

## **BASIC CONCEPTS from Sociology and Anthropology - Tools to think with.**

**SOCIETY:** humanly created organization or system of interrelationships that connects individuals in a common culture. All the products of human interaction, the experience of living with others around us. Humans create their interactions, and once created the products of those interactions have the ability or power to act back upon humans to determine or constrain action. Often, we experience society (humanly created organization) as something apart from the individuals and interactions that create it.

## **PRODUCTS OF HUMAN INTERACTION - COMPONENTS OF SOCIETY**

**CULTURE:** sets of traditions, rules, symbols that shape and are enacted as feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of groups of people. Referring primarily to learned behavior as distinct from that which is given by nature, or biology, culture has been used to designate everything that is humanly produced (habits, beliefs, arts, and artifacts) and passed from one generation to another. In this formulation, culture is distinguished from nature, and distinguishes one society from another.

**LANGUAGE:** a system of verbal symbols through which humans communicate ideas, feelings, experiences. Through language these can be accumulated and transmitted across generations. Language is not only a tool, or a means of expression, but it also structures and shapes our experiences of the world and what we see around us.

**VALUES:** preferences - ideas people share about what is good, bad, desirable, undesirable. These are usually very general, abstract, cut across variations in situations.

**NORMS:** concepts and behaviors that constitute the normal. Behavioral rules or standards for social interaction. These often derive from values but also contradict values; sometimes derives from statistical norms but often not. Serve as both guides and criticisms for individual behavior. Norms establish expectations that shape interaction.

*“Culture. Those patterns of meaning that any group or society uses to interpret and evaluate itself and its situation.”* Bellah et. al. Habits of the Heart 1985:333.

*“Culture. A system of durably acquired schemes of perception, thought and action, engendered by objective conditions but tending to persist even after an alteration of those conditions.”* Bourdieu, The Inheritors. 1979.

*“Habitus. A set of historical relations ‘deposited’ within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action.”* Bourdieu.

*“Culture. What it means to act according to one’s culture is, loosely speaking, to follow one’s inclinations as they have been developed by learning from other members of one’s community.” Hannerz, Soulside, 1969:177.*

*“Culture. Refers to the learned repertoire of thoughts and actions exhibited by members of social groups - repertoires [transmitted] independently of genetic heredity from one generation to the next.” Harris. Cultural Materialism, 1979:47.*

*“Culture. Symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, ceremonies, as well as informal ... practices such as language, gossip, stories and rituals of daily life.” Swidler, “Culture in Action” 1986:273.*

*“Culture. The cultural is the creative, varied, potentially transformative working out ... of some of the fundamental social/structural relationships of society.” Willis, Learning to Labor. 1977:137.*

**SOCIAL ORGANIZATION:** the arrangement of the parts that constitute society, the organization of social positions and distribution of people within those positions.

**STATUS:** socially defined niches, positions (student, professor, administrator).

**ROLE:** every status carries a cluster of expected behaviors, how a person in that status is expected to think, feel, as well as expectations about how they should be treated by others. The cluster of expected duties and behaviors that has become fixed in a consistent and reiterated pattern of conduct.

**GROUP:** two or more people regularly interacting on the basis of shared expectations of others’ behavior; interrelated statuses and roles.

**INSTITUTIONS:** patterns of activity reproduced across time and space. Practices that are regularly and continuously repeated. Institutions often concern basic living arrangements that human beings work out in the interactions with one another and by means of which continuity is achieved across generations. The basic building blocks of societies. Social institutions are like buildings that are at every moment constantly being reconstructed by the very bricks that compose them.

**SOCIAL STRUCTURE:** Structure refers to the **pattern** within culture and organization through which social action takes place; **arrangements** of roles, organizations, institutions, and cultural symbols that are stable over time, often unnoticed, and a changing almost invisibly. Structure both enables and constrains what is possible in social life. If a building were a society, the foundation, supporting columns, and beams would be the structure which both constrains and enables the various

kinds and arrangements of spaces and rooms (roles, organizations, and institutions). Schemata and resources (material and human) through which social action takes place, becomes patterned, and institutionalized. Incorporates both culture and the resources of social organization.

*Social structures have a dual character, defined as composed simultaneously of schemas, which are virtual, and of resources, which are actual. Schemas function as fundamental tools of thought... not the formally stated prescriptions but the informal and not always conscious schemas, metaphors and assumptions presupposed by such formal statements. Schemas are the effects of resources, just as resources as the effects of schemas.* William Sewell 1992.

*Social structure. The organized set of social relationships in which members of the society or group are variously implicated. Patterned behavior and relationships. "The patterned arrangements of role-sets, status-sets, and status-sequences can be held to comprise the social structure."* Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure. p. 370.

*"Social Structure. Patterned arrangements of role-sets, status-sets, and status sequences consciously recognized and regularly operative in a given society and closely bound up with legal and political norms and sanctions."* Turner. Drama, Fields, and Metaphors, 237.

*Social Structure: Relatively stable systems of social relationships and opportunities in which individuals find themselves and by which they are vitally affected, but over which most of them have no control and of the exact nature of which they are usually unaware."* Greenfield. Nationalism, p. 2.

**AGENCY:** "the realized capacity of people to act upon their world and not only to know about or give personal or intersubjective significance to it. .. the power of people to act purposively and reflectively, in more or less complex relationships with one another, to reiterate and remake the world in which they live, in circumstances where they may consider different courses of action possible and desirable, though not necessarily from the same point of view." Consider human beings as producers, as instruments, and as products, to be the drivers, the vehicle and the recipients of acts of others. (Inden, 1990:23)

**IDENTITY:** combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations. Imaginings, consciousness, reflections of self produced, improvised from cultural materials and social transactions. caught between past, present and future, constant negotiation. Rather than a unified, single, original or genetic subjects, composite of many, often contradictory self-understandings and performances, often not confined to the body but spread over the material and social environment, few of which are durable.

## **INEQUALITY:**

**SOCIAL STRATIFICATION:** the division of people socio-economically into layers or strata. When we talk of social stratification, we draw attention into the unequal positions occupied by individuals in society. In the larger traditional societies and in industrialized countries today there is stratification in terms of wealth, property, and access to material goods and cultural products.

**RACE:** a human group that defines itself and/or is defined by other groups as different...by virtue of innate and immutable physical characteristics. It is a group that is socially defined on the bases of physical criteria.

**ETHNICITY:** cultural practices and outlooks of a given community of people that set them apart from others. Members of ethnic groups see themselves as culturally distinct from other groups in a society, and are seen by those others to be so in return. Many different characteristics may distinguish ethnic groups from one another but the most usual are language, history or ancestry - real or imagined, religion, and styles of dress or adornment. Ethnic differences are wholly learned.