

Discourse and Culture

In this course, students are asked to critically analyze the cultural environment they have grown up within. In order to do this, one needs a theory of culture - an explanation of what culture is and how it both shapes and is shaped by those who live within it. This text draws on a range of intellectual traditions, from anthropology and sociology to semiotics and contemporary cultural studies, to articulate a communication-based theory of culture. The text begins with a conceptual definition of the term *culture* itself, along with a discussion of the complex relationship between human nature and culture. A distinction is then drawn between *psycho-structural* dimensions of culture (i.e., structures of the human psyche), as well as *socio-structural* dimensions of culture (i.e., structures of social organization), in order to draw attention to these two distinct but inter-related aspects of culture. In turn, a theory of cultural change and adaptation is articulated around the concepts of *cultural codes* and *discourse*. The text concludes with a discussion of the concept of *hegemony*, which serves as a useful device for understanding the way that dominant cultural codes can come to serve the narrow interests of privileged segments of society.

The Nature/Culture Dialectic

The word *culture* has a complex history and many shades of meaning.¹ In its popular contemporary usage, it often refers to the ensemble of arts, food, dress, and other aesthetic variations that distinguish one social group from another. In semiotics and cultural studies, it tends to refer to the systems of representation, meaning, belief, and other ideological variations between social groups. And in its broadest sociological and anthropological use, it also refers to the political, economic, legal, and other structural variations between social groups. What all of these meanings have in common, however, is a reference to phenomena that are socially learned or constructed, and therefore relatively fluid and variable, as opposed to phenomena that are biologically inherited or determined and therefore relatively “fixed.”

For the purposes of this text, *culture* will be defined in these broad terms, as the entire social heritage of a community, including its material expressions, its ideological expressions, and its structural or institutional expressions – all of which are socially learned or constructed and therefore contingent and variable.² In contrast, the term *human nature* will be used to signify those shared species characteristics that are biologically inherited and therefore relatively fixed or invariable.

For instance, while the need to eat is an innate characteristic of human nature, everything from our tastes in food to the ways we produce and distribute food are expressions of human culture. Similarly, while the capacity to use complex languages is an innate characteristic of human nature, the diverse languages that different populations actually develop are expressions of human culture. Likewise, while the tendency to live in social groups may be an innate characteristic of human nature, the diverse ways that we actually structure our social relations are expressions of human culture. Understood this way, human beings are remarkably (although not entirely) malleable creatures. With a finite range of fixed species characteristics we are capable of an almost infinite range of cultural expressions.

¹ For overviews of the etymology of the word *culture*, refer to Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London, Fontana Press., and Williams, R. (1983). *Culture & Society: 1780-1950*. New York, Columbia University Press..

² For a similar definition, refer to Bullock, A., O. Stallybrass, et al., Eds. (1988). *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*. London, Fontana Press..

Of course, as these examples illustrate, the relationship between nature and culture is subtle and complex. Most human thought and behavior is a product of the interplay between the two. Accordingly, nature and culture need to be understood *dialectically*: each acts upon the other, and although they can be considered separately for analytical purposes, their real-world expressions are inextricably linked. However, they still serve as useful analytical categories. Consider, for instance, how shades of color can be analyzed in terms of the primary colors that constitute them. Human thought and behavior are like shades of color in this regard. In one sense, green is neither blue nor yellow. It has its own independent characteristics and can be studied accordingly. In another sense, green is composed of both blue and yellow, and it can be analyzed in terms of the interplay between the two – even as the actual eating habits of a given person can be understood in terms of the interplay of biological impulses and culturally determined tastes and opportunities.

This *dialectical* or mutually informing relationship between nature and culture can also be seen in the fact that our capacity for culture is itself an innate characteristic of human nature. Moreover, this capacity for culture enables people to regulate various biological impulses. Consider human sexuality. Though the sex impulse is part of our biological nature, most cultures establish norms regarding its appropriate and inappropriate expressions. Therefore, when discussing the relationship between human nature and human culture, it is important to recognize that we have the cultural capacity to regulate various natural impulses.

To complicate things further, many anthropologists point out that the latter stages of our biological evolution occurred within the matrix of early proto-human cultures. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains, culture was not a last-minute addition to an otherwise finished evolutionary product: *Homo sapiens*. Rather, the earliest proto-human cultures appear to have played a directive role in the evolutionary process that led to modern *Homo sapiens*.³ Processes of physical and cultural evolution were therefore not distinct and sequential. Rather, there was a period of overlap in which they were mutually informing, especially with regard to the evolution of the human brain.

Although the distinction between nature and culture is therefore subtle and complex, it can still serve as an analytically useful distinction. Indeed, after exploring the dialectical relationship between nature and culture, Geertz himself concedes that

³ Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York, Fontana.. Refer especially to discussions of this theme in Chapters 2 and 3.

[while] the boundary between what is innately controlled and what is culturally controlled in human behavior is an ill-defined and wavering one... some things are, for all intents and purposes, entirely controlled intrinsically: we need no more cultural guidance to learn how to breathe than a fish needs to learn how to swim. Others are almost certainly largely cultural; we do not attempt to explain on a genetic basis why some men put their trust in centralized planning and others in the free market... [similarly] our capacity to speak is surely innate; our capacity to speak English is surely cultural.⁴

Moreover, the distinction between nature and culture serves an especially important purpose in cultural critique because of the problem of *naturalization*. When cultural practices have been internalized, they often appear natural and inevitable to those who have internalized them. And that which appears natural and inevitable appears impossible to change. Therefore, as many cultural critics and reformers have learned, the first step toward reforming specific cultural practices is *denaturalizing* them by demonstrating that they are culturally contingent rather than biologically determined. For instance, in many cultures throughout history, slavery was perceived as a natural and inevitable phenomenon. Accordingly, one of the primary strategies of the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement was to demonstrate the cultural contingency of slavery. Similarly, in many cultures throughout history, the subordination of women has been viewed as a natural and inevitable phenomenon. One of the primary strategies of the modern women's movement has likewise been to demonstrate the cultural rather than natural basis of gender inequality.

In sum, the distinction between culture and nature is a starting point for critiquing the assumptions of *biological determinism* – the notion that most, if not all, of what we do and become is directly programmed by our genes.⁵ And though such assumptions trace back centuries, they still echo today in the darker corners of discourses such as sociobiology – where they often surface as a justification for existing social injustices or racial inequities. In contrast, cultural critics question the “naturalness” or “inevitableness” of racism, sexism, nationalism, militarism, competitive materialism, and so forth – both in their individual as well as collective or structural expressions.

⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

⁵ Refer, for example, to critiques of biological determinism in Rose, S., R. C. Lewontin, et al. (1987). *Not In Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature*. New York, Penguin., as well as Lewontin, R. C. (1991). *Biology as Ideology: The Doctrine of DNA*. New York, HarperCollins..

Dimensions of Culture

Defining culture as that which is socially learned or constructed and therefore contingent and variable, in contrast to those species characteristics that are biologically inherited and therefore relatively fixed, is only a starting point for a useful theory of culture. Thus defined, the range of phenomena that falls within the domain of culture is still so broad that its value as an analytical category is limited. For the purpose of this text, two primary dimensions of culture also need to be distinguished. On one hand, culture has a *psycho-structural* dimension consisting of *structures of human consciousness*. On the other hand, culture has a *socio-structural* dimension consisting of *structures of social organization*.

Like the categories of human nature and culture discussed above, these psychological and sociological categories also need to be understood dialectically. Both are inseparably related and mutually informing. Nonetheless, they serve as useful analytical categories because they highlight the way that culture both shapes and is shaped by the interior world of the human mind as well as the exterior world of social organization. As the anthropologist Marc Howard Ross demonstrates in his work on culture and conflict, culture cannot be understood adequately without reference to both.⁶

The term *psycho-structural* refers to culturally shared attitudes, values, and response tendencies – or structures of the mind – acquired through processes of social learning.⁷ These psychological structures develop within a cultural matrix. They are widely shared rather than idiosyncratic. Of course, individuals do develop certain unique and idiosyncratic attitudes toward, and ideas about, the world around them. In addition, there is always variation between the ways different individuals think within a given culture. Cultures are not monolithic entities. Within any given culture there are always many currents, cross-currents, and sub-currents of attitudes, ideas, and behaviors. At the same time, many of the ways that we understand and respond to the world are socially learned and culturally contingent.

⁶ Ross, M. H. (1993). *The Culture of Conflict: Interpretations and Interests in Comparative Perspective*. London, Yale University Press..

⁷ The term *psycho-structural* is adapted here from Ross's term *psycho-cultural*. I prefer the term *psycho-structural* because it reminds us that social structures have counterparts in structures of human consciousness.

Structures of social organization, on the other hand, include the political, economic, legal, and other social arrangements (e.g., structures of authority, relations of production, systems of resource distribution, divisions of labor) that constrain and direct human attitudes, ideas, and behaviors. Of course, these social arrangements both shape and are shaped by the psycho-structural dispositions of those who live within them. Both categories are inseparably linked and mutually informing. At the same time, they are analytically useful distinctions because they provide complementary insights into human culture.

Consider the case of conflict between social groups. Socio-structural analyses tend to highlight objective conflicts of interest within the organization of society (i.e., the empirically identifiable relations between capital and labor in a capitalist economy, between men and women in a patriarchal society, or between first- and third-world nations in a post-colonial world order). Moreover, socio-structural prescriptions tend to focus on reforming underlying economic, political, or legal structures – that is, reorganizing the relations of production within the economy, formulating laws that guarantee the equality of men and women, or writing off third-world debt and subordinating an unfettered global economy to structures of democratic control.

Psycho-structural analyses, on the other hand, tend to highlight the diversity of interpretations and responses within otherwise objectively identifiable social arrangements (i.e., different ways the same social arrangements are culturally justified by those who are privileged by them as well as different cultural responses to the same social arrangements by those who are disadvantaged by them). Accordingly, psycho-structural prescriptions tend to focus on reforming attitudes, values, and beliefs (i.e., the subjective structures of the mind rather than the objective structures of social organization). Given the significant role that early childhood development plays in the formation of these psycho-structural dispositions, these strategies often focus on cultivating new attitudes and values in children or youth during their formative years. Of course, psycho-structural dispositions continue to be formed or reinforced throughout life by a wide range of social institutions. Accordingly, strategies to reform these dispositions can also be directed at other age groups, as seen in contemporary “social marketing” campaigns (i.e., media campaigns that promote attitudes, values, and beliefs rather than material commodities).

Though disciplinary or paradigmatic blinders often privilege one perspective over the other, each perspective reveals as much as it obscures – like looking at different sides of the same coin. Although social arrangements may be objectively identifiable, perceptions of interests are highly subjective and vary significantly across cultures with otherwise similar social structures, and psycho-structural research is needed to understand and explain these differences. In addition, even

though socio-structural theories often admit the possibility of multiple cross-cutting interests, psycho-structural research is needed to explain how and why the same interests are ranked differently by different people in otherwise similar situations. At the same time, psycho-structural studies can obscure larger social structures by focusing only on internal structures of consciousness. Therefore, socio-structural analyses are also clearly needed. As Ross explains, objectively structured conflicts of interest are half the picture. Subjective interpretations of interests are the other half.⁸

Change and Adaptation

Given that structures of the mind and structures of social organization are both culturally contingent rather than genetically programmed, a theory of culture also needs to explain how and why these structures vary between cultures. A theory of culture, in other words, needs to account for processes of cultural change and adaptation. Of course, even processes of genetic adaptation (i.e., evolution) defy simple modeling, and cultural adaptation is an infinitely more subtle and complex process. In this regard, cultural change and adaptation can be accounted for only through the crudest conceptual models. Nonetheless, crude models at least provide an initial vocabulary for thinking and talking about culture, as well as a starting point for cultural analysis and critique.

The model of cultural change and adaptation articulated below draws from a range of theoretical traditions, ranging again from anthropology and sociology to semiotics and cultural studies. At the core of the model is the concept of *cultural codes* (or conventions). After an initial definition of this core concept, the model is developed by examining how cultural codes function within a series of increasingly expansive cultural phenomena, from isolated *representations* to more complex *discursive constructs* to integrated *discourses* to *comprehensive discursive formations*.

⁸ Ibid., Chapter 10.

Cultural Codes and Discourse

Psycho-structural dispositions and socio-structural arrangements can vary widely between cultures. Even within a given culture, they often change over time. However, within any given culture at any given moment in time people are generally able to understand one another, communicate, and interact effectively because of culturally shared conventions or “codes.”

Cultural codes, in this context, refer to widely shared *rules of correspondence* – or structured relationships – within and between the complex elements that constitute a given culture (i.e., the structures of mind and structures of social organization).⁹ Some codes are explicitly stated and others merely implied. Some codes are learned or constructed through conscious effort and others are learned or constructed largely unconsciously. Regardless of how they are stated, learned, or constructed, cultural codes establish conventions or rules of correspondence through which thought, talk, and action becomes mutually intelligible within a shared culture.

In semiotics and cultural studies, a key concept for understanding the function of cultural codes is the concept of *representation*.¹⁰ And though a full-fledged theory of representation is not needed here, a simple overview of the concept provides a means of understanding the way that cultural codes function. In this context, representation refers to the social process of creating and exchanging meaning through the use of languages or “signifying systems.”¹¹ Languages facilitate the exchange of meaning within a culture because words and other signs are *encoded* to stand for (i.e., to *represent*) the meanings and things we associate with

⁹ Refer to Hall, S. (1997). *The Work of Representation. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Sage Publications: 13-74., for a concise discussion of cultural codes. See also Eco, U. (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press.; Fiske, J. (1982). *Introduction to Communication Studies*. London, Methuen.; and Turner, G. (1990). *British Cultural Studies*. Boston, Unwin Hyman., for additional discussions of the concept of codes.

¹⁰ For the most comprehensive scholarly treatment of the field of semiotic theory and history, refer to Bouissac, P., Ed. (1998). *Encyclopedia of Semiotics*. London, Oxford University Press. The discussion that follows is adapted in large part from the work of Stuart Hall, who has woven concepts from diverse intellectual traditions, including semiotics, into a concise and insightful theory of culture. For an edited collection of Hall’s contributions in this regard, refer to Morley, D. and K.-H. Chen, Eds. (1996). *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. London, Routledge. For a concise discussion of many of the specific concepts outlined below, refer to Hall, S. (1997). *The Work of Representation. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Sage Publications: 13-74..

¹¹ O’Sullivan, T., J. Hartley, et al., Eds. (1994). *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*. London, Routledge..

them. In addition, the term *representation* also refers to the product of this process: *representations*.

Representations can be understood in terms of three basic dimensions or components. First, a representation is associated with some *sign* or *signifier* – a word, a gesture, an image, or anything that is used to refer to something else. Second, a representation is associated with some actual *thing* or *practice* in the world – some material or social phenomenon apart from the signifier used to refer to it. And third, a representation is associated with some *meaning* – some cognitive and/or affective association – that is conceptually linked with the respective sign and thing.¹² Together, this three-way association between a given sign, thing, and meaning constitutes a given representation.¹³

The relationship between these three components in any given representation, of course, is culturally determined. That is, there is no necessary correspondence between the signs, things, and meanings we associate together in a given representation. Meanings do not “reside” in things – as the things can clearly have different meanings in different cultures. Neither do meanings reside in the signs we use to refer to those things – as the same signs can also have different meanings in different cultures. Nor does a necessary relationship exist between any given thing and the sign we associate with it – as the same things are frequently signified by different signs in different cultures. We associate signs, things, and meanings together in our minds and through our language in culturally contingent rather than genetically programmed ways.

The formal study of these representational relationships and the codes

¹² The term *meaning* refers not merely to conscious and rational interpretations of things, but also to unconscious and affective associations with signs and things. Refer, for example, to discussions of this theme in Allan, K. (1998). *The Meaning of Culture: Moving the Postmodern Critique Forward*. Westport, Connecticut, Praeger..

¹³ This rather simplistic sounding but analytically useful distinction between *thing*, *sign*, and *meaning* is borrowed from Hall, S. (1997). *The Work of Representation. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Sage Publications: 13-74.. The genealogy of these terms can be traced to Saussure, F. d. (1960). *Course in General Linguistics*. London, Peter Owen.. Saussure conceptualized a *sign* as embodying both a *signifier* and a *signified*. In Hall’s usage, and in this text, the term *sign* is synonymous with Saussure’s *signifier* – the actual word, sound, image, and so forth, used to signify something else. Saussure’s term *signified*, on the other hand, refers to the mental concept that a specific sign is associated with – or the *meaning* in Hall’s vocabulary. Following Saussure, other authors (e.g., Ogden, C. and I. Richards (1923). *The Meaning of Meaning*. London, Routledge.) added the term *referent* to refer to the actual phenomenon that a given sign referred to (as opposed to the mental concept or meaning the sign was associated with). In Hall’s usage, and in this text, the term *thing* is synonymous with this use of *referent*. Much semiotic theory has subsequently been developed around this three-way distinction between *sign*, *meaning*, and *thing*, although the vocabulary employed varies from author to author.

that make them culturally intelligible has yielded valuable insights into the social or cultural construction of reality. Semiotic scholars point out, for instance, that while codes temporarily “fix” or “stabilize” the rules of correspondence within a culture, and thereby enable groups of people to “translate” meaning in mutually intelligible ways, these codes are never entirely or permanently fixed. Subgroups within a given culture often challenge or change widely shared cultural codes. Alternative and oppositional codes often coexist alongside culturally dominant ones. In addition, dominant codes shift and change over time as a result of forces within and between cultures.

Of course, while representations and the codes that render them intelligible may be among the most basic elements of culture (the “semiotic bricks” from which cultures are constructed), narrow attention to the isolated building blocks can obscure the larger and more complex cultural constructs that are often built from them. In this context, representations and codes take on depth and dimension as they are *articulated* together into more complex constructions. *Articulation*, in this sense, has a twofold meaning.¹⁴ First, it refers to expression through language, where language is understood as any organized system of words or signs. In addition, it refers to the linking of two or more things together, such as the articulation of two bones at a joint. Of course, the two meanings are not as distinct as they appear at first glance, for expression through language always involves the joining or linking together of multiple words or signs.

Bearing in mind the insights of semiotics, articulation has a deeper meaning in cultural studies than in popular usage. Because all words or signs are parts of representational triads that also embody associations with specific things and meanings, the linking of signs together on the linguistic surface of communication is accompanied by the simultaneous linking of different meanings in people’s minds, as well as different things and/or social practices in the material world. For example, the phrase “that’s just human nature” is, on the surface, a simple linguistic expression. But beneath the surface of that linguistic expression lies a culturally coded set of meanings and practices. In many Western cultures, the phrase embodies a complex set of attitudes and beliefs (i.e., meanings) about the inevitability of certain human behaviors, such as the

¹⁴ For discussions of the concept of *articulation* as used in cultural studies, refer to O’Sullivan, T., J. Hartley, et al., Eds. (1994). *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*. London, Routledge.; Hall, S. (1980). Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance. *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*. UNESCO. Paris, UNESCO: 305-45. and Hall, S. (1986). "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10(2): 45-60.; and Slack, J. D. (1996). The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies. *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. D. Morley and K.-H. Chen. London, Routledge: 112-127..

competitive pursuit of individual self-interests. These attitudes and beliefs translate into social structures and practices that tolerate or even encourage such behaviors.

In this way, just as individual words are articulated together to form more complex grammatical constructions in a given speech act, the meanings and things (or practices) that are associated with those words (or other signs) simultaneously articulate together to form more complex social constructions – or what will be referred to below as *discursive constructs*.¹⁵ Like the concept of articulation, however, the term *discursive* also has a surface meaning and a deep meaning.¹⁶ On the surface, it refers simply to complex linguistic expressions that are larger than a sentence or so. On a deeper level, however, it refers to the meanings and things or practices that are associated with these linguistic expressions. It reminds us of the inseparable connection between language, thought, and things or practices in our material and social worlds. It reminds us, in other words, that cultural ways of talking and thinking about things influence the ways we act in relations to those things.

A *discursive construct* is therefore a socially constructed way of talking about, thinking about, and, by extension, acting in relation to, a given phenomenon – such as “human nature” in the example above. Moreover, discursive constructs also tend to be governed by cultural codes or conventions. That is, some representations are more likely to be articulated together than others because cultural codes determine whether a given discursive construct will “make sense” or not within a given culture.

To extend the example above, highly individualistic and self-interested representations of human nature are easily intelligible when interpreted through the dominant codes of modern Western-liberal cultures. Some non-Western cultures, however, have historically represented human nature in a much more “relational” manner, with interests being understood primarily in communal rather than individualistic terms. In such cultures, Western representations of

¹⁵ The term *discursive construct*, as used in this text, is a loose adaptation of the concept of *statement*, as conceptualized by Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London, Tavistock..

¹⁶ This use of the term *discourse* also owes much to Foucault, Ibid. See also Hall, S. (1997). *The Work of Representation*. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Sage Publications: 13-74., and O'Sullivan, T., J. Hartley, et al., Eds. (1994). *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*. London, Routledge., for summaries of the concept as it has come to be used in cultural studies.

human nature would be relatively unintelligible.¹⁷ Discursive constructs are therefore culturally and historically specific. Even though they may have only a vague meaning, if any, in other cultures or at other times, they have very specific meanings that translate into concrete material practices within the cultures that articulate them.

To extend the analysis further: *discursive constructs* can be articulated together into highly complex systems of representation – entire *discourses* – which tend also to be governed by cultural codes or conventions. Discourses are widely shared systems of representation which provide culturally and historically specific ways of thinking about, talking about, and acting in relation to an entire class of phenomena. It is in this context that the connection between cultural codes and social practices becomes especially apparent. For instance, for much of this century, Western medical discourse has provided culturally specific ways of thinking about, talking about, and practicing medicine. It has articulated a conceptual system – primarily a “disease model” of medicine – characterized by a specific vocabulary for thinking and talking about the human body. It has articulated a system of research and expertise that has determined what counts as valid medical knowledge. It has articulated doctor-patient relations in ways that largely define the former as expert service providers and the latter as victims of disease and passive recipients of medical intervention. And it has articulated the institutional arrangements – hospitals, health insurance, and so forth – that have organized and regulated modern medical practices. Other discourses, such as discourses on education, commerce, law, politics, and so forth, can be understood in the same way. They are all culturally and historically specific ways of thinking about, talking about, and acting in relation to a given class of phenomena.

In this context, all discourses share a number of similar characteristics. They articulate what is generally “sayable” or “thinkable” in relation to a given class of phenomena in any given cultural and historical context. They articulate bodies of “knowledge,” as well as authoritative producers of this knowledge, that in turn constitute culturally and historically specific beliefs or “truths” about these phenomena. They articulate their “subjects” – the people that act within them or that they act upon – in such a manner that these subjects can be seen to, or even start to, personify or conform to these representations. And finally, they articulate social structures that organize and regulate collective practice in a manner that is consistent with these representations.

¹⁷ As the political anthropologist Marc Howard Ross points out, “The notion of the individual apart from the group is a product of Western thought, not of the general human experience” (Ross, M. H. (1993). *The Culture of Conflict: Interpretations and Interests in Comparative Perspective*. London, Yale University Press.).

Moreover, discourses are as much defined by what they *exclude* as by what they include. They simultaneously influence what is *not* sayable or *not* thinkable in a given cultural context; what does *not* constitute authoritative knowledge or truth and who is *not* an authoritative producer of such knowledge or truth; how subjects should *not* act; and what institutional configurations are *not* present.

For instance, in the case of Western medical discourse, holistic concepts such as “health maintenance” and “prevention” have until recently been eclipsed by reductionist concepts such as disease management and intervention. In this manner, healing arts based in nutrition, the use of herbs, body movement, acupuncture, and so forth have largely been excluded as valid knowledge systems in the West for much of this century. In turn, the human “subjects” of Western medicine have generally not been seen as primary agents in their own health-maintenance and healing. Accordingly, institutional support for these alternative approaches to health and healing have been largely absent. In all of these ways, modern medical discourse has been defined as much by what is absent within it as by what is present.

To extend the analysis even further, while discursive constructs can be articulated together into entire discourses, entire discourses can in turn be articulated with other discourses into comprehensive discursive formations.¹⁸ In this context, a *comprehensive discursive formation* refers to the articulation of distinct but mutually compatible discourses in a manner that reinforces similar ways of thinking, talking, and acting in relation to many classes of phenomena. And once again, discourses articulate together into larger discursive formations according to cultural codes or conventions.

For instance, when the medical discourse described above is articulated with discourses that idealize the free-market delivery of goods and services, they form part of a larger discursive formation that translates, in practice, into a commercialized medical system that sells health care as a commodity to those who can afford it and thereby operates much like any other free-market entity – as in the United States

¹⁸ This use of the term *comprehensive discursive formation* is loosely adapted from Foucault’s two terms *discursive formation* and *episteme*, as conceptualized in Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London, Tavistock.. In this text, a *comprehensive discursive formation* refers to the articulation of entire discourses into a larger discursive complex or totality. In this way, the distinction between *discursive construct*, *discourse*, and *comprehensive discursive formation* is used to indicate three distinct levels of analysis: the micro, meso, and macro, respectively. At the same time, however, these three terms are not meant to constitute mathematically precise units of measurement. The “boundaries” between them cannot be rigidly defined. Rather, they are metaphorical constructs intended to aid thinking and talking about micro-, meso-, and macro-level cultural constructions.

today. On the other hand, when the medical discourse described above is articulated with discourses that value the public delivery of essential goods and services, they form a discursive formation that translates, in practice, into a public health care model that provides service irrespective of the financial status of its recipients – as in Canada today (along with all other industrial countries).

In this regard, a discursive formation can be thought of as a sort of discursive universe – a constellation of relevant discourses that characterize a given culture at a given historical time, and within which its members are born, grow and develop, and learn “normal” ways of thinking, talking, and acting.¹⁹ And though this constellation of discourses is never permanently fixed and might always be re-articulated in new ways, it tends to appear entirely “natural” to those who were raised within it. In other words, we tend to take our cultural or discursive environment for granted.

None of this, of course, implies that these discursive formations should or even could be avoided. Discourses *enable* as well as *constrain* us. They provide the productive scaffolding for human talk, thought, and practice, even though that scaffolding simultaneously limits us in various ways. Either way, discourses are an inevitable and necessary feature of social existence. Human beings are discursive creatures. We will always exist within discursive environments. The challenge, from a cultural studies standpoint, is to remain aware that these environments are culturally constructed and that they can be reformed.

Moreover, even though semiotic and cultural studies scholars tend to use the concept of *discourse* to emphasize the crucial role that systems of language and representation play in the formation of cultures, the role that collective social structures and practices play should not be overlooked. Languages provide a model for thinking about culture because languages provide the means of thought and communication that make cultures possible. But language is only a partial model or metaphor for culture. Once the insights provided by this metaphor are grasped – especially the role played by cultural codes – it is helpful to translate the concept of discourse back into the broader concept of culture. In this regard, one can think not only in terms of *discursive constructs* but also in terms of *cultural constructs*. Similarly, one can think not only in terms of *comprehensive discursive formations* but also in terms of *comprehensive cultural formations*. In both cases, the former terms

¹⁹ The terms *worldview*, *ideology*, *paradigm*, *episteme*, *weltanschauung*, or *knowledge system* all approach this same abstraction from only slightly different angles. In the context of this text, however, the advantage of a *discursive* analysis is that it focuses on the relatively tangible and accessible communicative traces or indicators of these more abstract mental and cultural phenomena.

highlight the linguistic or representational dimensions of culture while the latter terms bring our attention back to the full breadth of cultural expression, including social structures and practices. One can therefore use these terms interchangeably, depending on whether one is emphasizing “representational” or “practical” expressions of culture.

Influences on Cultural Codes and Discourse

Moving from the analysis of isolated representations to the analysis of increasingly complex discursive systems to the analysis of integrated cultural formations provides an increasingly expansive vantage point from which to examine and critique culture. From each of these vantage points, one of the more obvious features of any discursive or cultural system, as discussed above, is its social and historical relativity. Different societies employ different codes, which yield different discursive or cultural formations.

Recognition of this historical specificity raises questions such as how and why do specific cultural formations arise in a given historical context? What are the social consequences and implications of these different formations? And how, as well as on what basis, can the codes that underlie these formations be critiqued, evaluated, or reformed? The theoretical framework outlined above provides conceptual categories with which we can begin to answer these questions as well as influence or reform our cultural environment. Consider the question: How do different cultural codes gain prominence (or dominance) within a given culture?

On the most obvious level, natural environment appears to play some role. Cultural codes can be understood at least partially as social adaptations to environmental features and pressures. Many cultures have developed complex systems for talking and thinking about unique features of their natural environments, from tropical rainforests to tundra and from deserts to oceanic atolls. On another level, historical chance and circumstance undoubtedly play a role in the propagation of various cultural codes, as when diverse cultures come in contact with one another through migration and exploration, and the cross-fertilization of words, ideas, and practices occurs. On yet another level, individual leaps of imagination and invention undoubtedly play a role in the genesis of new cultural codes, as when individual minds articulate radical new insights – such as Einstein's grasp of the relation between energy and matter (i.e., $e=mc^2$) – that in turn exert profound influences on social thought, talk, and practice (in this example, by ushering in the atomic era).

The Role of Social Relations

But beyond these basic forces, many critical scholars have also turned their attention to the important role that social relations – relations of production, gender, race, nationality, age, and so forth – play in the ascendance of various cultural codes. Much of this scholarship has focused on the role that *unequal power relations* play in these processes.²⁰ From this vantage point, cultural codes can at least partially be understood as the outcome of ongoing historical struggles between competing social groups seeking to construct our cultural worlds – from our structures of consciousness to our structures of social organization – in ways that serve their own self-interests.²¹

Though it can be argued that not all social groups are motivated to promote their own self-interests at the expense of others, the historical record clearly demonstrates that many have been, and continue to be, motivated in these ways. For instance, even as historical instances of slavery provide glaring examples of this phenomena, the more subtle forms of racism that are still prevalent today can also be understood in the same way. Economic exploitation and gender domination provide other obvious examples of the same phenomenon.

Moreover, even though history can be interpreted (in part) as a process of competing social groups seeking to construct the world in ways that best serve their own self-interests, it must be remembered that a level playing field has not always characterized this competition. Historically, some groups have had clear advantages over others in their abilities to propagate cultural codes that promote their own self-interests. By depriving women of equal access to higher education and in turn to

²⁰ For overviews as well as seminal edited collections of this scholarship, refer to Turner, G. (1996). *British Cultural Studies :An Introduction*. London, Routledge.; Storey, J. (1996). *Cultural Studies And The Study Of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods*. Georgia, The University Of Georgia Press.; Hardt, H. (1992). *Critical Communication Studies: Communication, History and Theory in America*. London, Routledge.; During, S., Ed. (1993). *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London, Routledge.; Grossberg, L., C. Nelson, et al., Eds. (1992). *Cultural Studies*. New York, Routledge.; Surber, J. P. (1998). *Culture and Critique: An Introduction to the Critical Discourses of Cultural Studies*. Boulder, Westview Press.; Dirks, N. B., G. Eley, et al., Eds. (1994). *Culture, Power, History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.; Giroux, H. A. and P. Shannon, Eds. (1997). *Education and Cultural Studies: Toward a Performative Practice*. New York, Routledge.; Scannell, P., P. Schlesinger, et al., Eds. (1992). *Culture and Power: A Media, Culture and Society Reader*. London, Sage Publications.; Gurevitch, M., T. Bennett, et al., Eds. (1994). *Culture, Society and the Media*. London, Routledge.; and Morley, D. and K.-H. Chen, Eds. (1996). *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. London, Routledge.

²¹ It should be noted that mutualism and cooperation also appear to play very important roles in social or cultural evolution. To date, however, most critical analyses have tended to neglect mutualism and cooperation as important determinants of discourse and culture – a theme that will be picked up again in subsequent chapters of this text.

the means of cultural production, men have gained many historical advantages. Many ethnic minorities and the working poor have also experienced unequal access to the means of cultural production, with similar results. For various material and historical reasons, then, some social groups (and alliances of groups) have historically occupied privileged positions from which to define or construct our cultural worlds.

To say that power relations influence the ways we think, talk, and act need not imply, however, that such influence is necessarily conscious or intentional – although in some cases it clearly is. The leadership in Nazi Germany, for instance, was clearly pursuing intentional designs through its articulation of discourses around German nationalism, militarism, and racial supremacy.

Even though efforts to define reality may sometimes be conscious and intentional, self-interested definitions of reality need not always be arrived at through conscious and deliberate processes. People are often inclined to “see” the world in ways that serve their own self-interests, without necessarily being aware that they are doing so.²² We do not always consciously decide that we want to interpret things one way rather than another after weighing the extent to which other possible interpretations might promote our self-interests. Rather, our interpretations of reality emerge through the interplay of complex, subtle, and often subconscious processes of motivation, rationalization, socialization, and so forth.

Moreover, because of the complex “chicken-and-egg” nature of causality between language, thought, and social practice, efforts to attribute intentionality are doubly problematic. How can intentionality be solely and definitively attributed to individuals or groups when the intentions of those individuals or groups are influenced by the language, thoughts, and practices that preceded them? Intentions are at least partially shaped by psycho-structural dispositions that we do not choose to inherit. This is not to suggest that individuals or groups should be excused from any responsibility for their own actions. Rather, it is simply to suggest that issues of intentionality are often complicated and

²² Refer, for instance, to the concept of *elective affinity* articulated by Weber in Weber, M. (1946). *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Oxford, Oxford University Press., and elaborated by Clement in Clement, W. (1975). *The Canadian Corporate Elite: An Analysis of Economic Power*. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart.. In brief, elective affinity refers to the ways that people have a natural affinity for ideas that support their material interests and they elect, either consciously or unconsciously, to adopt those ideas over others. Moreover, as Clement illustrates, those with the most control over the means of cultural production are often able to project ideas that they have an affinity for onto others, even though those others might have different material interests.

conscious intentionality cannot always be assumed. We do exercise free will, but we exercise it within mental and social structures that were not entirely of our own choosing.

Regardless of whether these processes are conscious and intentional or not, the ultimate ascendancy and establishment of some cultural codes over others can still be a function of social relations. For example, because some groups are in more privileged positions from which to determine how various phenomena are represented, it follows that their systems of representation will dominate – whether intentionally or not – within a given culture at a given historical moment.²³ In this regard, one of the most consistently supported empirical findings in mass communications research is the existence of a “hierarchy of access” to the commercial media, characterized by a relatively exclusive population of elite voices at the top.²⁴ Furthermore, in contemporary societies, those who have better access to the means of mass communication occupy a privileged position from which to construct the dominant representations, or preferred definitions, of reality.²⁵ The ascendancy of a remarkably narrow range of interpretations on most issues does not mean, however, that the individuals positioned at the top of this hierarchy of access are consciously “conspiring” with one another to promote self-serving interpretations of reality. Many of them may well be entirely sincere in their efforts to simply interpret, and respond to, the world as they see it. The ways that they see the world, however, often unconsciously coincide with their own self-interests.

²³ The genealogy of this theme can be traced, for instance, to Marx, K. and F. Engels (1967). *The German Ideology*. London, Lawrence & Wishart.. Refer also to Eagleton, T. (1994). *Ideology*. London, Longman., for a more contemporary discussion of this theme.

²⁴ Refer, for example, to Hackett, R. (1985). "A Hierarchy of Access: Aspects of Source Bias in Canadian TV News." *Journalism Quarterly* 62(2): 256-265, 277.; Gandy, O. (1992). Public Relations and Public Policy: The Structuration of Dominance in the Information Age. *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations*. E. Toth and R. Heath. Hillside, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 131-164.; Schlesinger, P. (1990). Rethinking the Sociology of Journalism: Source Strategies and the Limits of Media-Centrism. *Public communication: The new imperatives*. M. Ferguson. London, Sage: 61-83.; Ericson, R., P. Baranek, et al. (1989). *Negotiating Control: A Study of News Sources*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.; Gans, H. J. (1979). *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*. New York, Vintage.; and Sparks, C. (1986). *The Media and the State. Bending Reality: The State of the Media*. J. Curran, J. Ecclestone, G. Oakley and A. Richardson. London, Pluto Press: 76-86..

²⁵ For more detailed discussions of this theme, refer to Eagleton, T. (1994). *Ideology*. London, Longman.; Larrain, J. (1992). *The Concept of Ideology*. Brookfield, Vt, Gregg Revivals.; Hall, S. (1994). The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies. *Culture, society and the media*. M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran and J. Woollacott. London, Routledge: 56-90.. Many contemporary discussions of this theme can in turn be traced to Marx, K. and F. Engels (1967). *The German Ideology*. London, Lawrence & Wishart..

Moreover, the degree to which such privileged groups are successful in their discursive construction of reality is the degree to which the codes they cultivate appear normal or natural within their culture. And the degree to which these codes appear normal or natural is in turn the degree to which alternative cultural codes are ignored or marginalized. On the other hand, cultural codes are never completely fixed, and efforts to advance alternatives from the margins are sometimes successful. In this regard, the histories of cultures can at least in part be interpreted as ongoing processes of discursive or cultural “negotiation” – whether conscious or not – between diverse social groups.

Hegemony

The process of establishing and maintaining, as well as challenging or reforming, dominant discursive or cultural formations was explored over three-quarters of a century ago by Antonio Gramsci.²⁶ Central to Gramsci's analysis was his reworking of the traditional concept of *hegemony*. Historically, the concept of hegemony referred to the spatial or geographical extension of dominance by one political entity over others. This type of hegemony was typically achieved and sustained largely through force. In contrast, Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony referred to the relative ability of various social classes to project their own ways of seeing and representing the world on others. This was accomplished, according to Gramsci, not primarily through physical force but through cultural leadership.

Since Gramsci's original reworking of the concept of hegemony, the term has fallen into rather clichéd usage through which it has lost much of its value as a theoretical construct. The term is often used simply to refer to dominance of any kind. In Gramsci's usage, however, the term signified the ability of dominant social classes to cultivate, through non-coercive means, a popular worldview that naturalized their dominant social positions and made these structural arrangements appear to serve the interests of all other social classes. Force is not needed if subordinate social classes consent to their own subordination based on the assumption that it is inevitable or that it actually serves their best interests.

Of course, Gramsci developed his analysis primarily in terms of economic class dominance. Retaining Gramsci's original sense of the term, contemporary cultural theorists have also applied the concept of

²⁶ Refer to Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York, International Publishers..

hegemony to relations of race, gender, nationality, and so forth. In this expanded context, hegemonic dominance is achieved when any social group (or alliance of groups) is able to establish their representations of reality so effectively that they become the accepted “common sense” not only within their own group but also within other groups whose interests are subordinated in the process. The key point, however, is that hegemony is not achieved perceptibly, through force. Rather, it is achieved relatively imperceptibly, through the cultivation of consent to a given social order. To the degree that this is effective, the result is the normalization or naturalization of particular ways of thinking, talking, and acting – along with the marginalization of alternatives. In this manner, hegemonic dominance legitimates some cultural codes while simultaneously discrediting others.

For example, historical efforts to exclude women from many arenas of public life, ranging from higher education to public decision making, and to consign them primarily to domestic affairs, can be understood as a hegemonic process. It involved the cultivation of “common sense” notions among both men and women regarding the “appropriate” role of women in society. Of course, not all women historically accepted these common sense notions and many struggled against them. On the other hand, many women did accept these notions, as demonstrated by women who organized in opposition to women’s suffrage movements on the conviction (among others) that the moral purity of women would be compromised by their entrance into public life and that the entire social fabric would thereby be weakened.²⁷

As this example demonstrates, of course, hegemonic dominance is never final or absolute. Even though much remains to be achieved, Western women (as well as many ethnic and other historically oppressed minorities) have gained significant ground in recent decades. History can therefore be understood as an ongoing process of hegemonic struggle or negotiation. Discursive “boundaries” shift and change over time along with the cultural codes that underlie them. Sometimes they remain relatively unchanged for extended periods. Other times they go through radical transformations. In any given period of hegemonic dominance, however, change tends to come from the margins – from outside of the dominant cultural common sense.

Efforts to change established cultural codes therefore tend to be uphill

²⁷ For an overview of the arguments put forward by women who opposed women’s suffrage, refer to Cholmeley, R. (1970). *The Women's Anti-Suffrage Movement*. London, National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies., and Adams, J. (1995). "Better Citizens Without the Ballot": American Anti-Suffrage Women and Their Rationale During the Progressive Era. *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement*. M. Wheeler. Troutledge, OR, NewSage Press: 203-220..

struggles. Even when such changes may be in the widest popular interests, populations whose language, thought, and actions have been largely prefigured by existing discursive or cultural formations, and who have thereby internalized views that may ultimately subordinate their own interests to other historically privileged groups, can be expected to resist those very changes that might emancipate them from their own oppressive conditions. Simply put, it is often difficult to step outside of a discursive universe that you have been born and raised in. It is difficult to imagine what the world might look like outside it. Moreover, it can be difficult even to recognize that you are living in a culturally and historically specific discursive formation at all. To the extent that hegemonic dominance has been effective, that formation will appear not as a cultural construct at all but simply as “reality” itself – normal, natural, and inevitable.

We are therefore born into culturally constructed worlds that are not of our own making. This is not to suggest that people cannot be agents in changing or reconstructing the cultural worlds they inhabit. In light of the ultimate fluidity of cultural codes, such possibilities are always present. Such changes, however, are contingent upon our ability to recognize the historical specificity of our cultural environment and to step outside of it, if only in our imaginations at first.