Cultural Universals

September 30th, 2019
George Murdock

- Anthropologist
- Studied a wide variety of cultures
- Was interested in **Cultural Universals** – things that exist in every culture
Cultural Universals

- Element, pattern, institution, trait or behavior that is common in every culture
- The entire body of cultural universals can be referred to as the **Human Condition**
- Behavioural psychologists hold that these traits are culturally universal because they help with **evolutionary adaptation**
Universals of Culture by George P. Murdock
American Anthropologist, 1945 compendium
From: Consilience, E.O. Wilson, 1998. p.147

- age-grading
- athletic sports
- bodily adornment
- calendar
- cleanliness
- training
- community organization
- cooking
- cooperative labor
- cosmology
- courtship
- dancing
- decorative art
- divination
- division of labor
- dream
- interpretation
- education
- eschatology
- ethics
- ethnobotany
- etiquette
- faith healing
- family feasting
- fire making
- folklore
- food taboos
- funeral rites
- games
- gestures
- gift giving
- government
- greetings
- hair styles
- hospitality
- housing
- hygiene
- incest taboos
- inheritance rules
- joking
- kin groups
- kinship
- nomenclature
- language
- law
- luck superstitions
- magic
- marriage
- mealtimes
- medicine
- obstetrics
- penal sanctions
- personal names
- population policy
- postnatal care
- pregnancy usages
- property rights
- propitiation of supernatural beings
- puberty customs
- religious ritual
- residence rules
- sexual restrictions
- soul concepts
- status differentiation
- surgery
- tool making
- trade
- visiting
- weaving
- weather control

(Source: http://www.unc.edu)
Happiness: A Cultural Universal?

- What is happiness?
- What makes an individual happy?
- Are these the same things that make a society happy?
- What does society need to be happy?
UN World Happiness Report

Considers the following

• Wealth
• Social Support
• Health
• Freedom
• Generosity
• Lack of Corruption
Ranking of Happiness 2016-2018

1. Finland (7.769)
2. Denmark (7.600)
3. Norway (7.554)
4. Iceland (7.494)
5. Netherlands (7.488)
6. Switzerland (7.480)
7. Sweden (7.343)
8. New Zealand (7.307)
9. Canada (7.278)
10. Austria (7.246)
11. Australia (7.228)
12. Costa Rica (7.167)
13. Israel (7.139)
14. Luxembourg (7.090)
15. United Kingdom (7.054)
16. Ireland (7.021)
17. Germany (6.985)
18. Belgium (6.923)
19. United States (6.892)
20. Czech Republic (6.852)

- Explained by: GDP per capita
- Explained by: social support
- Explained by: healthy life expectancy
- Explained by: freedom to make life choices
- Explained by: generosity
- Explained by: perceptions of corruption
- Dystopia (1.88) + residual

95% confidence interval
What’s up with the Scandinavians?

• Norway, Finland, Denmark and Sweden consistently fall in the top 10 of the UN World Happiness Report

• Why?

• What would a sociologist examine to find out?
Hygge

- Danish word that has no direct English translation
- Consider Sapir-Whorf
- What does it mean and what does it say about Danish people?
What does Happiness Really Mean?
Happy People: A Year in the Taiga

• 2010 Documentary by Werner Herzog and Dmitry Vasyukov

• Follows the lives of people in the village of Bakhtia along the Yenisei River in the Siberian taiga
- Yenisei River
- The Taiga
Happy People: A Year in the Taiga

What comprises the culture of the people in the village of Bakhtia?

1. What do they value?
2. What beliefs do they hold?
3. What norms dictate acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in their society?
4. How does the culture of the people of Bakhtia compare with ours?
5. Comment on the title of the film - “Happy People.” Are the people of Bakhtia truly happy? Why or why not? How do they compare to us (Eastern Canada) as far as happiness goes? Would you want to live there? Why/Why not?
Studying Culture

• Research and report on the culture of a tribal group from anywhere in the world

• Discussion:
  – What makes this group who they are?
  – (What specifically has shaped their culture?)
  – Material and non material aspects
  – Cultural Universals v. Particulars

• Research: Use a variety of sources, use academic sources
Understanding Culture Assignment

• Choose one of the following.
• Create a map that uses examples to connect norms, values, beliefs, material culture, rituals and perhaps other aspects of a particular group’s culture
• Consider the Happy People of Bakthia. Choose 3 general, yet important aspects of their culture to analyze. Rank them as Very, Somewhat and Marginally important. Compare these 3 in our culture. Do they carry the same ranking.?