in the right way at the right time.
- It must anticipate or encapsulate a mood, a 'moment'

Thus . . .

Of each of the sub-cultural groups that
we looked at in our whistle stop tour

Each encapsulated different moods or
articulations of their disaffection within
mainstream society but were unique in their
consumption and leisure choices

Post-War Impact upon the Development of Youth Subculture

The existence of sub-cultures was made possible by;

- Baby boom after WWII
- Improved wages
- Young people had disposable income
- Focused advertising in the media
- Developed a new dominant image of 'teenagers' as consumer demographic to be taken seriously

Role of Media

- Sub-cultures were seen as being influenced by the development of;
 - Mass media advertising
 - Film
 - Television
 - Rock and roll e.g. Elvis and the Beatles as symbols of resistance
- Media seen as developing complex youth cultures linked to a shared leisure practices

But sub-culture is more than 'buying an identity'

- Sub-culture is more than just buying things
- It is also about the embeddedness of consumption within an articulated lifestyle
- Style as symbol of resistance
- Style as symbol of subculture
- Style as symbol of 'belonging'
- Style as identifying with the 'values' of the group

Power & Hegemony

Hegemony = Leadership, dominance or undue influence

All human action is influenced by power structures;

- Physical power – police, army, brute force
- Cognitive power – academia, media, influencers
- Emotional power – charismatic and rhetorical power

The exercise of this power shapes;

- What we do or don't do
- What we think
- What we feel

(Thomas & Thomas, 1928)

Inequity and power

- Power is a concept to make sense of our unequal access to;
 - Material
 - Cultural
 - Social
 - Economic
 - Emotional
 - and psychological resources

(Thomas & Thomas, 1928)

- And the formation of a sub-culture is a response to this

Hegemony vs Subcultures

- Subcultures do offer alternative frames of reference wherein young people learn to think outside the box
- Or at least learn to think inside a different box

Reasons for joining a sub-culture

‘Is it preferable to ‘think’ without having critical awareness .

..

In other words to ‘participate’ in a conception of the world ‘imposed’ mechanically by external environment . . .

Or is it preferable to work out one’s own conception of the world consciously and critically, and so out of this world of one’s own brain to choose one’s own sphere of activity, to participate actively in making the history of the world, and not simply to accept passively and without care the imprint of one’s own personality from outside?’

(Gramsci, 1971, p. 58)

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