

## Chapter 2

# A Social World

*Historically, culture is a particular way of being in fundamental situations: birth, death, love, work, giving birth, being embodied, growing old, speaking. People have to be born, to die, and so forth, and a people arises in response to these tasks, to these calls, as it understands them. This understanding, this listening, and the resonance that is granted it, is at the same time what a people is, its understanding of itself, its being-together. Culture is not a system of meanings attributed to fundamental situation on the basis of conventions, a project or a contract; it is the being-there that is people.*

*(Jean-Francois Lyotard<sup>1</sup>)*

When Captain James Cook and his crew landed in Tahiti on April 13, 1769, after sailing through the bitter weather of the South Pacific, a whole new world opened up not only to them but also to the many people in different parts of Europe who subsequently read accounts of their voyages. Cook himself represented the best of the British Royal Navy; he was a brilliant cartographer, a strong leader, and someone who was deeply respectful of other people and their cultures. Others on board included artists, botanists and one key ambassador of European culture, Joseph Banks. He was a man of aristocratic upbringing and with broad interests in both the arts and the sciences and it was his writings that provided Europe with a window on a new way of interpreting this and their own world.

At first, the voyagers encountered the new world as both enthralling and perplexing. They were immediately struck by the natural beauty of the place and its people. The crew enjoyed the absence of European restrictions on

### William Robertson Sights Tahiti

"We saw the whole coast full of Canoes, and the country had the most Beautiful appearance it's possible to Imagine. From the shore side, one two and three miles Back, there is a fine Level country that appears to be laid out in plantations, and the regular-built Houses seem to be without number; all along the Coast, they appeared like long Farmer's Barns, and seemed to be all very neatly thatched, with Great Numbers of Cocoa-Nut Trees.... This appears to be the most populous country I ever saw, the whole shore-line was lined with men, women and children all the way that we sailed along."

*(Master of the ship Dolphin)*

lifestyle and sex, and several sought to establish their homes on the islands. But much of what they encountered was hard to understand. For example, Polynesian interpretations of ownership seemed to differ from their own, and the crew was increasingly angered by the constant accessing of their possessions. This they interpreted as "stealing" and they had difficulty appreciating the very different approach Tahitians had to property. Such different interpretations led to bitter disputes and at times bloody confrontations.

Nonetheless, besides these first contact misunderstandings, what Banks recognized was that the natural beauty and order of this apparent Garden of

Eden made somewhat of a mockery of European attempts to construct a utopian world (see inset box above).<sup>2</sup> For some time, Enlightenment Europe had championed the role of reason and advanced civilization in building the ideal society. Already the challenge of Romanticism was claiming that the ideal world cannot be constructed, instead it emerges from the beauty and order of the natural world.<sup>3</sup> Europeans with all their advanced culture and technology were misguided to think their way was superior, and the Banks accounts of encounters in the South Pacific appeared to confirm this position. The encounter between the two worlds was important both for opening up new possibilities and for appreciating one's own interpretive frameworks.

## Worlds, Paradigms, and Assumptions

Before exploring approaches to addiction, we need some conceptual tools that enable comparisons between the different approaches. Three terms will be employed for this purpose: *worlds*, *paradigms*, and *assumptions*. A *world* is understood here as a total environment that involves a complex of relationships within which people live, think, and interact (see the inset box below for common examples). As with the first contact between two separate cultures, worlds can often emerge as a result of two physically separate environments. Long-term separations enable very different ways to emerge of looking at the world. However, in an age of high physical mobility and mass communication these physically separate worlds are less common, and the separation is more likely to emerge from adherence to different cultural and belief systems. For example, in large cities people of different cultures occupy the same physical environment but at the same time live separately in parallel worlds; they share the same space and time but experience events quite differently. While these differences are often driven by culture and ideology, they are also affected by more subtle variations in background that have impacts on outlook. For example, people brought up in a home riddled with tension and conflict would be expected to experience their world with higher levels of anxiety than would people up in a happy and stable home environment.

The term *paradigm* refers to the conceptual system out of which a particular world is constructed. Paradigms<sup>4</sup> involve clustered ways of approaching experience that incorporate systems of interlocking forms of seeing, thinking, and talking. They are on the whole larger overarching systems that enable the smaller conceptual units—such as theories, models, arguments, approaches, and discourses<sup>5</sup>—to operate. Their relative size and scope is important. Their expansive overarching character often

### Everyday Worlds

- "Caught between two worlds"
- "The wonderful world of science"
- "A ghastly world of death and destruction"
- "Your world is different than mine"
- "A world within a world"
- "We belong to the new world"
- "Welcome to my world"
- "She's in her own little world"

means they fade into the background, while in the foreground attention is dominated by specific theories and models. For example, Captain Cook and his crew immersed in a Eurocentric view of the world had little awareness that their way of seeing things was determined by their own perspectives, and this prevented them from appreciating the different cultural practices of Polynesians. The elements of a paradigm also tend to entail a range of diverse linkages with these smaller conceptual units that make them difficult to pin down and describe. For example, well-formed theories tend to make specific predictions about aspects of a world, and these predictions are often testable; someone could go out into the world and check their accuracy. However, paradigms with their diffuse and interlocking ways of approaching experience are often difficult to define, nonspecific in what they refer to, and certainly do not lend themselves to testing and validation.

Paradigms themselves are resourced by sets of underlying basic *assumptions*. To use the crude metaphor of a glass fish container, if each major assumption provides the substance for a glass wall, the paradigm is then composed of the interlocked structures of several walls that are required to create a container, and the “world” becomes the fluid environment in which the goldfish swims. Accordingly, assumptions are unavoidable elements within a paradigm that simultaneously limit and enable how a paradigm functions. For example, the most celebrated—and most disputed—contrast in assumptions between two paradigms occurred in the sixteenth-century Copernican Revolution during which thinking switched from the assumption that the earth was at the center of the universe to the assumption that the sun was at the center. In hindsight, this switch seems relatively simple and self-evident, but at the time, for those wedded to the assumption of the earth at the center, the switch was inconceivably huge. Over previous centuries astronomers had established an elaborate array of theories and models that explained the regularity of movements by the heavenly bodies. The new assumption of the sun at the center would entail having to abandon these theories and reshape from scratch a whole new paradigm from which to interpret what is observed. Furthermore, the assumption of the world at the center was linked with other domains of knowledge such as theology, physics, and medicine. To relinquish this assumption would require them to entirely rethink what it might mean for humans and their world to no longer be at the center.<sup>6</sup>

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function**

### *Four Features of Paradigms*

There are four critical features of paradigms that are worth examining before moving on to applying paradigms to addictions. The first important feature is that they are “incommensurable”<sup>7</sup>; aspects belonging to two separate paradigms are incommensurable when they cannot be legitimately compared with each other because their use and meaning function differently in one

contextual system than they do in the other. Since the assumptions within a paradigm contribute strongly to specific meanings, attempts at one-to-one translations lead inevitably to misunderstandings. For example, Tahitian and Maori use of the term *aroha* (*alofa* in Samoa, *aloha* in Hawaii) roughly translates into English as “love,” but the one-to-one translation of an important word like this is riddled with problems. In Polynesian eyes, *aroha* links up with other aspects of how Polynesians see the world and how they understand the connection between the individual and the broader collective. Its use signals the many ways in which specific instances of love partake in a grander collective process of universal love. This means that equating it to the narrower European notion of love misses out on the range of other important nuances appreciated by the speaker of each Polynesian language and thereby loses many of its vital associations and meanings. One world is carved up differently than the other world in such a way that any one-to-one translation of this and many other key words misses out on meanings and interrelationships between concepts. While in a peripheral manner they could function as roughly equivalent, their full meanings are incommensurable because they are derivative of different systems of assumptions.

A second critical feature of paradigms is that their basic assumptions are untestable. In essence, fundamental assumptions are leaps of faith; they involve ways of looking and thinking that are necessary for research and theory, but are themselves unfalsifiable. For instance, in the European scientific paradigm of “objectivism,”<sup>8</sup> one basic assumption is that knowledge, to be knowledge, needs to be reproducible and objective; if it is not solidly established, it remains merely a matter of opinion. However, this assumption itself is not testable; besides, it would be impossible to conceive of a way of testing it. It is not only a strongly held belief but also a fundamental commitment to a way of looking at things, a commitment that lays out the ground rules for acquiring knowledge and sharing it<sup>9</sup>; it will be defended by adherents of the paradigm regardless of what happens. Proponents have invested much of their time and talents into it being the case, and to shift away from this assumption would involve cutting frighteningly loose from the enterprise of science as they know it.

A third critical feature is that different paradigms offer different opportunities for seeing and understanding how things fit together. This provides the counterweight to the paradigm inertia that result from dependence on one system of assumptions. Different paradigms involve cutting up what we observe in different ways, and exposure to them will generate alternative ways of seeing and thereby stimulate alternative ways of responding.<sup>10</sup> For example, when James Cook and his crew returned to England, his exposures in the South Pacific contributed significantly to supporting a paradigm switch to the Romanticism that was sweeping Europe at that time. Up until then, the European Enlightenment had propelled an overriding interest in the human capacity to use rationality to create a civilized world. Those who accompanied Cook were able to point to a natural and primitive world could manifest

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high degrees of order and beauty, and this challenged assumptions of the superiority of their rationally constructed social order. Rather than viewing the natural world as something to be tamed or conquered, Cook's voyages supported an interest in nature as something that civilized society seeks to negotiate an ongoing and reciprocal relationship.

The fourth and final feature is that paradigms are slow to change. Their essential untestability and incommensurability mean both that it is difficult to convince people of the need to shift and that the prospect of a new world opens up as daunting and unfamiliar. Furthermore, particularly for core supporters of a paradigm, why should they shift? It is what they know and it has successfully helped explain things in the past. Besides, they have conducted all their research and theorizing within that paradigm and to move on from it could negate all that effort. Thomas Kuhn, in his analysis of how paradigms behave, argued that for major paradigm changes, the reluctance of adherents to convert leads the majority to stick doggedly to what they know and to repel challenges by adapting the old paradigm in ways that ensure its survival.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the time it takes to complete a paradigm shift is the time it takes for determined adherents either to be removed or die out. This in most contexts would take decades.

### *Dominant and Alternative Paradigms*

Paradigms vary in strength and scope. In some situations paradigms compete vigorously as equal combatants that contest with each other for adherents. When these contests occur, societies benefit because the multiple ways of looking at things enable all parties to become aware of their assumptions, and they are constantly challenged to reflect and justify their various positions. Unfortunately, pluralistic environments require considerable effort and commitment to maintain, and historically these periods tend not to last long before one paradigm begins to edge into a more dominant position than the others. For this reason, pluralistic environments can be seen to function in most cases as periods of transition from one dominant paradigm to another. Strong examples of pluralistic periods occurred in classical Athens, Song-dynasty China, Moorish Spain, and Vienna of the 1900s.<sup>12</sup> Each of these periods was followed by changes into new orthodoxies. As one paradigm gains dominance it also increases its access to political and institutional systems and processes. The environment is no longer a level playing field, and the adherents of alternative paradigms are relegated to subsidiary and marginalized roles such as those of playing the critic, the curiosity, the clown, or even the outcast roles of radical or crackpot. For example, when Russia embraced Marxist-Leninism, it enabled the socioeconomic assumptions incorporated into this paradigm to be constantly reinforced through the media, political structures, and ways of speaking. Only

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