Culture is tricky. A recent encounter with the word *culture* in the Sunday newspapers illustrates just how tricky it can be. In one article, *culture* referred to classical music, dance, and art—sometimes called *highbrow* culture. Another section listed cultural events—each of them celebrating one or another *ethnic* group. In a third instance, a reporter wrote about how religious organizations were marketing books and music through retail chains, ensuring the place of these materials in the *popular* culture. Each of these articles wrote of culture, but the cultures they addressed only hinted at the thing we call culture. None provided a picture of culture as a central part of daily life for most people.

Perhaps a recent encounter with a child and his father is more illustrative of culture at work.

As I entered a grocery store with an empty cart, a small Black boy of about 4 put up his hand as if to stop me. I perceived a game, and exclaimed with a smile, “Oh, do I have to stop?” He grinned widely and put up both hands. “Oh, no, I can’t go yet!” I responded. He laughed, and a man I assumed to be his father looked up from feeding coins into a sorting and counting machine and smiled before he returned to his task. The boy waved me on in the best traffic police style, and I thanked him as I, an older White woman, went on to do my shopping.

How was this experience cultural? Obviously, the boy and I shared knowledge of a traffic officer (or crossing guard) and an understanding of games of pretend. We recognized signs each of us gave the other of being ready to play. The man (who in my culturally constructed view was probably his father) understood the signs as well—I was not going to harm his child, nor was the boy causing trouble. We were all interacting with each other in a shared understanding. There were other cultural things going on here as well, thrifty behavior by the man, a woman perhaps fulfilling a stereotypic role of provisioning for the family, the license granted a child to engage in mildly disruptive behavior in the spirit of play. Despite our differences in age and ethnicity, each of us knew the rules and played the game spontaneously and correctly. This was culture at work, and while it might seem like a common enough interaction, it was embedded in Western views of childhood and play. Comparing this episode to Bazyk, Stalnaker, Llerena, Ekelman, and Bazyk’s (2003) account of the play of Mayan children in Belize, it becomes apparent that what happened to me was not a universal adult–child construction...
of play, but something peculiar to the time, place, and circumstances, and following agreed upon, albeit tacit, procedures and rules for behavior. This sort of cultural understanding and sharing takes place constantly in our daily lives.

If we could live in isolation in a small world of people who are all just like us we wouldn’t need the concept of culture, although we would almost certainly experience phenomena encompassed by the term “culture.” We become conscious of this thing named culture when we leave our world and come up against differences—substantive and stylistic differences in the way the ordinary practices of life are carried out, differences in what matters and what doesn’t, differences in what constitutes family and beliefs about how children should be raised, different rules of speech. In such situations the construct of culture is useful to explain the breadth and depth of what is similar within a group and what is different between groups. Culture happens among and between people, by definition. A person cannot be cultural or have culture in isolation from others. Culture is collective, and it becomes apparent in our recognition of difference (see Hasselkus, 2002).

Bonder, Martin, and Miracle (this issue) propose that culture is also individual, enacted by individuals and changed by individual actions. Their model of Culture Emergent, in the context of occupation or a therapeutic encounter, requires the therapist to be client-centered, using general knowledge of the client’s culture as preliminary knowledge, much in the same way that knowledge of a diagnosis informs therapy but is inadequate to guide all forms of clinical reasoning (Mattingly & Fleming, 1994; Rogers, 1983). While acknowledging the conservative aspect of culture, Bonder et al. emphasize the dynamic nature of culture enacted. In doing so, they ask the health care professional to know the typical (with respect to the culture) and the specific (with respect to the individual who is receiving services). This model of culture is a corrective to the idea that we can know “a culture” and can design interventions to fit a person of that culture without consideration of individual differences, a view of culture that is inherently stereotyping and only minimally useful.

In commenting on the work of Bonder and her colleagues (this issue), I will build upon two of their points. The first is the dynamic aspect of culture enacted, and the second is the cultural nature of each individual in an encounter focusing on the cultural therapist. Finally, I will offer a cautionary note, suggesting that the Culture Emergent model’s focus on individual agency does not grant us license to ignore the collective and conservative nature of culture.

Culture Enacted

Michael Agar (1994) argues that culture is not only something one has, but also something that happens (an event) in an encounter between people with different cultures, a position not unlike that of Bonder et al. (this issue). Culture is an edge phenomenon, not something we think about in our day-to-day lives except when we are faced with behaviors or language that are difficult to comprehend and seem to come from an other culture. Thus, it is not surprising that the concept of culture seemed to go dormant in American occupational therapy texts between Dunton’s writing in 1918 (as cited in Bonder et al.) and the 1980s when it began to appear in papers such as Levine’s 1984 description of Mr. DeMarcasi and the way that a therapist’s awareness of cultural factors supported clinical reasoning in a home health case.

Occupational therapy had its origins in the progressive movement, when programs such as those at Hull House celebrated immigrants’ cultural traditions and crafts (although as a means of promoting assimilation) (Quiroga, 1995). In the years that followed, immigrants to the United States were expected to assimilate to the way things were done here, and relatively few Americans traveled or lived in foreign situations. Furthermore, the shift in occupational therapy practice to encompass more of a structuralist perspective that emphasized the common neurologic, kinesiologic, and even psychic characteristics of all humans (as described by Hooper and Wood, 2002) set aside the need to consider such things as cultural differences between people. In recent years, however, globalization of business, growth of foreign travel by Americans, and increased immigration of individuals for whom assimilation has either not been a goal or has been difficult to accomplish, have spotlighted the significance of cultural differences. Without exposure to such differences, culture would probably not be a professional concern.

The relatively recent development of professional concern with culture can be traced in American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) documents. In the second edition of the Uniform Terminology for Occupational Therapy published in 1989 (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA]), culture is not mentioned (nor is context). By the third edition, in 1994, context has been added, with culture included as part of the environment (AOTA). The 2002 iteration, now called the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework continues the placement of culture within context, defining it as follows: Customs, beliefs, activity patterns, behavior standards, and expectations accepted by the society of which the individual is a member. Includes political aspects, such as laws that affect access to resources and affirm personal rights. Also
involves opportunities for education, employment, and economic support. (AOTA, 2002, p. 623)

There is nothing particularly wrong about this definition, but it does seem to position individuals within a container of culture, with little recognition of the practice of culture in a dynamic system. Furthermore, the inclusion of structural elements such as laws and educational opportunities seems to go beyond culture to include factors that are certainly culturally influenced but may not be fundamentally cultural.

Culture doesn’t function very well as a container. At best, the container must be leaky—people move between cultures, sometimes picking and choosing aspects that suit their needs. In some cases this may be difficult. Ojeda (1993), for example, struggled with questions of child rearing when she moved to the United States from the Philippines:

There was, however, one thing of which I was certain: I wanted the best for my child, that is, the best of two worlds, America and my own. To do this, there were choices to be made. Predictably, I found myself straddling between two cultures, my right hand not knowing what my left hand was doing. At times, I found myself engaged in a balancing act in an effort to understand American culture without jeopardizing my cultural ways. Thus, alternatively, I would be strongly assertive and modestly defensive when my peculiar beliefs and actions were questioned. (p. 58)

On the other hand, many of us act within different subcultures all the time without necessarily feeling any particular conflicts, and one way to understand the nature of Culture Emergent or culture in action is to look at how we negotiate being part of different cultures. I might consider, for example, the difference between the way I behave at an occupational therapy conference and what I am like at an anthropology conference. According to Gallimore and Lopez (2002):

…people’s lives are embedded within “multiple ecologies,” or settings that place slightly different constraints and resources on them, and as a result, they draw on different cultural models to best meet the challenges they encounter. (p. 73S)

Becoming aware of these shifts in one’s own behaviors in response to different settings helps to illuminate the concept of culture. Garrison (2002) says, “culture has us before we have it” (p. 11S). He suggests that we must recognize, critique, and to some extent change this culture that has us (or our actions within the culture) before we can realize our potentials.

Everyone Has Culture, Even the Occupational Therapist

One tricky aspect of the Culture Emergent model (Bonder et al., this issue) resides in the authors’ concept of vantage. To effectively engage in client-centered culturally informed practice, the therapist must be attuned to culture, having a vantage that considers the possibility of culture in the actions and words of the individual. But as Bonder et al. point out, the therapist is cultural too. I believe that the problematic cultures in therapy are often not those of the client, but rather those of the therapist. One commonly cited example of the problematic nature of the culture of therapists is the value they place upon independence—a Western perspective that may not be shared by the client. But even the concept of occupation is cultural, as Darnell (2002) points out. She suggests that professional training and socialization establish shared values about occupation (work and leisure, for example) that clients may not accept. In such cases, the “helping” professionals may label clients as unmotivated or uncooperative.

But what would happen if we, as therapists, could recognize these disconnects as a problem, not in the individual, but in the space or gap between us and them? This is where culture occurs, according to Agar (1994), and he suggests that there are two ways to address this situation—one can view the strange as simply wrong, or one can use the difference as an opportunity to experience culture, learning much about oneself in the process. Agar refers to these moments when culture happens as rich points. Being open to the other as a cultural being provides us with the possibility of learning about self and the ways we are shaped by our cultures. In some ways, this extends the notion of conscious use of self, articulated by Mosey (1986), to include not just the psychological and social, but also the cultural. Hassellkus (2002) emphasizes how recognition of similarity and difference leads to knowledge of the many kinds of people in the world and their fundamental ordinariness in their own cultural worlds. If we can tune into our own cultural perspectives, recognizing them for what they are, then it is likely that we will be more effective in our work with individuals who are not like us. Or, more to the point, we are not like them.

Culture Is Collective and Conservative

By proffering a model that recognizes the dynamic and individualized qualities of culture enacted through (and emergent in) occupations, Bonder et al. (this issue) provide a corrective to concepts of culture as a container one is in, or a prescription for how one is to behave. I think there is danger, however, if we interpret their work as a license to focus on individuals and their actions without regard for larger cultural issues. (And I hasten to add, Bonder et al. do not suggest that one should do this.) Individuals are part of larger worlds, enmeshed in so many
ways that it is impossible to separate the person from the context. Individual agency is not free of culture, and while individual and collective actions do change culture over time, culture can be very conservative and resistant to change. As Gallimore and Lopez (2002) point out, “cultural models are resistant to change, in part because of humans’ proclivity as individuals and collectives to change just enough to make things work” (p. 738).

If cultures are collective and conservative, then workshops, courses, or reading about specified cultures should provide helpful insights and strategies for working with people of those cultures. Bonder et al. (this issue) address the limitations of both the descriptive and rules approaches to culture, and assert that education based upon these will not necessarily produce a culturally competent student. What then is the value of educational approaches to developing cultural competence? Such attempts may cause us to assume too much about individuals based upon broad generalizations related to their ethnicity or heritage. Yet, I would not ever suggest that we eschew these opportunities to learn. Study of another culture can be fascinating in its own right and has great potential to open us to the notion of difference in very basic ways of thinking and acting. It is not so much that we learn that a particular group of people has rules different from ours for turn-taking in conversation, or that eye contact is avoided, or that women having their menstrual periods cannot be in the presence of men. As Bonder et al. point out, such rules are at best general and fail to account for individual variations, not to mention the factor of people having multiple cultures. But in becoming aware of these rules, that rules for such basic behaviors exist, we learn that we follow particular patterns and behave in ways that are not universal. Once we are attuned to this, the cultural in us, it is far easier to understand and appreciate the cultural in others.

Trice (1993), in addressing occupational subcultures, identifies both cultural ideologies and cultural forms. The latter includes myths and fictions, stories and songs, symbols, language and argot, rituals and taboos, and rites and ceremonies. These cultural forms, often associated with ethnicity, are what may come to mind when we are asked to think about culture. Ethnic festivals celebrate the forms of cultures, perpetuating a sense that culture is static—locked in some past time and place. But even the most static cultural form changes subtly over time. Consider, for example, the family reunions that take place all over America during the summer. They may look the same over many years—the hand-lettered signs by the park shelters, the elders sitting in the shade while children play—but planning for the event may have gone on via Internet, the fried chicken and homemade pies prepared by the women when I was a child may have been replaced by buckets of take-out chicken and low-fat store-bought cheesecake, and some of the food might have ethnic origins quite different from those of the family celebrating the reunion.

What is less evident in this example is the cultural ideology embedded in the family reunion, and the way it too has accommodated changing models of family. There was a time in some segments of America when a divorced person might not be welcome at a family reunion, nor would unmarried individuals be accepted if they were known to be living together. The contemporary reunion might include these individuals, step-parents and children, Grandpa’s “lady friend” he took up with after he divorced the woman he had left Grandma for, and same-sex couples. An ideology that stresses the importance of family persists, but cultural beliefs about marriage, gender, and sexuality have shifted. If younger members of the family no longer attend the reunions, it is possible that the value placed upon family is also changing.

Cultural understanding is never complete—there is too much to learn, and nothing stays the same. Bonder et al. (this issue) offer an approach to culture that compels us to recognize this fact. But our very being in the contemporary world requires cultural understanding. Attending to cultural moments, sensitivity to the possibility of difference, and awareness of the cultural in our own realities are strategies to help us achieve cultural competence in the moment.

References


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