

Seeing Culture

It's 3:22 am on a Friday morning in October 1981. I am walking on a downtown street in Mannheim, West Germany, stumbling back to my room after a night out drinking a few Pilsners in a basement nightclub, literally an underground bar. Parts of Mannheim look like the War ended only few years ago, with entire blocks vacant, overrun with weeds, and others draped with acid-stained cheap concrete storefronts.

Not many people are out at this hour. As I approach the street corner to cross over, I notice a man standing there waiting, fully attentive. It takes me a moment to see that this guy is staring straight ahead looking at the stop light, which is red. That's why he's stopped. But there is no traffic, none to the right, none to the left and not a moving car anywhere in sight. We are headed in the same direction it seems, but in no time at all I have overtaken him: I am in the street moving briskly to the other side while he remains standing, waiting on the light to change. Halfway down the block, I glance back over my shoulder and see him walking in my direction, the light now glowing green.

It is a scene that I saw played out similarly many times during my six-month stint in Mannheim. It is similar to scenes one might witness in other places, Singapore and Denmark come to mind. But it is one that I don't think I have ever witnessed in the US and would be surprised to see in Italy.

Why is that? What made this man in Mannheim behave like this when a similar man in Naples would not?

The answer is likely no surprise: culture. The German heeds rules and official directives while the Italian just does what he thinks makes sense in this nondescript situation. Both undoubtedly feel fully justified and right in pursuing their courses of action.

What may be more surprising is how emblematic---or not---this kind of situation is about culture generally. The situation I am referring to is a single person alone, with no one watching (which was true until I ambled along that night in Mannheim). Is culture more starkly revealed by what one does when no one is watching? Or do we more clearly see culture operate when a group of peers is watching a person intently?

The questions concern how to see or infer culture from observed behavior. I know colleagues, professional social scientists and experienced managers, on both sides of the issue. One group says, "culture is what you do when you are alone," while the other group says, "culture is what you do when others are watching." Who is right?

At the risk of sounding disingenuous, my answer is both are right---but it depends. Culturally driven behavior emanates from internalized norms, beliefs and values: ideas and expectations that a person has adopted as their own and has come to regard as the right or appropriate way

to act in a given situation. That man on the corner in Mannheim that night was waiting for the light to turn green because he had internalized the norm that you should not cross the street when the light is red. He believed that was the right thing to do and he would behave that way whether someone was watching him or not. Any myriad of personal beliefs may lie behind why he thinks that is appropriate behavior (the rationale), what's more important for current purposes is that he follows the cultural prescription and no longer even really thinks about it. He just does it. Culturally induced behavior falls in the category of what psychologists call automatic cognition, as opposed to deliberative cognition.

But where and how did this man learn to abide by this prescription, and why? He grew up in, and lives in, a society (Germany) where most of the other people hold the same internalized norm, and they behave in the same way. He knows that if he is in a group of these people and someone walks across the street when the light is red, the other people will not just ignore him. No, they will express their disapproval. Some will stare, some will scowl, some will shake their heads. Others yet will verbally reprimand him for his behavior, perhaps chastising him for setting a bad example for children and saying he is endangering their lives. Really---I have seen it.

All things considered, would the man alone be more likely to be enacting culture or would it be the man with a group of peers watching? Odds are it's the man in the group. It's the safer choice, the one more likely to be true. But it does depend on: the people in the group each holding the same internalized norm; the man being aware of (or conditioned to) what that norm is; and the group not expressing disapproval when they see him act. If any of those conditions does not hold, then the inference could easily be wrong. On the other hand, the man alone may very well be enacting a cultural norm if he has been previously enculturated to it, and if he has internalized the behavior as the appropriate or right thing to do in this context. This would be especially likely if this man has never been exposed to alternative responses to the context.

These are hard things to know just by simple observation. Ideally, we'd know more about the people involved or at least be able to ask them questions before making a determination. If we can't do that, then we might build our evidentiary base through two other kinds of observations. The first involves self-reflection: Does the man's behavior surprise us (as it did me)? When it does, that tells us that we hold different expectations about the right behavior in this context, suggesting the action is culturally driven if we are from a different culture. The second kind of observation involves comparisons to others: Do we repeatedly see others in this context behave similarly? Cultural behavior is typically widespread, explaining in part why it becomes automatic.

Finally, let me say I suspect some of the reason for the differences in opinion about which situation---solitary or group---is more likely to show culture in action arises from confusing the inferential question with an assessment of cultural intensity or force. Culturally driven behavior springs from norms, beliefs and values that are more or less internalized, embraced by a person

in varying degrees of acceptance. I may know and follow the norm for a given context---but it could matter a lot to me, or a little. That's intensity.

Now let's assume that we've answered the inferential question: we know both the man alone and the man in the group are enacting a cultural norm. Given this, can we say anything about the intensity with which either of the two men hold the norm? Can we say who feels the norm more intensely? Like many social scientists, I would answer affirmatively. To me, the answer is the solitary man. His actions clearly represent his belief in what is the right thing to do. That could also be true of the man in the group. But it may not be---he could be acting this way because he seeks the approval of the group, or at least wants to avoid their open disapproval. Such behavior is calculative, designed to achieve a purpose other than just doing the right thing. Social approval acts like an anvil for culture, forging behaviors to follow expectations.

By the time I left Mannheim in December 1981, I had started to pause—and sometimes even stop completely--before crossing a street with no traffic in the face of a red light. Even at 3:22 am. That's what you do to avoid feeling the sharp pain of an anvil hitting you.

By Glenn R. Carroll
January 20, 2021