

WHAT IS VALUED IN DIFFERENT CULTURES?



INA CORINNE BROWN *

AS WE move into the final decades of the 20th century, one fact stands out above all else: The various peoples who share the globe must take one another into account. That we understand one another and appreciate our differences is essential to survival.

Probably the poorest means of achieving such understanding is to start out briskly to "get the facts," because the facts are elusive, slippery, and often subject to a variety of interpretations. There is some question as to what really constitutes a nation, and on any morning one may wake to find that a new one has been born or that one has been swallowed up by some larger power. Yet even if we can define a given nation by precise political boundaries, there is no assurance of uniformity of values within such boundaries. To add to the problem, "getting to know people" is no guarantee that we will either understand or like them. Some of the bitterest hostilities of the present world are between peoples who are of the same race, language, and religion and who know each other very well.

What then can we do? We all know by now that a culture is the sum total and organization of all the patterned ways by which a people live. Because there are hundreds of different cultures and subcultures, nobody can hope to learn about them all. Yet the problem is not as difficult as it may appear, for in spite of their specific differences all

cultures are basically alike and all serve essentially the same functions. Within any society there must be ways of getting food, clothing, and shelter. There must be some way of dividing up the work, and some patterning of the relationships of men, women, and children, of old and young, and of kin and non-kin.

There must be some means of aesthetic expression and some kind of value system with ways of maintaining it. And there must always be some means by which children are brought into the world, cared for, and enculturated so as to maintain continuity in the life of the society.

Similar Needs, Similar Resources

The first step in understanding a particular culture, then, is to learn what any culture is, what it does, and how it operates. This gives one a theoretical framework within which to organize information and experience. The second step is to get some idea of the variety of ways in which human behavior has been institutionalized, for this makes one aware of alternatives. Finally, one needs to keep in mind the interrelatedness of the patterns within any culture. When one is armed with this approach, the problem of

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understanding other cultures can be reduced to manageable proportions.

All human beings have the same fundamental needs and all societies must to some degree meet the needs of their members. We can even say that all human groups have essentially the same problems to meet and basically the same resources with which to meet them. At first glance Eskimos, Hottentots, and Dobuans may appear to live in very different worlds of snow, desert, and tropical island, and to encounter very different problems. Yet they all have the resources of air, land, and water. All have some form of plant and animal life. All must reckon with the forces of nature. All people have similar organisms with similar needs. They must eat and sleep and they all go through the same life cycle from birth to death. All must find ways to cope with illness, accident, and misfortune, and none can survive without the assistance and cooperation of his fellows.

Once we see what any culture does and how it operates, we need to get some idea of the variety of ways in which problems can be met. For example, all societies define certain objectively edible substances as food. Most societies reject some equally edible substances as unfit for human consumption. The rejections of other people may include things we accept, such as meat, milk, and fresh eggs, and their acceptables may include our rejected rats, caterpillars, and ready-to-hatch eggs. We do not have to share one another's definitions but we do need to realize that our differences lie not in the edibility of certain substances but in the ways in which such edibility is made acceptable.

All societies in some way regulate sexual behavior and provide for something that can be called a family. But the way in which marriages are arranged, the form the family takes, who is counted as kin, and the rights and duties of all these persons with reference to one another are, again, a matter of cultural definition. No one way is necessarily superior to another. They are all simply different solutions to certain problems of human relations and a way of guaranteeing that children will be born and brought up to become functioning members of the society.



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Grammar of Culture

In all societies there is some degree of interrelatedness in the culture patterns so that change in any one pattern may well affect numerous others. Therefore, persons acting as change agents must always take into account the fact that no pattern exists outside a cultural matrix and that any pattern may have numerous ramifications that are not apparent on the surface.

However, the differences in culture are not merely differences in overt behavior patterns. Both language and culture affect the way in which objects, actions, and events are perceived. Each culture has its own way of organizing experience and these organizations may take many different forms. As a member of a given society, a child learns what has been called the grammar of his culture in the same way that he learns the grammar of his language. Both kinds of grammar are then taken for granted and become a part of his thinking and of his way of perceiving the world. Thus, as Julian Huxley points out, people with different sets of experiences have different maps of reality.

Furthermore, peoples in other parts of the world may face specific problems unknown in the West. In parts of Asia and Africa the problems of education are complicated by linguistic differences. Within a given area there may be not just one or two but dozens of different languages, for some

of which there may be no written material at all. And there may be not only a deep attachment to one's language but also deeply felt national or tribal loyalties. Sometimes racial, religious, linguistic, and other cultural differences may all be involved at once.

On top of this and exacerbating the other problems is the spread of Western technology to preindustrial societies. The transistor radio has penetrated to the remotest villages, and in many places there is a community television set. Inevitably, there has grown up a conflict in values. People may well want the goods and gadgets of the West, but they may also cherish their older ways which put the buying and upkeep of Western goods far out of their reach.

Julian Huxley points to the seemingly contradictory movement toward fragmentation of the large, formerly Western-controlled areas into many smaller, highly self-conscious national entities, at the same time that the diffusion of Western technology brings these countries into the orbit of the modern world. One of the major problems confronting international education is to find ways by which efficiency of exploitation of the world's resources can be reconciled with the fulfillment of personality within different cultural frameworks. Only as this problem is met will there be available to the world the contributions of various cultures whose experiments in living open up new avenues for the life-enrichment of us all. □

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