

IDENTIFYING AND COMBATING FALSE NEEDS

John Ivers—Dean, College of Language and Letters

Editor's note: John spoke with Scott Samuelson on 8 July 2008.

John: As a culturalist, I'm very interested in culturally-encouraged interpretation of reality. You see, different cultures provide us with paradigms that we use to interpret social reality. Each cultural milieu is deeply invested in certain paradigms, and these paradigms are used to interpret individuals' value and self-worth. Culture creates a lot of artificial reality, and this particularly artificial reality becomes social reality. Everyone agrees that there are trees and rocks in our environment, but I'm also convinced of the existence of culturally created false needs and false problems.

Scott: What are some examples?

John: Materialism would be an example of a culturally-created false need. I just returned from Butte, Montana, where I noticed people who have very little compared to a typical individual here in Rexburg, Idaho. Yet, at the same time, they were very happy, very open. They were people who seemed to me unburdened by materialistic false needs, maybe a little less burdened than some of us here in Rexburg.

I'm interested in the way culture helps to create sadness, anguish, or depression that doesn't need to be. For example, most depressed people have a genetic propensity to be depressed. That's basically without doubt. Yet at the same time, it is all but proven that culture can aggravate or ameliorate depression. For example, Hispanics born in the United States have a higher rate of depression than Hispanics born in Spanish-speaking countries. Their genetic make-up would be almost the same. Also, the same applies to African-Americans, who have the higher rate of depression than people born and raised in Africa, even though the genetics would be similar. The same applies to Asians.

As another example, schizophrenia has been definitely linked to biochemical imbalances, yet it abates more quickly in some cultures than in other cultures. Schizophrenia will get better faster in some cultures than it will get better in others. So

we know these cultural paradigms are nothing to be taken lightly.

We also know there are certain universals out there—for example, the concept of what constitutes an attractive man and an attractive woman. Concepts of beauty exist in all cultures, but in addition, there are subconscious areas where culture does its work—either good work or bad work. Many attractive people in the space-time continuum are born in a time period or cultural region that interprets them as being unattractive. Or their personality is thought of as unimpressive. This power, this almost unlimited power that is afforded to these culturally-created artificialities disturbs me, especially considering the fact that there's almost zero critical reflection afforded to the phenomenon.

Scott: So you see a function of education as being to raise consciousness about the power of these cultural forces and help individuals reshape them or maybe not be as susceptible to them?

John: Exactly. This raising of consciousness is something that has always struck me as extremely important in education. It's one of our obligations as educators to raise the consciousness of the students concerning the cultural forces in their lives that are manipulating them. This raising of consciousness can give them more freedom to overcome some of the negative and irrational, illogical cultural influences that are affecting their lives.

Anthropologists talk about cultural irrationality. All cultures in the world are replete with irrationalities, false needs, and false problems. If we can educate students to recognize cultural irrationality, to recognize false needs and false problems, their lives will be so much happier. We have many of our neighbors in Idaho and in Utah struggling with depression, or with enormous amounts of debt and other things which are somewhat the result of cultural forces that are forcing them into things, into worldviews about having large homes or living beyond their economic means. Their lives could be so much happier if they just realized the artificiality and irrationality of it all. But it's very hard to get people to do that. I'm not naïve enough to think that we can make people acultural. We're all cultural people. The only thing we can do is maybe fix the problem a little bit. But a little bit over an

80-year lifetime would be a lot and would help an individual avoid much grief and sadness.

Scott: In my field, for example, we practice interpretation of literary texts. What I hear you saying is that culture and its influence on individuals is a text that requires critical analysis.

John: Exactly. For example, it really helped me as a bishop to have read *The Scarlet Letter*. I kept thinking about the “scarlet letters” we put on people. I asked myself, “Does this person have a metaphorical ‘A’ written on them? In what ways can I get that off?” *The Scarlet Letter* was a book that protested Puritanical paradigms. A good teacher could encourage students to compare these paradigms with the paradigms of our own time and culture. We invite students to critically evaluate the forces that manipulate everyone’s thinking.

Scott: What do you feel a language class needs in this context? What are your strengths that you would like to talk about?

John: I’m always taking things toward a culturalist perspective because that’s where I feel my strengths are, and that’s what I enjoy talking about. I feel that’s where I can give students a greater gift. Bad cultural paradigms and cultural irrationality are destroying the planet. We are destroying ourselves, which is definitely irrational. The destruction is connected to the false needs we have and our contributing to them in so many ways because we are striving to get what culture says we need to have.

Scott: So how do you raise student consciousness about this without politicizing the discussion?

John: That’s always very difficult. I normally stick with nonpolitical topics and stay away from environmental topics, but if we teach them how to think deeply and make application, then they’ll be able to use those skills in any arena. But for classroom discussions, I try to stay away from the touchy stuff. But these paradigms, they play with our emotions all the time. They ruin self-worth, self-concept. They are control switches for turning on and off our sadness and happiness. It’s scary stuff because so much of it goes unexamined.

For example, differences in worldviews concerning beauty, concerning tolerance for emotional expression, even here in the United States. Take a New Yorker versus a Utahan. Utahans would have fairly low tolerance for emotional expression

whereas a New Yorker would have very high tolerance for that. And New Yorkers would be high on expressivity whereas a Utahan would probably be low on expressivity. Or on the treatment of old people—huge cultural differences there. And then it goes back to our paradigms of what constitutes a worthwhile, valuable individual, to what is a person of worth and value.

Scott: Perhaps views of children, too?

John: That's right—the treatment of children, absolutely. For example, to a much lesser degree, imagine if I'm walking through the line at the grocery store and I do something that irritates the cashier. She is much less likely to get irritated with me than she would with a young twelve-year-old who does the same thing. That shows that maybe in her mind I'm a person of more worth. But examples abound. Respect afforded different professions is an interesting idea. In some places, Latin American physicians are perceived to be about the same vocational level as professors. But in our country, a medical doctor is generally thought of as the professional pinnacle.

Another example is attributions, that to which do we attribute personal success or failure, or the victories or losses of others. Do we attribute these things internally or externally? For example, most Americans attribute the failure of another to internal character weakness: "It was his or her fault." "They blew it." "They messed up." "They weren't good workers." But the same people will attribute their failures to external causes: "My parents did it to me, or a bad teacher, bad luck, a bad boss, a malevolent God." However, they'll attribute their success internally. In Japanese culture, for example, attribution is the exact opposite. In Japan they'll attribute their own failures internally: "It's all my fault." They'll attribute their own successes externally: "I wasn't successful because of me; I was a success because of my parents and my teachers."

These matters are even more complicated in a religiously conservative community such as ours. For example, we'll attribute our failures both externally and internally. Some people will attribute some of their failures as external acts of God based on their internal unworthiness. I was seeing people do that in my ward all the time when I was a bishop, inventing these terrible things, making things they had done in their lives much worse than they really were. They were trying to

find out why these bad things happened and why God cursed them with the things. These culturally taught attributions can wreak havoc with one's personal self-concept and happiness. These attributions need to be critically examined, though sometimes the more conscientious a person is, the more he or she will start attributing some of these irrational things to himself or herself.

A related problem stems also from the complexity of culture: you've got family culture, church culture, national culture, racial culture, BYU-Idaho culture. We wear a number of cultural hats. And each one of them has its own set of paradigms, paradigms that sometimes are in concert and just as often are in conflict.

No one inhabits a culture completely homogenous to anyone else. There are some people, of course, who are very close. Still, no one inhabits a world completely identical to someone else's. There are always different factors involved. Yet at the same time there are enough generalities for us to say that most Americans would view the situation this way, and most Italians would view the situation that way, but always with millions of exceptions.

Scott: So where do you teach these principles?

John: I teach them in my foreign language classes when the opportunity presents itself. For example, in classes of a more grammatical bent, I teach it when I feel like I've covered the grammar enough or when I have some extra time. In a beginning class in Spanish literature, I look at cultural ideas that come out in the works. Then, of course, I teach a Spanish teaching methods class, and I have to teach students how to teach culture. One of the problems of foreign language education is that the typical lesson on culture is something like, "Let's make Mexican fruit salad." As part of our Mexican fruit salad we are going to put guava because they have guava in Mexico, and we're going to put pineapple, and we're going to put all this stuff in and now we've made a fruit salad, and we've learned what type of fruit you can get in Mexico. Usually the culture in foreign language education is very superficial and trivial. Teachers choose some culturally distinct item—sombrosos, piñatas, and bullfights in Spanish, and baguettes and Brie cheese in French—and say that is what we mean when we say culture.

Such things may be distinct or interesting, but culture is bigger, and there are more important issues. We live in a world fraught with genocide, terrorism, war; 30,000 children die every day of starvation. Learning about sombreros and French bread is not going to do anything to stop that. One of the main reasons for some of these problems is cultural difference. The main problem between the United States and radical Muslims is a paradigm split. The paradigms the radical Arabs rely on almost force them to interpret us negatively. We need to get to the point where across cultures we understand this concept of paradigms forcing the interpretation and inculcate within our students and give them that skill that they can take into the world to effect positive change. But a treatment of sombreros and French bread and piñatas, that's just not going to do it. ☺

