

Sociology Induction Task

SOCIOLOGY AND OTHER CULTURES

Although the focus of most of the A level is on modern western societies, sociologists have always recognised that, to understand our own culture better it is useful to compare it with other cultures and societies around the world, both now and in the past. Much sociological understanding comes from such comparisons. Anthropologists usually study small scale societies. On the following pages are some extracts from some famous anthropological studies.

Induction work

Choose any three of the cultures described below and write a description of the differences and similarities between the cultures you have chosen and your own culture (you do not need to compare the cultures to each other). This piece of work should be about **800 words** long. Look up and define the following concepts and try to use them in your essay where appropriate:

- Norms
- Status
- Roles
- Values
- Socialisation
- Gender roles
- Division of labour
- Family structure
- Deviance
- Community

A. THE CHEYENNE INDIANS

The Cheyenne Indians lived on the Great Plains of the United States of America, west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains. The following account describes part of their traditional way of life which came to an end at the close of the nineteenth century when they were defeated by the US Army and placed on reservations.

The Cheyenne believe that wealth, in the form of horses and weapons, is not to be hoarded and used by the owner. Instead it is to be given away. Generosity is highly regarded and a person who accumulates wealth and keeps it for himself is looked down upon. A person who gives does not expect an equal amount in return. The greatest gift he can receive is prestige and respect for his generous action.

B. THE IK

The IK were a small tribe who lived in northern Uganda. The IK regarded children as a great nuisance. So much so that they were thrown out by their mothers at the age of three and expected to look after themselves.

In this environment, a child stands no chance of survival on his own until he is about 13 years old, so children form themselves into two age bands, the first from 3 to 7. For the most part they ate figs that had been partially eaten by baboons, a few cherries, bark from trees, and when they were really hungry they swallowed earth or even pebbles.

C. THE POMO INDIANS

'Without the family we are nothing, and in the old days, before the white people came, the family was given the first consideration by anyone who was about to do anything. That is why we got along. We had no courts, judges, schools, and the other things you have, but we got along better than you. We were

taught that we would suffer from the devils, spirits, ghosts or other people if we did not support one another. The family was everything, and no one forgot that. Each person was nothing, but as a group joined by blood the individual knew that he would get the support of all his relatives if anything happened. He also knew that if he was a bad person the head man of his family would pay another tribe to kill him so that there would be no trouble afterward and so that he would not get the family into trouble all the time.

With us, the family was everything. Now it is nothing. We are getting like the white people, and it is bad for the old people. We had no old people's homes like you. The old people were important. They were wise. Your old people must be fools'.

D. THE KGATLA PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA

The women and girls till the fields, build and repair the walls of the huts, granaries and courtyards, prepare food and make beer, look after the fowls, fetch water, earth and wood, collect wild plants, and do all the other housework.

The women fill in their time with one or other of the many tasks that village life may entail. A new coating of plaster may be needed on the walls, or there are cracks that must be mended, and for these purposes loads of earth must first be dug, carried in baskets and worked into a suitable mud.

Men on the other hand, have no regular daily work in the villages. The herding of livestock is done by the boys, who take the animals out in the morning to graze and bring them back again in the afternoon. Specialists like the doctors and thatchers will generally have something to do almost every day, but the rest seem to work spasmodically, and frequently spend days on end merely lounging about.

E. THE BUSHMEN OF THE KALAHARI DESERT

The Bushmen live in small bands rarely numbering more than twenty people. They have a hunting and gathering economy – the men hunt and the women gather edible roots and berries. The Bushmen are nomadic; they roam from place to place in search of food and water. They have few possessions and build tiny dome shaped huts made of grass.

Bushmen dress in the skin of animals. Men wear only a leather loincloth; women a small leather apron and a cape made from a whole animal hide. Sometimes they wear sandals but mostly their feet are bare. Bushmen waste nothing. When they kill an antelope most of the meat is dried to preserve it but sooner or later every last bit is eaten down to the gristle inside the ears and sometimes even the hide. Blood from the kill is collected in a shallow hole lined with skin then scooped out in handfuls and drunk. Bones are cracked open for marrow and worked into arrow points to kill more antelope.

Bushmen are polygynous; a man may have two or more wives. He is allowed to have as many wives as he can afford – which depends on how well he hunts. Co-wives are often

sisters. Girls marry young – around 6 or 9 years to a husband in his teens. However sexual intercourse is not permitted until the wife reaches puberty. The husband always goes to live with his wife's family. Divorce is a straight forward matter – the couple simply announce their divorce and separate.

Many Bushmen women have decorative scars on their foreheads and thighs. The cuts are made while they are young with a knife or an axe blade, then charcoal is rubbed in. One woman explained that it was worth the pain. She had been extremely ugly and the scars had improved her looks.

Bushmen rarely fight with each other and go to great lengths to avoid quarrels and disagreement. In particular they try to prevent jealousy and for this reason the few possessions they have are constantly circulating round the group. No one keeps a good knife for long even though they may really want it because they will become the object of envy. Their culture insists that food, water and material possessions are shared. Without this they may not survive the famines and droughts of the Kalahari Desert.

F. THE TCHAMBULI PEOPLE OF NEW GUINEA

The women go with shaven heads, unadorned, determinedly busy about their affairs. Adult males in Tchambuli society are skittish (highly strung and fickle), wary of each other, interested in art, in the theatre, in a thousand petty bits of insult and gossip. The men wear lovely ornaments, they do the shopping, and they carve and paint and dance. Men whose hair is long enough wear curls, and the others make false curls out of rattan rings.

G. BODY RITUAL AMONG THE NACIREMA

Even the most exotic and bizarre rituals do not surprise the anthropologist. Take the Nacirema. Their magical beliefs and practices present such unusual aspects that they can be described as an example of the extremes to which human behaviour can go. The culture of these people is very poorly understood, but here are some of its main features.

Nacirema culture is characterised by a highly developed market economy that has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labours and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which is a dominant concern to these strange people. The fundamental belief underlying the whole Nacirema culture is that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to feebleness and disease: the rituals and ceremonies are designed to avert these characteristics. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals have several shrines in their house and in fact, the status of a house is often measured in terms of how many such ritual centres it possesses. Whilst each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. Adults never discuss the ritual, and children are only told as much as they need in order to be initiated successfully into the bizarre rituals. However, after a long period of time I managed to build up a good enough rapport to observe the shrines and have their rituals described to me – though I was unable to observe anybody engaging in the ceremonies.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest that is built into the wall. In this chest are kept many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialist practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts.

However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and the herbalist, who provide the required potions for another gift. Even when these potions have served their purposes, for the real or imagined illnesses they are supposed to treat, they are not thrown away, but are kept in the charm box, often for years - presumably the Nacirema believe that the presence of the potions helps to ward off evil spirits.

Beneath the charm box is a small font. Each day, twice a day, every member of the family enters the shrine room in succession and bows his head before the charm box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the water priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the water ritually pure.

The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them and their lovers reject them. They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual ablution of the mouths of children, which is supposed to improve their moral fibre. The daily body ritual performed by everybody includes a mouth-rite. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalised series of gestures. Also, the people seek out a holy mouth-man once or twice a year. He uses a variety of probes and prods to exorcise the evils of the mouth, by looking for holes and filling them with some magical material. As he jabs his tools into an exposed mouth, the native screams with pain: the sadism of the practitioner combined with the masochism of the natives is remarkable. Men and women have their own barbaric, masochistic rites: for men this involves a daily body ritual of scraping and lacerating their faces with a sharp instrument; for women, roughly every month they bake their heads in a small oven for about an hour.

The medicine men also have special temples called Latipsohs, where elaborate ceremonies are carried out on sick natives. As well as the medicine men, the natives are treated by a large group of vestal maidens who move sedately about the temple chambers in distinctive costume and headdress. As soon as she or he enters the Latipsoh the patient is stripped of all clothes. In everyday life the Nacirema avoids exposure of his body and its natural functions. Bathing and excretory acts are performed only in the secrecy of the household shrine. But in the Latipsoh all changes: a man whose own wife has never seen him in an excretory act, suddenly finds himself naked and assisted by a vestal maiden while he performs his natural functions into a sacred vessel...

There are ritual fasts to make fat people thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people fat. Still other rites are used to make women's breasts larger if they are small and smaller if they are large. General dissatisfaction with the breast shape is symbolised in the fact that the ideal form is outside the range of human variation. A few women afflicted with almost inhuman hyper-mammary development are so idolised that they make a handsome living by simply going from village to village and permitting the natives to stare at them for a fee...