

CHAPTER 1: CULTURE AND MEANING

Extended or Take-Home Essays

1. Human beings are unique in how they view the world largely because unlike most, if not all, of the two million described species of living organisms that inhabit the earth, only human beings construct the meanings of the worlds that they live in. Human beings in groups create culture; that is, they assign meanings to their experiences and proceed as if those meanings were real.

We will examine cultural differences and what they mean, and we will explore how to go about interpreting the meanings that people in our own and other cultures assign to their experiences. We will examine how to interpret cultural texts. Your first essay will be an exercise in **interpretation**. You will examine a typical Canadian setting or text and write about Canadian culture as it is expressed or represented in that setting.

The cultural text you will examine is a *Tim Hortons restaurant*. As a guide to your interpretation, consider the following four steps:

1. Read the language used to refer to places, people, and events;
2. Read the spatial and temporal distribution of places, people, and events;
3. Read the contrasts between peoples or types of people; that is, who is doing what;
4. Read the behaviour and interactions between people.

Be sure to use the discussions of the Balinese cockfight and Canadian hockey in the text as a guide, but feel free to be imaginative. You may also want to visit a Tim Hortons restaurant just to refresh your experience.

2. In our class discussions, we will examine cultural differences and what they mean, and we will explore how to go about interpreting the meanings that people in our own and other cultures assign to their experiences. We will examine how to interpret cultural texts. Your first essay will be an exercise in **interpretation**. You are to prepare an article for publication in which you examine a typical Canadian setting or text and write about Canadian culture as it is expressed or represented in that setting.

The cultural text you will examine is a *university cafeteria*. As a guide to your interpretation, consider the following questions:

1. How are diners controlled and disciplined in the cafeteria setting?
2. Why would the university cafeteria be buffet style, and not some alternative food distribution scheme?
3. Is there any kind of social hierarchy or status system, and if so, how is it expressed?
4. Do people's eating styles tell you anything about them?
5. What similarities are there between the cultural setting of the university cafeteria and that of the typical university classroom?

3. In our class discussions, we will examine cultural differences and what they mean, and we will explore how to go about interpreting the meanings that people in our own and other cultures assign to their experiences. We will examine how to interpret cultural texts. Your first essay will be an exercise in **interpretation**. You are to prepare an article for publication in which you examine a typical Canadian setting (text) and write about Canadian culture as it is expressed or represented in that setting.

You are free to ***choose the setting*** (a shopping mall, a classroom, a high school, a restaurant, etc.), but you must address the following questions:

1. What are the basic features of the setting? (i.e., physical description, primary function, type of persons, etc.)
2. What cultural elements would you say are the most important — what stands out?
3. How would you briefly describe the rules for how to act in the setting to someone who is not familiar with it?
4. What meanings might you infer exist behind the setting?
5. Is it possible to evaluate or judge the setting for its positive or negative effects on people?

Whatever setting you choose to describe and interpret, you will need to refer often to your readings and to our class discussions.

4. The chapter on culture and meaning indicates that it is a difficult task to understand other people's beliefs and behaviours. Different groups of people create, share, and participate in different realities, and assign different meanings to their experiences as a result. Understanding requires more than just a willingness to attempt this task. Being able to see the world through the eyes of others (even for a short time) is particularly difficult because we do not know much about the context of other people's lives. Everyone has grown up doing things and thinking about things in defined ways that shape their understanding of the world.

As an exercise to grasp this challenge, consider how your life would be different if you had grown up before the advent of electricity and the use of fossil fuels other than coal. There would be no electricity (or electrical devices), no television or Internet, no cars, no airplanes, or any other transportation apart from train and horse transportation. Even horse transportation would be expensive in the city, where you live. How would this change your daily life, your outlook on life, and your interactions with others? To prepare this assignment, you might begin with making a list for yourself of what you do each week and what activities you spend your time doing. You may want to write a day by day schedule as an aid. Would you still be attending university, or would you be pursuing other education or work? Next, you should consider your relationships with others (friends, co-workers, and family) and how they would change. Third, consider what might change in terms of your beliefs about the world (i.e., religious and philosophical), and/or your beliefs, hopes, and aspirations for the future. What beliefs and goals would become more important to you, and which would become less important than today?

Write the essay in three parts. In the first part, explain how your life would change. In the second part, explore how your relationships with others would change. In the third part, explain how you believe your outlook on the world would change.

5. The symbolic meanings present in events and activities can be read as cultural texts. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz deciphered the meanings of the Balinese cockfight for what it reveals about Balinese society, and it was suggested that Canadian hockey could be deciphered in a similar way, so as to understand it as a ritual that creates meaning. Together, the two rituals can be used to help explain status, success, and community or group solidarity.

Using these two examples of decipherment as models, examine the commonplace Canadian ritual of gambling with lottery tickets. Many Canadians purchase lottery draw tickets and scratch tickets with almost ritual regularity, despite the odds of winning the top prize often being greater than the odds of being struck by lightning. Explain the cultural significance of this weekly practice for Canadians. As was done with the Balinese cockfight and hockey, you should explain some of the aspects of this gambling practice and the motivations of the practitioners. To help with your analysis and writing, brainstorm questions to ask those who practice this ritual. Think of what you might observe in terms of who buys these tickets, when they buy them, where they buy them, how they use them, and why they continue to do so. For the essay, put forward your best explanations about the significance of this ritual in Canadian society.

6. It is not uncommon for people to judge the beliefs and behaviours of others. Such judgements often do not go beyond reactions of shock, puzzlement, or condemnation. Anthropologists attempt to avoid this ethnocentric tendency to judge by employing cultural relativism. Anthropologists try to understand behaviours or beliefs in terms of the purpose, function, or meaning they have for people in the societies where we find them.

For this essay, you will examine the toys that North American adults buy for their children. You are asked to examine the repertoire of toys of one toy company on the Internet, and to concentrate on toys for children in any age group under ten. Examine the images and descriptions of the toys and plan to discuss at least seven different toys. What might someone from outside of North America find shocking, puzzling, offensive, or inappropriate about these toys and the idea of children playing with them? How could you explain the cultural context of why children play with these toys in North American society? What do the toys suggest about North American society and its values, beliefs, and interests?

Multiple Choice

1. What does a socio-cultural anthropologist hope to reveal about a culture by looking beyond the everyday experience and doing cross-cultural analysis?

- A. the political anatomy of the culture
- B. the meanings people give to everyday experiences
- C. the true nature of society
- D. the statistical basis of social hierarchies

ANS: B

REF: p. 3

BLM: Remember

2. Members of the same society share a culture; what effect does this have?

- A. They view the world in a similar way.
- B. They view the world in differing ways.
- C. They become increasingly xenophobic.
- D. They become aware of their cultural views of the world.

ANS: A

REF: p. 6

BLM: Remember

3. Which of the following options best describes why people from different societies understand and interpret similar life events in different ways?

- A. They culturally ascribe different meanings to the experience.
- B. Biological differences affect brain development.
- C. They come from different geographical regions.
- D. People are individualistic in their assigning of meaning.

ANS: A

REF: p. 6

BLM: Remember

4. The Peruvian practice of raising guinea pigs for food is not seen as appropriate in North America, where guinea pigs are raised as pets. What does that indicate about food acquisition and consumption patterns?

- A. The edibility of an item is culturally determined.
- B. The edibility of an item is based on nutritional considerations.
- C. The edibility of an item is individually determined.
- D. The edibility of an item is ethically determined.

ANS: A
REF: pp. 7–8
BLM: Remember

4. What is the main social function of funeral customs in Italy?

- A. to allow an ancestor a chance to offer advice
- B. to discourage the dead from returning
- C. to force family members to make an offering
- D. to bring good luck to the household

ANS: B
REF: p. 7
BLM: Remember

5. What does Clifford Geertz mean when he states that “human beings are incomplete or unfinished animals who complete themselves through culture — not just culture in general, but specific forms of it: Balinese, Italian, Ilongot, Chinese, Kwakiutl, American, and so on”?

- A. Culture is forced on people and is oppressive.
- B. Culture helps individuals become aware of their “true” egocentric self.
- C. Culture helps individuals evolve from a primitive state of nature to modern society.
- D. Culture helps people comprehend their experiences and impose order on their universe.

ANS: D
REF: p. 8
BLM: Higher Order

6. What research method did early anthropologists, such as E. B. Tylor, use?

- A. relativistic
- B. comparative
- C. salvage
- D. participant

ANS: B
REF: p. 9
BLM: Remember

7. When anthropologists do participant observation, the act of setting aside their own cultural views and immersing themselves in a new culture, often causes them to take on a certain demeanour and status. What demeanour and status do anthropologists in this situation acquire?

- A. dignitary
- B. child

- C. elder
- D. academic

ANS: B

REF: p. 10

BLM: Higher Order

8. What research method is being used when an anthropologist lives among the people of the culture being studied and engages in the practices of their everyday life?

- A. objective engagement
- B. impartial observation
- C. inductive survey
- D. participant observation

ANS: D

REF: p. 10

BLM: Remember

9. What perspective does participant observation allow an anthropologist to attain?

- A. emic
- B. qualitative
- C. etic
- D. quantitative

ANS: A

REF: p. 11

BLM: Remember

10. What does ethnography represent?

- A. description and analysis of anthropological fieldwork.
- B. analysis using the comparative method
- C. a survey summary
- D. an ethnocentric interpretation

ANS: A

REF: p. 11

BLM: Remember

12. What ability should an anthropologist strive to hone by using the ethnographic method, participant observation, and cross-cultural comparison?

- A. the ability to prove one's own view of the world

- B. the ability to question the beliefs of the culture being studied
- C. the ability to modernize the culture being studied
- D. the ability to question one's own view of the world

ANS: D

REF: pp. 10–11

BLM: Remember

13. Unlike in anthropology, where the researchers are concerned about the issue of representation, in the mass media there is still a tendency to represent particular cultural groups as homogeneous. What is the term for this kind of uncritical stereotyping?

- A. essentialism
- B. journalism
- C. moralism
- D. passivism

ANS: A

REF: p. 14

BLM: Higher Order

14. While initially seeking to experience and interpret the lives of those they are researching and participating with, what else do most anthropologists experience?

- A. validation of their own beliefs
- B. questioning of their own beliefs
- C. generalized apathy
- D. sustained empathy

ANS: B

REF: p. 18

BLM: Remember

15. Why is ethnocentrism academically challenging for socio-cultural anthropologists?

- A. It creates unbiased understanding.
- B. It impedes intercultural understanding.
- C. It creates uneven social hierarchies.
- D. It creates unbiased representation.

ANS: B

REF: Page(s): 19, 37

BLM: Remember

16. Which fallacy is it when people hold the notion that their own culture's beliefs are right, and

the beliefs of other cultures are wrong?

- A. relativistic
- B. essentialist
- C. objectivist
- D. ethnocentric

ANS: D

REF: p. 19

BLM: Remember

17. While doing fieldwork in Turkey, you heard numerous informants talk about the importance of virginity testing, where the hymeneal blood stain is displayed for people to see the morning after a wedding. What metaphor combo do they use to explain their cultural reasoning of this ritual practice?

- A. war and conquest
- B. love and sacrifice
- C. dominance and control
- D. seed and soil

ANS: D

REF: p. 20

BLM: Remember

18. What did the Wari' say they were doing by performing the ritual of funerary cannibalism?

- A. defying colonial regulations
- B. recycling their ancestors
- C. obliterating painful memories
- D. utilizing a protein source

ANS: C

REF: p. 21

BLM: Remember

19. While anthropology has traditionally striven to be an objective and relativistic discipline, what has Nancy Scheper-Hughes suggested as a new approach for anthropologists?

- A. morally engaged and ethically grounded
- B. legally aware and logistically driven
- C. stoic and impassively observant
- D. ethnocentrically motivated and militant

ANS: A

REF: p. 23

BLM: Remember

20. When working as an anthropologist, what would be the best way to interpret cultural similarities and differences in order to avoid both the ethnocentric and the relativistic fallacies?
- A. by statistically mapping the various ways that humans construct their belief systems
 - B. by treating them as puzzles that can help us understand ourselves and others
 - C. by demonstrating how similar all cultures are
 - D. by determining social policies that will help to overcome the differences

ANS: B

REF: p. 24

BLM: Remember

21. What word do the Balinese use to refer to the fighting cock and to a metaphorical hero, warrior, champion, political candidate, or tough guy?
- A. Sabung
 - B. Mangu
 - C. Liget
 - D. Potlatch

ANS: A

REF: 26

BLM: Remember

22. Renato Rosaldo, while doing research amongst the Ilongots with his wife Michelle, could not initially understand how rage stemming from grief could result in them severing the heads of other people in order to throw away the anger. What personal experience caused him to better understand their practice?
- A. spinal paralysis
 - B. experiencing near starvation
 - C. the death of his wife
 - D. a kidnapping

ANS: C

REF: p. 28

BLM: Remember

23. In a parallel to hockey in Canada, what idea is embedded in the cockfight for the Balinese?
- A. the meaning of revenge
 - B. the meaning of success
 - C. the meaning of sport

D. the meaning of entertainment

ANS: B

REF: 29

BLM: Higher Order

24. According to the study by Peter Collings and Richard Condon, what new activity was appropriated by the residents of Holman, NWT, that enabled them to work through the social reality that hunting was no longer a dominant way to sustain oneself and achieve status?

A. pool
B. curling
C. hockey
D. swimming

ANS: C

REF: p. 30

BLM: Remember

25. What do both the Balinese cockfight and Canadian hockey conceptually represent in terms of small-scale renderings of their respective cultures?

A. violence
B. democracy
C. status
D. rivalry

ANS: C

REF: p. 31

BLM: Higher Order

26. In North America, hockey is a performative demonstration of the cultural value of success. What else does it symbolically inform individuals in North America about?

A. the rules that govern success inside the rink
B. the rules that govern success outside the rink
C. the rules that govern the patriarchy
D. the rules that govern the merchant class

ANS: B

REF: p. 31

BLM: Remember

27. Why do Marvin Harris and Eric Ross believe beef became a centrepiece of the North American diet?

- A. The meat is suitable for grilling.
- B. Cattle are domestic to North America.
- C. Livestock maintenance and processing is efficient.
- D. Beef is high in protein and easy to digest.

ANS: A

REF: p. 31

BLM: Remember

28. What could an anthropologist gain insight into by researching the purchase and consumption of popular fast food meals in North America?

- A. how limited consumer nutritional education is
- B. ecological patterns, demographics, agricultural history, and gender roles
- C. intergenerational dependence
- D. univocal nature of food

ANS: B

REF: Page(s): 31–32

BLM: Remember

29. If an anthropologist is attempting to understand the beliefs, behaviours, and rituals of a culture in terms of the function or meaning they have for the individuals of that culture, what approach is that anthropologist taking?

- A. ethnocentric
- B. relativistic
- C. psychoanalytic
- D. subjective

ANS: B

REF: p. 37

BLM: Remember

True or False

1. Culture can give meaning to objects and events, while also obscuring their meaning.

ANS: True

REF: pp. 6–8

2. Differences in cultural beliefs and practices can arise because people participate in different realities.

ANS: True

REF: p. 8

3. Researching and understanding North American culture enables us to prove cultural superiority over third world countries.

ANS: False

REF: p. 9

4. Contemporary anthropologists still rely on hierarchies of cultures in order to fully understand and compare the vast array of human beliefs and behaviours.

ANS: False

REF: p. 9

5. Participant observation involves living with a group of people and participating in their daily tasks, except for the tedious mundane daily ones.

ANS: False

REF: p. 10

6. Historically, anthropologists focused their studies on indigenous groups, but now they are just as likely to study their own culture.

ANS: True

REF: p. 12

7. One of the ways that an anthropologist can come to understand hidden aspects of another culture is by making mistakes.

ANS: True

REF: pp. 15–16

8. Anthropologists believe that it is easy to see through the eyes of someone living in another culture in an objective and emic way.

ANS: False
REF: p. 18

9. According to the eminent 20th century anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, by doing fieldwork an anthropologist makes himself “marginal” in a world of “others.”

ANS: True
REF: p. 18

10. A Canadian’s opinion, spoken while wearing a toque, that the ceremonial fur hat of an individual from another culture looks odd, can be considered ethnocentric.

ANS: True
REF: p. 19

11. Ethnocentrism holds that no belief should be judged odd or wrong and that it must be understood in relation to the culture in which it is embedded.

ANS: False
REF: p. 19

12. People often use ethnocentric justifications for conquest and racism, while accepting the same practices and beliefs in their own culture that they abhor in the other culture.

ANS: True
REF: p. 21

13. After returning to the shantytowns of Brazil, Nancy Scheper-Hughes realized that there was no contradiction between “objective” anthropology and politically committed anthropology.

ANS: False
REF: pp. 22–23

14. *Sati* is a funeral practice in some areas of India that involves the burning of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre.

ANS: True
REF: p. 23

15. In anthropological terms, the text of a culture refers to the written and spoken language.

ANS: False
REF: p. 25

16. Anthropological research is limited only to the study of cultures foreign to the researcher.

ANS: False

REF: p. 28

17. According to Yngve Lithman, rituals reflect real situations in a society and draw attention to, or try to “explain,” other less tangible aspects.

ANS: True

REF: p. 30

18. While it is important symbolically as a central part of the diet in North America, beef-raising is a both environmentally destructive and inefficient.

ANS: True

REF: p. 32

Short Answer/ Essay

1. How do Turkish villagers conceptualize reproduction when speaking about virginity testing? Is there a comparable conceptualization in North America?
2. What daily struggles are embedded in the cockfight for the Balinese?
3. What can a study of fast-food meals, specifically those directed towards children, tell us about North American culture?
4. Does the objectification of North American culture, in the same way that other cultures have been objectified, yield any academic and social benefit?
5. When faced with beliefs, behaviours, and practices that differ greatly from their own, can research anthropologists gather and interpret information in an unbiased manner? Can you think of any examples where a cultural group has not been represented in a fair manner?
6. Are there situations where it is not only possible, but also arguably essential, based on basic human rights, for an anthropologist to judge the practice(s) being done by a cultural group as wrong? Please give an example from the textbook and offer your academic opinion supported by anthropological terminology on that example.

Essay

1. Please describe cultural ethnocentrism and relativism. What academic and representation inadequacies and benefits are found in both?
2. What are some of the difficulties faced by anthropologists because of the ethnocentric and relativistic fallacies? Please use two examples from the textbook to illustrate the difficulties.

3. Please use an ethnocentric view to describe an “insider’s,” or emic, cultural and historical justification of *sati*, and then use relativism to justify the same topic from an “outsider’s,” or etic, perspective.

Study Questions or Additional Short Answer Questions

1. What is one of the major characteristics of human beings that distinguish them from other species?
2. What do fieldwork and the ethnographic method involve? What is the value and purpose of participant observation?
3. What are some of the new methods of doing fieldwork anthropologists use today?
4. What is the ethnocentric dilemma? What is the relativistic dilemma?
5. What is one solution to the dilemma of choosing between relativism and ethnocentrism?
6. Why did Michael Kearney begin to wonder about the validity of his own scientific and materialistic view of the world when he began attempting to understand witchcraft?
7. In what way is culture like a "text"?
8. What kind of statements does the cockfight make to Balinese males about status?
9. What are some of the meanings about the Canadian idea of "success" contained in a hockey game?
10. What are three examples of what you can do with a B.A. in Anthropology?