

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

How Culture Works

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3f38k9rb>

Journal

Journal of Marketing, 60(2)

ISSN

0022-2429

Authors

Graham, John L

Bohannon, Paul

Publication Date

1996-04-01

DOI

10.2307/1251936

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

How Culture Works
By Paul Bohannon (New York: The Free Press,
1995, 217 pages, \$24.95)

When I was asked to review *How Culture Works* I saw it as an opportunity to catch up with the latest thinking in anthropology. Paul Bohannon has been one of the leading authors in the field and has perhaps the broadest perspective on its substance and trajectory. Although anthropological methods now are being applied frequently in consumer behavior research (e.g., Penaloza 1994) and concepts have "leaked" slowly into the broader marketing literature (e.g., Clark 1990; Roth 1995; Steffle 1968; Takada and Jain 1991), many of the ideas and theories developed in "the study of human beings" deserve wider application in a variety of marketing science contexts. Perhaps the most obvious example is international marketing. For example, why has culture's influence on marketing strategy or sales management practices received so little attention from American marketing scholars? Indeed, seven years ago Kjell Gronhaug and I (see Graham and Gronhaug 1989) attributed the lack of the exchange of ideas between marketing science and anthropology to the former's adoration of positivism and the latter's aversion to business enterprise. In seven years, things have changed: Marketing has a growing interest in postmodernism (e.g., Venkatesh and Firat 1995). But, what about anthropology? I opened *How Culture Works* anticipating a cogent overview of the future of the field and perhaps a few new gems of applicability for marketing. I was not disappointed.

The book starts out slowly—particularly in the first chapter in which Bohannon expends great effort distinguishing among matter, life, and culture. I did not find this chapter worthwhile generally, and it certainly is irrelevant to most marketing scholars. So, I recommend reading this section quickly, because the more interesting material begins in Chapter 2.

One important concept to which Bohannon often refers throughout the book is defined in the preface. *Cultural traps* are aspects of culture that once were useful, but over time have become obsolete and even dangerous if they are not adjusted to. For example, in marketing, emphasizing mass-media advertising for grocery products made sense until the advent of scanner technology. Now, the competition is more for shelf space than for a share of the consumer's mind, and persisting in an emphasis on such "old proven tools" as television spots, Burke scores, and the like makes little sense.

I believe the concept of market share is a cultural trap as well. Perhaps company sales (the numerator) and industry sales (the denominator) were easily defined in the 1980s (for an opposing view, see Levitt 1960). In the 1990s, however, with strategic alliances (e.g., AT&T with Mitsubishi with INTEL) spreading "like a winter flu" and the boundaries of markets (e.g., telecommunications, computer hardware, software) blurring, neither numerator nor denominator in the market-share equation is easily assessable. The mere calculation of market share is a cultural trap in the dynamic

technological churning and corporate networking of today's and tomorrow's markets.

For anyone working in the information processing area, Chapter 2 is important material. Bohannon presents a model of individual learning that at first glance is no different from consumer behavior models that appeared in the marketing literature in the 1970s (p. 16). But his model has a new element—something he calls a *comparator*. Usually, I am irritated when people use arcane terminology for common concepts, even if I can find them in *Webster's Dictionary*, which I did in this case. But Bohannon's notion of a comparator is more intricate than the related concepts used in marketing, such as filters, attitudes, and stimulus elaboration, and thus it deserves a new appellation. Simply stated, people make sense of all stimuli by *comparing* them to a standard based on the sum total of their experience (i.e., learning and culture) and genetic inputs. It is this individual standard that Bohannon terms a *comparator*. Comparators include cultural values, memories, and cognitive schemata (i.e., mental categories and systems for organizing information), of which language and grammar are just two important types.

This notion of a comparator helps people better understand and explain, for example, the different Anglo and African-American audiences' reactions to movies such as *White Man's Burden*:

"It was two different movies," says writer and first-time director Desmond Nakano.... "For the white audience, it was much more of a drama—heavier and more intense. But some of the black audience thought it was almost a comedy" (Coleman 1995, p. 29).

In other words, the movie was "made sense of" in two different ways because the people in the two audiences had different comparators. Likewise, consider Americans' reactions to the O. J. Simpson verdict. Or, take for example the word *blue*. Its meaning depends completely on the context and comparators. Blue can be the color of the sky on a nice day or a kind of music, or it can be associated with cold. Some Native American languages do not distinguish between blue and green, so to them trees might be blue. Indeed, Bohannon tells us that in the African tribe he studies, colors are verbs, not nouns or adjectives. In addition, there are blue (pornographic) movies. Indeed, this notion of comparator helps people understand why R-rated American movies sell well overseas. Because sex and violence (death) are cultural universals, foreigners can understand the story lines. Themes that are more subtle do not translate. Those working in semiotics will see the value of Bohannon's comparator concept.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Bohannon explains culture's effects on society. He distinguishes between the behavioral patterns people share with other animals and those particular to the human species. In the first category, he includes four concepts: (1) dominance, (2) kinship, (3) specialization of tasks, and (4) cooperation. He makes a special point about the close connection between kinship and cooperation. His discussion recalls an understudied aspect of rela-

tionship marketing, namely, the role of kinship, particularly in Asian and Hispanic markets.

The second category of what might be called *cultural universals* is even more interesting. It includes seven fundamental concepts: (1) contract, (2) role, (3) ranking, (4) property, (5) the market principle, (6) networking, and (7) mass audience and public relations. Here, as I interpret concept 5, 6, and 7, Bohannon gives permission and good reason for anthropologists to study marketing topics and contexts. He has both granted marketing the status of a basic social science and freed his colleagues from approximately 30 years of disciplinary myopia. Once again anthropologists can study traders as they commonly did before the 1960s (Graham and Gronhaug 1989). I can only hope his colleagues take his advice seriously.

In Chapter 5, the author convincingly argues that a basic unit of analysis in the study of cultural dynamics is the *action chain*.

Actions and events follow one another in predictable chains, sometimes founded on cause and effect, sometimes only on cultural tradition. Unless it is disturbed, a known sequence of acts, once begun, is usually followed through. Although the participants have the option of removing themselves from most action chains, the price may be very high. Moreover, only with the completion of the sequence can any of the actions do what the actors intended them to do. The same actions, in different contexts outside the sequence, may well have utterly different meanings and effects. Correct sequence imparts meaning and efficiency to actions chains (p. 49).

Certainly in marketing, scholars have studied chains of behavior (e.g., repeat purchases and customer loyalty). And almost everyone argues for longitudinal studies. But Bohannon's notion of action chains focuses on interaction *processes*, and the *sequence* of events becomes crucial. His comments here are particularly pertinent to the work being done under the rubric of relationship marketing.

Chapters 6 through 11 are only somewhat useful for marketing scholars. In them, Bohannon defines and clarifies several social science constructs mostly related to changes in culture (e.g., patterns, turbulence, recontextualizing, invention, cultural cusps, disasters). These chapters are more useful for those considering the broader topics of marketing and society. His discussion regarding predictable responses to cultural disasters is poignant.

People lose both the right to run their own lives and the sense of responsibility for doing so. They can no longer make all their own decisions; they lose faith in themselves, become listless and apathetic ... social problems burgeon as more and more disoriented people take refuge in alcohol or drugs (pp. 130–31).

Might not marketing scholars also contribute to the debate on illicit drugs?

In the last four chapters, Bohannon describes research methods. In Chapter 12, he argues for the "bread and butter" of anthropology, namely, field work and ethnography, as he advocates for a focus on action chains in that sort of work. Chapter 13 was the most surprising, because Bohannon argues for the use of *simulations* in anthropology. Because I have used simulations (of marketing negotiations) to compare cultures and, as a consequence, have encountered the ire of anthropologists for not studying "real" behavior, Chapter 13 is a nice pat on the back. Chapter 14 has more on cultural traps. Finally, in the last chapter Bohannon argues that systematic scenario development or "futurography" will play an important role in social science and policy making. His comments deserve consideration toward counterbalancing the current interest in marketing with the often single-minded game-theoretic predictions and quantitative forecasting techniques.

In summary, *How Culture Works* is a worthwhile exchange medium between anthropology and marketing science. Although the book is short, it is not a quick read because it is thought provoking. In the book, Bohannon has laid out a variety of opportunities for cross-disciplinary fertilization. I suggest we take advantage of his ideas.

JOHN L. GRAHAM
University of California, Irvine

REFERENCES

- Clark, Terry (1990), "International Marketing and National Character: A Review and Proposal for an Integrative Theory," *Journal of Marketing*, 54 (October), 66–79.
- Coleman, Todd (1995), "As Complex as Black and White," *Los Angeles Times*, Calendar Section (November 26), 29–30.
- Graham, John L. and Kjell Gronhaug (1989), "Ned Hall Didn't Have to Get a Haircut, or Why We Haven't Learned Much About International Marketing in the Last 25 Years," *Journal of Higher Education*, 69 (2), 152–87.
- Levitt, Theodore (1960), "Marketing Myopia," *Harvard Business Review*, 38 (July/August), 45–56.
- Penaloza, Lisa (1994), "Atravesando Fronteras/Border Crossings: A Critical Ethnographic Exploration of the Consumer Acculturation of Mexican Immigrants," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21 (1), 32–54.
- Roth, Martin S. (1995), "The Effects of Culture and Socioeconomics on the Performance of Global Brand Image Strategies," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 32 (May), 163–75.
- Stefflre, Volney (1968), "Market Structure Studies," in *Applications of the Sciences in Marketing Management*, F. M. Bass, C. W. King, and E. A. Pessemier, eds. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 251–68.
- Takada, Hirokasu and Dipak Jain (1991), "Cross-National Analysis of Diffusion of Consumer Durable Goods in Pacific Rim Countries," *Journal of Marketing*, 55 (April), 48–54.
- Venkatesh, Alladi and A. Fuat Firat (1995), "Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (3), 239–67.