Chapter 4

The Social and Cultural Construction of Reality

Problem 4

- Why do people believe different things, and why are they so certain that their view of the world is correct and other views are wrong?

The Central Question

- One of the central problems in anthropology is explaining how human beings, who possess the same sensory abilities, can dwell in such different worlds.
Understanding Beliefs

• How is it that people can believe in a God whose existence cannot be proven?
• How can they believe in ancestor spirits, or witches, or devils, or in the power of magic to call forth spirits of the dead?
• Early writers on religion, such as Edward Tylor, Emile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski and Sigmund Freud approached the study of religion as the attempt to explain mistaken beliefs.

Understanding Beliefs

• Recent anthropological attempts to understand belief have built on these early efforts, but the general effort has been to try to understand how it is that people are persuaded that their view of the world is correct.

Totemism

• The totem, said Durkheim, was an element of nature that served as a symbol for a group or clan.
• The totem was worshipped and was considered sacred and holy by the members of the group.
• The answer to the power of the totem, said Durkheim, lies in the constraints that people feel are imposed on them and in the special power people feel when groups come together in celebration and ritual.
Symbolic Actions

- Rituals, myths, arts, literature, and music that we enjoy or participate in.
- All play a role in organizing and making concrete a particular view of the world.

Questions

- How does language affect the meanings people assign to experience?
- How does symbolic action reinforce a particular view of the world?
- How do people come to believe what they do, and how do they continue to hold to their beliefs even if they seem contradictory or ambiguous?

Questions

- How does the way we live affect our beliefs and rituals?
- How can people reorder their view of the world if it becomes unsatisfactory?
Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

According to Sapir and Whorf, vocabulary reflects the social and physical environment of a people.

Whorf noticed that the Inuit have a variety of words for different kinds of snow.

Sapir noted how the vocabulary of the Paiute, living in the desert regions of southern Utah and northern Arizona, where complex directions were needed for finding water, contained detailed descriptions of features of the landscape.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

In English, Whorf points out, there are two dominant types of sentences:

– The actor–action type: “Sally runs.”

In both cases, the subject is spoken of as if it were an enduring object, something stable through time that acts or is acted on by something else.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

In English, we speak of time as if it were an object or a thing, as if we could isolate a piece of it:

– I’ll study for three hours.

In this sense our grammar reflects, reinforces, and perhaps determines our general view of the world as consisting of objects or substances, with everything perceived as an attribute of some object.
Metaphors

• Metaphors take language from one domain of experience, such as the domain of the body or the domain of animals, and apply it to another domain, such as persons or landscape features.

• Metaphors are like theories, templates, lenses, or filters we can use to help us understand one domain of experience in terms of another.

• Americans use metaphors of war to explain and interpret many aspects of life, as in this cartoon.

Key Metaphors

• Most societies seem to have one or more domains from which they borrow extensively for metaphor.

• These become key metaphors that give a culture a style that makes it distinctive.
  – The act of eating is a key metaphor for the Kwakwaka’wakw who speak of different things using the vocabulary and language associated with hunger, eating, and food.
Kwakwaka’wakw Metaphor

- In this religious ceremony, dancers portray cannibal birds with long beaks; a totem pole includes faces with gaping mouths.

The Kwakwaka’wakw Cannibal Dance

- The Cannibal Dance, a four-day spectacle that serves as the highlight of the Kwakiutl Winter Ceremonial, a period of celebration and ritual in which all worldly activities cease.
- The Cannibal Dance centers on the taming of a cannibal spirit, the hamatsa, who has an unquenchable desire for human flesh.

The Kwakwaka’wakw Cannibal Dance

- In the Kwakiutl view of things all humans are cannibals who must be socialized and tamed.
- Through swaddling, ritual fasting, denial of food, and other actions, parents transform their children from cannibals into moral human beings.
- The Cannibal Dance is a ritualistic enactment of this view.
The Tarot

- Adherents of tarot cards use them to foretell the future and to interpret their own experiences in life.

Symbolic Actions

- Symbolic actions such as ritual, myth, literature, art, games, and music are as important as language in forming our beliefs.
- Symbolic actions carry bundles of meanings that represent public displays of a culture.

Dorothy Meets Luke Skywalker

- From what you remember about *The Wizard of Oz* and *Star Wars*, how does each represent the process of coming of age?
- Are there key differences in the stories that are significant?
Dorothy Meets Luke Skywalker

- What does each of the heroes seek?
- From whom do they obtain their power?
- What form does the power take?
- What helpers join the heroes, and what is the hero’s relationship to them?
- How do the heroes destroy evil, and what is the reaction to their heroic deeds?
- What lesson does each hero learn, and in what way have their adventures transformed them?

Religious Views

- During a religious service at the Old Rock Holy Church in Alabama, participants handle poisonous snakes because they believe Scripture tells them to do so.

Interpretive Drift

- Tanya Luhrmann suggests that changing one’s beliefs involves a process of what she calls interpretive drift,
  - “the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone’s manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity.”
Changing Beliefs

• For centuries, Europeans believed in a cosmology that placed the earth at the center of the universe, with the sun, planets, and stars circling around it.
• The idea of a sun-centered cosmos was considered heretical.

Rationalizing Beliefs

• People may defend their beliefs, even if they contain contradictions by such processes as:
  1. Secondary elaboration - creating a secondary reason to rationalize a belief
  2. Selective perception - seeing only what we want to see
  3. Suppressing evidence - not allowing evidence that contradicts a cherished belief.
  4. Appeals to ideas of faith or mystery
  5. Appeals to authority
  6. Violence
How Does the Way We Live Affect Our Beliefs and Rituals?

- The way we live must influence what we believe, how we represent those beliefs, and how we act them out.
- For example, a belief that most Westerners have held at one time or another, that they are or have been “in love”, is clearly related to the pattern of interpersonal relations, economic institutions, and values of Western society.

Acting “in Love”

- In order to act “in love” a person must be able to finance the rituals of love, activities that convey the appropriate meanings to the actors, activities we define as “romantic moments.”

Love and Class Structure

- How we act in love relates to the class structure of our society in three ways:
  1. The ability to act in love is restricted to some extent by a person’s income.
  2. Class will determine the object of one’s romantic love.
  3. The rituals of love, such as dining out, traveling, giving gifts, and even “making love,” follow certain rules and require some competence.
Changing Beliefs

• In spite of the tendency for people to resist changing their beliefs, they sometimes do.
• Often changes in the meanings that people assign to their experiences are triggered by social upheavals, in which the old way of looking at the world is no longer satisfactory.

Revitalization Movements

• Anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace suggests the term revitalization movements for attempts by people to construct a more satisfying culture.
• The Ghost Dance among indigenous peoples of North America and the Shaker Movement that spread through the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century are examples of revitalization movements.

The Ghost Dance

• The major prophet for the Ghost Dance was a Paiute named Wovoka who had a vision in which he was taken up to heaven, where he saw God and all the people who had died performing their traditional games and activities.
• God told him he must go back and tell people to live in peace with whites and with each other.
• He was given instructions for a ritual dance and was told that if this dance were performed for five days and nights, people would be reunited with their friends and relatives in the other world.
The Ghost Dance

- Wovoka’s message spread the word from Nevada to Native American groups throughout the United States and Canada.
- The message was sometimes reinterpreted as it spread from native group to native group.
- In some versions, the world would be destroyed and only the Native Americans brought back to life; in others, Euro-Americans and Native Americans would live together in harmony.

The Ghost Dance

- The Ghost Dance was adopted by groups seeking a revival of a way of life disrupted by Euro-American expansion, including the Sioux.
- Frightened that The Ghost Dance might turn into a rebellion, the Indian agent on a Sioux reservation called in the military.
- Some of the Sioux fled the reservation, chased by the Seventh Cavalry, General George Custer’s group that had been decimated by a Native American army at the Little Bighorn in 1876.

The Ghost Dance

- After promise of a safe return to the reservation, the Sioux surrendered their arms at Wounded Knee and were surrounded by the Seventh Cavalry equipped with Gatling guns.
- Someone fired a shot and the army opened fire, killing hundreds of men, women, and children.
- The Ghost Dance represents an attempt of a people to build a new culture, a new system of meaning, after the destruction of a previous one.
The Ghost Dance

- Wovoka, the major prophet of the Ghost Dance, is shown here in a photograph taken by anthropologist James Mooney in 1891.

The Shakers

- Shaker men and women shared authority but lived separately.
- In their religious meetings, both genders participated but did not interact with each other.

Case Study in Doing Anthropology: Public Relations, Counseling and Tourism

- Given a background in the way that different societies construct and manipulate the meanings assigned to experience, you can understand how an anthropological background can fit into a career in public relations, marketing, and politics.
- It can also serve in areas such as advocacy or public policy to help make people aware of the way that the meanings they assign experience can be manipulated by those with the power to do so.
Doing Anthropology

• Linguist George Lakoff is applying his expertise to advising political candidates on the best way to express their political message.