

HOW TO STUDY CULTURES

A Unit Introduction

What is a culture? A culture is a total way of life of a people.

Individuals growing up in a culture learn acceptable ways to behave and function in their culture. They learn how to use the natural resources found in their environment and how to adapt to the topographic and climatic features of their geographic region. They learn about the economic activities carried on by members of their culture. They acquire knowledge, skills, and techniques that will allow them to participate in these activities. They also learn about the social groups that have been formed within their culture and how to participate in these groups. They discover what is valued and believed by members of their culture and that these values and beliefs influence how people behave.

This Unit of Study is designed to help you learn how to study and analyze any culture. Therefore, the Unit is organized around certain key questions:

- How do culture members adapt to their environment?
- What economic activities do culture members carry on to help them survive in their environment?
- What social organizations exist within the culture and what are their purposes?
- What do members of a culture value and believe, and how do these values and beliefs influence individual and group behavior?

The four videotapes and their respective activities in this Unit will help you learn how to study cultures. This knowledge is becoming more important as exposure among cultures becomes more common in our world. New methods of communication and transportation have made most of the earth more accessible to its citizens than ever before. By understanding the components of a culture, you will be able to understand its members and the way in which they conduct themselves. This knowledge will be extremely valuable throughout your lifetime.

HOW TO STUDY CULTURES A Study Model

Directions: Use the following outline to prepare a report on a specific country and its culture.

I: Cultural Overview

- A. Where is the culture located?
- B. What is the population size of the culture?
- C. What percentage of the population lives in rural areas, and what percentage lives in urban areas?
- D. What percentage of the population is involved in the economic activities listed below?
 1. Service
 2. Industry
 3. Agriculture
- E. What form(s) of government exist in the culture?
- F. What type(s) of religion exist in the culture?

II: A Description of the Environment In Which the Culture Lives

- A. What are the prominent topographic features of the environment?
- B. What climatic conditions (average temperatures and precipitation) exist in the region in which the culture lives?
- C. What are the primary natural resources found in the environment?

III: Major Economic Activities and Level of Technological Development

- A. How do members of the culture satisfy their need for food, water, clothing, and shelter?
- B. What economic activities exist in the culture? Describe the major economic activities in some detail.
 1. Hunting and gathering
 2. Simple or mechanized agriculture
 3. Simple or mechanized industrial activities
 4. Service-related activities
- C. Generally, what kinds of tools, machines, procedures, and techniques do members of the culture use to accomplish their economic activities and carry on their daily lives?

IV: Social Organization

- A. What types of groups have culture members formed and why do these groups exist?
 1. Family organizations (nuclear or extended)
 2. Work groups
 3. Religious groups
 4. Educational groups
 5. Governmental groups
 6. Recreational groups
 7. Other (such as ethnic groups)

(Continued on Blackline Master 3)

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A Study Model (*Continued*)

V: Beliefs and Values and Key Concepts

- A. What are some major religious beliefs within the culture and how do these beliefs influence individual and group behavior?
- B. What economic concepts have been used to organize the economy (free market economy, command economy, etc.) and how do these reflect the values and beliefs of the culture?
- C. What political concepts have been used to develop the culture's governmental system (democracy, monarchy, communism, etc.) and how do these reflect the values and beliefs of the culture?
- D. What do culture members value?
 1. Material objects
 2. Social relationships
 3. Procedures, skills, and techniques
 4. Artistic ability
 5. Education
 6. Other

VI: Communication

- A. What is the official language of the culture?
- B. Is the language both oral and written?
- C. Do other languages exist in the culture? If so, what are these other languages?
- D. What types of artistic expression exist in the culture? Describe these in some detail.

VII: Cultural History

- A. Briefly describe three major events in the history of the culture. Answer the following questions:
 1. What actually happened?
 2. Why did the event occur?
 3. How did the culture change as a result of the event?

HOW TO STUDY CULTURES

Ethnocentrism

To a certain degree, people living in any culture tend to be "culture bound." They think that their way of life is superior to other cultures. They believe that their culture is the best and all other cultures are inferior. When studying other cultures, it is important to guard against being ethnocentric.

Ethnocentrism is the tendency of persons to judge other cultures according to their own cultural standards. People studying other cultures may tend to judge others as inferior if they are not just like them. They may conclude that other cultures are not as "good" as their own. Differences between cultures emerge as people ask such questions as: How are women treated in other cultures? What religious beliefs are held sacred? What foods are eaten? How do people dress? How do they communicate? What forms of education exist in other cultures?

It is important to be objective when studying other cultures. Admittedly, this is not easy. It will become easier if you try to focus your study by asking good questions. Why do people behave as they do? Why do they value what they value? Why do they believe what they do? To what forces of nature and environment have they had to adapt? What sort of historical events have shaped the lives of members of other cultures? By asking and answering questions such as these, you will avoid judging members of other cultures and imposing the standards of your own culture on them.

An interesting thing happens when two cultures come into contact with each other. They tend to borrow from each other. The American culture is an ideal example. How much of the American culture actually originated in the United States? In 1937, Ralph Linton, a distinguished anthropologist, wrote an article that was published in The American Mercury magazine. Linton wrote the article, titled "One Hundred Percent American," to encourage Americans to be less ethnocentric. He wanted to point out that, as a rule, cultures draw heavily upon other cultures for their defining ideas. What makes the American culture so rich is what it has borrowed from other cultures - cultures that Americans often consider inferior. Linton illustrates in the article that many of the basic components of the American "way of life" are not American at all. They have been imported and adapted by Americans to become part of the American culture.

Read the article, which follows on Blackline Master 5, and then discuss the following questions: • What would the American culture be without the "goods" it has borrowed from other cultures?

- Should Americans judge other cultures as inferior if they have borrowed from them so freely over the years?
- What role does ethnocentrism play in the world today? Discuss specific cultural clashes, such as those in the Middle East, Bosnia, Africa, and Russia, to illustrate your points. How does the study of culture help eliminate ethnocentric misunderstandings?
- Give examples of different food, dress, rituals, and other cultural functions in your daily life which have come from cultures outside of your own.

Name _____

Date _____

HOW TO STUDY CULTURES

One Hundred Percent American

Ralph Linton

Originally printed in The American Mercury magazine, April, 1937

There can be no question about the average American's Americanism or his desire to preserve this precarious heritage at all costs. Nevertheless, some insidious foreign ideas have already wormed their way into his civilization without his realizing what was going on. Thus dawn finds the unsuspecting patriot garbed in pyjamas, a garment of East Indian origin; and lying in a bed built on a pattern which originated in either Persia or Asia Minor. He is muffled to the ears in un-American materials: cotton, first domesticated in India; linen, domesticated in the Near East; wool from an animal native to Asia Minor; or silk whose uses were first discovered by the Chinese. All these substances have been transformed into doth by a method invented in Southwestern Asia. If the weather is cold enough, he may even be sleeping under a down quilt invented in Scandinavia.

On awakening, he glances at the clock, a medieval European invention, uses one potent Latin word in abbreviated form, rises in haste, and goes to the bathroom. Here, if he stops to think about it, he must feel himself in the presence of a great American institution; he will have heard stories of both the quality and frequency of foreign plumbing, and will know that in no other country does the average man perform his ablutions (wash) in the midst of such splendor. But the foreign influence pursues him even here. Glass was invented by the ancient Egyptians, the use of glazed tiles for floors and walls in the Near East, porcelain in China, and the art of enameling on metal by Mediterranean artisans of the Bronze Age. Even his bathtub and toilet are but slightly modified copies of Roman originals. The only purely American contribution to the ensemble is the steam radiator.

In this bathroom the American washes with soap invented by the ancient Gauls. Next he cleans his teeth, a European practice which did not invade America until the latter part of the eighteenth century. He then shaves, a masochistic rite first developed by the heathen priests of ancient Egypt and Sumer. The process is made less of a penance by the fact that his razor is of steel, an iron-carbon alloy discovered in either India or Turkestan. Lastly, he dries himself on a Turkish towel.

Returning to the bedroom, the unconscious victim of un-American practices removes his clothes from a chair, invented in the Near East and proceeds to dress. He puts on close-fitting tailored garments whose form derives from the skin clothing of the ancient nomads of the Asiatic steppes and fastens them with buttons whose prototypes appeared in Europe at the close of the Stone Age. This costume is appropriate enough for outdoor exercise in a cold climate, but it is quite unsuited to American summers, steam-heated houses, and Pullmans. Nevertheless, foreign ideas and habits hold the unfortunate man in thrall even when common sense tells him that the authentically American costume of gee string and moccasins would be far more comfortable. He puts on his feet stiff coverings made from hide prepared by a process invented in ancient Egypt and cut to a pattern which can be traced back to ancient Greece and makes sure they are properly polished, also a Greek idea. Lastly, he ties about his neck a strip of bright-colored cloth which is a survival of the shoulder shawls worn by seventeenth-century Croats. He gives himself a final appraisal in the mirror, an old Mediterranean invention, and goes downstairs to breakfast.

Here a whole new series of foreign things confronts him. His food and drink are placed before him in pottery vessels, the popular name of which - china - is sufficient evidence of their origin. His fork is a medieval Italian invention and his spoon a copy of a Roman original. He will usually begin the meal with coffee, an Abyssinian plant first discovered by the Arabs. The American is quite likely to need it to dispel the morning-after effects of over-indulgence in fermented drinks, invented in the Near East; or distilled ones invented by the alchemists of medieval Europe. Whereas the Arabs took their coffee straight, he will probably sweeten it with sugar, discovered in India; and dilute it with cream, both the domestication of cattle and the technique of milking having originated in Asia Minor.

If our patriot is old-fashioned enough to adhere to the so-called American breakfast, his coffee will be accompanied by an orange, domesticated in the Mediterranean region, a cantaloupe domesticated in Persia, or grapes, domesticated in Asia Minor. He will follow this with a bowl of cereal made from grain domesticated in the Near East and prepared by methods also invented there. From this he will go on to waffles, a Scandinavian invention, with plenty of butter, originally a Near-Eastern cosmetic. As a side dish, he may have the egg of a bird domesticated in Southeastern Asia or strips of the flesh of an animal domesticated in the same region, which have been salted and smoked by a process invented in Northern Europe.

Breakfast over, he places upon his head a molded piece of felt, invented by the nomads of Eastern Asia, and, if it looks like rain, puts on outer shoes of rubber, discovered by the ancient Mexicans, and takes an umbrella, invented in India. He then sprints for his train - the train, not the sprinting, being an English invention. At the station he pauses for a moment to buy a newspaper, paying for it with coins invented in ancient Lydia. Once on board he settles back to inhale the fumes of a cigarette invented in Mexico, or a cigar invented in Brazil. Meanwhile, he reads the news of the day, imprinted in characters invented by the ancient Semites by a process invented in Germany upon a material invented in China. As he scans the latest editorial pointing out the dire results to our institutions of accepting foreign ideas, he will not fail to thank a Hebrew God in an Indo-European language that he is a one hundred per cent (decimal system invented by the Greeks) American (from Americus Vespucci, Italian geographer).