3.3C: Cultural Lag

The term "cultural lag" refers to the fact that culture takes time to catch up with technological innovations, resulting in social problems.

Learning Objectives

• Produce an example of cultural lag using an example of the tension between material and non-material culture

Key Points

• Cultural lag is not only a concept, as it also relates to a theory and explanation in sociology.
• It helps identify and explain social problems and also predict future problems.
• According to Ogburn, cultural lag is a common societal phenomenon due to the tendency of material culture to evolve and change rapidly and voluminously while non-material culture tends to resist change and remain fixed for a far longer period of time.
• Due to the opposing nature of these two aspects of culture, adaptation of new technology becomes rather difficult.

Key Terms

• innovation: The act of innovating; the introduction of something new, in customs, rites, and so on.
• material culture: In the social sciences, material culture is a term, developed in the late 19th and early 20th century, that refers to the relationship between artifacts and social relations.
• non-material culture: In contrast to material culture, non-material culture does not include any physical objects or artifacts. Examples of non-material culture include any ideas, beliefs, values, and norms that may help shape our
The term cultural lag refers to the notion that culture takes time to catch up with technological innovations, and that social problems and conflicts are caused by this lag. Cultural lag is not only a concept, as it also relates to a theory and explanation in sociology. Cultural lag helps to identify and explain social problems and to predict future problems.

The term was coined by the sociologist William F. Ogburn in his 1922 work “Social Change with Respect to Culture and Original Nature.” According to Ogburn, cultural lag is a common societal phenomenon due to the tendency of material culture to evolve and change rapidly while non-material culture tends to resist change and remain fixed for a far longer period of time. His theory of cultural lag suggests that a period of maladjustment occurs when the non-material culture is struggling to adapt to new material conditions.

Due to the opposing nature of these two aspects of culture, adaptation of new technology becomes rather difficult. As explained by James W. Woodward, when material conditions change, changes are felt in the non-material culture as well. But these changes in the non-material culture do not match exactly with the change in the material culture. This delay is the cultural lag.

Cultural lag creates problems for a society in different ways. Cultural lag is seen as a critical ethical issue because failure to develop broad social consensus on appropriate uses of modern technology may lead to breakdowns in social solidarity and the rise of social conflict. The issue of cultural lag tends to permeate any discussion in which the implementation of some new technology can become controversial for society at large.
Human Embryonic Stem Cells: As example of cultural lag is human embryonic stem cells. We have the necessary technology to turn stem cells into neurons but have not yet developed ethical guidelines and cultural consensus on this practice.