Cultures, Subcultures, and Countercultures: Crash Course Sociology #11

Crash Course: Sociology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=RV50AV7-Iwc
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/RV50AV7-Iwc

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

How many cultures are there in the world? We've talked a lot about the things that make a culture, a culture, things like norms and symbols and languages, but we haven't really discussed how you lump all those little things together and say, yes, these are the things that belong together, these things are culture A, and these other things are culture B. So what are the rules of culture?

Well, culture isn't just about nationality or the language you speak. You and another person can live in the same country and speak the same language and still have totally different cultural backgrounds. Within a single country, even within a single city, you see lots of different cultures and each person's cultural background will be a mish-mash of many different influences. So there really isn't and never will be a single agreed upon number of cultures that exist in the world. But that doesn't mean we can't recognize a culture and understand cultural patterns and cultural change and think about how different cultures contribute to the functioning of society.

(Intro)

Are you more likely to spend your free time at a football game or at a modern art gallery? Do you watch NCIS or True Detective? Do you wear JC Penney or J. Crew? These distinctions and many more like them are just one way of distinguishing between cultural patterns in terms of social class, 'cause yes, class affects culture and vice versa. So, one way of looking at culture is by examining distinctions between low culture and high culture, and okay, yeah, those are kind of gross sounding terms, but I wanna be clear. High culture does not mean "better" culture. In fact, so-called low culture is also known as popular culture, which is exactly what it sounds like.

Low or popular culture includes the cultural behaviors and ideas that are popular with most people in a society. High culture, meanwhile, refers to cultural patterns that distinguish society's elite. You can sort of think of low culture vs high culture as the Peoples' Choice Awards vs. the Oscars. The Hunger Games probably weren't gonna be winning Best Picture at the Oscars, but they were massive blockbusters, and the original movie was voted the best movie of 2012 by the Peoples' Choice Awards. By contrast, the winner of Best Picture at the Oscars that same year was The Artist, a black and white silent film produced by a French production company. Very different movies, very different types of culture.

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Now, you can also look at how different types of cultural patterns work together. The Hunger Games and The Artist may appeal to different segments of society, but ultimately, they both fit into mainstream American media culture.

Mainstream culture includes the cultural patterns that are broadly in line with a society's cultural ideals and values, and within any society, there are also subcultures, cultural patterns that set apart a segment of a society's population. Take, for example, hipsters. They make up a cultural group that was formed around the idea of rejecting what was once considered 'cool' and (?~2:35) have a different type of cultural expression.

Yeah, your beard or your six gear bike or your bleach blond hair or your thick frame glasses, they're all part of the material culture that signifies membership in your own specific subculture. But who decides what's mainstream and what's a subculture? I mean, the whole hipster thing has gone pretty mainstream at this point.

Typically, cultural groups with the most power and societal influence get labeled the norm, and people with less power get relegated to subgroups. The US is a great example of this. In large part because of our history as a country of immigrants, the US is often thought of as a "melting pot", a place where many cultures come together to form a single combined culture. But how accurate is that? After all, each subculture is unique and they don't necessarily blend together into one big cohesive culture just because we share a country, and more importantly, some cultures are valued more than others in the US. For example, everyone gets Christmas off from school, because Christian culture holds a privileged role in American society. That might not seem fair if you're a member of a subculture that isn't folded into mainstream culture. So it's not really a melting pot if one flavor is overpowering all the other flavors, and this brings me to another subject: how we judge other cultures and subcultures.

Humans are judgmental. We just are, and we're extra judgmental when we see someone who acts differently than how we think people should act. Ethnocentrism is the practice of judging one culture by the standards of another. In recent decades, there's been growing recognition that Eurocentrism or the preference for European cultural patterns has influenced how history has been recorded and how we interpret the lives and ways of people from other cultures. So what if, rather than trying to melt all the cultures into one, we recognized each individual flavor?

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One way to do this is by focusing research on cultures that have historically gotten less attention. For example, Afrocentrism is a school of thought that recenters historical and sociological study on the contributions of Africans and African-Americans. Another option is expanding and equalizing your focus. Instead of looking at behavior through the lens of your own culture, you can look at it through the lens of multiculturalism, a perspective that rather than seeing society as a homogenous culture, recognizes cultural diversity while advocating for the equal standing of all cultural traditions. In this view, America is less a melting pot and more like a multicultural society. Still, the ways in which cultures and subcultures fit together, if at all, can very depending on your school of thought as a sociologist.

For example, from a structural functionalist perspective, cultures form to provide order and cohesiveness in a society. So in that view, a melting pot of cultures is a good thing, but a conflict theorist might see the interactions of subcultures differently. Prioritizing one subculture over another can create social inequalities and disenfranchise those who belong to cultures that are at odds with the mainstream. It's hard to encourage individual cultural identities without promoting divisiveness. In the US, at least, it's a constant struggle. But sometimes, subgroups can be more than simply different from mainstream culture, they can be in active opposition to it.

This is what we call a counter-culture. Counter-cultures push back on mainstream culture in an attempt to change how a society functions. Let's go to the Thought Bubble to take a trip back to one of the biggest counter-cultural periods of the 20th century--the 1960s.

In the United States, the 1960s were rife with counter-cultures. It was a time of beatniks and hippies, of protests against the Vietnam War and a protest for Civil Rights and women's liberation. These movemenets were often led by young people and were seen as a rebellion against the culture and values of older generations. This was the era of free love, where people embraced relationships outside of the traditionally heterosexual and monogomous cultural norms. Drug use, especially the use of psychedelic drugs, was heavily associated with this sub-culture and was celebrated in its popular culture, think Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds or (?~5:52)

about acid trips.

But this counter-culture was also a push back politically against mainstream culture. Many cornerstones of the politics of the American left have their origins in the counter-culture of the 1960s: anti-war, pro-environmentalism, pro-civil rights, feminsim, LGBTQ equality. From the Stonewall Riots to the Vietnam War protests, '60s counter-culture was where many of these issues first reached the public consciousness.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

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So counter-cultures can often act as catalysts for cultural change, especially if they get big enough to gain mainstream support. But cultures change all the time, with or without the pushback from subcultures and counter-cultures, and different parts of cultures change at different speeds. Sometimes we have what's called a cultural lag, where some cultural elements change more slowly than others. Think how education works, for example. In the US, we get the summer off from school. This is a holdover from when this was a more agricultural country and children needed to take time off during the harvest. Today, there's no real reason for summer vacation, other than that's what we've always done.

So how does cultural change happen? Sometimes people invent new things that change culture. Cell phones, for example, have revolutionized not just how we make phone calls, but how we socialize and communicate, and inventions don't just have to be material. Ideas, like about money or voting systems, can also be invented and change a culture. People also discover new things. When European explorers first discovered tomatoes in Central America in the 1500s and brought them back to Europe, they completely changed the culture of food. What would pizza be without tomatoes?

A third cause of cultural change comes from cultural diffusion, which is how cultural traits spread from one culture to another. Just about everything we think of as classic American culture is actually borrowed and transformed from another culture. Burgers and fries? German and Belgian, respectively. The American cowboy? An update on the Mexican vaquero. The ideals of liberty and justice for all enshired in our founding documents? Heavily influenced by French philosophers like Rousseau and Voltaire and British philosophers like Hobbes and Locke, as well as by the Iroquois Confederacy and its ideas of representative democracy.

Whether we're talking about material culture or symbolic culture, we see more and more aspects of culture shared across nations and across oceans. As symbolic interactionists see it, all of society is about the shared reality, the shared culture, that we create. As borders get thinner, the group of people who share a culture gets larger. Whether it's the hot dogs we get from Germany or the jazz and hip-hop coming from African traditions, more and more cultures overlap as technology and globalization make our world just a little bit smaller.

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As our society becomes more global, the questions raised by two of our camps of sociology, structural functionalism and conflict theory, become even more pressing. Are the structural functionalists right? Does having a shared culture provide points of similarity that encourage cooperation and help society function? Or does conflict theory have it right? Does culture divide us, and benefit some members of society more than others? In the end, they're both kind of right. There will always be different ways of thinking and doing and living within a society, but culture is the tie that binds us together.

Today, we learned about different types of culture, like low culture and high culture. We looked at different ways of categorizing cultures into subcultures. We contrasted two different ways of looking at cultural diversity: Ethnocentrism and Multi-culturalism. We discussed the role of counter cultures and explored how cultural change happens, and lastly, we looked at a structural functionalist and a conflict theory perspective of what cultures mean for society.

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