

Talk #11 Culture and Relationship

... those working in social theory, I suggest, should be concerned first and foremost with reworking conceptions of human being and human doing, social reproduction and social transformation.

– The Constitution of Society

Anthony Giddens – Introduction p XX

“... a child doesn't think: I will now let go of the finger in order to grasp this other thing. Completely unself-consciously, without purpose, it turns from one to the other, and we would say that it is playing with the things, were it not equally true that the things were playing with the child.”

– Zen in the Art of Archery, Eugen Herrigel

Thea: What are you going to do with the notion of culture? With your concepts of suggestion and re-suggestive structure, can you sharpen that concept at all? People cling to ideas and habits – even silly or harmful ones – as if they themselves would disappear if they let go of them; and they speak of their cultures as fragile possessions in need of protection from alien influences. As a therapist, I spend half my time helping people to disentangle their identities from self-defeating “cultures,” whether of the family or the big world.

Guy: It's surely true that people identify with their cultures, and have the greatest difficulty in detaching from them. The human animal depends on that internalized guidance system, as we've seen. Without it we are scarcely human.

Thea: But, what is culture anyway? Conceived informally as lore and lifestyle, the notion seems clear enough; but when the anthropologist tries to speak of culture as a coherent system, the inconsistencies and conflicts are obvious.

It turns out that the concept is hopelessly circular. We define groups by the traits they have in common, and think of culture as a shared repertoire of attitudes, traits and tools. But when we invoke that concept to explain why people behave in a certain way, we find that it explains nothing at all: The Ougabou culture is what the Ougabou do. The Ougabou do what they do because they are Ougabou. You can describe what most Ougabou seem to be doing most of the time, but as soon as you try to specify which practices are essential to the Ougabou culture, or to describe the quintessential Ougabou personality, the arguments get started. This is deeply embarrassing both for anthropologists and psychotherapists.

Guy: I can see why anthropologists would have a problem. Why therapists?

Thea: Because usually it's neither feasible nor desirable to separate people from the cultures they belong to and identify with. An adult Ougabou cannot be understood as a generic human who just happens to be running the software for Ougabou culture. In some deep sense, and however you

conceptualize identity, he *is* an Ougabou. Especially in your account, he has not only an Ougabou mind and personality, but an Ougabou brain, nervous system and body. Whatever common humanity he or she possessed as an infant has been re-shaped, if not altogether swamped by his Ougabou upbringing and customs.

Similarly, my clients really are the totality of their feelings and beliefs and habits – including the ones they feel badly about. Including the dysfunctional ones.

Guy: This may be why Bateson found himself having to conceive of psychology and cultural anthropology in ecological terms. He saw that there can be no clear distinction of the mind of a single person from that of the groups to which he or she belongs. As the ecology of a pond is scarcely separable from the forest around it, the ecology of a single mind is not separable from its society and relationships.

Much as we cherish personal self-hood and autonomy, we know that minds are shaped by the groups they belong to, and by the cultures they grow up with and take on board – as these in turn co-exist and co-evolve with one another.

Thea: But when you speak of “cultures” now, in the plural, you don’t mean those relatively self-contained structures that ethnographers have tried to document – the cultures of those distinctive tribes in the literature of anthropology?

Guy: No indeed – and it’s important to be clear about that. Scarcely any culture in the world today is self-contained and homo-geneous. A modern society is comprised of many overlapping cultures, only partially accommodating to one another and not at all self-contained: There are the ethnic cultures that one encounters in any metropolitan city. There are professional, corporate and religious cultures. Readily available on the Internet there are numerous sexual cultures. Any group you can think of has a culture of its own – itself a confection and compromise of diverse influences. People today grow up amongst all of these and, in varying degrees, are either influenced by them or in reaction against them. That is one reason why a language of suggestion and re-suggestive structure is needed.

We need to think of culture not only as a common repertoire of artifacts and mentifacts but as a system of suggestions and relationships that people create on-the-fly by living in each other’s faces. In some circles, Bateson’s notion of cognitive ecology gets invoked a lot, but we still don’t have anything like a coherent psychology or social science grounded in the eD paradigm.

Thea: Why not? What is the problem? *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* was published almost forty years ago, you told me.

Guy: My sense is that Bateson’s vision needed a better theory of communication than we had, because the ecology he conceived cannot be comprised of messages or information or control signals. These

concepts are not fundamental, as we've seen.¹ They depend on prior understandings, and already gloss most of the co-evolution and ecological ordering that characterize a living culture. We can get further if we conceive of cultures as comprised of co-evolving structures of re-suggestion – of co-evolving memes, to use Richard Dawkins term.

memes and suggestions

Thea: I've heard that word "*meme*" before. It sounds very scientific, but I have no idea what it means. What is a meme, exactly?

Guy: Richard Dawkins coined the term in 1976² to call attention to some interesting analogies between biological and cultural evolution. The analogies are not as strong as he first thought, but they are still interesting and worth exploring – with just a grain of salt to avoid getting carried away by them.

Thea: Which analogies did he see?

Guy: Dawkins introduced the concept of a meme as a unit of cultural inheritance, comparable to the gene as a unit of biological inheritance. I prefer to think of them as re-suggestive structures that resemble genes in some respects, but not in others.

Like the gene, a meme can be conceived as reproducing itself by imperfect copying, and as competing against alternative possibilities³ for "market share" – that is to say, for influence in a population of potential carriers. The carrier population will be a scarce resource for the meme, insofar as the time, attention and energy of potential carriers are limited. From the human carrier's perspective there is an opportunity cost in buying into this meme rather than that competing one; but from the meme's perspective, it must survive against fierce competition from alleles (alter-native memes) also in search of carriers to influence.

Further, like the genes, our memes must be imagined as "selfish" – in that their reproductive success depends on their tenacity and deftness in propagating – and not directly on their contribution to our welfare. Indeed, like genes, some memes (for example, gambling and extreme sports) may be dangerous or positively harmful.

Finally, like the genes, our memes evolve. That is to say, by a process of imperfect replication, natural selection and Baldwinian choice of the selection criteria that act upon them they gradually transform and re-combine to produce novel effects. When people speak of cultural evolution, this evolution of the meme pool is what they have in mind.

Thea: Those are striking analogies! But you say they should be taken with a grain of salt?

¹ In Talk #3.

² See www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/formerly-hyper-weird/memetics.html.

³ Called *alleles* in genetics.

Guy: Yes, and again for several reasons: First, the meme is not a discreet or coherent entity in the way that genes are, nor is it an all-or-nothing proposition. One either does or does not receive a copy of a certain gene from one's parents, but one can be strongly or only mildly influenced by a certain meme, as well as totally unaware of it. Second, in meme theory, the absolute distinction between genotype and phenotype cannot be sustained. We do not find packets of cultural information insulated from a person's cultural life, as a gene is insulated from the life of the body. Third, the variation and selection of memes is and must be experienced (at least partly) as a matter of conscious design, however we come to understand consciousness. Memes may be conceived as selfish propagators but their propagation isn't "blind," as genetic propagation is. We have a degree of autonomy in our cultural choices. We consciously pick and choose amongst the possibilities on offer, and construct novel possibilities in doing so. This has not been true of genetic propagation to date – although technology for such choice is now available. Fourth, much more radically than genes, a given meme may suggest different attitudes and activities to different people, or to the same person at different times. For example, the meme for a given ideology or religion attracts devotion from some human suggests but bitter hatred from others. Genes can switch on or off but, so far as I know, when they're on they usually do their thing in a pretty straightforward way. Though we know of exceptions, where a gene's phenotypic effect depends on its environmental situation.

Thea: So the comparison of cultural transmission to the biological kind is not very good at all.

Guy: No, it's not. And yet, if we don't push it too far, the analogy is significant. It is correct to think of cultural patterns as subject to processes of imperfect propagation and selection – therefore, to a version of evolution; and it is roughly correct to think of them as grounded in transmissible seed-ideas that re-shape themselves over time. To that extent, the meme analogy is natural and useful; and it draws attention to the important fact that some cultural patterns manage to thrive despite the harm they work to people who practice them.

Thea: All right. I can see that.

Guy: As well, the meme concept breaks culture into separable chunks, and encourages us to think of cultures not primarily as coherent structures (though they may *evolve* a degree of coherence, given the chance) but more as repertoires of independently trans-missible chunks. The point is: culture is not an all-or-nothing proposition. People commonly accept and internalize some parts of their natal cultures while rejecting other parts. We accept memes uncritically at first because humans are born with an aptitude for imitation and no basis for criticism. But as we grow up, we learn to evaluate, choose and recombine the fragments of culture on offer to us. A given culture is comprised of any number of such fragments – each with a degree of cohesion that encourages onlookers to recognize

that fragment as a whole, and with affinities for other fragments that complement it in some way. Think of sausage and eggs, over easy, with baked beans, toast, marmalade and coffee on Sunday morning for an example of independent memes that often cluster with one another as recombinant elements of the larger meme called “brunch.”

Of course, when you decompose a culture into such fragments, you must abandon the ethnographer’s notion of culture as a homogeneous canopy of tribal custom. It no longer makes sense to think of culture as a unitary, structurally coherent inheritance from the ancestors, though some memes may have a traceable lineage and though they will tend to co-evolve toward ecological compatibility. In a modern society, culture is like a personal toolkit. Each individual lives in and through a personal culture of his own.

Thea: But the very idea of culture was invented to describe what the people of some group have in common – making them the people they are. Isn’t that what the anthropologists want to study?

culture need not be shared

Guy: It’s what they wanted to study. Fifty years ago, anthropologists could still write meaningful ethnographies, describing what the Arapesh, the Yanomamo, or some other other small tribe had in common. Today this is scarcely feasible for the most remote and isolated peoples, and certainly not for persons in the thick of a post-modern world, where no two individuals have identical cultures. Today, I think we can get further with the idea of culture if we tackle it from the other end. Rather than starting with an idea of culture as a shared way of life, we can define it as the system of re-suggestive structures, that guide a given individual. We can think of culture as a personal inventory – basically, as a synonym for personality⁴ – before we ask whence that inventory came, or with whom it is shared.

Thea: But there are still many traits that the Japanese have in common by virtue of being Japanese. There are even traits that we Canadians have in common as Canadians.

Guy: Perhaps true, but they’re not easy to identify. We can talk about tendencies that many Canadians share, but it’s hard to go further than that. There are cultural traits that computer programmers or dairy farmers or civil servants tend to share. There are traits that you and I share as a couple. It’s easy to find groups of people with significant culture in common. But in no modern city is it possible to find even two people with exactly the same culture. For that reason, it will be simpler and more fruitful to think of personal culture as the system of re-suggestion that guides a given individual, and then look for overlaps amongst such systems in the groups we want to study.

Thea: I don’t necessarily disagree, but what you are saying now sounds odd

⁴ See Talk #10.

from a man who also wants to insist that the elements of culture are not the work of single persons as such, but always an evolutionary product of some group as a whole. How can you turn around and say that culture should be considered first of all as a guidance system of individuals?

Guy: Of course the elements of culture evolve, and always as the collective effort of some group. But, so far as I can see, we actually find culture in only two places: stigmergically encoded in cultural artifacts, and written onto the brains of living individuals as components of personality. In Japan, the masters of a craft or “Way” are honored as “national treasures” because they re-suggest a portion of their national tradition. But in a humble way, everyone does this: We transmit culture in the act of living it and being guided by it.

For a given individual it makes sense to ask which meme-bearing artifacts she is exposed to, and on how frequent, regular and exigent a basis. It also makes sense to ask which memes she has internalized, out of those potentially available. There’s no contradiction in pointing out that culture is instantiated only in particular artifacts and particular persons, though it evolves through group interaction.

I’m surely not denying the collective nature of culture. As you say, I’m insisting on it. But I’m also saying that it must be internalized and owned by individuals to exist as anything but data for archaeologists – as buried relics of cultures no longer lived by anyone. I’m saying, we should think of culture as the guidance system of individuals before we ask who shares it.

Thea: OK. I see where you’re coming from. And I take your point that it may be more convenient in this post-modern, global society to speak of culture as the possession of individuals before we ask how it is shared. But I’m not happy with the idea of memes as species in a cognitive ecology, co-evolving to possess us as their hosts. I’d rather think of culture as an expression of human creativity. I think most people would.

Guy: It’s a question of purpose, isn’t it? For most purposes, it’s convenient to take a common-sense, folk-psychology stance and think of ourselves as autonomous agents, deciding what to do as we go along. But for psychology and social science, we may do better to think of memes that drive us only as they prevail in competition against other memes.

Thea: But which idea is true? They can’t both be right!

Guy: The argument keeps coming back to that same mistaken question: “Which idea is the unique truth?” Why is it so difficult to grasp that interpretations are just alternative ways of seeing, and that it is nonsense to ask which one is true? Interpretations are only suggestions; there is always room for a contradictory suggestion that may be more appropriate in some other situation, or for some other purpose. Here: I make a suggestion that we go to a movie tomorrow night, and another that we stay home and talk. We need to make a choice on any given occasion, but no one would say we must always do one or the other. Similarly,

when competing interpretations are in play, how you see something involves a choice which may become habitual as a matter of speed and convenience, but which need not always be made the same way. An interpretation is just a cognitive strategy; and there may be great advantage in learning to deploy and use a variety of strategies as the occasion suggests.

From this perspective, culture is *both* an expression of human creativity *and* a super-personally evolving eco-system. Sometimes we may wish to stress one aspect, sometimes the other. If you like to think of culture as an expression of human creativity, by all means continue to do so. I do myself, most of the time. But if you ask for an explanation of existing cultural arrangements, you need a different approach, because these arrangements are beyond the control of any personal will – beyond even the collective will of a powerful social group. They are memes in an impersonal ecology.

Thea: Perhaps that is the real issue: I don't think I want to know why our arrangements are as they are. I am afraid to question them too much – afraid of what I might see if I look too closely. I have to live by these cultural patterns, and I need to trust them. I need to think of them as the right and proper way to live, – preferably, as given us by wise, benevolent gods or ancestors. Of course, I know what you are going to say. You're going to say that refusal to question is the attitude of an ostrich with its head in the sand.

Guy: Well, since you know that, I don't have to say it. I'll only say that to keep a reputation for integrity, the anthropologist must be as steadfast and skeptical in the study of his own society as of any other. In your field, of course, the same point is made: that the therapist's first and last case study must be himself. But there's no denying that many people – probably most – would rather keep the veil of mystification that science progressively strips away.

Thea: What can I say? There are many hero-projects and each person has his own.⁵ For science-minded types like you, the project is to face the world's complexity and dispense with comforting mystifications. By contrast, for the religious, the hero-project is precisely their faith in the absurd. We therapists have a foot on both sides of this issue, and often one in our mouths as well.

Let me ask you this: If you treat culture firstly as the guidance system of individuals, then how does the sharing happen?

relationship and culture

Guy: Quite simply: Culture gets shared as it is negotiated between individuals in their relationships. My hope is that the language of suggestion will help us cut beneath the surface of fictitious substances like “relationship,” “culture” and “love” without falling into the mechanical language of “drives” and “scripts” and “rules.” It might then be possible

⁵ On hero-projects, see Ernest Becker's truly heroic book, *The Denial of Death*.

to describe how we are formed by the relationships that engage us – not in a rigid, causal way, but as a matter of affordance, and suggestive influence. For example, everyone knows that children are shaped by their parenting and family backgrounds – not just by significant people in their lives, but by their physical environments as well. Everyone knows that a person’s beliefs on some matter are strongly influenced by the lived relationships and interests that touch upon it. It should be possible to take analytic account of such influences without falling into a specious determinism.

Thea: Yes, I can see how that might be useful. Therapists are constantly faced with the problem of understanding why some people transcend abusive backgrounds or situations magnificently while others succumb to them. Clearly there are influences at work, sometimes with strong correlations to their apparent consequences. Yet these are influences only – no more than that. Hopefully other influences, including those of a successful therapy, will prove more important in the long run.

Guy: The point is, we’re now in a position to see relationships and cultures as self-organizing processes, not as static entities. We can think of ourselves as “making up our minds” under a barrage of suggestive input, or we can think of innumerable suggestive influences co-evolving into loosely stable ecologies of personality. We can look at an individual mind (yours, mine or anyone’s) as family therapists do, thinking of it as one co-adapted node in a history of inter-personal relationships.

Thea: What will you say about the causal power of culture? In what sense can we use culture as an explanatory principle?

Guy: I think we can do better by talking about the influence of strong and frequently repeated suggestions than about the causal power of culture. There is no such “thing” as a culture. What we call “culture” goes the same way as “mind.” As brains are minding systems, groups and societies are culturing systems. “Culture” is just a sloppy, but sometimes useful word for re-suggestive structures that are widely shared amongst the members of a group.

Thea: But where does that leave anthropology then? If culture cannot be understood as the shared possession of a tribe or a whole society, there may be nothing left for it to study. Your ecoDarwinian paradigm puts anthropology at risk in the same way as it does psychology – robbing both fields of their subject matter.

an ecology of suggestions

Guy: I can only repeat: It’s a misunderstanding to think that either concept – mind or culture – becomes less useful because we begin to understand how they work. I can’t see that the psychologist’s notion of mind is in any danger at all. The case of cultural anthropology is somewhat different, as this field has been losing its traditional subject matter to modern history as the old tribal cultures lose their identities.

Correspondingly, the discipline itself seems to be dissolving into ethnography (a kind of sociological history) on one hand, and into social psychology on the other. Cultural anthropology's focus today must be on two great questions that apply perfectly well in our own society: How do groups develop and maintain their shared cultures and identities? And, how do these shared cultures stabilize (more or less) as coherent systems? To these questions, the notion of suggestion ecology seems our most promising approach; and the eD paradigm may be just what anthropology needs to study the sharing of chunks of culture – the so-called “memes” – in a post-modern, globalizing world.

Thea: I'm still not sure what this ecological perspective tells us about relationships and cultures that we didn't already know.

Guy: It gives a new perspective, leading us to ask new questions, or to ask some old questions differently. It sees culture more as a dynamic system than as a structure of static inter-relationships. It sees culture as defined less by roles and rules than by its semi-durable stigmergic features and by the interests, issues and conflicts that stem from these. As the Zen master might say, we can see culture as a set of rules for playing ball. But we can also see it as the dynamic outcome of a large ball, the earth itself, as it plays with us.

Thea: Interesting. I must admit: there is a pleasing common sense in seeing culture always as an imperfect compromise of human animals with their physical environment, history and local situation.

Guy: Yes. And it is pleasing too that the approach will work on any scale of social organization from individuals to couples to corporations and countries. What is personality, after all, but personal culture: the imperfect compromise of a human animal with its body-type and history? And what is a relationship – of whatever complexity, with however many players – but a kind of loose game, played by the suggestions of its participants on a stigmergic playing field.

The approach also works well for our global society as a whole. You can imagine all mankind today as sharing a single, deeply troubled suggestion ecology, painfully knitting together into a self-consistent system.