Essay 1: Relational Models and Cross-Cultural Comparisons

Everyone uses a set of four relational models to make sense of the culture around them before they even begin to relate to people. The four relational models, communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing, do not stand alone; they are a complement of culture and they are what make social life function. The models are used in different ways, at different times, in different cultures. Everyone is born with the four relational models, and it is through these models that children learn to be cultural, that is, they learn social rules specific to their culture. The typical American family can be contrasted with the !Kung family to show how each family and community use different relational models in varying contexts.

The communal sharing model is commonly used in foraging societies within the domain of home and community. Homes are built on communal land and food that was hunted by one family is shared throughout the village. The !Kung best exemplify communal sharing in the home and in the community. Greediness or selfishness towards family members and community members is looked down upon in !Kung society due to the scarcity of resources. In Life in the Bush, an ethnography of !Kung life, Nisa the protagonist, describes how food, especially hunted foods, must be equally distributed to avoid insulting anyone. Within the community no one person or family gets the first share or larger portion of food it is all equally divided in the community. People are expected to maintain humility at all times; in this sense pride is communally shared as
well. Within the home, the responsibility of raising children doesn’t rest solely on the parents but on the siblings and to an extent the community as well. (Shostak 1983).

When it comes to food and resources in the U.S., the distribution of goods is based largely on market pricing (MP). If I wanted to eat the same food that my neighbor was eating, the ingredients or food would be readily accessible in the local grocery store a few minutes away. The food is sold on the basis of prices. Unlike the !Kung who spend much of their time looking for food, for Americans most of the time is spent working in another area outside of the home and community. It is work that is unrelated to food to receive wages to pay for food and other resources such as an apartment or house with a kitchen to cook the food in. In this sense food and resources are not communally shared with the community. Food, however, is usually distributed equally within the household. The organization of the average U.S. community is stratified to a certain extent by who holds the most money or potential resources, people with more money can buy more food and own more resources. Another example of MP and how MP affects the distribution of goods is how land is owned and not communally shared. So if a person doesn’t have enough money to purchase their own land they must rent from someone who does own land. MP also affects the way children are raised. Since much of the parents’ time is spent earning money to pay for food and housing, MP sets the wages for paying a stranger, friend, or relative to take care of the younger children. Often parents will pay an “allowance” or wage to their kids for cleaning and/or looking after their younger siblings.

Within the house and community of any society, these relational models will play out, and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Although, I used the communal
sharing model to describe the relationships within !Kung society, it doesn’t mean that the
!Kung don’t practice market pricing. The CS model is also used in the U.S. household to
distribute resources equally within the household, like money education or even just
sharing dinner together. In !Kung society, the communal sharing relational model is used
to distribute food, power, and responsibility throughout the community. In the U.S.,
however, the market pricing model is used to distribute food, power, and responsibility
throughout the community.