

Three Top-Scoring Essays

Essay #1 Score: 6

Clyde Kluckhohn, in his passage from the book *Mirror for Man*, defines what anthropologists mean by culture and explains the differences and similarities among the world's people. His view, one that I find to be true from my own experiences, is that culture is "the social legacy individuals acquire from their group." Simply put, people act and react the way they do "because they were brought up that way," not due to biological differences.

On a recent trip to Spain I was surprised to find that nearly all the beaches were topless. The women seemed perfectly comfortable being in public almost nude, but more surprising was the fact that no one stopped and stared or took the event to be shocking or indecent. Had a similar scene taken place on a California beach it would have soon become at least a point of interest and curiosity. These people did not neglect to wear their tops due to any severe climate change from America to Spain that makes tops unbearable. There is no biological or anatomical difference that causes this varying custom. It is simply the way they were brought up.

The same applies to my surprise at their "indecenty." Seeing nude women at a beach was not something I had been accustomed to. However, I am accustomed to seeing nude women from African tribes in National Geographic and similar documentaries, and these nude women, biologically similar to those of Spain, had never shocked me. The reason for my differing views was an acquired, not an instinctive one.

In Kluckhohn's essay he cites the example of a trader's wife in Arizona that fed guests rattlesnake flesh without alerting them to the nature of the meat. The guests would eat the sandwiches described as "delicious and reminiscent of chicken and tuna fish. None complained until they were told what they had eaten, and then they would vomit "instantaneously." Their bodies were adapted to the digestion of the meat, but their minds had not.

In William Shakespeare's "Hamlet", the main character is confronted by the ghost of his father and told to revenge his murder. The audience of the day accepted the event unreservedly. The question was not whether the ghost was real or not, but whether it was actually the ghost of the dead King or the devil in disguise trying to trick Hamlet. If a similar scenario were presented today the audience would be much more reluctant to accept the idea of a ghost. They would question Hamlet's sanity, perhaps his sobriety, and speculate on the seriousness of the work. This is not due to a change in the human mind that has taken place over the years, but a change in the way people are raised to view such events.

The same concept applies to another area of culture, art. During the earlier ages of civilization artwork strived for realism. The greatest artist was the one who could reproduce reality the most accurately. The pain-filled works of Van Gogh and the symbolic renditions of Picasso would have been scorned and rejected,

and certainly not accepted as the masterpieces they are today. However, there have been no major anatomical changes in the human eye for thousands of years. Earlier civilizations would have seen the same work, but different upbringing would have changed their perception of it.

Kluckhohn is careful to point out that human biology and natural laws limit culture. No culture on earth raises their children to fly. The tribes of the desert regions are not familiar with fishing. Aside from this limitation, culture, the total way of life of a people, is derived solely from the patterns and customs of their specific group.

COMMENT: *Essay #1 demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of Kluckhohn's argument and genuine rhetorical flair. It is also notable for the range of subjects its author draws on to illustrate Kluckhohn's point that different peoples' actions result from different upbringings, not differences in biology. Discussing in turn a topless beach in Spain, the author's reaction to that toplessness, Kluckhohn's rattlesnake meat anecdote, audience ideas about ghosts in Shakespeare's day and in our own, and the evolution of painting, the essay consistently shows how differences in perception derive from people's ideas and expectations, not from their physical characteristics. Besides providing in its first and last paragraphs a concise and specific explanation of Kluckhohn's views about how biology and culture interrelate, this essay insightfully considers the implications those ideas have in a variety of arenas - including, in paragraph three, the writer's own perceptions. Its thoughtfulness is leavened by moments of wry humor - the observation that Spain's climate did not make tops unbearable and that today's audience "would question Hamlet's sanity, perhaps his sobriety" - moments that reinforce the seriousness of the analysis as a whole.*

This essay's prose is as engaging as its development. Besides choosing words aptly, this essay's sentences use sophisticated patterns of modification ("Simply put, people act and react") and match length and structure to content. The sureness and specificity of the prose in Essay #1 can be highlighted by contrasting it with the vagueness of the prose in Essay #11.

Essay #2 Score: 6

In the book *Mirror for Man*, Clyde Kluckhohn presents an argument that culture accounts for many people's behaviour, as opposed to the "biological properties of the people concerned, their individual past experience, and the immediate situations." He defines culture as "the social legacy individuals acquire from their group." To him culture is like a huge weight, whose inertia forces us to act according to certain observable patterns. Unfortunately, Kluckhohn's explanation of culture is fallacious because, though culture may seem to account for many behaviours, in actuality it accounts for a relatively small number of behaviours, or perhaps none at all.

Kluckhohn says that people are different because of their individual cultures, but are similar in several fundamental ways. One example is the differences in eating habits between different cultures. Kluckhohn relates a story of trader's wife who served snake-meat in a sandwich to unsuspecting guests. Once they found out, many of them vomited the previously-thought delicious food. Another example he gives is the practice of polygamy. American women abhor the idea, while the Koryak women of Siberia support it wholly. In spite of these superficial differences, Kluckhohn says that there are several fundamental similarities in all men. The one which is crucial to his argument is that all men are greatly affected by their culture. Their different, contrasting actions are all accounted for by their varying "social legacies."

This idea is false for several reasons, but before we go on, we should examine his own ideas that support his sweeping generalization.

The flaws in his argument stem from his idea that culture accounts for all behaviours except those limited by biological factors. He dismisses "individual past experience and the immediate situation" as factors that influence a people's behaviour. However, it is these factors which determine an individual's behaviour and it is the sum of all the **individuals** which determine a people. Applying this to his examples, we find that they are weak arguments at best. His first point involves Americans. Though we think of ourselves as individualistic, he says that we all follow certain patterns — we brush our teeth in the morning, we put on pants instead of a grass skirt, we eat three meals a day, and we sleep in a bed, not in a hammock or sheep pelt. All this is attributed to the "American culture." However, upon closer examination, the "American culture" cannot account for all this. Instead, other factors are more likely to account for these actions. Most people brush their teeth in the morning and eat three meals a day, because that is how they, as individuals, were raised by their parents. One might argue that their parents got this "tradition" from their parents and so on, which amounts to a cultural influence. However, a cultural influence is that from a **people's** past experience and the habit of teeth-brushing or eating three meals a day could not have started with a whole population suddenly deciding to brush their teeth in the morning or eat three meals a day. Instead, what is more likely is that an individual started doing this, which then spreads to more people. The other two "habits" — those of putting on pants and sleeping in bed — could also have been attributed to one person, instead of a whole culture.

In addition, the environment certainly has an affect. Many Americans don't wear grass skirts because they don't have the appropriate grass to make into skirts. If a person begins to live like a hermit in a forest, he surely won't be able to find a bed with two mattresses to sleep on. In the end, what an individual finally does is ultimately his own decision. The same line of reasoning can be applied to Kluckhohn's examples of polygamy, the American who acted like a Chinese person and the woman who served snake-meat. The American wife usually finds polygamy abhorrant because of the morals she was brought up with, not because of the "American culture." If that were not the case, then the Mormons during the 1800's would have also disliked polygamy. The American man who acted like a Chinese person did so because he was raised in China. If he was raised in an

American school in China, he would perhaps have **learned** American mannerisms and traits. And as for the guests who disliked the rattle-snake meat, they probably did so, because they were used to eating other animals. If one of the "American" guests was used to eating snake, then his own individual tastes would not have submitted to the American culture's tastes. In short, culture is a cause more remote than individual experience or immediate environment in affecting a person's behaviour.

Other ideas and phenomena refute Kluckhohn's idea of culture's influence on people. The adaptation in Darwin's theory of evolution, when generalized to people's behaviour, refutes Kluckhohn's idea. Kluckhohn's definition of culture is static. He says that people's actions are determined by their ancestor's experience. This is empirically not the case. Societies in primitive times had to adapt and change, away from their past traditional means of acting, in order to survive. Societies and individuals must be dynamic, or else they stagnate and disappear. On a more individual level, the experiences of many foreigners show that Kluckhohn's idea is false. Foreigners often adapt and accept new "American" ideas which often contradict their previous cultural mores. Some don't do so, however. Yet this is not because of a "culture's influence," but rather it depends on the individual's ability to adapt. In addition, the great discoveries of the past were breaks away from previous past thought. If Kluckhohn's idea that culture defines a person's behaviour were true, then we would still think that the earth is flat or that the earth was the center of the universe. Individuals such as Columbus and Copernicus broke away from their contemporary idea which their culture had perpetuated. Yet another idea which contradicts Kluckhohn is the humanistic philosophy. According to humanists, every decision that the individual makes is "his own decision." That is, the decisions a person makes do not follow a pattern caused by certain past factors. Instead, each decision is a new step forward, independent of events in the past. By no means does the individual act because the past experience of other people dictate such an action.

The powerful influence that Kluckhohn attributes to culture is clearly not true. Rather, culture is a remote factor which affects an individual's behaviour to a limited extent.

COMMENT: *Unlike Essay #1, Essay #2 argues valiantly against the influence of culture. Challenging Kluckhohn's "sweeping generalization" about culture's influence over all behavior that is not biologically limited, the essay strives to rehabilitate the individualism Kluckhohn dismisses by demonstrating the more immediate influence — even in Kluckhohn's own examples — of "individual past experience" (paragraph 4) and "the immediate situation" (paragraph 5). The essay goes on to claim that Kluckhohn's idea of culture, essentially "static," contradicts the reality of innovation and adaptation exemplified by Darwin's theory of evolution, the assimilation of immigrants, the accomplishments of Columbus and Copernicus.*

Essay #2's emphasis on individualism is epitomized by this ringing sentence from the end of paragraph seven: "Instead, each new decision is a new step forward, independent of events in the past." Although both readers scored this essay 6, it is

unlikely that either was led to agree fully with this statement, or to share the writer's evident impatience with the idea of culture. Both probably realized that, in order to argue against culture's influence in paragraph four, the writer has treated culture as something imposed by a sudden decision of a whole people, rather than — as Kluckhohn shows in example of the American/Chinese — as something derived from and inculcated through the immediate family environment. A similar blurring of definitions of environment, culture, and upbringing can be observed in paragraph five. Nevertheless, the essay does suggest genuine limitations to the general validity of Kluckhohn's statements, exemplify those limitations concretely, and make a strong if not compelling case for its point of view.

The prose of this essay is as vigorous as its argument. It shows its writer's consistent ability to choose words precisely, to use subordination accurately, and even, occasionally, to rise to a rhetorical flourish (as in the simile of culture as "a huge weight" in paragraph 1). This consistent control is particularly impressive given the essay's length.

Essay # 3 Score: 6

In a world where everyone has experienced "the same poignant life experiences, such as birth, helplessness, illness, old age, and death," it is incredible to think of the number of ways that peoples can go through these events in life. It is most common that their attitudes and responses are influenced by their environment and society. As Clyde Kluckhohn had explained in "Mirror for Man", the best explanation for any human action is the "concept of culture." One cannot clearly define this idea, but through the comparison of two different groups of people hopefully one can better understand the meaning of culture. By comparing Vietnam and the United States, two very contrasting nations, one can see the force behind the concept of culture in shaping people's lives.

In terms of education, the similarities between the two countries are few. Both aim at improving their people's lives, and yet the method in which this is achieved differs greatly. Vietnam, a small country with a large population, has to make do with the lack of technology. It stresses hard work rather than the use of machines. Children are encouraged to do math mentally rather than depend on calculators. As a result, the Vietnamese people do not consider it a sacrifice that they should lead a hard life. Also, their education emphasizes morality rather than independent thinking. Therefore, most Vietnamese children would never think of leaving their families before marriage, unlike the Americans, who would leave for college right after high school or move out of their parents' house to live with friends. The Americans would also prefer to make their lives as easy as possible, which means that rather than adding mentally, they would turn to an adding machine or a computer. Their two ways of thinking differ as a result of different education methods.

One can also see how culture causes people to be different in their dress styles. In Vietnam, it is acceptable to wear clothes similar to pyjamas out in the street. Yet

in America, one cannot do this. One has to dress properly, which means that pyjamas is worn at night and to bed only. However, it is incomprehensible to the Vietnamese why the Americans have to dress so well to go to sleep, why they have to wear nightgowns or pyjamas with fancy designs. They do not understand why it is important to put on a robe when one eats breakfast. Most of all, the Vietnamese people are shocked when they realize that some Americans go to the opposite extreme and not wear anything at all. Such indiscreet action is never tolerated in their culture. Even though their clothes are simple, the Vietnamese people always make sure that their bodies are covered. The women would never be found wearing anything that would reveal their bodies in an improper fashion. The way that the Vietnamese and American people dress is very much determined by their ways of thinking.

A very important factor which is influenced by culture is marriage. In both societies, this is the time when a man and a woman come together and become one. The process for the wedding, however, is different. The Vietnamese people place an emphasis on parents' approval, and therefore the parents play an important role in their children's marriage. Sometimes they even act as the matchmakers. In the United States, however, the children are left to make their own decisions. They meet someone they like, fall in love, and get married. Sometimes they go through this process without consulting their parents. Very often, they would go to places like Reno to marry quickly and have no second thoughts about what their parents might have to say. For some of them, it does not matter what others think as long as they are happy with their decisions. Again, the differences are results of different ways of thinking.

As can be seen, people's actions and thoughts are influenced by their cultures. The differences between Vietnam and the United States in such areas as education, dress styles, and marriage are results of the way they were raised. Their different behaviors can be traced back as early as their first education and then along the way as they are growing up. They are all born being the same, but because they are taught different sets of rules, their attitudes and responses to things in life are different. A Vietnamese person would not be so unless he behaves in certain ways. He can become as American as an American by birth as long as he is educated like an American.

COMMENT: *Rather than giving Kluckhohn's ideas a ringing affirmation, as does Essay #1, or opposing them, as does Essay #2, Essay #3 shows their validity through a sustained comparison of the cultures of the United States and Vietnam. The writer conveys a clear understanding of Kluckhohn's ideas about the relationship between biology and culture in the first three sentences of the first paragraph and in this sentence from paragraph five: "They [people] are all born being the same, but because they are taught different sets of rules, their attitudes and responses to things in life are different." In between, the writer describes the differences between American and Vietnamese ways of education, dress, and marriage, showing through the examples how attitudes, sometimes influenced by environmental factors, shape expectations and behavior, thereby creating and perpetuating cultures or "ways of thinking." The essay concludes its gloss on*

Kluckhohn by introducing, albeit somewhat abruptly, the observation that upbringing overrules biology. Throughout, the essay develops its comparisons specifically and insightfully.

This essay's prose has less flair than that of Essays #1 and #2. It does, however, demonstrate considerable stylistic skill: it manages sophisticated subordination effectively, chooses precise and usually active verbs, uses parallel constructions to good effect, and employs a variety of transitional devices to highlight connections established by its content. The few instances in which the essay's language shows non-native usage — its preference for "would leave . . . prefer . . . go" (paragraphs 2, 2, 4) rather than simple present tense to express habitual actions; its use of "the" with plural nouns ("Americans," "matchmakers," "children," paragraphs 3, 4, 4) that more usually stand alone; its treatment of "pyjamas" as a singular noun, like "pair of pants" paragraph 3); its use of "Clyde Kluckhohn had explained" rather than "explained" or "explains" (paragraph 1) — in no way inhibit communication. Instead, they suggest that the writer's freshman composition class will help refine an already sophisticated control of written English.