

the world. For example, Asian cultures where notions of happiness were traditionally collective in orientation are now being layered with western individualist ideas. Notions of happiness are also historically specific.

The cultural nature of happiness argument means that ‘despite intentions to be value-neutral, subjective well-being is actually normative; its very design presupposes values and assumptions that are central to Western culture’ (Christopher, 1999: 146). Thus, according to John Chambers Christopher, empirical happiness research has problematically presupposed western notions of individualism ‘as normative prescriptions for the good or ideal person’ (1999: 144).

### *Cultural studies, happiness and power*

Cultural studies seeks to explore the links between culture, happiness and power since emotion is formed with and through power relations (Harding and Pribram, 2002). Thus cultural studies explores the cultural processes of power that caused a particular conception and experience of happiness to appear and with what effects. Luka Zevnik (2014), for example, proposes a Foucauldian genealogical analysis of happiness that would trace the origins and development of notions of happiness and the relations of power implicated in them. He argues that we should not assume that ‘happiness’ is a good thing, for example we may be subject to the pressures of a kind of ‘compulsory happiness’ (Bruckner, 2001) that brings distress if we cannot achieve what we think we are expected to achieve. That said, Zevnik also suggests that cultural studies should explore practices of happiness in the context of Foucault’s notion of ‘care of the self’, in which the subject adopts specific practices in order to transform themselves. Thus, we can utilize practices of happiness in pursuit of a ‘culture of contentment’ (Barker, 2002) while simultaneously subjecting them to a historical and cultural critique.

## MEME THEORY

Some writers influenced by evolutionary biology have adopted the term *meme* to act as a bridge between genetic theory and culture (Blackmore, 1999; Dawkins, 1976; Dennett, 1995). A meme is understood to be the smallest cultural element that is replicated by means of the human capacity for imitation. Examples of memes would include the wheel, the alphabet, particular tunes or musical phrases, clothes fashions, books and ideas. The reproduction of a particular meme is not necessarily best for us; rather, memes are replicated simply because they can be. That is, a successful meme is one that is continuously imitated. This reproduction is advantageous to memes rather than to human beings *per se*. However, the pressures of evolutionary adaptation, and the role of our own esteem in relation to specific memes, mean that the general drift of meme replication is in line with our values (themselves memes).

The more ways there are to spread memes, and the faster they can go, the less constrained they will be by genes. The development of mass communications on a global scale,

from the printing press through television and on to the internet, has been a major contemporary mechanism for this process. Further, this argument suggests that memetic evolution allows human beings to be more altruistic than genes alone would have allowed.

The reason why some memes succeed and others fail is a consequence of the properties of our sensory systems and mechanisms of attention. That is, the most significant single element determining which memes proliferate lies in the parameters set by our evolved psychological mechanisms. A memplex is a group of memes that are reproduced together. This would include the idea of the self – a selfplex – as a set of interconnected memes. Our memes are who we *are*. Human consciousness itself is a product of memes.

## Internet memes

In contemporary popular culture, the term ‘meme’ is used to refer to viral images, videos and catchphrases which are constantly modified by users and which circulate rapidly through the cybersphere (Coleman, 2012: 109). Internet memes – which are usually intended to be humorous – may also take the form of hyperlinks, hashtags, words with intentional misspellings and pranks. An example of the latter includes ‘rick-rolling’ in which misleading hyperlinks are used to trick internet users into clicking onto a music video for the cheesy 1987 Rick Astley song ‘Never Gonna Give You Up’.

Memes involving lolcats (a portmanteau of the abbreviation for ‘laugh out loud’ and the word ‘cat’) have an enduring popularity in the cybersphere. Lolcat memes feature photos of cats accompanied by wry captions – often involving idiosyncratic text and internet slang. Grumpy Cat (whose real name is Tardar Sauce) is a particularly well-known lolcat celebrity (see more in Chapter 13). She has been featured on the covers of the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York* magazine, and, in mid 2015, her Facebook page had nearly 8 million ‘likes’. Grumpy Cat has her own agent – aka a ‘meme manager’ – and is associated with a spin-off industry valued at \$1 million (Syckle, 2013). Her popularity is attributed to the fact that she epitomises two well-established internet obsessions: cats and scornful humour. As Katie Van Syckle writes of Grumpy Cat, ‘Her permanently cranky face is pure snark. Technically a birth defect, it somehow seems fashionable: permanently judgmental and perpetually unimpressed’ (2013).

Images of Richard Dawkins – who coined the term ‘meme’ in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) – have also featured in internet memes such as the one referenced below drawing attention to his physical resemblances with Emma Watson, the actress who plays Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter films. Asked about the internet’s hijacking of the word ‘meme’, Dawkins has said the new meaning is close to the original: ‘It’s anything that goes viral. In the original introduction to the word meme in the last chapter of *The Selfish Gene*, I did actually use the metaphor of a virus. So when anybody talks about something going viral on the internet, that is exactly what a meme is’ (Dawkins cited in Solon, 2013). Dawkins has, however, raised the possibility that ‘morphing software’ might have been used in the Emma Watson meme (ibid).

Perform a Google search for the meme comparing Dawkins and Watson. Do you think it is ironic that Dawkins himself has been 'memed' in this way? If so, which of the types of irony discussed in Chapter 3 do you think are involved?

## GRUMPY DOG



Use one of the many meme-making sites on the internet to generate a grumpy-cat style meme using your own captions over the grumpy dog image above.

### Deconstruct this: nature vs. culture

- How is nature in culture?
- How is culture in nature?
- Where is the borderline between nature and culture?