CULTURE (AND SEX)
Culture – lecture outline

- Ideal and real culture
- Ethnocentrism and cultural relativism
- Culture and biology
- Culture and ideology
- Elements of culture
- Culture as “toolkit”
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Ideal and real culture

- Ideal culture – refers to how we want to behave.
- Real culture – refers to how we actually behave.
- When thinking about culture, we need to make sure that we do not confuse real with ideal culture, since how people say they behave may be very different from how they actually behave.
  - E.g., adultery
  - E.g., honesty
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Understanding other cultures

- Ethnocentrism – judging other cultures by the standards of one’s own.
  - E.g., calling an Amish farmer backward for tilling his fields with a horse and plow

- Cultural relativism – The practice of judging a society by its own standards.
  - E.g., cow worship in India
Ethnocentrism examples

- E.g., Shannon notes that women in some cultures voluntarily alter their bodies with sometimes painful piercings that look weird from the point of view of her culture. She takes from this that women in those cultures must be horribly oppressed compared to women in her own culture.

- E.g., Johann is from the United Kingdom. In his cross-cultural studies, he sees that women in Afghanistan are often forced to wear headscarves, but women in the United Kingdom are not. He concludes, then, that women in Afghanistan would be more free if their culture were more like that of the United Kingdom.
Cultural relativism example

- E.g., Sapphire studies differences between nations that are largely Islamic and those that are largely Christian. She takes great care in her research to examine the differences she finds neutrally and without value judgments.
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When it comes to the relationship between nature and nurture in human behavior, sociologists believe that nature and nurture interact to shape human behavior.

- E.g., strength differences
- E.g., sexual promiscuity
Culture and biology

- **Sociobiology** refers to the application of biological principles to explain the social activities of animals, including human beings.

- Sociobiology argues that our genetic makeup accounts for most aspects of social life.

- Differences in “reproductive strategies”
  - According to sociobiologists, reproductive strategy has led to female chastity and male promiscuity.

- Criticism from cross-cultural research
  - E.g., Kim McDonald, Shared Paternity
According to Kim McDonald, women in some societies in South America, like the Bari of Venezuela, have multiple sex partners to maximize the chances that her child will survive to adulthood.
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Culture and ideology

- Culture is shaped by ideology
  - the social construction of female sexual desire as ideology
    - Female sexual desire is defined by men as part of a strategy to sustain patriarchy
      - Victorian female sexual desire
      - Muslim female sexual desire
In the Western world, during the Victorian era, “normal” women had low levels of sexual desire. Western societies, with their emphasis on women’s sexual passivity, rely on internalized sanctions against premarital sex and adultery.

Muslim female sexual desire

- In some Islamic societies, women are considered to have much more sexual desire than men.

- Muslim culture, with its view of female sexuality as active and assertive, uses more external and explicit forms of control as veiling, constant surveillance.

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Elements of culture

- **Culture** consists of the **values** the members of a given group hold, the **norms** they follow, and the **materials** they create.

- Conceptual distinction between culture and society
  - **Society** refers to a system of interrelationships that connects individuals who share the same culture.
Elements of culture

- Values are abstract ideals.
  - Very powerful
  - E.g., American values – family, materialism, individualism
E.g., James wants to investigate why many modern societies tend to strongly encourage monogamous relationships among their members.
Elements of culture

- Norms are widely agreed-upon principles or rules people are expected to observe; they represent the dos and don’ts of social life.
  - E.g., don’t cheat on exams
  - Very powerful
E.g., Candace is doing a comparative study in her thesis work to compare different societies’ expectations of how husbands should treat their in-laws.
Elements of culture

- **Material goods** refer to the physical objects that individuals in society create. These objects, in turn, influence how we live.
  - Powerfully shapes our lives
  - E.g., Pablo studies clothing choices in subcultural groups
Beliefs – shared beliefs and ideas

- E.g., according to Karl Heider, the Dani of New Guinea have extraordinarily little interest in sex.
- E.g., sex is not seen as pleasurable in all societies.
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- According to sociologist Ann Swidler, we all possess **cultural tool kits**, which contain a variety of social scripts that we can draw on.
- We have in our cultural “toolkit” a variety of “tools.” We pick and choose from this toolkit to solve problems that we encounter in life.
- There are multiple definitions of love in our cultural “toolkit.”
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