

TUTORIAL
6.6

Culture threads

This tutorial introduces a framework for describing cultures - *culture threads*.

Introduction

As we saw in the last tutorial, each society and culture is made up of many different 'personal cultures' of individuals, which differ because of religious, regional, gender, work or other factors.

So how can we look at the various factors that *are* common to that culture or that are representative of that particular culture? In this tutorial we are going to identify some general categories that we can use to look at the commonly held cultural values and some of the *cultural threads* that permeate the lives of each individual within a culture. We will then describe several different cultures using these categories.

Culture 'study'

Over the years, there have been a number of anthropological models developed - with hundreds of separate cultural categories - designed to provide a framework for describing any particular culture in great detail. However, information about people as they live their lives in "real time" in their particular cultural framework does not lend itself naturally to being dissected and recorded in neatly labeled categories. There is something missing - a personal, spontaneous element that doesn't come through in the rather static definition and categorization of objects, actions, systems, rituals, etc. that anthropologists have used.

Anthropological 'culture study' has traditionally seen cultures in a structurally functional - almost scientific - way, concentrating on social organisation and often assuming that there are no moral and cultural absolutes. Each culture is seen as an autonomous and static model that can be recorded as a captured image and then studied in an objective manner, requiring the researcher to remain (mentally at least) *outside* of the culture in order to somehow retain an unbiased view. Unfortunately, this often leads to an unbalanced focus on form

(the behaviour of people) to the detriment of consideration of underlying meaning (identity, worldview).

As we have seen, culture and language cannot be separated because language is the verbal expression of culture. In the same way, culture cannot be separated from the lives of people - there is no separate entity or body of information that is 'culture'. We could say that it is impossible to 'study' a culture without knowing and understanding real, living people, and in moving toward becoming a part of their lives. Because just as languages are always in a process of change, cultures too are in a dynamic process of change.

So, in order to 'deal' with the dynamism and interrelatedness of everything in a culture, we need to identify the important threads that help us to find a framework for entering into the thinking of the people who live within that culture. We want to think just as much about how people express themselves, and not only focus on how they organise themselves.

Culture Threads

The following four areas - *Communication*, *Life Values*, *Relationships* and *Identity* - could be an initial description of common threads running through any culture. They can at least provide a framework for beginning to look in more detail at areas that might be important to people and how the culture is expressed through the lives of people. The descriptions under each heading provide some ideas of some things to think about, but are not an exhaustive list as to what might be important in that area in every culture.

1. Communication

Avenues and methods of communication:

Languages: What are the major languages and varieties of languages used? What is the status and comparative use of these languages?

Outside communication: What is the level or status of communication from outside of the society? (e.g. visitors, media)

Literacy levels: What are the available reading materials, languages of literacy, availability of schools? Is literacy related to status, is it a priority?

Verbal and non-verbal communication: Is communication mainly verbal, or are words and gestures used at different times and in different situations? Do eyes, eyebrows, face, tilt of head, hands, posture, space, time, pitch and tone of voice have a large role in conveying meaning?

Spiritual communication: What are the avenues and methods of communication between people and the non-physical world? (e.g. prayer, interaction with spiritual beings)

Levels of communication:

Formal and informal communication: Is there formal and informal discourse? Are there formalised courtesies? Is there commonly conversation between

strangers? When is formal and informal discourse used? (e.g. public and private, dependent on relationship)

Role of age, gender and social status: Do all people interact with all others with the same freedom? Is everyone expected to talk, or is there a spokesperson (within families or larger groups)?

Effective and ineffective communication:

Facets of effective communication: When do people listen? Who do they listen to? When do they understand or misunderstand and how is that communicated? What are the identifying factors in effective and ineffective communication - such as the role of respect, empathy, honesty, status and relationship?

2. Life Values

Harmony

Systems to provide harmony: What systems are in place to provide harmony within the society? Social, economic, political? How is disharmony viewed? What is expected, what is enforced? Is bending the rules okay? What do they expect of one another - what is polite behaviour and impolite behaviour - what embarrasses people?

Conformity: What value is put on obedience, conformity and agreement?

Authority

Who has authority: Which people in the society have authority and how is it expressed? (e.g. within families, groups, or whole communities) How is authority gained? (e.g., through age, position, role?)

Power distance: In which areas do people abdicate responsibility to others for decisions? How important are, equality, class, rank, dominance and non-dominance?

Rebellion: How is protest, or rebellion against authority viewed?

Responsibility

Personal or group responsibility: Is personal responsibility or group responsibility more important? What are the tasks or obligations an individual is expected to do independently? What responsibilities do they have as a group? To one another, to outside groups, to the spiritual world?

What is responsible: When would someone be considered an 'irresponsible person'?

Time

Concept of time: Are they monochronic or polychronic? Is time considered a commodity, how do they think about use and misuse of time and management of time? What are the prevailing attitudes to 'wasting' time, waiting, going fast or slow?

Types of time: What is the unity or separation of "work" and "recreation"?

Measurement of time: Do they favour natural (seasons, moons, harvests) or artificial measurement of time?

Routines and habits: What are the established routines for daily, family, and group life? To what degree are routines expected to be followed, and by whom. What are the rhythms of life?

Time frames: What are considered normal time frames within the lifespan, the working day or week, seasons? What are their ideas about past, present and future orientations?

Privacy

Aloneness: What is the concept of 'aloneness'? Is there a desire to be alone, or is there security within a group?

Levels of privacy: Are there variations of behaviour depending on privacy level?

Use of space: What are the concepts of the quantity and quality of space, exclusive and inclusive space, maximum and minimum space?

Security

Fears: What do they express as fears, and how do they attempt to overcome these? What makes them feel insecure? Sickness, uncertainty, loss, weakness, poverty?

Financial, social, physical security: What are acceptable levels of security, and what are the methods of gaining security or safety? What are their sources of security? Knowledge, status, relationships, government, society, organisations?

Priorities

Goals: Which goals are shared and openly talked about?

Success: How is achievement defined? Who is seen as being successful and why?

Values: How much do people comparatively value: a comfortable life, an exciting life, a sense of accomplishment, a world at peace, a world of beauty, equality, family security, freedom, happiness, inner harmony, mature love, national security, pleasure, salvation, self-respect, social recognition, true friendship, wisdom? What other values are important?

Motivations: What are the motivating factors behind behaviour? (e.g. gaining prestige, physical comfort, financial gain, learning and improving individually or as a society, independence or interdependence, establishing friendships, being a role model, adventure or enjoyment, power and influence)

Enculturation

Respect: Who are the most respected people in the community, the ones people listen to?

Important topics: What are common topics of conversation?

Enculturation: How are the values of effective communication passed on? How are ethical/religious values instilled or strengthened? What methods are used to pass on appropriate and acceptable relationship-building skills? How is

identity described and consciously or unconsciously communicated? What is the priority of passing on certain values in the society? (e.g. ambition, open-mindedness, competence, neatness, courage, honesty, logic, love, obedience, politeness, dependability, self-control, joyfulness, forgiveness, independence, intelligence, helpfulness)

Changing values: How are values changing and what are the influences for change?

Origin of values - Foundations for ethics

Origins of life: How do their understandings regarding the origins of life affect their values? How does their view of nature affect what they hold in high regard and how they behave toward those things?

History: Do they see history as an unending series of cycles, or as linear? What effect does this have on values? How have specific events in their history affected what they hold in high esteem or low esteem?

Human beings: What is their understanding of the nature of human beings? How does this affect their values?

3. Relationships

Personal interaction

Different levels of interaction: Do all people interact with equal freedom?

Touching: Who touches whom and how? On what occasions?

Getting together: Who visits whom and where? When, where and how do people interact, socialise, converse, eat together, meet, organise events, chat, gather? When do people spend time together? Doing what? Is anyone excluded?

Group interaction: What are the patterns of behaviour with neighbours, guests, bill collectors, business people, schoolteachers, children, policemen, politicians, officials, and family members?

Levels and types of relationships

Groups: What are the distinct groups evident within the society? How do they relate to one another? What are the relationships between individuals of the same or different age, gender, social status, family groups?

Signs of relationship: How do different relationships manifest themselves at different times and in different situations? (i.e., what are the obligations of a relationship - gift exchange, authority, respect, formal language?)

Scope of relationships: How many relationships does a person typically develop and with whom? (e.g. family, other ties, business, formal)

Relationships with those outside the society

Patterns of behaviour to outsiders: What are the different types of outside relationships? What is the purpose and value of outside relationships?

Attitudes to outsiders: Who do they fear, socialize with, scorn, suspect, accept?

Forming and breaking of relationships

Forming relationships: What is the progression of a relationship developing, what are the possible bases for relationships forming, do people think about obligation, mutual dependence, etc.? What are the formal and informal aspects of relationship development?

Relationship breakdown: What are the reasons for and attitudes toward relationship breakdown?

Patterns: What are the real and ideal patterns for relationships in the society?

Relationships between the physical and the spiritual world

Religions: What are the formal and informal aspects of religion in the society, and the varieties of religious belief? What are some examples of individual or group relations with spiritual beings? What are some of the attitudes and understanding - beliefs - about the spiritual world?

Specialists: Are there religious specialists, priests, pastors, etc.?. What are the attitudes to these people from others within the society - fear, respect or lack of respect?

4. Identity**Individualism and community**

Individualism: Does an individual make decisions on his own? Are group beliefs and decisions accepted by all? How much freedom does the individual have, and in which areas? Is individual action socially encouraged?

Perception of oneself: How does a person identify themselves in relation to others? What is their self concept, self respect? How much importance is attached to personal freedom? Does an individual have emotional security?

Competition and affiliation: Is there cooperation and when would people cooperate, or be non-cooperative and individualistic? When would there be group-oriented actions? What would they see as group-identifying factors? Are some criteria more important than others? What is the group proud of? What do they consider a 'scandal', a 'tragedy'? What do they complain about? What are they ashamed of?

Boundaries

Ingroup and outgroup: What are the boundaries of their perception of who is 'one of them' and who isn't? When is someone seen as an outsider? When is someone accepted into the society?

Position in the world: What is their understanding or perception of their place in the wider world? What do they see as their position in wider society? How do they identify themselves to an 'outsider'? Are they defensive? Critical? Complementary?

Foreigners: How do they view those of other races and cultures?

Roles

Roles: What are the major recognised roles in society? Is everyone expected to have a community role? What part does each person play in the society?

Origin of roles: Are they acquired at birth? Tied to social status, gender? Are they assigned, and by whom? Defined by personality, imposed by government, schools, church?

Changing Roles: Are roles shifting or evolving within the society? Have the expectations for certain roles changed? What are some of the attitudes or consequences to role changes?



ACTIVITIES

Culture Threads

1. Choose one of the subheading sections of the Culture Threads outline (e.g., *Avenues and methods of communication, Authority, Individualism and community, etc.*). Do a brief write-up on your own culture using the questions under the subheading you chose.
2. Now, using the same subheading you used above, try to find Bible verses that describe Biblical culture for the points mentioned.
3. After you have completed the activities above, think about how people from different cultures might interpret the Bible through their own cultural framework.