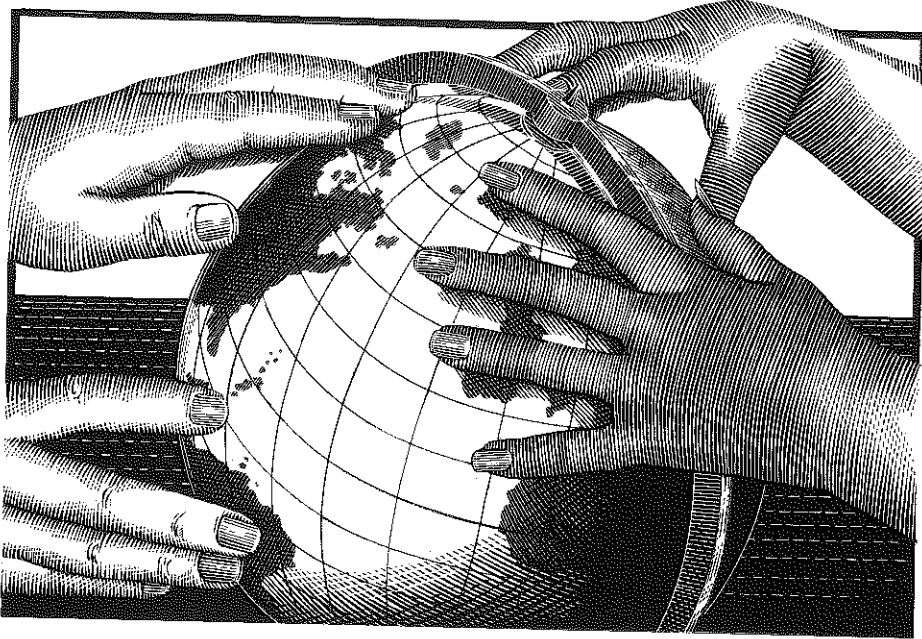


A GLOBAL ANALYSIS OF CULTURE



PREREADING

Discussion

Before reading “A Global Analysis of Culture,” discuss the following questions as a class.

- 1 How do you define the word *culture*? What aspects of culture do you expect to read about in this article?
- 2 Alex Thio, the author of “A Global Analysis of Culture,” tells us that there are certain cultural needs that all human beings have. He says that some needs “are rooted in biology” and others are “basic necessities of social life.” What examples of each of these types of needs can you think of?
- 3 Thio also tells us there are differences among cultures and that these differences may lead to global conflicts. What differences among cultures can you think of? How might these differences lead to global conflicts?

Vocabulary: Words in Context

Read these passages from “A Global Analysis of Culture.” Work with a partner. Use the context to help you understand the meaning of the italicized words. Then take turns explaining to your partner the meaning of each passage in your own words.

- 1 To meet their need for *aesthetic* and religious experiences, peoples all over the world create art forms . . .
- 2 Western *notions* of individualism, *human rights*, democracy, and the separation of church and state often *run counter to* Islamic, Confucian, Buddhist, Latin American, and other cultures.
- 3 People in other cultures find many of our favorite foods *nauseating*. The Hindus in India *abhor* beef, and the Jews and Muslims in many countries *spurn* pork. Many Europeans consider corn on the cob fit only for animals. Numerous Asians and Africans *recoil from* cheese because they find it too smelly.

GENRE: Academic Essay

A Global Analysis of Culture

Alex Thio

Alex Thio was born of Chinese parentage in Malaysia and grew up in a multicultural environment. He moved to the United States to attend college and received a bachelor's degree in social sciences from Central Methodist College. He also received a master's and a doctoral degree from State University of New York at Buffalo. He is now a professor of sociology at Ohio University. The excerpt below is taken from his textbook Sociology: A Brief Introduction (4th edition).

• The world is full of cultures. But are cultures universally the same in
• some ways? Do cultural differences cause international conflict and
• violence? These are some of the questions of global significance that we
• will address here. 1

Cultural Universals

• Human beings everywhere are the product of the same evolutionary
• process, and all of us have the same needs that must be met if we are
• to survive. Some, such as the need for food and shelter, are rooted in
• biology. Others, such as the need for clothing, complex communication,
• peaceful coexistence, and aesthetic and spiritual experiences, are basic
• necessities of social life. Cultures are the means by which people
• everywhere meet these needs. Because these needs are universal, there
• are cultural universals – practices found in all cultures as the means for
• meeting the same human needs. 2

• These universals appear in both material and nonmaterial cultures. 3
• To meet their need for food, all peoples have some kind of food-getting

technology, such as food gathering, hunting, or farming. To meet their need for shelter, people in all societies build some kind of housing, such as a grass hut, igloo, wooden house, or brick building. To meet their need for complex communication, all societies develop symbols and language. To meet their need for aesthetic and religious experiences, peoples all over the world create art forms – such as music, painting, and literature – and believe in some kind of religion. There are more than 60 other cultural universals, including incest taboos,* myths, folklore, medicine, cooking, bodily adornment, feasting, dancing, and so on.

Culture Clash

While cultural universals reflect the *general* means by which all societies meet their common needs, the *specific* content of these means varies from culture to culture. For example, religion is a cultural universal, but its specific content varies from one culture to another, as can be seen in the differences among Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Confucianism, and so on. These religions, along with other values, norms,* and languages, constitute the specific culture of various societies. These cultures can be classified into larger groupings called *cultural domains*, popularly known as *civilizations*. There are, according to Samuel Huntington (1996), about eight cultural domains in the world today. [According to Huntington, they are Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and African.]

The differences among these cultural domains can be expected to generate most of the conflict around the globe. As Huntington (1996) observes, in the new world emerging from the ashes of the cold war,* the dominating source of international conflict will no longer be political or economic but instead cultural. Huntington offers a number of reasons, including the following.

First, differences among cultures are real and basic. A common example is the differences in language around the globe. These differences do not necessarily mean conflict or violence, as can be proven by the increasing appearance of multiple languages on the Internet. But linguistic and other cultural differences have for centuries produced the most violent conflicts, as in the form of wars between tribes or nation-states.

Second, the world is shrinking, increasing interactions between peoples with different cultures. This reinforces awareness of the differences between cultures. . . .

Third, economic modernization and social changes are destroying local traditions, the longstanding source of identity for much of the

* *incest taboos*: the forbidding of sexual relations between closely related family members

* *norms*: socially acceptable behavior * *cold war*: intense competition in building defense systems between the former U.S.S.R. and the U.S. and their respective allies after World War II

world. Religion has moved in to fill the gap, often in the form of fundamentalist religious movements.

Fourth, Western notions of individualism, human rights, democracy, and the separation of church and state often run counter to Islamic, Confucian, Buddhist, Latin American, and other cultures. As Harry Triandis (1989) found in a review of 100 comparative studies of cultural values in different societies, "the values that are most important in the West are least important worldwide." This culture clash* may explain why Western efforts to promote those values often provoke charges of "human rights imperialism"* from the rest of the world (Huntington, 1996).

Because of those forces, culture clash may create more conflict and violence in the world. This may not happen if people learn to understand each other's cultures, especially in the ways people in a different culture see their own interests. But there is strong resistance to such an understanding, which exists in the form of ethnocentrism. Let us analyze ethnocentrism and how we can deal with it.

Ethnocentrism

Almost from the time we are born, we are taught that our way of life is good, moral, civilized, or natural. At the same time, we learn to feel that other peoples' ways of life are not. The result is ethnocentrism, the attitude that one's own culture is superior to those of other peoples.

Ethnocentrism exists to some degree in every society. People in North America consider it psychologically unhealthy that children in some non-Western traditional countries sleep with their parents until they reach puberty.* On the other hand, people in traditional countries tend to find it cruel that North Americans let their elderly parents live by themselves. Ethnocentrism can also become so deeply ingrained in our bodies that we can become physically ill if we eat something our culture defines as sickening. Try eating toasted grasshoppers, which the Japanese relish,* or ants, which some tribes in Brazil eat with gusto.* Just the thought of eating either of these things might turn your stomach. Similarly, people in other cultures find many of our favorite foods nauseating. The Hindus in India abhor beef, and the Jews and Muslims in many countries spurn pork. Many Europeans consider corn on the cob fit only for animals. Numerous Asians and Africans recoil from cheese because they find it too smelly (Harris, 1985).

Ethnocentrism can serve as a glue to hold a society together. By declaring among themselves that "We're the greatest," people tend to feel a strong sense of unity as a nation. Usually, nations keep their ethnocentrism to themselves. But ethnocentrism can become excessive, leading to global violence, as suggested in the preceding section.

* *culture clash*: conflict between different values and traditions * *imperialism*: the attempt of one country to control another country, especially by political and economic methods * *puberty*: time of sexual maturity * *relish*: enjoy * *gusto*: enthusiastic enjoyment

Cultural Relativism

Although ethnocentrism is universal, it can be suppressed* with cultural relativism, the belief that a culture must be understood on its own terms. By looking at the cultures of others from their own perspective, we can understand why they do things their way. 14

Such an understanding can bring a bonanza* of profits to U.S. business operations around the globe. In our legalistic,* rule-oriented culture, a written contract is usually required for conducting business. Once a contract is signed, negotiations should more or less cease.* But to succeed in Greece, U.S. businesspeople have to look at the contract from the Greek point of view: The contract is only a charter for serious negotiations, which will stop only after the work is completed. In the Arab world, success in business requires acceptance of the Muslim view that a person's word, when given in a special kind of way, is just as binding as, if not more so than, most written contracts (Morgan, 1989). 15

Cultural relativism can also contribute to international peace. Soon after Bill Clinton took office as president in 1993, he repeatedly pressured the Chinese government to correct its human rights abuses (which involved mistreating political dissidents*). The pressure seriously strained U.S.-China relations. Clinton obviously refused to see the problem from China's perspective. The Chinese felt that President Clinton was wrong to interfere in other countries' internal affairs and should focus instead on the United States' own human rights problems such as poverty, racism, and police brutality against African Americans. Finally, with an eye to China as a potentially huge market for U.S. products, Clinton seemed to adopt cultural relativism and came to understand the Chinese view. He stopped pressuring China on its human rights problem and started focusing on the task of increasing U.S. exports to China. As a result, U.S.-China relations began to improve. 16

But Clinton was criticized for kowtowing* to China by ignoring its human rights abuses. This raises the question of how far cultural relativism should be carried. Should ethical judgment* be suspended when others engage in such horrors as infanticide, genital mutilation, torture, or genocide? Only extremists would answer "yes," arguing that no matter how repugnant* they themselves find these horrors, their duty is only to understand them from others' perspectives, without passing judgment on them. They would pursue the "live and let live" policy. But most cultural relativists would condemn the horrors because, to them, cultural relativism requires only understanding a culture on its own terms, *not* also abandoning one's own moral conscience (Berreby, 1995). 17

* *suppressed*: put an end to or stopped * *bonanza*: source of sudden wealth or luck

* *legalistic*: ruled by the law * *cease*: stop; discontinue * *political dissidents*: people who disagree with or rebel against the political structure of their country * *kowtowing*: being overly respectful or attentive * *ethical judgment*: decisions based on moral principles

* *repugnant*: distasteful; very unpleasant

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POSTREADING

Think about the Content

Discuss the following questions in a small group.

- 1 According to the text, what is the main reason for the most violent conflicts between societies?
- 2 What is ethnocentrism? How can it help society? How can it cause harm?
- 3 Explain why the incident discussed in paragraph 16 concerning U.S. President Clinton and China is an example of cultural relativism.
- 4 In the essay “Cultural Identity vs. Ethnic Fashions,” in Chapter 4, Sunita Puri writes about cultural imperialism. In this chapter, Thio writes about human rights imperialism. What is the difference between these two concepts?

Think about the Writing

Discuss the following questions as a class.

- 1 Writers often use the introduction to ask a question, or questions, that will be discussed in the body of their text. Notice that Thio does this in his first paragraph. Where and how does Thio answer the questions he raises?
- 2 Find three important words in the text that Thio defines. For each word, analyze the grammatical device he uses to define it. For example, Thio introduces the word *cultures* (paragraph 2) by making it the first word in a sentence. Then he uses the verb *be* to link this word to its definition: “Cultures *are* . . .”
- 3 What is the main idea of the “Culture Clash” section of “A Global Analysis of Culture”? Where is the main idea stated? How does Thio help readers find the important points of this section?
- 4 “A Global Analysis of Culture” is an excerpt from a textbook and does not have a true conclusion, as an article or essay would. What type of conclusion do you think

would be most effective for this excerpt? (Review the Conclusions section on page 66 of Chapter 4, if necessary.) Why? Work together as a class to write a conclusion.

A Personal Response

Discuss the following questions with a partner.

- 1 Have you ever had an experience in which the values, behaviors, or traditions of someone from another culture were puzzling or upsetting to you? What did you do?
- 2 What examples of ethnocentrism can you think of? Do you think being ethnocentric is a positive quality or a negative quality? Explain.
- 3 Do you think that cultural relativism is good or bad? Explain.

WRITING

Journal Writing

Remember that your journal is a place to reflect and think in writing. When you write in your journal, do not worry about spelling, grammar, or the mechanics of writing.

Write for at least ten minutes about one or more of the following questions.

- 1 What new ideas did you find in “A Global Analysis of Culture”?
- 2 Which ideas in the text were most interesting to you?
- 3 Which ideas were the most disturbing or confusing?

Formal Writing: Paraphrasing

There are three basic methods to use when you are referring to other people’s ideas in your writing: quoting, summarizing, and paraphrasing. This section focuses on paraphrasing. (See Chapter 2, page 38, for information on quoting; a discussion of summarizing occurs later in this chapter, on page 86.)

Paraphrasing is using your own words to express what another person has written. When you paraphrase, however, you do not simply substitute synonyms for a few of the words. Here are some guidelines for paraphrasing:

- After reading and understanding the text you are going to paraphrase, write the ideas in your own words without looking back at the original source.
- A paraphrase may be shorter than the original, but sometimes it can be the same length if you need to explain something to make it clear.
- If you like any particular words or phrases from the original source, you may include them in the paraphrase, but be sure to put quotation marks around any words you have copied. Remember to proofread anything you put in quotes to make sure you have copied it accurately.