

# CULTURE

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## CULTURE

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Linguistics**

### 1. Core Definition

The concept of **culture** represents the complex totality of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by humanity as a member of society. This comprehensive definition, rooted in 19th-century anthropology, encompasses the specific traditions, morals, concepts, insights, art, or dialect characteristic of a commune or entire society, providing a structured framework through which individuals interpret reality and interact with the world. It serves as the fundamental mechanism for human adaptation, allowing societies to cope with the environment and regulate internal life, making it distinct from instinctual behavior as it is entirely learned and socially transmitted.

A crucial distinction in defining culture lies between its material and non-material components. **Non-material culture** includes the abstract creations of society, such as values, norms, language, symbols, and beliefs, which dictate appropriate behavior and shared meaning. Conversely, **material culture** consists of the physical objects or artifacts that a society produces and uses, ranging from basic tools and technology to architecture and art forms. Both components are inextricably linked, as material objects often embody and reflect the underlying non-material values and principles of the group that created them.

Furthermore, the term **culture** is frequently applied to denote the symptomatic outlooks and actions of a specific, identifiable group within a larger society, such as a social hierarchy class, an age set, or a professional body. This recognizes the existence of **subcultures**--groups that share a distinct set of values and norms that differentiate them from the dominant culture, while still operating within the broader societal framework. Understanding culture in this segmented manner allows for the analysis of internal diversity, social stratification, and the complex ways in which smaller groups maintain identity while navigating pervasive societal expectations and structures.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The English term **culture** derives from the Latin root *colere*, meaning "to tend to the earth," "to cultivate," or "to inhabit." Initially, its use was primarily agricultural, referring to the nurturing of crops or livestock. During the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, the meaning shifted metaphorically to describe the cultivation and refinement of the human mind or spirit, leading to the idea of "high culture" associated with intellectual and artistic achievement. This early usage was often inherently hierarchical, suggesting that some societies or individuals were more "cultured" than others.

The modern academic conceptualization of culture originated primarily in the field of anthropology in the late 19th century. E.B. Tylor, a foundational figure in anthropology, formalized the inclusive, descriptive definition of culture, treating it as a measurable and observable phenomenon common to all human societies, regardless of their perceived level of "civilization." This move was critical because it shifted the focus from a singular, hierarchical notion of "Culture" (with a capital C) toward the acceptance of diverse, equally valid "cultures" (plural), paving the way for non-ethnocentric analysis.

The 20th century witnessed significant theoretical refinements, especially within the American school of anthropology led by Franz Boas. Boasian theory introduced **cultural relativism**, emphasizing that a culture must be understood on its own terms, rejecting evolutionary scales and universal judgments of value. This development cemented culture as a distinct, learned system of behaviors, beliefs, and practices specific to a particular historical and geographic context, fundamentally changing how social scientists approached human variation and development.

### 3. Key Characteristics and Mechanisms of Transmission

One of the defining characteristics of culture is that it is fundamentally **learned**, a process known as enculturation or socialization. Unlike biological inheritance, culture is transmitted through observation, imitation, communication, and formal instruction, starting immediately after birth. This learning process teaches individuals the appropriate values, norms, language, and behavioral scripts necessary for functioning effectively within their society. The efficiency of this cultural learning, rooted in the human capacity for symbolic thought, is what distinguishes human societies from other animal groups.

Culture is also inherently **shared**, acting as a social glue that binds individuals into cohesive groups. While individuals may interpret cultural elements differently, the broad acceptance of shared symbols, values, and practices provides a common ground for prediction and interaction. This shared understanding reduces friction and allows for coordinated action, whether in the organization of labor, the establishment of legal systems, or the performance of communal rituals. Without this shared framework, societal organization and predictability would collapse, making shared meaning a prerequisite for social survival.

Crucially, culture is highly **symbolic**; meaning is rarely inherent but is assigned through arbitrary conventions recognized by the group. Language is the most powerful example of symbolic culture, allowing for the communication of complex ideas and abstract concepts that transcend immediate physical reality. Other symbols include gestures, flags, icons, and rituals, all of which carry significant emotional and conceptual weight established solely by cultural agreement. Furthermore, culture is generally **integrated**, meaning that its various parts--such as economic systems, religious beliefs, and kinship structures--are interdependent and form a coherent whole, although

this integration is rarely perfect or static.

#### 4. Anthropological Perspectives: Relativity and Holism

The anthropological perspective often hinges on the principle of **cultural relativism**, which posits that a person's beliefs and activities should be understood based on that person's own culture, without judging them against the standards of another. This methodological tool is essential for objective cross-cultural study, forcing researchers to suspend their own ethnocentric biases--the assumption that one's own culture is superior or the standard against which others should be measured. Cultural relativism promotes deep empathy and detailed understanding of diverse human life-ways, recognizing that cultural practices, however strange they may seem externally, are logically consistent and meaningful within their specific context.

Complementing relativism is **cultural holism**, the methodological commitment to viewing cultural systems as integrated, interconnected wholes. Anthropologists argue that one cannot properly understand a single aspect of a culture (such as a marriage custom or a form of subsistence) in isolation; rather, these elements must be analyzed in relation to the entire social, economic, political, and spiritual framework in which they operate. For example, understanding a society's dietary restrictions requires analyzing not just nutritional science, but also the religious beliefs, economic structures, and social hierarchies that govern food production and consumption.

This holistic approach contrasts sharply with reductive analyses that isolate phenomena. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of cultural parts, anthropology highlights how changes in one realm--for instance, the introduction of new technology--can cascade throughout the entire system, altering everything from kinship patterns and religious rituals to power dynamics. This systemic view is vital for generating comprehensive, nuanced models of human social organization and behavior across diverse global settings.

#### 5. Sociological Dimensions: Structure and Subgroups

From a sociological standpoint, culture plays a crucial role in maintaining social order and structure. Sociologists often focus on how **norms** (rules defining appropriate behavior) and **values** (shared standards defining what is good or desirable) are institutionalized and enforced, creating predictable social interactions. Functionalist theorists, like Émile Durkheim, viewed culture as serving essential functions, providing collective consciousness and shared moral boundaries that ensure societal stability and cohesion by channeling individual impulses into socially acceptable actions.

Furthermore, sociology rigorously examines how culture is stratified and expressed across different social levels. As indicated by the second definition of culture, specific social classes, regional groups, or age cohorts develop distinct cultural patterns, known as **subcultures**. These groups

may share the overall societal culture but differentiate themselves through specific dialects, fashion, artistic tastes, or occupational norms. Conversely, **countercultures** actively reject or oppose key elements of the dominant culture, seeking to establish alternative values and lifestyles, often acting as agents of social change or conflict.

The relationship between culture and power is a central sociological concern. Cultural capital, a concept advanced by Pierre Bourdieu, refers to the non-financial assets--such as education, intellect, style, and taste--that promote social mobility and status within a stratified society. The dominant culture often reinforces the existing social hierarchy, as institutions like schools and media tend to prioritize and reward the cultural practices of elite groups, making the acquisition of cultural knowledge a mechanism for reproducing inequality across generations.

## 6. Elements and Components of Culture

The comprehensive analysis of any culture requires breaking it down into its constituent elements, which collectively form the integrated system. These components are necessary for the creation, transmission, and maintenance of shared societal life:

**Values:** Abstract standards that define ideals within a society, guiding the formation of norms and determining what members consider morally right, aesthetically pleasing, or socially desirable (e.g., individualism, familial honor, democratic participation).

**Norms:** Specific rules and expectations for behavior. These range from **folkways** (everyday customs lacking moral significance, like dining etiquette) to **mores** (strict norms essential to core values and often codified into law, like prohibitions against murder).

**Symbols and Language:** Language is the core symbolic system that allows culture to be cumulative and transmitted. Symbols (anything that carries a particular meaning recognized by people who share a culture) are the building blocks of symbolic communication, conveying information efficiently and emotionally.

**Beliefs:** Specific statements that people hold to be true, often relating to metaphysics, cosmology, or the nature of human existence, which justify values and norms.

**Artifacts and Technology:** The material objects and tools created and used by a culture. Technology, in particular, refers to the knowledge and techniques used to produce these artifacts, reflecting a culture's capacity for innovation and adaptation to its environment.

## 7. Significance and Impact

Culture is significant because it provides the essential behavioral blueprints necessary for individual functioning and societal survival. It dictates not only what we eat and how we marry, but

also how we perceive time, space, and reality itself. By supplying ready-made solutions to recurring life problems, culture reduces the necessity for constant re-evaluation and experimentation, freeing up cognitive resources and allowing for cumulative knowledge building that transcends individual experience. This adaptive capacity is arguably the most powerful evolutionary advantage of the human species.

On an individual level, culture profoundly shapes personal identity and self-conception. As illustrated by the provided source content, individuals often feel a deep connection and identification with the cultures associated with their ancestry or upbringing. This process of identity formation--determining one's place within the world and relating to others--is mediated entirely through the lenses of cultural values and shared narratives. Cultural identification provides a sense of belonging, continuity, and predictability, which are crucial for psychological well-being and social stability.

In the global context, culture is a powerful force driving both integration and conflict. Processes like globalization facilitate **cultural diffusion**, where cultural traits spread from one society to another through migration, trade, and media. However, this spread often leads to tensions as groups seek to protect their unique cultural heritage from perceived homogenizing forces (such as Westernization), leading to movements centered on cultural preservation and often nationalism. Understanding culture is therefore indispensable for international relations, conflict resolution, and effective cross-cultural communication in an increasingly interconnected world.

## 8. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its utility, the concept of culture is subject to ongoing academic debate. One major criticism concerns the inherent tension between **universalism** and **cultural relativism**. While relativism is vital for methodological objectivity, its application has ethical limits; some critics argue that extreme relativism prevents the condemnation of universally harmful practices (e.g., violence or discrimination), thus undermining the possibility of global human rights standards. Finding a balance between recognizing cultural integrity and upholding universal ethical principles remains one of the central dilemmas in the study of culture.

Another significant criticism addresses the risk of **essentialism**--the tendency to view a culture as a fixed, monolithic entity that rigidly determines individual behavior. Critics argue that this viewpoint ignores individual agency, diversity within groups, and the dynamism inherent in cultural practice. Anthropologists and sociologists increasingly emphasize that culture is not a static list of rules but a constantly negotiated set of practices, heavily influenced by individual interpretation, contestation, and power struggles. Attributing complex social phenomena, such as poverty or political conflict, solely to "culture" risks neglecting underlying structural inequalities and economic factors.

Furthermore, the utility of the concept is sometimes questioned in modern, highly diverse, and rapidly changing societies. In highly multicultural environments, defining a single, coherent national culture becomes virtually impossible, leading researchers to focus instead on cultural processes, identity politics, hybridization, and the constant mixing and re-creation of meaning rather than attempting to delineate clear cultural boundaries. The focus has shifted from "what culture is" to "what culture does" and how it is employed by different actors.

### Further Reading

[Culture \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[The Concept of Culture \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Culture: Definition, Characteristics, Theories \(Encyclopedia Britannica\)](#)

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