


Chapter 2: Culture and Nature

PSY 450
Social Psychology

Outline

- Nature vs. Nurture?
- Explaining the Psyche
- Evolution
- Culture
- Important Features of Human Social Life

Culture and Nature



- The case of “Little Brenda”
 - The penis of a male baby was badly damaged during circumcision
 - Parents decided to raise him as a girl (with the help of surgery and female hormone injections)
 - The child did not adapt well to the female role
- What does this suggest about culture and nature?
- On the spectrum of innate versus socialized, where do you believe sex differences to be?

Compared with males, the average female...

- Has 70% more body fat, 40% less muscle, and is 5 inches shorter
- Is more sensitive to smells and sounds
- Is twice as vulnerable to anxiety disorders and depression
- Gravitates toward jobs that reduce inequalities (e.g., public defender)
- Binds families together (buy 3x as many gifts & greeting cards, write 4x more personal letters, make 20% more long distance calls)
- Smiles more
- Is more empathic
- Is more valued as a friend by both men and women
- Is better at understanding nonverbal communication and expressing herself nonverbally
- Earns 77% of what the average male earns

Compared with females, the average male...

- Slower to enter puberty (by 2 years) but dies earlier (by 5 years)
- 3x more likely to commit suicide, 4x more likely to take Ritalin for ADHD, 5x more likely to become alcoholic, and 6x more likely to be killed by lightning
- More likely to be capable of wiggling ears
- Is far more likely to be a legislator (86% vs. 14%), prime minister/president (95% vs. 5%), and CEO of Fortune 500 company (99% vs. 1%)
- Is more concerned with social dominance and is more likely to be conservative
- Is more likely to invite for dates, drive, and pay
- Tend to be directive in their communication
- Is more likely to speak assertively, interrupt others, and stare at others
- Is more likely to be comfortable with "casual" sex with different partners (48% vs. 12%) and believe that it is OK for two people to have sex even if they've only known each other briefly (53% vs. 36%)

Nature vs. Nurture?

- This debate may no longer be useful
- Both "nature" and "nurture" have real influences on behavior
- Nature is fundamental...but nature and culture appear to shape each other in a complex interplay
 - The psychological traits that may set us apart from non-human species are those that allow us to maintain culture (e.g., language, self concept, theory of mind)

Explaining the Psyche

- Psyche is a broad term for mind which encompasses emotions, desires, perceptions, and all other psychological processes
 - Nature – Genes, hormones, brain structure, and other innate processes dictate how you will behave
 - Culture – Learned experiences from parents, society, and other sources

Nature



- Theory of evolution – Focus on how change occurs in nature
- Natural selection – those members of a species that survive and reproduce most effectively are the ones that pass along their genes to future generations
 - Survival until reproduction
 - Reproduction



Evolution

- Survival – living longer
 - “Survival of the fittest”
 - Competition within and between species
- Mutation – a new gene or combination of genes
- Reproduction – producing offspring that survive long enough to reproduce and are capable of reproduction
 - Creation of viable offspring is a vital element of natural selection
 - Different reproductive strategies for males and females

Evolution and Psychology

- In recent decades, psychologists have started to examine the evolution of behavioral tendencies
 - Evolutionary psychology is the study of the evolution of behavior using principles of natural selection
 - Based on the idea that evolution may "select" psychological and behavioral traits that enhance the preservation and spread of one's genes
 - This has been helpful in understanding areas such as mating strategies (e.g., the function of jealousy) and emotions

Culture

- Culture – The enduring behaviors, ideas, attitudes, and traditions shared by a large group of people and transmitted from one generation to the next
 - Culture as shared ideas – understanding abstract concepts as a group (e.g., freedom)
 - Culture as system – links people together (e.g., food production/distribution system)
 - Culture as praxis – shared ways of doing things (e.g., drive on the right side of the road)
- In research, there is a need to consider cultural differences as well as underlying similarities

The Importance of Ideas

- Culture consists of shared ideas
- Humans choose their actions based on what something means
 - Ideas – mental representations (thoughts) that are abstract (i.e., they refer to more than a single concrete thing) and that can be expressed in language
 - Example: Laws are ideas
- To understand human behavior, it is essential to understand what the behavior means to the person

Example of the Importance of Ideas

- In 2005, a Danish newspaper published a series of editorial cartoons which depicted the Islamic prophet Muhammad
- Muslims were upset by these depictions because they considered them to be blasphemous
- Results
 - Protests and violence (more than 100 deaths)
 - Danish embassies set on fire in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran
 - Various death threats

Social Animal or Cultural Animal?

- Social Animal – seek connections to others
 - Includes humans but also many other animals
 - Work together
 - Learn from one another
 - Help kin
 - Resolve conflict with aggression
- Cultural Animal – evolution shaped human psyche to enable humans to create and take part in culture
 - Defining trait of what makes us human
 - Division of labor
 - Deliberately share knowledge
 - Help strangers
 - Resolve conflict with many alternatives
 - What has been passed on to you from previous generations?

The Individual and Society



- Social Brain Theory
 - The human brain may have evolved because of our social system
 - In other species, larger brains tend to be linked with more complex social systems (Dunbar, 1993, 1996)

Advantages of Culture

- Human brain allows us to capitalize on the virtues of culture
 - Language
 - Progress - to build on experience of others
 - Division of Labor
 - Exchange of Goods and Services
- Have humans evolved to participate in culture?

Interplay of Nature and Culture

- All cultures are confronted with certain tasks...
 - Food
 - Shelter
 - Procreation
 - Organization
- ...but cultures find diverse ways to satisfy these demands
- Example: Food
 - Some foods are poisonous or have no nutritional value...so we tend to avoid them
 - However, other potential food sources are considered taboo because of cultural standards

Culture and Food Preferences

- Americans eat oysters but not snails.
- The French eat snails but not locusts.
- The Zulus eat locusts but not fish.
- The Jews eat fish but not pork.
- The Hindus eat pork but not beef.
- The Russians eat beef but not snakes.
- The Chinese eat snakes but not people.
- The Jale of New Guinea find people delicious.
- What are some of the reasons that different cultures vary in the foods they eat?

Sex and Culture

- Is sex simply a matter of genes and hormones causing people to feel desire?
- Does culture play a role in our sexual behavior?
- Some features are common across cultures
 - e.g., men have more sexual partners; primary (if not only) means for procreation; same basic sexual activities have existed for thousands of years (with the exception of sadomasochistic behaviors)
- Common features influenced by culture
 - e.g., rules about who can have sex; preventing conception; prostitution
- Differences BETWEEN cultures
 - e.g., virginity at marriage (required in Turkey but forbidden in Guam); masturbation is a capital crime according to Indonesian law; homosexual acts are normative in New Guinea prior to marriage; Lebanese men are not allowed to have sex with male animals but they can have sex with female animals
- Differences WITHIN cultures
 - e.g., number of partners (some are virgins at 30 while others have dozens of partners while still in high school); choice of sexual activities; attitudes toward pornography

Tradeoffs

- Tradeoffs – a choice in which taking or maximizing one benefit requires either accepting a cost or sacrificing another benefit
 - Small cars use less gas but they may sacrifice safety, comfort, and convenience
- Tradeoffs are an important aspect of human social life...we are constantly being confronted with these sorts of decisions
- Time Tradeoffs – Now versus Tomorrow
 - Delay of gratification (e.g., having high credit card bills)
 - Natural selection has not favored concerns about the distant future...but a future orientation and delay of gratification skills are important for cultural beings
- Political Tradeoffs
 - Laws address current problems but may create new ones
 - Ohio law in the 1990s freed pregnant female prisoners...which led female prisoners to having a lot of unprotected sex with guards and attorneys to gain release from prison
 - Protecting the environment vs. cost of energy
 - Taxes to government services
 - Politicians recognize these tradeoffs but tend to ignore them during campaigns
 - This is also a tradeoff: In order to win elections, you need to oversimplify the issues and ignore the complications

Important Features of Human Social Life

- The Duplex Mind
- Interpersonal Functions
- Conflicts Between Nature and Culture
- Putting People First

Example of the Duplex Mind

- I want you to list the numbers from 1 to 10 in numeric order out loud as quickly as you can when I say “GO”
- Now, I want you to list the numbers from 1 to 10 in alphabetical order as quickly as you can when I say “GO”
- Which is easier? Why?
- The automatic system is important to our behavior
 - Do you have to think “right foot...left foot...right foot” when you walk?
 - Does it take much attention for you to tie your shoes in the morning? To drive a car?

The Duplex Mind




Conscious	Automatic
Slow	Fast
Controllable	Outside of conscious control
Guided by intention	Unintentional
Flexible	Inflexible
Good at combining information	Poor at combining information
Precise, rule-based calculations	Estimates
Can perform complex operations	Simple operations
Does one thing at a time	Can do many things at once
Reasoning	Intuition
Effortful	Effortless
Features full-blown emotions	Features quick feelings of like and dislike, good and bad
Depends on automatic system “Figure it out”	Can be independent of conscious processing “Go with your gut feeling”

- Automatic system
 - Outside of consciousness
 - Runs a lot of simple operations
 - Quick and efficient
 - Increased focus on the role of automatic system
 - Can learn, think, choose and respond
 - Has ideas and emotions
 - Knows “self” and other people
- Conscious system
 - Carries out complex operations
 - Focuses on complex thinking and logic
 - Allows us to deal with novel situations
 - Allows us to combine information in a rule-driven manner
- These systems work together
 - These systems may come into conflict and the conscious system can override the automatic system

Interpersonal Functions

- One of the basic functions of the self is to gain acceptance from others
 - Many of our inner processes serve interpersonal functions (e.g., self-esteem)
- We have to be able to understand what other people want and expect...then try to modify our behavior to meet those expectations
- What are some of the things that people do to obtain social acceptance?
 - e.g., behave politely, acquire skills, get an education, earn credentials, find steady employment, attract and maintain romantic relationships

Conflicts Between Nature and Culture

- “Nature says go, culture says stop” 
- Nature – impulses, wishes, automatic responses
 - Tends to be “go” oriented
- Culture – teaches self-control and restraint
 - Tends to be “no” oriented
- ...but there are certainly exceptions
 - Nature’s disgust reactions (No!) 
 - Cultural timetable for meals (Go!) 



Selfish Impulse Versus Social Conscience

- Nature tends to make us selfish
 - Preservation of self
- Culture helps us resist selfish impulses
 - Consideration of what is best for society
 - Moral Code
 - Laws

Bad Is Stronger Than Good

- Are negative things “stronger” than good things?
 - Think about a time when someone said something bad about you
 - How memorable or powerful is that compared to good things that people have said?
- Bad things tend to have greater psychological impact
 - Trauma versus joyful event
- May be an innate tendency that is linked with survival
- Positive found in cultural ideas
 - Positive psychology
- Since bad things are stronger than good, we need more good experiences than bad ones for us to flourish (about three times as many)

Putting People First

- People get most of what they need from other people (including information)
- Culture serves as a “general store” of information
- People look to each other first
 - Asch’s research on conformity

Conclusion

- Human behavior results from the interplay of nature and culture
- Human life is enmeshed in culture
 - Diverse but share common themes
 - Creates unique problems
 - Is shared from generation to generation
