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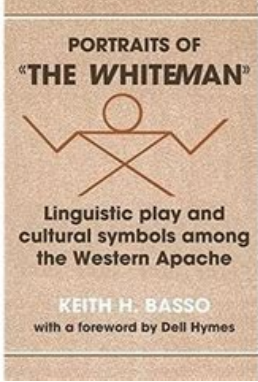
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Symbolic and interpretive anthropology pdf

Symbolic and interpretive anthropology examples.

By Scott Hudson, Carl Smith, Michael Loughlin and Scott Hammerstedt Symbolic anthropology studies the way people understand their surroundings, as well as the actions and utterances of the other members of their society. These interpretations form a shared cultural system of meaning—i.e., understandings shared, to varying degrees, among members of the same society (Des Chene 1996:1274). Symbolic anthropology studies symbols and the processes, such as myth and ritual, by which humans assign meanings to these symbols to address fundamental questions about human social life (Spencer 1996:535). According to Clifford Geertz, humans are in need of symbolic “sources of illumination” to orient themselves with respect to the system of meaning that is any particular culture (1973a:45). Victor Turner, on the other hand, states that symbols initiate social action and are “determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action” (1967:36). Geertz’s position illustrates the interpretive approach to symbolic anthropology, while Turner’s illustrates the symbolic approach.

Symbolic anthropology views culture as an independent system of meaning deciphered by interpreting key symbols and rituals (Spencer 1996:535). There are two major premises governing symbolic anthropology.



The first is that “beliefs, however unintelligible, become comprehensible when understood as part of a cultural system of meaning” (Des Chene 1996:1274). The second major premise is that actions are guided by interpretation, allowing symbolism to aid in interpreting conceptual as well as material activities. Traditionally, symbolic anthropology has focused on religion, cosmology, ritual activity, and expressive customs such as mythology and the performing arts (Des Chene 1996:1274). Symbolic anthropologists have also studied other forms of social organization such as kinship and political organization.



Studying these types of social forms allows researchers to study the role of symbols in the everyday life of a group of people (Des Chene 1996:1274). As implied above, symbolic anthropology can be divided into two major approaches. One is associated with Clifford Geertz and the University of Chicago and the other with Victor W. Turner at Cornell. David Schneider was also a major figure in the development of symbolic anthropology, however he does not fall entirely within either of the above schools of thought.

Interestingly, however, Turner, Geertz, and Schneider were together at the University of Chicago briefly in the 1970s. The major difference between the two schools lies in their respective influences. Geertz was influenced largely by the sociologist Max Weber, and was concerned with the operations of “culture” rather than the ways in which symbols influence the social process. Turner, influenced by Emile Durkheim, was concerned with the operations of “society” and the ways in which symbols function within it. (Ortner 1983:128-129; see also Handler 1991). Turner, reflecting his English roots, was much more interested in investigating whether symbols actually functioned within the social process the way symbolic anthropologists believed they did. Geertz focused much more on the ways in which symbols relate to one another within culture and how individuals “see, feel, and think about the world” (Ortner 1983:129-131). In part, symbolic anthropology can be considered as a reaction to structuralism that was grounded in linguistics and semiotics and pioneered by Claude Levi-Strauss in anthropology (Geertz 1996:1275). This dissatisfaction with structuralism can be seen in Geertz’s (1973b) article “The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Levi-Strauss.” Levi-Strauss’s focused on binary oppositions expressed by many and various aspects of culture and not on their separate meanings that are embedded in symbols was contested by the mostly American symbolic anthropologists. Structuralists downplayed the role of individual actors in their analyses, whereas symbolic anthropologists believed in “actor-centric” interpretations (Ortner 1983:136). Further, structuralism utilized symbols only with respect to their place in the “system” and not as an integral part of understanding the system (Prattis 1997:33). This split between the symbolic anthropologists and the structuralists dominated the 1960s and the 1970s. Symbolic anthropology was also a reaction against materialism and Marxism. Materialists define culture in terms of observable behavior patterns where “techno-environmental factors are primary and causal” (Langness 1974:84). Symbolic anthropologists, instead, view culture in terms of symbols and mental constructs. The primary reaction against Marxism was its basis in historically specific Western assumptions about material and economic needs which, they alleged, cannot be properly applied to someone in particular; to impart a particular message; according to a socially established code; and without the knowledge of the other members of the group of which the winker and winkee are a part. In addition, the wink can be a parody of someone else’s wink or an attempt to lead others to believe that a conspiracy of sorts is occurring. Each type of wink can be considered to be a separate cultural category (Geertz 1973d:6-7). The combination of the blink and the types of winks discussed above (and those that lie between them) produce “a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures” (Geertz 1973d:7) in which winks and twitches are produced and interpreted. This, Geertz argues, is the object of ethnography: to decipher this hierarchy of cultural categories. Thick description, therefore, is a description of the particular form of communication used, like a parody of someone else’s wink or a conspiratorial wink. Hermeneutics is a term first applied to the critical interpretation of religious texts. The modern use of the term is a “combination of empirical investigation and subsequent subjective understanding of human phenomena” (Woodward 1996:555). Geertz used hermeneutics in his studies of symbol systems to try to understand the ways that people “understand and act in social, religious, and economic contexts” (Woodward 1996:557). The hierarchy that surrounds Balinese cockfighting provides an interesting example (Geertz 1973f:448). Geertz (1973f:443-8) identifies cockfighting as an art form representing social arrangements in the community and a subsequent self-expression of community identity. Turner used hermeneutics as a method for understanding the meanings of “cultural performances” like dance, drama, etc. (Woodward 1996:557). Social Drama is a concept devised by Victor Turner to study the dialectic of social transformation and continuity. A social drama is “a spontaneous unit of social process and a fact of everyone’s experience in every human society” (Turner 1980:149). Social dramas occur within a group that shares values and interests and has a shared common history (Turner 1980:149). This drama can be broken into four acts. The first act is a rupture in social relations, or breach. The second act is a crisis that cannot be handled by normal strategies. The third act is a remedy to the initial problem, or redress and the re-establishment of social relations. The final act can occur in two ways: reintegration, the return to the status quo, or recognition of schism, an alteration in the social arrangements (Turner 1980:149). In both of the resolutions there are symbolic displays in which the actors show their unity in the form of rituals (Des Chene 1996:1276). In Turner’s theory, ritual is a kind of plot that has a set sequence which is linear, not circular (Turner and Turner 1978:161-163; Grimes 1985). For examples of some published discussions of social dramas, see Turner (1967; 1974) and Grimes (1985). Like many forms of cultural anthropology, symbolic anthropology is based on cross-cultural comparison (Des Chene 1996:1274). One of the major changes made by symbolic anthropology was the movement to a literary-based rather than a science-based approach. Symbolic anthropology, with its emphasis on the works of non-anthropologists such as Ricoeur, utilized literature from outside the bounds of traditional anthropology (see Handler 1991:611). In addition, symbolic anthropology examines symbols from different aspects of social life, rather than from one aspect at a time isolated from the rest. This is an attempt to show that a few central ideas expressed in symbols manifest themselves in different aspects of culture (Des Chene 1996:1274). This contrasted the structuralist approach favored by European social anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss (Spencer 1996:536; see also mention of a rebellion against “the establishment” with respect to social theory in Schneider 1995:174). Symbolic anthropology focuses largely on culture as a whole rather than on specific aspects of culture that are isolated from one another. The major accomplishment of symbolic anthropology has been to turn anthropology towards issues of culture and interpretation rather than the development of grand theories. Anthropology. In Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology. David Levinson and Melvin Ember eds. Pp. 1274-1278. New York: Henry Holt, Douglas, Mary, 1966. Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. New York: Routledge. Douglas, Mary, 1970. Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology. New York: Pantheon, Douglas, Mary, 1992. Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory. New York: Routledge. Geertz, Clifford, 1973a. The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man. In The Interpretation of Cultures. Pp. 33-54. New York: Basic Books, Inc. Geertz, Clifford, 1973b The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Levi-Strauss. In The Interpretation of Cultures. Pp. 345-359. New York: Basic Books, Inc. Geertz, Clifford, 1973c The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books, Inc. 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Impact

- Forced anthropologists to become aware of cultural texts they interpret and of ethnographic texts they create.
- In order to work as intercultural translators, anthropologists need to be aware of their own cultural basis as well as other cultures they research.
- Reflexivity in anthropology.

On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. For general discussions of careers, see: Geertz, Clifford, 1995.

After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropology. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Handler, Richard, 1991. An Interview with Clifford Geertz. Current Anthropology 32:603-613. Schneider, David M., as told to Richard Handler, 1995.

The Best Big Data for Symbolic Anthropology:

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Schneider on Schneider: The Conversion of the Jews and other Anthropological Stories. Durham and London: Duke University Press. Turner, Edith, 1985. Prologue: From the Ndembu to Broadway. In On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience. Edith Turner, ed. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. Thick Description is a term Geertz borrowed from Gilbert Ryle to describe and define the aim of interpretive anthropology. He argues that social Anthropology is based on ethnography, or the study of culture. Culture consists of the symbols that guide community behavior. Symbols obtain meaning from the role which they play in the patterned behavior of social life. Culture and behavior cannot be studied separately because they are intertwined. By analyzing the whole of culture as well as its constituent parts, one develops a “thick description” which details the mental processes and reasoning of the natives. Thick description, however, is an interpretation of what the natives are thinking made by an outsider who cannot think like a native but is guided by anthropological theory (Geertz 1973d; see also Tongs 1993). To illustrate thick description, Geertz uses Ryle’s example which discusses the difference between a “blink” and a “wink.” One, a blink, is an involuntary twitch—requiring only a “thin” description of eye movement—and the other, a wink, is a conspiratorial signal to a friend—which must be interpreted through “thick” description. While the physical movements involved in each are identical, each has a distinct meaning “as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows” (Geertz 1973d:6). A wink is a special form of communication which consists of several characteristics: it is deliberate; to someone in particular; to impart a particular message; according to a socially established code; and without the knowledge of the other members of the group of which the winker and winkee are a part. In addition, the wink can be a parody of someone else’s wink or an attempt to lead others to believe that a conspiracy of sorts is occurring. Each type of wink can be considered to be a separate cultural category (Geertz 1973d:6-7). The combination of the blink and the types of winks discussed above (and those that lie between them) produce “a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures” (Geertz 1973d:7) in which winks and twitches are produced and interpreted. This, Geertz argues, is the object of ethnography: to decipher this hierarchy of cultural categories. 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This contrasted the structuralist approach favored by European social anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss (Spencer 1996:536; see also mention of a rebellion against “the establishment” with respect to social theory in Schneider 1995:174). Symbolic anthropology focuses largely on culture as a whole rather than on specific aspects of culture that are isolated from one another. The major accomplishment of symbolic anthropology has been to turn anthropology towards issues of culture and interpretation rather than the development of grand theories. Arguments. While acknowledging Geertz’s strengths, Asad argues that Geertz’s weakness lies in the disjunction between external symbols and internal dispositions, corresponding to the gap between “cultural system” and “social reality”, when attempting to define the concept of religion in universal terms. Asad argues that anthropologists should instead focus on the historical conditions that are crucial to the development of certain religious practices. Moving away from the definition of religion as a whole is important, Asad argues, because the development of religious practices differ from society to society. In addition, Marxists charge that symbolic anthropology, while describing social conduct and symbolic systems, does not attempt to explain these systems, instead focusing too much on the individual symbols themselves (Ortner 1984:131-132; Des Chene 1996:1277). Symbolic anthropologists replied to this attack by stating that Marxism reflected historically specific Western assumptions about material and economic needs. Due to this fact, it cannot be properly applied to non-Western societies (Sahlins 1976; Spencer 1996:538). Another attack on symbolic anthropology came from cultural ecology. Cultural ecologists considered symbolic anthropologists to be “fuzzy headed mentalists, involved in unscientific and unverifiable flights of subjective interpretation” (Ortner 1984:134). In other words, symbolic anthropology did not attempt to carry out their research in a manner so that other researchers could reproduce their results. Mental phenomenon and symbolic interpretation, they argued, was scientifically untestable. Also, since different anthropologists could view the same symbol in different ways, it was attacked as being too subjective. Symbolic anthropologists answered the cultural ecologists by asserting that cultural ecology was too scientific. Cultural ecologists ignored the fact that culture dominates all human behavior, thus they had lost sight of what anthropology had established previously (Ortner 1984:134). Asad, Talal, 1983. Anthropological Concepts of Religion: Reflections on Geertz. Man (N.S.) 18:237-59. Des Chene, Mary, 1996. Symbolic Anthropology. 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Interpretive Anthropology

- How people themselves explain and interpret their own values and behaviors
- Ideas, meanings
- Emic, relativistic, reflexive
- Combines self-knowledge with knowledge of the people studied
- **Interpretivism vs. Cultural Materialism**
 - Meaning, beliefs, emic vs. infrastructural determinism, etc

This emic perspective means that one must view individuals as attempting to interpret situations in order to act (Geertz 1973b).

While this actor-centered view is central to Geertz’s work, it was never systematically developed into an actual theory or model. Schneider developed the systematic aspects of culture and separated culture from the individual more than did Geertz (Ortner 1984:129-130). Turner’s major contribution to anthropology was the investigation of how symbols actually do social “work”, whether or not they function in the ways in which symbolic anthropologists say they do. This was an aspect of symbolic anthropology that Geertz and Schneider never addressed in any great detail. This reflects Turner’s embeddedness in the traditions of British social anthropology (Ortner 1984:130-131). Douglas played a role in developing the Cultural Theory of Risk which has spawned diverse, interdisciplinary research programs. This theory asserts that the structures of social organizations offer perceptions to individuals that reinforce those structures rather than alternatives. Two features of Douglas’ work were imported and synthesized. The first was her account of the social functions of individual perceptions of danger and risk, where harm was associated with disobeying the norms of society (Douglas 1966, 1992).

The second feature was her characterization of cultural practices along the group and grid which can vary from society to society (Douglas 1970). Symbolic anthropology has come under fire along several fronts, most notably from Marxists. In an important critique of Geertz’s views on religion, Talal Asad (1983) attacks the dualism evident in Geertz’s arguments. While acknowledging Geertz’s strengths, Asad argues that Geertz’s weakness lies in the disjunction between external symbols and internal dispositions, corresponding to the gap between “cultural system” and “social reality”, when attempting to define the concept of religion in universal terms. Asad argues that anthropologists should instead focus on the historical conditions that are crucial to the development of certain religious practices.

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