Week 5 - Discussion 1

Cultural Contexts

“Culture” has become more of an integral component to research in the social sciences. Briefly describe the importance of incorporating cultural concepts into the planning and modification of a program. In greater detail, define how you would evaluate a program based on its inclusion or omission of cultural context. Your discussion post should be between 300-350 words.

Introduction: Week 5

This week discusses the important role of cultural issues in research and program planning.

Cultural issues impacting service delivery and program planning are the major topics in this week's readings. Students will discuss the importance of incorporating cultural concepts into the planning and modification of a program. Students will also apply their understanding of these concepts by suggesting culturally appropriate program modifications in their written assignment.

Resources

Required Text

Netting, F.E., O’Conner, M.K., & Fauri, D.P. (2008). *Comparative approaches to program planning*(1st ed.). Retrieved from https://redshelf.com

* Chapter 6: Program Planning in Diverse Cultural Contexts

Required References

Directorate for Education and Human Resources. (2010). The 2010 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation. Chapter 7. Retrieved from  [*https://www.purdue.edu/research/docs/pdf/2010NSFuser-friendlyhandbookforprojectevaluation.pdf (Links to an external site.)*](https://www.purdue.edu/research/docs/pdf/2010NSFuser-friendlyhandbookforprojectevaluation.pdf)

Fierson, H.T, Hood, S., & Hughes, G. Strategies that address culturally responsive evaluation. Retrieved from [*http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/nsf02057\_5.pdf (Links to an external site.)*](http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/nsf02057_5.pdf)

Manoogian, M., Jurich, J., Sano, Y., & Ko, J. (2013). “My Kids Are More Important Than Money”: Parenting Expectations and Commitment Among Appalachian Low-Income Mothers. *Journal of Family Issues, 34*(5), doi: 10.1177/0192513X13490402 Sage Database  Retrieved from  [*http://jfi.sagepub.com/content/36/3/326.full.pdf (Links to an external site.)*](http://jfi.sagepub.com/content/36/3/326.full.pdf) **(Click while logged into your course). Also available in the University of the Rockies library**

GUIDANCE

***Let’s Start With You…***

Did you know that you are the center of your world? Yep, no matter how selfless you may think you are it’s still all about you. And honestly, how could it not be? You can’t know any other reality that the one you create. Let me give you a basic example.

You sit at a table across from a friend. On the table is a salt and pepper shaker set. From your view, the salt is to the right of the pepper. That is your reality. From your friend’s view, the salt is to the left of the pepper. Is your friend wrong? No, it is simply their reality.

Now, the placement of a salt and pepper shaker set may not alter someone’s life choices but consider this in a much more social world. The placement of things, the understanding of things, and the relationships between things can be perceived completely differently between two people – no matter how alike they may seem – and this is why we are each the center of our worlds. Our reality shapes us, we shape it, and no one else has quite the same reality. Makes you feel pretty unique, right?

Even more interesting is when we consider that behavior is socially constructed as well – even if we don’t know it. Think about your life. Think about all the influences that affect your behavior such as surroundings / environment, self-interest, self-concern, and relationships (to name but a few). I’m sure you can think of others as well but what is perhaps more interesting is that our behavioral change is not as calculated as we might like to believe. We don’t necessarily consciously choose to act a certain way in some situations. In fact, a large portion of our behavior is automatic.

Ok, so let’s get back to you specifically. Your self-concept is derived by your self-schemas, which are constructed from your reality. This means you not only perceive yourself according to your reality but you also believe that is what you project to the outside world. And let’s always keep in mind that our self-concepts are malleable – they can change and are shaped by environment, relationships, interests, successes, failures, judgments, and so on. Did you ever have a really good friend who changed a lot when they started dating someone new, when they landed a new job, or when they moved to a new place? Their self-concept is changing – sometimes right before your eyes!

Seeing as we are talking about you, we can’t avoid the topic of self-esteem. Often mislabeled and misused, let’s get a clear definition now. Self-esteem – a person’s evaluation of their own self-worth; it is the sum of all of our self-schemas (that is, the extent to which they view themselves as good, competent, and decent. We know that low self-esteem is very harmful and people who have low self-esteem can suffer serious problems such as depression, substance abuse, poverty, etc. However, high self-esteem can be equally terrible for an individual as it can cross over to narcissism. Many narcissists are charming and outgoing however their eventual lack of compassion leads to relationship problems down the road. [Some social scientists feel so strongly about the negativity of narcissism that they included in the “Dark Triad” of negative traits. The other two are manipulativeness (aka Machiavellianism) and anti-social psychopathology.]

In the U.S., our culture of self-worth and emphasis on individualism and self-esteem has led to some perplexing issues for researchers. How do you measure and categorize individuals who all see themselves as unique and special? How can you account for self-serving bias when asking people to report on their lives? If everyone thinks they’re better than average, how can we ever find the midpoint? [By the way, self-serving bias may sound bad but it has good points to. It can save people from depression, anxiety, and even soften the blow of our own mortality. But is does have some bad effects too such as blaming others for their own unhappiness (external locus of control) or absolving themselves from responsibility when things go badly.]

You can start to see how “know[ing] thyself” can be very difficult, let alone being a social researcher trying to understand how people react within the social world. In the end, our self-efficacy encourages us not to resign to bad situations and need to persist despite bad situations and self-doubt in order to survive. Self-esteem helps us do that by believing in our positive abilities. But while these are important, it is equally important to not be so self-confident that you border on self-delusion or narcissism. Taking it too far can cause you to blame others for your own reality.

***Although we are the center of our worlds, we do not live in a vacuum***

Ok, so we have started to realize that our realities are contrived by our self-schemas. What we may not readily understand is that this reality – our individual reality – shapes our judgments, beliefs and perceptions and interpretations of the world. The way we think about our world is socially constructed and this happens because of priming.

Priming refers to an increased sensitivity to certain stimuli due to prior experience. Because priming it believed to occur outside of conscious awareness, it is different from memory that relies on the direct retrieval of information. Direct retrieval utilizes explicit memory, while priming relies on implicit memory. Research has also shown that the effects of priming can impact the decision-making process (Jacoby, 1983).

Basically put, once primed you see things in a certain way.

Why does this matter? If you were primed at a young age to associate Boston with an image of a crime-ridden and filthy city, chances are as an adult you are not too fond of Boston. But let’s take that further. You may not like the Patriots or Red Sox. You may make career decisions that keep you away from Boston (even if the opportunities were better there). You may even decide to not date someone because they are from there. Priming can set the stage for how we perceive our world. In this case, in our world, Boston is a crime-ridden and filthy city. In another person’s world, it’s the best city in the country. Once you have a belief, it influences how you perceive all other relevant information in the world.

Priming can set the stage for racism, xenophobia, ageism, sexism, classism, etc. However, even if you were primed to associate a person’s color with a negative belief, you can change. That’s the beauty of being human – nothing is permanent. Change is a conscious choice and as a result, you can reconstruct your priming.

***Ok, so how does this relate to culture?***

Up to this point, I have focused on you because you socially construct your reality. However, it’s your reality and not all reality and this is an important concept when thinking about human agency, social research and culture. What we haven’t really talked about is the influences that are forced upon us and – for the most part – we have little to no control over.

I do not want to get into a debate about evolution – we will save that for a philosophy or biology class – but I do want us to recognize the theory of natural selection because regardless of what your personal believes are about the origin of the species, the fact remains that social Darwinism – survival of the fittest – actually happens in our everyday lives.

Natural Selection is essentially this:

* Organisms have many and varied offspring (for those of you with siblings, how different are you from them?)
* Offspring compete for survival (just like kids compete for attention)
* Certain differences between them increase their chances surviving and carrying on through more offspring
* The survivors then pass their traits on to their offspring
* Ergo, the most successful traits continue (through more offspring) while traits that aren’t very useful disappear
* Thus over time, population characteristics change

Ok, let’s go to an example. How many of you have wisdom teeth? Do you know why you have wisdom teeth?

“Anthropologists believe wisdom teeth, or the third set of molars, were the evolutionary answer to our ancestor’s early diet of coarse, rough food – like leaves, roots, nuts and meats – which required more chewing power and resulted in excessive wear of the teeth. The modern diet with its softer foods, along with marvels of modern technologies such as forks, spoons and knives, has made the need for wisdom teeth nonexistent. As a result, evolutionary biologists now classify wisdom teeth as vestigial organs, or body parts that have become functionless due to evolution.” – R. Cooper, NYU

In other words, our ancestors had rough diets that called for heavy chewing therefore we had extra teeth to ensure our ability to feed ourselves (kind of important to survival). However, over time we changed our diets and began to eat in different ways (utensils, cooking methods, etc.) and the wisdom teeth because useless. Over time, wisdom teeth have started to evolve out of the human genetic code. There are people born today who have no wisdom teeth at all. According to anthropological studies, there are some cultures around the world that don’t get any wisdom teeth while in the Western world we are seeing smaller and smaller numbers of wisdom teeth (i.e. people have only 2 instead of 4). Wisdom teeth are a very real physical example of our biology getting rid of a trait that’s not necessary anymore.

Ok, so how does this relate to social research? Evolutionary theory applies to the development of our traits and behaviors thus shedding light on human nature. In short, our social beings are the product of many generations before us.

I’m sure that every single one of you has heard of the nature versus nurture debate. If not, I will sum it up here:

Picture two brothers raised by the same parents in the same home their whole lives. Later in life, one becomes a doctor while the other becomes a thief. Since both bothers were raised in the same environment, we assume the differences between the two must be genetic – it is simply in their nature to become a doctor or a thief. But wait, just because they were raised in the same environment, does not mean they received equal love and attention. Therefore, we might argue that their family-life experience may have had an influence - it is their nurturing, or lack of, that led them to be either a doctor of a thief.

In essence, this is the crux of the nature/nurture debate – how much of you or others is derived from genetic factors (nature) versus environment (nurture).

If genes are our nature, what encompasses nurture? What is our environment? Without a doubt culture is one of the most significant pieces of our nurture influences. Culture sets forth the way we perceive and deal with our world and it follows the footsteps of our ancestors as it is passed from generation to generation. It establishes norms for us so that we know how to react and behave in the group – and consequently, it defines when people don’t follow the behaviors of the group.

As you can imagine, culture can be just as diverse as there are numbers of groups on the planet (and that’s a lot), but there are also some deep-rooted similarities that cross the human condition whether you are East, West, North, South, dead center or on the tippy fringes on the globe.

But culture can’t explain everything – even within cultures there are distinct differences on who and what we are. Men and women tend to play very different roles in different societies and cultures. And despite out generalizations, we have to acknowledge that these are trends, not certainties. Boys are not always more aggressive than girls at playtime nor are little girls always more talkative then boys. Women are not always more connected to each other while men are more competitive. Women aren’t always from Venus and men aren’t always from Mars. The fact is, while there are trends on some of these social traits, they are not exclusive. Instead, trends like this help us better understand what influences can affect our behaviors and allow us the ability to reflect on whether those are traits we want to continue to pass along to our next generations. In other words, our culture helps us survive and those traits that are most beneficial get passed on through generations.

In summary, I wanted to give you a bit of a background on culture so that as you read the assigned readings for this week, you are thinking about the influences that come from you as well as others and how that creates, defines and can even alter culture. As we think about our social issues, can we see how culture has defined how we talk, think and even deal with social issues? What do we mean when we say cultures of poverty? What do we mean when we say women-culture, American-culture, Latino-culture, Catholic-culture, or geek-culture? Or more importantly, once we know that it is socially constructed and we know that as humans we are capable of change, can we alter the way we think about these culture and how we approach and study cultures so that we are more respectful, aware and even accepting? Maybe we can