Sociology 101: The Social Lens

Unit 2 Overview: Culture

Once when I took a class about culture, the professor began by holding up a twenty dollar bill and asking the students, “What is this?” Some students said, “It’s money.” Others said, “It’s a twenty dollar bill.” Eventually, someone got it: “It’s a piece of paper.” The twenty dollar bill in and of itself is nothing but a piece of nice paper with green ink. By itself, it isn’t money, let alone twenty dollars. This fact presents us with a vital question: If the money isn’t there in the piece of paper, where is it?

Before we answer that question, let me tell you a story. There is a group in South America where the men and women who want to be religious will fast for a year or more (these are controlled fasts). After that time they will be visited by the hekura. The hekura will come inside the person where it will find hills and trees and rivers in which it can live. The men and women who have achieved this state use the hekura to devour the souls of their enemies or to cure sickness in their own village. Here we can ask another important question: How can people think that hekura are real?

Let’s take our question about money first. Money doesn’t exist in the paper; it exists in the sets of institutions and practices surrounding the paper. In other words, that piece of paper is twenty dollars for us because we act like it’s money. As a counter example, think about Confederate “money.” It used to be money but now it’s not -- it’s something that people collect as part of a hobby. However, in order to have money, there’s something even more important than how we act. You and I are able to turn paper into money because of culture.

For human beings, what something actually is doesn’t really matter -- it’s the meaning that something has for us that’s important. Human beings, by their very nature, can’t accept things simply as they are. Humans must give meaning to things. In fact, we have to give meaning to everything. Whatever it might be, it doesn’t exist for us unless and until we give it meaning. And meaning is never the thing itself.

Think about killing a person -- it isn’t the actual act or the fact that a person’s life has ended -- it’s the context wherein the killing takes place. Killing can be war, or terrorism, or murder, or accidental homicide, or suicide, or religious sacrifice, or first-degree murder, or execution in response to first-degree murder. Killing can be legitimate or morally wrong depending on its meaning context. Human life doesn’t matter in and of itself; it’s the context that matters.

Remember the movie or the history of Apollo 13? The eyes of the entire world were on three men trapped in that space craft. America watched in horror as the catastrophe unfolded and had heartfelt concern for the lives of those three Americans. While at the exact same time, hundreds if not thousands of people were being killed or maimed in Vietnam by American servicemen. What matters isn’t life; what matters is meaning. And meaning is created by culture. Think about the following quote from philosopher Ernst Cassirer: “No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man’s symbolic activity advances.” This is actually one of the most important ideas you will ever consider.

Now let’s take our next question: How can people think that hekura are real? In answering this question we must keep our minds focused on what we just learned: For human beings, the thing itself doesn’t matter, it’s the meaning we attach to it that’s most important. And humans have been very creative in
creating meaning. Part of that is very easy to see; all we have to do is look at all the fiction and fantasy books and movies we’ve seen or have heard about. Humans have literally created hundreds of thousands of worlds; some of them we read about and think of as fiction, others we live in and think of as real.

So, how can people believe that the hekura are real? Well, the short answer is that humans can create almost any meaning we want, and people are socialized into various cultural meanings. Socialization is the process through which a society's culture and practices come to exist inside the individual. So strong are some forms of socialization that we feel as if our culture comes from nature: it’s natural for us to feel or act this way. So natural, in fact, that we will react emotionally or physically when confronted with culture, positively for our own and negatively toward others. We’re going to talk more socialization in the next unit. For now I want to consider why culture and meaning are so important to us.

The first thing we need to see is that humans are utterly and completely social. Being social is how we as a species exist. Every species is defined by its method of survival or existence. Why are whales, lions, and hummingbirds all different? Because they have different ways of existing in the world. What makes human beings different from whales, lions, and hummingbirds? The answer is simple: humans have a different mode of existence.

But being social is only part of the answer. There are a number of species that exist socially, like ants and bees, so what makes humans different from them? What is different is the magnitude of our sociability, and, more importantly, the way in which we create our social bonds. Most other societal species instinctually create social bonds through a variety of things such as scent, physical spacing, and so on. Humans use symbols to create meaningful social bonds. Granted, there are some species that have a kind and degree of culture, but no other animal uses culture to the extent that humans do—and no other species uses symbols. We are primarily built for and oriented toward using signs and symbols. Culture and language are the reasons we have the brain structure that we do; culture is the reason we have the kind of vocal structures that we do; culture is why we have the kind of hands that we do—culture is the defining feature of humanity. Culture and meaning are thus anthropological necessities for us. We can’t be human without them.

In this unit we will be considering how culture is involved in building society; we’ll look at different forms of society and how culture is different in each; we’ll think about what elements go into making up culture; and, of course, we’ll consider culture through our three lenses of functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction. As we go through this unit, ask yourself, “How has culture made me who and what I am?”