Chapter 24
Culture: The Grand Web of Meaning

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Meaning and culture mutually constitute each other. Culture rests on meaning, whereas meaning exists and is propagated in culture. The uniquely human quest for meaning transpires against the background of culture and is simultaneously recreating culture. The current chapter aims to explore different aspects of this dynamic relationship between meaning and culture. We begin by defining meaning and culture, and elaborating the nature of their intricate relationship. Then, we analyze the universal and relative aspects of meaning systems across cultures. Finally, we examine meaning in the backdrop of multiculturalism to illuminate how individuals navigate through different cultural webs of meaning and its implications to cultural competence.

Meaning and Culture

Meaning can be defined as "shared mental representations of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships" (Baumeister 1991, p. 15). Central to meaning, thus, are relationships, symbols, and shared understandings. A shared network of meaning that is produced, distributed, and reproduced among a group of interconnected individuals constitutes culture (Chiu and Hong 2007). Culture, as a web

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of meaning, facilitates adaptation to a given ecology (Fiske 2000). This web of meaning includes norms, values, beliefs, scripts, and schemas of a community, and serves as symbolic resources (Baumeister 2005; Chiu and Hong 2006, 2007; Kitayama et al. 2006). The meaning constituting culture is sustained by the members of the culture, as well as instantiated in different external media, such as cultural institutions and practices. Dominant cultural ideas are often encoded in the news, fairy tales, urban legends, personal space, architecture, art, and cultural icons; these carriers of culture play a critical role in propagating the meaning embedded in a culture.

It is the human ability to create, share, and transmit meaning that allows the accumulation of culture. This capacity for symbol-based culture is what has allowed humankind to achieve an unparalleled level of intelligence and progress, setting it apart from other animals (Tomasello 1999). Unlike other animals, meaning pervades in each and every human act and transforms it in the process. Although some animals may be able to transmit behaviors from one generation to another (e.g., sweet-potato washing by Japanese macaques; see Nakamichi et al. 1998), the extent of complexity of such animal cultures is far from that of human. Mice or monkeys, for example, do not have marriage or sex tourism, Romeo and Juliet or the Harlequin Desire series, Valentine's Day, or Taj Mahal—a shrine erected to lost love. Human cultures, on the other hand, have their own sets of meaning frameworks, cultural practices, and artifacts associated with sex and love. As we discuss later, these meaning frameworks may differ across cultures—Americans and Italians, for example, tend to see love as an intensely positive, happy experience, whereas Chinese conceive of it as an experience related to sadness, sorrow, and nostalgia (Shaver et al. 1991). Yet cross-cultural differences are never as stark as the cross-species differences that separate humans from non-cultural animals.

Meanings Embedded in Culture

The webs of meaning interwoven by culture can be characterized broadly in two ways (also see Janoff-Bulman and Yopyk 2004). One, which we may call small-m-meaning, revolves around the notion of *comprehensibility*—around detecting and expecting certain patterns, associations, or outcomes. This type of meaning facilitates individuals' understanding of their social, physical, and phenomenal world. When we know and expect snow to be white, Thursday to follow Wednesday, or the word "yes" to indicate affirmation in English, it is this type of meaning we are referring to. Meaning, in this sense, is "ubiquitous and effortless" (King 2012). Our everyday lives are saturated with these relatively simple small-m-types of meaning, and as a result, things automatically make sense to us most of the time. This is fortuitous, because people seem to need (and to want) things to make sense. As evidenced by the fact that stimuli that make sense trigger a short, mild positive affect (Topolinski and Strack 2009; Winkielman and Cacioppo 2001) and that even 5-month-old infants look longer at impossible events to reconcile the nonsensical

(Baillargeon et al. 1985), people have innate desire to make sense of things around them. As research inspired by the meaning maintenance model reveals, perceptions of violated expectations instigate an attempt to restore meaning through a variety of compensatory strategies (Heine et al. 2006).

Another type of meaning imparted by culture, which we may call capital-M-meaning (see Mascaro et al. 2004), has to do with questions of *significance and worth*, with explorations into how something fits with larger systems of value and meaning. When people contemplate about the meaning of life in general and their lives in particular, it is this broader type of meaning that is in question. A tradition of existential and humanistic scholars, such as Albert Camus (1955), Jean Paul Sartre (1964), Viktor Frankl (1963), and Irvin Yalom (1980), have delved into the question of capital-M-meaning. These authors wrote about the dilemma the inherently meaning-seeking individual faces in a universe that does not come furnished with preordained meaning and the necessity to construct one's own meaning system. Meaning embedded in cultures, in this larger sense, provides individuals with connection to entities larger than oneself.

If the essence of meaning is connection (Baumeister and Vohs 2002), small-m-meaning involves simpler, lower-level, relatively more concrete associations (e.g., a word and its referent, certain behavioral scripts and rules), whereas capital-M-meaning connects more complex, higher-level, abstract entities (e.g., values, beliefs, the self, and the universe). Culture and its attendant phenomena, such as language, institutions, and norms, serve as repositories of meaning, in the small as well as the grand sense of the word. Meaning and culture mutually constitute each other: Meaning resides in culture, while the perpetuation of culture depends on its meaning-providing function.

Meaning-Providing Functions of Culture

In order to perpetuate themselves and endure, cultures need to serve some adaptive functions. Scholars have underlined the role of culture in helping with the survival of the species, enhancing the optimal functioning of the society, and conferring psychological benefits to the individual (Baumeister 2005; Lehman et al. 2004; Schaller and Crandall 2004). Doubtlessly, the cultural ability to use, communicate, and transmit meaning helps to fulfill basic human needs and grants evolutionary advantages. Cultures also provide psychological benefits, such as a sense of self-worth (Wan et al. 2011), along with the epistemic and existential security that accompanies this sense (Chao and Chiu 2011; Kesebir 2011). Cultures fulfill these functions by furnishing their members with meaning in both the smaller and broader connotations. In this section, we briefly review the role of culture in providing meaning.

Cultural meaning frameworks segment the world into intelligible parcels. They organize the world into a larger, relatively coherent system for the individual, thereby serving a decided epistemic function. As such, culture is a territory of

meaning, and it is simultaneously the compass. The rules, norms, standards, ideals, and ideologies, which are indispensable elements of any culture, serve as compasses of how to live and how to live well. Some cultures are more insistent on their members following the culture's compass than others. Such cultures, called *tight cultures*, are relatively homogenous with norms and values that are clearly imposed (e.g., Japan), whereas *loose cultures* (e.g., the United States) are relatively heterogeneous and tolerate deviation from norms to a larger extent (Triandis 1989). Regardless of whether a culture is tight or loose, its prescriptive, guiding function affords a sense of epistemic meaning and security to its members, or the feeling of having answers to questions (Fu et al. 2007).

Since cultural meaning systems imbue the world with a sense of order, predictability, and controllability, and impart a sense of self-worth and significance to individuals, people tend to adhere to their cultural worldviews more fervently when their meaning system and the accompanying epistemic and existential security are under threat. Research conducted under terror management theory (Greenberg et al. 1997), uncertainty management theory (van den Bos et al. 2005), and meaning maintenance model (Heine et al. 2006) provides ample evidence in support of this, though the specifics of the accounts differ to some degree. By conforming to the rules, norms, and practices of their culture and by aspiring to its ideals, individuals not only obtain a sense of epistemic and existential security but also feelings of worth, significance, and ultimate meaning.

Individuals construct the meaning of their lives through a dialogue with their culture, negotiating personal inclinations with the possibilities offered by the culture. The desire to supply life with meaning is partly motivated by the awareness of our existence as a microscopic speck on the cosmic scale of time and space. As Yalom (1980) notes, "meaning, used in the sense of one's life having made a difference, of one's having mattered, of one's having left part of oneself for posterity, seems derivative of the wish not to perish" (p. 465). People thus seek meaning in endeavors that promise some sort of continuance across time and space. Meaning embedded in culture, in this larger sense, is instrumental in connecting individuals to entities larger and longer-lasting than the self, thereby offering the hope of transcending transience and enduring in the world (Kesebir 2011). Spheres of life in which people typically seek and find meaning—religion, politics, science, or art—are uniquely human, uniquely cultural. Emmons (2003), for example, proposes a "Big 4" taxonomy of personal meaning, which lists the domains in which people strive for a sense of meaning. These four domains are achievements/work, relationships/intimacy, religion/spirituality, and self-transcendence/generativity. All these domains are products and producers of culture. And in each of these domains, individuals construct a connection between the selves with some broader context—others, life, the future, or the transcendent. All these domains of meaning, which contain "a glimpse of eternity" (Emmons 2003, p. 113), can become potent antidotes to the fears of meaninglessness and ultimate insignificance.

The pursuit of meaning, in short, takes place within the context of culture. Thus far, we have examined meaning systems that are embedded in cultures and how cultures impart a sense of meaning for individuals to pursue. Culture and its

meaning-providing functions are inherently social in nature. They are knowledge representations that are shared, albeit incompletely, by members within a given ecology (Chiu and Hong 2007). It is this quality of sharedness that we will turn to next.

Culture as a Shared Web of Meaning

Bruner (1990) elaborates the importance of sharedness. He discusses the "public and communal" nature of meaning, as opposed to the "private and autistic," noting that "our culturally adapted way of life depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depends as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation" (p. 13). A collective in which people do not possess shared meaning systems would have a marked disadvantage in coordinating and solving problems the group faces (Fiske 2000; Heylighen and Campbell 1995). By the same token, an individual who is oblivious to the shared systems of meaning of a group would have serious difficulties in functioning and thriving within that group.

Language, a meaning system of its own and the foremost tool for using meaning, serves as an excellent example of how publicly shared understandings are crucial to the effective functioning of both the culture and the individual: A culture in which people use different words to denote the same concepts would be disadvantaged in solving the problems it is facing. Similarly, an individual who cannot speak the language of the surrounding community would be destined to a lonely, and most likely miserable, existence. *A Table Is a Table*, a short story by Swiss author Peter Bichsel (1995), serves as a case in point. It tells the story of an old man, who invents a new language by starting to call things by different names: He calls the bed "picture," the table "carpet," and the mirror "chair." Soon enough, nobody else can understand him anymore, nor is he able to understand anyone else. He has to laugh when he hears someone say, "it has been raining for 2 months now," for example, because it sounds so nonsensical to him. Eventually, he stops talking altogether, except to himself, and is doomed to a pitiful existence. As this story illustrates, shared meaning systems are central to communicating with others, thereby fostering social coordination and harmony, and propagating cultural knowledge in a collective.

The assemblage of meaning systems, small and large, surrounds us and affects our thoughts and actions even if we might be largely unaware of its presence, like fish in the water. We see the world through the lenses of cultural meaning. Shared cultural meaning and practices hence tend to be invisible, taken for granted, "undoubted and often even undoubtable" (Kitayama and Markus 2000, p. 116). At the same time, though, a culture is not a homogenous, monolithic, internally consistent, stable system. On the contrary, it is markedly diverse and dynamic. Culture evolves continuously. Its meaning systems are constantly under construction, being produced and reproduced. People use, search, and construct meaning ceaselessly, thereby participating in building and changing culture (Shweder 1991).

Thus far, we have examined the intricate relationship between meaning and culture. We posit that meaning and culture mutually constitute each other. Cultures are systems of meaning that are shared, albeit incompletely, among a group of individuals. The distinctly human capacity to make sense of the physical and social world, to go beyond the immediate world to imagine alternatives, and to communicate these meaning systems to each other has led to the formation and accumulation of culture. At the same time, culture is where people derive their systems of meaning from. Meaning systems are embedded within cultures and are passed along to new members (Baumeister 1991).

Cultural Differences in Meaning

Cultures can be seen as evolved coordinating devices that enable the individual, as well as the collective, to adapt to different physical and social ecologies (Campbell 1990, 1994; Barkow et al. 1992; Heylighen and Campbell 1995). Cross-cultural research that examines fundamental aspects of human psychology (e.g., self-enhancement, emotions) suggests that although the specific patterning of meaning is culture-dependent (see Lehman et al. 2004), they reflect universal psychological foundations (Chiu and Chao 2009). That is, while the pursuit of meaning and value is a human constant, the source of meaning can vary across cultures. As a case in point, studies reveal that North Americans self-enhance on individualistic characteristics, whereas Asians self-enhance on collectivistic qualities. Both groups self-enhance, yet on different, culturally sanctioned attributes, suggesting that the motivation to seek meaning and positive self-regard is a universal, though its manifestation differs across cultural contexts (Kurman 2003; Sedikides et al. 2003).

Research on culture and emotion further illustrates the universal and culture-dependent aspects of meaning. For instance, although the facial expression of basic emotions appears to be universal (Ekman 1980), emotion display rules—rules about when, where, and how emotions should be expressed (Ekman and Friesen 1969)—vary across cultures (e.g., Matsumoto and Ekman 1989). A study that investigated the microexpressions of the 2004 Olympic Games athletes revealed that universal facial expressions are produced spontaneously in response to victory (e.g., joy) and defeat (e.g., sadness, contempt); however, after the initial emotions are evoked, display rules regulate the subsequent communication of these emotions (Matsumoto and Willingham 2006). Compared with individualistic cultures, collectivistic cultures are associated with display rules that emphasize strict emotion regulation and discourage expressivity (Matsumoto et al. 2008). This suggests that while the pursuit of meaning and communication of emotional meaning are human universals, their particulars are contingent on the cultural context.

The observed variations in cultural meaning systems can be traced to the different adaptation problems that have been faced by the individual and the collective in the given ecologies. Analyses that examine regional prevalence of infectious diseases, for example, suggest that disease prevalence is associated with cross-cultural

differences in parenting practices (Quinlan 2007), personality characteristics (Schaller and Murray 2008), and collectivistic values (Fincher et al. 2008). Presumably, some meaning systems, values, and attitudes associated with collectivism (e.g., obedience, conformity) are better suited to prevent and control the spread of infectious diseases. These studies illustrate how different adaptive problems can result in the creation of different cultural meaning systems.

Multiculturalism: Multiple Webs of Meaning

Culturally shared norms and values tell people how to act, what to strive for, how to make sense of the events that happen to them and others, and how to make value judgments (Baumeister 1991). As remarked earlier, however, these effects of culture are typically taken for granted and are invisible to the individual. Exposure to different cultural knowledge traditions (e.g., through a sojourning experience or immigration) can increase individuals' awareness of the imprint of culture in their thoughts and behaviors. Exposure to and mastery over different cultures would also help individuals to navigate more successfully through the different meaning networks. Multicultural individuals, for example, who have acquired mastery over diverse cultural meaning systems, are capable of interpreting their world through different cultural lenses (DiMaggio 1997; Shore 1996) and acting accordingly (Wong and Hong 2005). Multiculturalism, in this sense, corresponds to the ability to switch between different meaning systems, just as a multilingual person can switch between different languages.

Multicultural individuals interpret and respond to situations differently depending on the cultural meaning system they are presently operating from. For example, compared with North American culture, Chinese culture emphasizes maintaining ingroup harmony and the sense of duty toward the ingroup (Gelfand et al. 2001; Leung 1987). Thus, activating the Chinese or the American meaning network could make Chinese-American bicultural individuals interpret a situation differently and respond based on the corresponding behavioral script. A study (Wong and Hong 2005) in which Chinese-American bicultural individuals took part in a Prisoner's Dilemma game with their friends has shown that when their Chinese meaning network was activated through exposure to Chinese cultural cues (e.g., the Great Wall), bicultural participants anticipated their friends to act more cooperatively than when their American meaning network was activated (through exposure to American cultural icons such as the Statue of Liberty). Therefore, these bicultural participants were more likely to make cooperative moves when their Chinese meaning system was activated as opposed to their American system. These findings testify to the notion that multicultural individuals can switch between the different webs of meaning, depending on the context, leading to differential responses to stimuli.

Importantly, multicultural individuals do not switch between different meaning frames in an indiscriminant, "knee-jerk reflex" fashion. Rather, they use their cultural devices strategically and display qualified reactions, depending on the

relevance and applicability of the meaning framework. In other words, their reactions to cultural cues are not passive and predetermined, but are rather shaped in a context of meaning and motivation (Kesebir et al. 2010). In the Prisoner's Dilemma study discussed above, for instance, when their Chinese meaning network was activated, the Chinese-American bicultural participants behaved more cooperatively only if the interaction partners were friends, but not if the partners were strangers, because the cooperative meaning frame was applicable to ingroup members, but not to strangers (Wong and Hong 2005).

In addition, multicultural individuals might also strategically adopt different meaning frames to assert valued attributes. As elaborated earlier, cultural meaning systems imbue the world with a sense of order and predictability and provide individuals with a sense of significance and worth. Thus, when one of the important meaning networks from which individuals derive their sense of significance and worth is threatened, multicultural individuals might seek to reassert its importance. For example, a study that examined the effect of experimenter language usage on value endorsement among Hong Kong Chinese students found that when the experimenter provided experimental instructions in Mandarin (the official language of Mainland China but not Hong Kong at that time), the Hong Kong Chinese participants endorsed Western values more strongly, presumably in an attempt to assert their westernized Hong Kong identity and distance themselves from their more traditional Chinese identity (Bond and Cheung 1984).

Subjective perceptions or beliefs also influence how individuals switch between the different webs of meaning. Essentialism is the belief that a social category, such as race or culture, possesses immutable underlying qualities that determine the abilities and traits of its members (Haslam et al. 2000). Research has shown that bicultural individuals who endorse essentialist beliefs perceive different cultural meaning systems as discrete entities with rigid boundaries (see Hong et al. 2009). Although people can acquire multiple meaning structures through exposure to various cultural knowledge traditions, those who endorse essentialist beliefs experience more difficulty in reconciling and integrating the apparently discrete meaning systems (Chao et al. 2007). Thus, rather than adopting and accommodating to the multiple meaning systems, they react against those that are perceived as foreign to them. A study examining emotional projection among bicultural Korean Americans illustrated this phenomenon (No et al. 2008). Previous research reveals that when interpreting interaction partners' emotional expressions, North Americans tend to project emotions felt by the self onto others (egocentric projection; e.g., I feel angry and others feel angry as well), whereas East Asians tend to project complementary emotions (relational projection; e.g., I feel angry and others are fearful; Cohen and Gunz 2002). The study on emotional projection among bicultural Korean Americans has shown that those who endorsed stronger essentialist beliefs responded with less egocentric and more relational projection when their American meaning network was cued (No et al. 2008). This finding suggests that multicultural individuals who perceive different meaning networks as discrete and incompatible tend to turn away from the meaning frame they deem as relatively foreign and assert their valued meaning system.

Taken together, the webs of meaning equip multicultural individuals with different cultural lenses and enable them to interpret and understand situations from diverse perspectives. These meaning structures are analogous to tools in a toolkit (DiMaggio 1997). In an increasingly multicultural society, being equipped with diverse cultural knowledge allows individuals to pick and choose from a wide variety of tools to achieve important life goals. However, as discussed, under some circumstances (e.g., when one's sense of identity distinctiveness is threatened or when the different webs of meaning are perceived as incompatible), individuals might hold on to a certain meaning frame more strongly, while reacting against the other. Although adherence to a valued meaning system can serve as a source of worth and significance, rigid devotion to a single meaning system might hinder individuals, as well as the collectives, from adapting to the evolving ecologies. It might preclude them from being able to benefit from diverse knowledge perspectives at best and lead to miscommunication and conflicts at worst. The question, then, becomes: How to foster receptiveness to diverse perspectives in this increasingly interconnected world? The answer lies in the concept of "cultural competence," to which we turn next.

Navigating Through Different Webs of Meaning

Culture facilitates adaptation to a given ecology (Fiske 2000). Cultural competence, accordingly, can be defined as the extent to which an individual has mastered the intricate webs of meaning, small and large, that is necessary to live and thrive in a particular ecology in which the individual regularly participates (D'Andrade 1987). With the rapid increase in exchanges across national and cultural boundaries, cultural competence has also come to denote the ability to navigate effectively between different cultural meaning networks and to function in a culturally diverse social environment (Chao et al. 2011). As societies become more interconnected than ever, the concept of cultural competence has drawn increasing attention (Ang et al. 2007; Earley and Gibson 2002; Straussner 2001; Sue 1998; Sue et al. 2009; Tsui and Gutek 1999).

Knowledge, awareness, and skills constitute the pillars of cultural competence (Sue et al. 1982). They highlight the need to understand different meaning systems, to be aware of the assumptions and embeddedness of one's own cultural milieu, and to act and react appropriately when navigating across different cultural meaning systems (also see Brown 2009). Knowledge obtained through exposure to diverse meaning networks is an important initial step towards multicultural competence; however, as illustrated by the studies on experimenter language usage (Bond and Cheung 1984) and emotional projection (No et al. 2008) discussed above, knowledge does not necessarily translate into behavior. Awareness bridges knowledge and skills; it transforms knowledge to action. Critical awareness is an indispensible component of cultural competence. It involves reflexive introspection on one's valued cultural meaning system, recognition of the strengths as well as biases associated with its attributes and assumptions, and appreciation of the potential to learn

and benefit from other meaning networks. To promote readiness to reflect on one's cultural heritage and to explore the meaning systems embedded in other cultures, it is important to (1) foster a sense of security towards one's own culture and (2) highlight the potential to learn and master different cultural meaning systems.

Sense of Security

We have already noted that culture serves as an important source of epistemic and existential security. Culture can provide a secure base for individuals to explore an unfamiliar environment (Hong et al. 2006). Similar to infant attachment to a primary caregiver (Bowlby 1973), attachment to culture can furnish individuals with a sense of protection and support. For a securely attached infant, the caregiver serves as a secure base for the child to explore the surroundings and as a safe haven in times of distress, whereas an insecurely attached infant shows signs of ambivalence and avoidance. In a parallel fashion, secure attachment to a valued culture provides individuals with a secure base to explore foreign cultural meaning systems. However, when individuals' sense of security is threatened, it might hinder them from being open to other cultures (Hong et al. 2006). For instance, individuals strive to connect with and to differentiate themselves from others simultaneously in order to maintain optimal distinctiveness (Brewer 1991); situations that threaten people's sense of connectedness with a valued culture and distinctiveness from another culture can thus undermine their sense of security. The study that examined the effect of experimenter language on value endorsement among Hong Kong Chinese students (Bond and Cheung 1984) illustrated the dynamics of this cultural process again. When instructed by a presumably Mainland Chinese experimenter in Mandarin, the participants' distinctiveness from traditional Chinese culture and connectedness towards their westernized Hong Kong identity were threatened. Rather than fostering their openness to explore the traditional Chinese meaning system the Hong Kong Chinese respondents attempted to restore their sense of security towards their westernized Hong Kong identity by adhering to its associated meaning frames more strongly. As this example illustrates, a perceived threat to individuals' sense of optimal distinctiveness to and from different meaning systems can undermine their secure base for exploration (Hong et al. 2006). To encourage critical awareness and exploration in a multicultural environment, it is important to bestow individuals with a secure cultural base through acknowledging and affirming the importance of their valued meaning system. With a secure cultural base, individuals may proceed toward exploring and navigating the diverse webs of meaning around them.

Sense of Mastery

A mastery orientation fosters the acquisition of knowledge and development of competencies (Dweck 1986, 1992). In the domain of academic achievement, an incremental view that intelligence is a malleable attribute that can be improved with

effort can enhance individuals' sense of mastery to learn and to deal with setbacks; contrarily, a view that intelligence is fixed and inalterable undermines the motivation to learn. Students with a fixed view of intelligence tend to be less persistent and show less task enjoyment in the face of academic setbacks (Mueller and Dweck 1998). Generalizing this principle to cultural learning, we argue that the essentialist belief that cultural meaning systems are fixed entities with rigid boundaries may hinder the development of cultural competence. Essentialist beliefs about culture might lead individuals to perceive cultural attributes and their associated behavioral manifestations as inherent and immutable qualities possessed by the respective cultural group members (Hong et al. 2009). Rather than enabling individuals to reflect on the embeddedness of their own culture and fostering an appreciation of cultural diversity, essentialist beliefs might result in reactance against meaning frames that are deemed as foreign (No et al. 2008) and reduce the desire to interact with different others (Williams and Eberhardt 2008). Thus, an essentialist view of culture might pose a challenge to the development of cultural competence: The perceived difficulty in reconciling the apparently discrete, at times incompatible, meaning systems can make intercultural boundaries salient and undermine the motivation in mastering and integrating knowledge from multiple cultural perspectives (Chao et al. 2011). Consistent with this argument, scholars across different fields (e.g., Brown 2009; Kashima 2009) have criticized the attempts by researchers to distill different meaning networks into discrete non-overlapping entities and to characterize observed cultural differences into essence-like antagonistic constructs (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism). To promote critical reflection on one's own cultural meaning system and an appreciation of the potential to learn and benefit from multiple meaning networks, it is important to foster a mastery learning orientation towards the different webs of meanings and highlight the possibility for growth and change in a multicultural environment.

In sum, individuals can master diverse meaning systems through exposure to different cultural traditions. Knowledge, awareness, and skills are crucial ingredients of cultural competence. Awareness can translate knowledge to skills, from knowing to acting flexibly across diverse environment. It involves critical reflection about one's valued cultural meaning system and exploration into other webs of meaning in order to learn and benefit from multiple meaning networks. Being culturally competent enables individuals to navigate different meaning systems and to interpret different aspects of life through multiple cultural lenses.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by examining the reciprocal relationship between meaning and culture. Culture and meaning are inseparable; they together make up the structure on which the human way of life, as we know it, is erected. Cultures are made of meaning systems and providing meaning is an essential function of cultures. Culture, meaning, and the individual are in a constant state of co-creation: People

rely on culture to provide them with meaning, and they shape and reshape their culture in the process of seeking and constructing meaning. Cultural process is dynamic. Individuals can acquire multiple webs of meaning through multicultural exposure and can switch between different meaning frameworks. In an increasingly multicultural society, being able to integrate the constantly evolving and interconnecting webs of meaning would enable individuals to benefit from what diverse cultural meaning systems have to offer.

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