

The Cultural Ecology of Health and Change (CEHC) Working Paper Series

**Introduction to Ethnographically Informed Community
and Cultural Assessment Research Systems
(The EICCARS)**

Assessments of Cultural Systems

A CEHC/EICCARS Working Paper

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Introduction

Cultural Assessments is one of two primary programs of the **Ethnographically Informed Community and Cultural Assessment Research Systems** (the EICCARS-- See Appendix 1 for list of all acronyms), a multi-method anthropologically based research system used to collect holistic or systemic data about a local community, population group, or a cultural system. The EICCARS itself, is one of four subsystems of the **Cultural Ecology of Health and Change** (the CEHC)¹, an applied research and technical assistance system that has evolved from my three dozen years of work of professional experience working with community based initiatives (CBIs) in the U.S. and abroad. The CEHC includes a series of Working Papers (that explore the conceptual components of the various CEHC systems) and Program Technical Manuals (PTMS-that are designed for training or skills transfer). For example, there is another working paper that discusses the other program of the EICCARS, which focuses on the assessment of local communities, ethnic groups, and total societies. The present working paper focuses on the assessment of other social systems, outside of local communities, ethnic populations, and societies, as cultural systems.

In discussing cultural assessments, we should start by first defining culture. While the concept of culture is frequently used by researchers, those in various professions, and by lay persons alike, there is a lack of clarity as to what they mean by culture, or how one might operationalize the concept for use in human problem solving, as attempted in community based initiatives. In fact, while the concept has long been “a central integrating idea in anthropology” (Freilich 1989:1), a number of anthropologists now consider it no longer a useful concept, and might in fact be harmful in its use², as it has become “fat” in its frequent but meaningless use.

At the same time, while the concept has long been this integrating theme in anthropology, anthropologists have done little to advance the clarity of the concept so that it could be adequately used by non-anthropologists, particularly those health and human service professionals who view the concept as very significant to their work, but are not clear as how to operationalize it. In fact, in the literature in cultural theory, anthropologists have contributed to quite a bit of the confusion regarding the concept as the concept became of how the concept is defined or implied has been at the center of many of the opposing schools of thought that characterizes cultural anthropology (e.g., functionalism vs structural functionalism, functionalism versus human ecology, functionalism versus postmodernism, culture as based in social structure versus culture as a cognitive construction, scientific positivists versus interpretists, etc---See Allaire and Fetscherin.).

In 1952, the anthropologists Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn published a book demonstrating that more than 200 definitions of culture had been provided by

¹The Other three CEHC systems are: (1) The CEHC System in Project Design and Implementation Plan (the PDIP); (2) The CEHC System in Project Implementation Programs (the PIPs); and (3) Ethnographic Assessment and Evaluation Systems (the EAES).

anthropologists up to that time. There have been additional definitions provided since, particularly with the emergence of postmodernist, poststructuralist, critical, and constructivist theoretical orientations that greatly influenced anthropology and other social sciences and humanities during the 1980s and 1990s. I have extracted 12 "attributes of culture" that I have found useful in my own work as an applied anthropologist and that cut across a good many of the definitions of the concept that have been provided by anthropologists over the years. These attributes of culture are the following: .

- (1) **Culture is a holistic "system"** with continuities between the interrelated components of that system.
- (2) **Culture provides rules and routines that facilitate *order, regularity, familiarity, and predictability*** to what is otherwise a disorganized world of people, things, and acts.
- (3) **Culture provides "meaning"** in the interpretation of people's behavior, things in the physical and metaphysical world, events, occurrences, and so on, so that people can construct and communicate their realities.
- (4) **Culture contributes to human communication and miscommunication.** The meaning systems that culture provides not only facilitates communication, but can also give rise to miscommunications and misunderstandings.
- (5) **Culture is a shared phenomenon.** The meaning system, and their interpretation of people and their behaviors, phenomena in the physical and metaphysical worlds, occurrences, are shared by members of a cultural group. (Intersubjectivity).
- (6) **Culture implies values.** Values are another of those problematic concepts in cultural theory. I am strongly of the opinion that our problems with values as a scientific construct is a function of the lack of advance in the development of the concept of values, similar to our failure to advance the development of the concept of culture. As a consequence, we have had the emergence of such harmful concepts as the "culture of poverty", "lower class culture", "ghetto specific culture", etc. I use the concept of values however, to refer to the **preferred** practices, social relationships, and ideas and sentiments of a human community. Thus the concept of values must be distinguished from statements, social circumstances, and behavioral patterns that are not preferred, but are rather situational. It would be a mistake, for example, to think that just because a person is experiencing single parenthood in a society where the norm is conjugal parenthood, and the life chances of the family system is enhanced by the latter, that this person then values his or her state of parenthood. I include the concept of values in my work because of the anthropological assumptions that values are those sentiments that are deeply entrenched as a consequence of cultural (intergenerational) reproduction. Thus in change programs, being able to discern peoples values from other sentiments like attitudes, or even beliefs is crucial

because if values are more deeply entrenched within a persons cognition, then theoretically they may be more difficult to change than other types of mental predispositions to behavior.

- (7) **Cultural patterns maybe ideal as well as real.** This is a notion similar to that regarding values. People's statements as to what their realities are may contradict what their behavioral patterns and products imply. This necessitates the value of participant observation in the study of cultural systems, and "etic" (interpretations of the cultural system from an external ethnographer's perspective) as well as "emic" (from the perspective of the cultural group or any of its members) approaches.
- (8) **Cultural patterns may be "tacit" as well as explicit.** Explicit culture is cultural knowledge that people can easily talk about in a direct fashion. Tacit culture is knowledge that people have that motivates particular ideational or behavioral patterns, but they might not be able to explain what that idea or behavior actually consist of, and why it is expressed. The concept of "personal space" (the distant of comfort in person to person interaction) is an example of tacit culture.
- (9) **Cultural Patterns are horizontally (within generations) and vertically (intergenerationally) reproduced.** However, there is also continuous change taking place within cultural systems. Thus in planned change programs, such concepts as "core" and "peripheral" cultural patterns are helpful, as core patterns can be assumed to be more resistant to change. But even in core cultural patterns, there are continual stress for change, and continual subpatterns that emerge, disappear, and sometimes reemerge.
- (10) **The expression of cultural patterns are highly Influenced, but not determined by environment.** Both physical and social environmental factors influences cultural expression. Environmental influences of a physical nature might take years or even generations to have their influence; while social environmental features may influence cultural expressions immediately and continually because of cultural mechanisms of social feedback.
- (11) **Culture is a historical production.** The emergence and continuity of cultural systems are not only products of vertical and horizontal reproduction; but significant events and processes can also give rise to the production and reproduction of specific cultural patterns.
- (12) **Culture is functional.** It is not fashionable in contemporary anthropological circles of postmodernism and cultural criticism to refer back to the functionalist perspectives of such anthropologists as Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown. But as an applied anthropologist with many years of working with health and human service professionals dedicated to action in their attempts to improve the quality of life of those that they serve, notions of the role that culture plays in meeting

an array of human needs are very fruitful. While I share critical reviews of the misuse of the concept of culture by past anthropologist that tended to harm their populations, I have found that holistic approaches to the study of the functional qualities of cultural systems to be very valuable in developing empowering action strategies that counter simplistic programs that can do more to harm than to help. For example holistic studies helps one to identify that where an intervention may be viewed as helping a community with regards to one issue, might be causing more harm in another area.

The Cultural Systems Paradigm and the Assessment of Social Systems as Cultural Systems

In surveying the attributes of culture above, the first item mentioned is culture being holistic or systemic. This holistic perspective is captured in the CEHC by the Cultural Systems Paradigm (CSP). The CSP is discussed in detail in a CEHC Working Paper on the CSP, and again briefly in the full CEHC Working Paper. As such, the paradigm is not going to be discussed to any great length here. However, we will briefly mention that there are two major components of the CSP, one referred to as the Cultural System (See Figure 2A), and the Second as the Human Ecological System (See Figure 2B).

The CSP is a cultural ecological model which first views human individuals as biological, cognitive, social and cultural beings, who must be studied in their social, historical, and meaning contexts. As such, the CSP consists of several subsystems, that are represented by several major categories. First there are those CSP categories that make up the Cultural System, and these are:

- (1) Individual and Normative **Behavioral Patterns**.
- (2)) **Significant Social Systems**, including **domestic units** (households or residential compounds); **extraresidential groupings and dyads** (ethnic groups, social networks and kinship systems, voluntary associations/organizations, symmetrical dyads such as friends, coworkers or real/and fictive kin dyads, asymmetrical dyad such at employer-employee, patron-client, etc.); the policies and practices of institutions and agencies of the **wider community and /society**; and **transnational alliances and influences** (e.g. religious or economic groupings that cross national borders, globalization systems such as mass media and computer technology, etc).
- (3) Individual and Shared "**Ideational**" or **Meaning Structures** (knowledge, beliefs, attitudinal systems, values, "significant symbolisms"),
- (4) **Expressive Culture** (Language, Music, Art, Literature, etc.); and
- (5) **Material Culture**. (technology, artificats, and other human made objects).

Individuals and their cultural systems are viewed as components of a **Human Ecology System**, which include three other major categories:

- (1) The **Physical Environment**, in which the human group resides and that group's cultural system provides a successful exploitation of life sustaining elements, protection against elements which have the potential of threatening life, and finds ways to overcome elements that constrain life sustaining activities.
- (2) **Real and Perceived Needs** that human groups and individual members have to meet in order to achieve physical and socio-psychological functioning, including. *organic needs* (i.e. reproduction, consumption of food, water and other energy sources, waste elimination, disease prevention and cure, protection from hazardous climate conditions, and physical space), *instrumental needs* (economic, educational/socializing, governance or political and legal, and communal); and *expressive needs* (cognitive [meaning and orderly world view], affective [social status and acceptance, being loved or liked, self and group identity etc]; and communicative [need to explain, communicate, etc).
- (3) **Significant Historical Processes and Events** that may be biophysical (e.g. floods, droughts, etc) or sociocultural (coups, wars, new economic or marketing systems, etc.) that either institutionalize or sustain a cultural system, or a part of that system, or result in a "regenerated" or syncretized (new, combined) cultural forms.

In the CEHC the CSP helps us to assess various social groups as cultural systems including the usual categories of national groups, ethnic groups, and localized communities. The community assessment methodologies of the EICCARS facilitates such research. At the same time the CSP also allows us to analyze other human groupings beyond these three usual social categories (national groups, ethnic groups and localized communities) as cultural groups or systems. In fact the CSP provides the framework for the analysis of **any of the social systems** included in the CSP categories as cultural systems. In other words, the CSP facilitates the cultural systems analysis of domestic units, extra-residential organizations, networks, dyads, wider community or societal institutions, policies, and practices, or transnational alliances and influences), **to the degree that they have aspects of the other categories of a cultural system**, in particular: (1) shared meaning systems; (2) preferred or normative behavior and social structure; and (3) shared expressive systems. Such socio-cultural systems will also frequently be influenced by human ecological components, as outlined in the CSP, including:

- 1) the influence of wider social and **physical environments** on the continuity or modification of the cultural system under analysis;
- 2) whether the members of the cultural system under analysis are having their **real and/or perceived needs** in relationship to the cultural system are being met by the normative or preferred patterns of that cultural system (i.e., the behavioral, social, ideational and expressive norms or preferences); and

- 3) whether there are certain **historical events** or **processes** that appear to have contributed to the reproduction of the preferred and/or shared patterns of the cultural system under analysis.

The CSP also facilitates the study of any social system as a cultural system also because of the presence of the other 11 attributes of culture found within the CSP. For example, various social systems can be explored in terms of whether they either explicitly or tacitly provides **order, regularity and predictability**. Bureaucratic and corporate cultures explicitly seek to attain such characteristics through written directives, guidelines, meetings and other strategies. But other social systems, while they may not have explicit guidelines, have practice these characteristics in a tacit way because: (1) humans are culture creating beings who began structuring cultural systems because of the need for order, regularity, familiarity, predictability and familiarity; and (2) the very survival of any social system is dependent on the development of such cultural characteristics, either explicit or tacit.

Order, regularity, and predictability are dependent on shared **meanings**, or what are referred to in the CSP as ideational systems. Social living may bring persons together with widely disparate meanings that they attached to the same phenomena. Again the survival and/or success of a social system is dependent on creating some common meanings and understanding to be able to function as a system. Meaning systems also facilitate communication between members of the group, and provides group members with cognitive models for explaining their worlds and bodies of knowledge to themselves, as well as to others. The discussion thus far has strongly implied the necessity of **shared** behavioral and meaning systems. Moreover, in order for the system to achieve the order, regularity, and predictability necessary to its survival and/or success, certain behaviors and ideations must be **valued** or preferred over others. As stated earlier, the guidelines for achieving order, regularity, and predictability maybe tacit as well as explicit. Even the most highly regulated bureaucracy in terms of explicit rules or guidelines, will also have many tacit patterns, some which might appear in conflict with those that are explicitly stated. Similarly, social systems may stay certain preferences or “**realities**” that may indeed be found to be **ideal** rather than what is really happening or true. The growth and continuation of a social system is dependent on the **horizontal and vertical reproduction** achieved through the socialization of new member to the group. While one does not usually think of organizations continuing to reproduce themselves intergenerationally, this is indeed achieved through the reproduction of the system over time through the rules and expectations that members have regarding practice of those ideas and behaviors preferred by the group. Of course, social systems are influenced by the social and **physical environments** of which they are a part. Social systems are also **functional** in the range of needs that they help their members meet, some of which, particularly some instrumental (e.g. communal needs related to sharing aspects of the cultural system) and expressive (e.g., self identify or group identity associated with that system) needs, are created from being a member of that system.

Methods in Cultural Assessment

The Methods in the EICCARS approach to Cultural Assessments are ethnographically based, and for the most part are similar to those carried out in the assessment of local communities, ethnic populations, and societies. That is, the primary methods used in the EICCARS approach to cultural assessments are the following:

Among the qualitative methods used in the EICCARS are:

- (a) the analysis of various secondary sources such as documents, archives, policies and procedures, statistical and other documents, and various other paper and electronic products;
- (b) the mapping of space and space utilization
- (c) ethnographic methods of observation and participant observation;
- (d) a number of different approaches to ethnographic interviewing, including a variety of strategies for the ethnographic interviewing of individuals, and of groups (including focus groups);
- (e) oral and life history interviews;
- (f) memory and historical reproduction;
- (g) household, family, kinship and social network analysis;
- (h) and the analysis of audio, visual, and “living” (discourse analysis) texts.

The selection of specific methods however will depend on what social system is being analyzed as a cultural system, and for what reason is that system being analyzed. The specifics of each of these methods will not be further discussed here, as there are CEHC PTMs that are being developed for each of these methods to which the reader can refer.