

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is defined as the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, and even material objects passed from one generation to the next.

1. Material culture—things such as jewelry, art, buildings, weapons, machines, clothing, hairstyles, etc.
2. Nonmaterial culture—a group's ways of thinking (beliefs, values, and assumptions) and common patterns of behavior (language, gestures, and other forms of interaction)

Culture provides a taken-for-granted orientation to life.

1. We assume that our own culture is normal or natural; in fact, it is not natural, but rather is learned. It penetrates our lives so deeply that it is taken for granted and provides the lens through which we perceive and evaluate things.
2. Coming into contact with a radically different culture produces "culture shock," challenging our basic assumptions.
3. A consequence of internalizing culture is ethnocentrism, using our own culture (and assuming it to be good, right, and superior) to judge other cultures. It is functional when it creates in-group solidarity, but can be dysfunctional if it leads to discrimination against those who are different.
4. Culture provides implicit instructions that tell us what we ought to do and a moral imperative that defines what we think is right and wrong.

Cultural relativism consists of trying to appreciate other groups' ways of life in the context in which they exist, without judging them as superior or inferior to our own.

1. Because we tend to use our own culture as the standard, cultural relativism presents a challenge to ordinary thinking.
2. At the same time, this view helps us appreciate other ways of life.
3. Robert Edgerton suggests developing a scale for evaluating cultures on their "quality of life." He argues that those cultural practices that result in exploitation *should* be judged as morally inferior to those that enhance people's lives.

Components of Symbolic Culture

Sociologists sometimes refer to nonmaterial culture as symbolic culture.

1. A central component of culture is the symbol—something to which people attach meaning and use in communications.
2. Symbols include gestures, language, values, norms, sanctions, folkways, and mores.

Gestures, or using one's body to communicate with others, are shorthand means of communication.

1. People in every culture use gestures, although the gestures and the meanings differ; confusion or offense can result because of misunderstandings over the meaning of a gesture or misuse of a gesture.
2. There is disagreement over whether there are any universal gestures. They tend to vary considerably around the world.
3. Because some gestures are so closely associated with emotional messages, the gestures themselves can often elicit emotions.

Language consists of a system of symbols that can be put together in an infinite number of ways in order to communicate abstract thought. Each word is a symbol to which a culture attaches a particular meaning. It is important because it is the primary means of communication between people.

1. It allows human experiences to be cumulative; each generation builds on the body of significant experiences that is passed on to it by the previous generation, thus freeing people to move beyond immediate experiences.
2. It allows for a social or shared past. We are able to discuss past events with others.
3. It allows for a social or shared future. Language allows us to plan future activities with one another.
4. It allows for the exchange of perspectives (i.e., ideas about events and experiences).
5. It allows people to engage in complex, shared, goal-directed behavior. It allows us to have common understandings that enable us to establish a purpose for getting together with each other.

In the 1930s two anthropologists, Sapir and Whorf, were intrigued by Hopi Indians, who had **no words in their language** to distinguish between past, present, and future.

1. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that our thinking and perception not only are expressed by language, but actually are shaped by language because we are taught not only words but also a particular way of thinking and perceiving.
2. Rather than objects and events forcing themselves onto our consciousness, our very language determines our consciousness.

Culture includes values, norms, and sanctions.

1. **Values** are the standards by which people define good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Every group develops both values and expectations regarding the right way to reflect them.
2. **Norms** are the expectations, or rules of behavior, that develop out of a group's values.
3. **Sanctions** are the positive or negative reactions to the way in which people follow norms. Positive sanctions (a money reward, a prize, a smile, or even a handshake) are expressions of approval; negative sanctions (a fine, a frown, or harsh words) denote disapproval for breaking a norm.
4. To relieve the pressure of having to strictly follow the norms, some cultures have moral holidays—specified times when people are allowed to break the norms and not worry about being sanctioned.
5. Some societies have moral holiday places, locations where norms are expected to be broken. An example would be the hometown of the team that wins the Super Bowl. For one night, the city becomes a location for a moral holiday.

Norms vary in terms of their importance to a culture.

1. Folkways are norms that are not strictly enforced, such as passing on the left side of the sidewalk. They may result in a person getting a dirty look.
2. Mores are norms that are believed to be essential to core values and we insist on conformity. A person who steals, rapes, and kills has violated some of society's most important mores.
3. Norms that one group considers to be folkways another group may view as mores. A male walking down the street with the upper half of his body uncovered may be violating a folkway; a female doing the same thing may be violating mores.
4. Taboos are norms so strongly ingrained that even the thought of them is greeted with revulsion. Eating human flesh and having sex with one's parents are examples of such behavior.

Many Cultural Worlds

A. Subcultures are groups whose values and related behaviors are so distinct that they set their members off from the dominant culture.

1. Each **subculture** is a world within the larger world of the dominant culture, and has a distinctive way of looking at life, but remains compatible with the dominant culture.
2. U.S. society contains tens of thousands of subcultures. Some are quite broad (teenagers), while others are narrow (body builders). Some ethnic groups form subcultures, as do certain occupational groups.

Countercultures are groups whose values set their members in opposition to the dominant culture.

1. While usually associated with negative behavior, some countercultures are not.
2. Countercultures are often perceived as a threat by the dominant culture because they challenge the culture's values; for this reason the dominant culture will move against a particular counterculture in order to affirm its own core values. For example, the Mormons in the 1800s challenged the dominant culture's core value of monogamy.

Technology in the Global Village

A. Central to a group's material culture is its technology. In its simplest sense, technology can be equated with tools. In its broadest sense, technology also includes the skills or procedures necessary to make and use those tools.

1. The emerging technologies of an era that make a major impact on human life are referred to as new technologies. The printing press and the computer are both examples of new technologies.

2. The sociological significance of technology is that it sets the framework for the nonmaterial culture, influencing the way people think and how they relate to one another.

B. Not all parts of culture change at the same pace; “cultural lag” was William Ogburn’s term for situations where the material culture changes first and the nonmaterial culture lags behind.

C. Although for most of human history, cultures have had little contact with one another, there has always been some contact with other groups, resulting in groups learning from one another.

1. This transmission of cultural characteristics is cultural diffusion; it is more likely to produce changes in material culture than the nonmaterial culture.

2. Cultural diffusion occurs more rapidly today, given the technology.

3. Travel and communication unite the world to such an extent that there is almost no “other side of the world” anymore. For example, Japan, no longer a purely Eastern culture, has adapted Western economic production, forms of dress, music, and so on. This leads to cultural leveling where cultures become similar to one another.