

Nonmaterial Culture

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1. Core Definition

Nonmaterial culture constitutes one of the two fundamental components that collectively define a culture, with the other being material culture. In its essence, nonmaterial culture encompasses all the intangible aspects of a society, comprising the abstract creations and shared understandings that guide human behavior and interpretation within a given social group. Unlike physical objects, which are the domain of material culture, nonmaterial culture exists in the minds and interactions of people, manifested through their beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and language. It provides the framework through which individuals perceive, interpret, and interact with their world, giving meaning to their experiences and shaping their collective identity.

While material culture includes all the physical artifacts that a society produces and uses, such as cities, neighborhoods, tools, clothing, and vehicles, nonmaterial culture consists of the non-tangible elements that organize and imbue these material objects with meaning. For instance, a traffic light is a material object, but the understanding of what a red light signifies (stop) is an element of nonmaterial culture. Similarly, a wedding ring is a material object, but the meaning of commitment and marital bond it symbolizes is nonmaterial. This distinction highlights that nonmaterial culture is not merely an absence of physicality but a complex web of shared cognitive and behavioral patterns that are learned, transmitted, and continuously reshaped within a community.

The interplay between nonmaterial and material culture is dynamic and reciprocal. Material objects often embody nonmaterial cultural concepts, and conversely, nonmaterial culture dictates the creation, use, and interpretation of material culture. Without the shared beliefs, values, and norms of nonmaterial culture, material objects would largely be devoid of their deeper social and cultural significance. This symbiotic relationship underscores the holistic nature of culture itself, where both tangible and intangible elements are essential for a comprehensive understanding of human societies.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of "culture" itself has a long and complex etymological history, originating from the Latin word "colere," meaning to cultivate, to till, or to cherish. Initially, it referred to the cultivation of crops or animals, later evolving to denote the cultivation of the human mind or manners, leading to terms like "culture" in the sense of refinement. By the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly with the rise of anthropology and sociology, the term broadened to encompass the entire way of life of a people, including their knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society, a definition notably articulated by Edward Burnett

Tylor in 1871.

The explicit distinction between material and nonmaterial culture became more prominent as social scientists sought to systematically analyze and categorize the diverse elements of human societies. Early sociological and anthropological studies often focused on observable practices and artifacts, but it soon became evident that the underlying systems of thought, belief, and social organization were equally, if not more, crucial for understanding cultural phenomena. Scholars like William Graham Sumner, a prominent early American sociologist, discussed the importance of "folkways" and "mores," which are direct precursors to the modern understanding of nonmaterial cultural norms. Émile Durkheim's work on collective consciousness and social facts also implicitly dealt with the non-tangible forces that bind societies together.

Throughout the 20th century, as these disciplines matured, the analytical separation of material and nonmaterial culture became a standard framework for cultural analysis. This allowed researchers to delve into the specific mechanisms of cultural transmission, adaptation, and change for both tangible objects and intangible ideas. Anthropologists such as Franz Boas and his students, including Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, emphasized the intricate relationships between cultural patterns and individual psychology, further illuminating how nonmaterial aspects of culture shape human experience and behavior. The ongoing development of semiotics and symbolic interactionism also contributed to a deeper appreciation of the symbolic and interpretive nature of nonmaterial culture.

3. Components of Nonmaterial Culture

Nonmaterial culture is a multifaceted construct, comprised of several interconnected elements that collectively define a society's shared worldview and guide its members' actions. These components are not isolated but rather form an intricate web, each influencing and being influenced by the others, contributing to the overall coherence and distinctiveness of a cultural group. Understanding these individual components is crucial for grasping the full scope and impact of nonmaterial culture.

One of the primary components of nonmaterial culture is **values**. Values are a culture's standards for discerning what is good and just in society, serving as broad guidelines for social living. They are deeply held, abstract ideals that indicate what a group considers important, desirable, and morally correct. For example, societies might value individualism, collectivism, equality, freedom, tradition, or innovation. These core values influence people's attitudes and behaviors, shaping their aspirations, guiding their choices, and defining their sense of right and wrong. They are often internalized from an early age through socialization and contribute significantly to social cohesion and identity.

Closely related to values are **beliefs**, which are specific convictions that people hold to be true.

Beliefs are the tenets or convictions that people hold regarding the nature of reality, the existence of deities, the origins of the universe, or the efficacy of certain practices. They can be religious, scientific, political, or personal, and they often stem from or support a culture's values. For instance, if a society values environmental preservation, it might hold beliefs about the sanctity of nature or the detrimental effects of pollution. Beliefs provide a cognitive framework for understanding the world and are often reflected in a society's mythology, folklore, scientific theories, and religious doctrines.

Norms are the established expectations of behavior within a society; they are the rules or guidelines that dictate how people should behave in specific situations. Norms can be formal, such as laws, or informal, such as customs or etiquette. They are practical applications of a culture's values and beliefs, translating abstract ideals into concrete behavioral expectations. For example, if a society values honesty, a norm might be to not lie under oath. Norms help maintain social order, predict behavior, and facilitate interaction, with deviations often resulting in social sanctions, ranging from mild disapproval to severe punishment, depending on the significance of the norm.

Symbols are objects, gestures, sounds, or images that represent something else and carry particular meaning recognized by people who share a culture. They are the means through which cultures communicate and express their nonmaterial elements. A flag is a symbol representing a nation; a handshake symbolizes greeting or agreement; a cross symbolizes Christianity. Symbols are powerful because they evoke shared meanings and emotions, allowing complex ideas and values to be communicated without words. The ability to create and manipulate symbols is a fundamental aspect of human culture, distinguishing it from other animal societies and enabling the transmission of vast amounts of information and cultural heritage across generations.

Perhaps the most fundamental component of nonmaterial culture is **language**. Language is a system of words and symbols, spoken or written, that allows people to communicate with each other. It is not merely a tool for communication but a primary medium through which values, beliefs, norms, and symbols are articulated, transmitted, and internalized. Language shapes thought, influences perception, and facilitates the development and maintenance of a collective consciousness. Different languages embody different ways of understanding the world, and learning a language involves learning the culture it carries. Without language, the sophisticated transmission and accumulation of nonmaterial culture, including complex ideas and abstract concepts, would be severely limited, if not impossible.

4. Interplay with Material Culture

The relationship between nonmaterial and material culture is not one of mere coexistence but of profound interdependence and mutual shaping. Material objects, from a simple tool to a grand architectural structure, are often imbued with meaning and significance through the lens of

nonmaterial culture. For instance, a temple (material culture) holds its sacred status and generates specific behaviors (bowing, praying) because of underlying religious beliefs and values (nonmaterial culture). The design of a city (material) reflects the values placed on community, privacy, efficiency, or aesthetics (nonmaterial). Thus, material culture serves as a tangible manifestation of a society's nonmaterial ideas and ideals.

Conversely, material culture also influences nonmaterial culture. Technological advancements, for example, which are products of material culture, can profoundly alter social norms, values, and beliefs. The invention of the internet and mobile phones (material culture) has led to new forms of communication, redefined social etiquette, altered expectations of privacy, and generated new ethical dilemmas (nonmaterial culture). The availability of certain resources or technologies can foster specific values, such as valuing efficiency in a highly industrialized society or sustainability in a society facing resource scarcity. This dynamic interaction means that changes in one domain often precipitate changes in the other, creating a constant evolutionary process within culture.

Furthermore, material objects can act as powerful symbols of nonmaterial cultural values. National monuments, works of art, or even everyday items like specific brands of clothing can carry symbolic weight, representing identity, status, history, or collective memory. The destruction of a cultural artifact (material) is often seen as an attack on the values and heritage (nonmaterial) it represents. This intricate connection means that one cannot fully understand a society's material culture without appreciating its nonmaterial underpinnings, nor can one fully grasp its nonmaterial culture without considering its material expressions.

5. Significance in Social Life

Nonmaterial culture plays an indispensable role in structuring social life, providing the foundational elements that enable human societies to function, cohere, and evolve. It is the invisible glue that binds individuals into communities, offering shared understandings and frameworks that allow for collective action and predictable social interactions. Without a common set of values, beliefs, and norms, social life would descend into chaos, characterized by constant misunderstanding, conflict, and a lack of shared purpose.

One of the primary significances of nonmaterial culture is its role in fostering social cohesion and collective identity. By sharing common values, such as respect for elders, patriotism, or a commitment to justice, individuals feel a sense of belonging and solidarity with their group. These shared cultural elements provide a basis for social trust and cooperation, allowing people to work together towards common goals. Language, in particular, is a powerful unifier, facilitating communication and the transmission of collective memory, stories, and traditions that reinforce group identity and distinguish one cultural group from another.

Moreover, nonmaterial culture provides meaning and purpose to human existence. Through

shared beliefs, people interpret their experiences, understand their place in the universe, and make sense of life's challenges and triumphs. Values guide individuals in making ethical choices and pursuing aspirations, contributing to a sense of personal and collective fulfillment. Norms establish social order, providing predictable patterns of behavior that reduce uncertainty and conflict in daily interactions. In essence, nonmaterial culture provides the interpretive lens through which individuals navigate their social world, endowing it with significance beyond mere survival. It is the very foundation upon which social institutions, moral systems, and collective identities are built, making it central to the human experience.

6. Transmission and Adaptation

The transmission of nonmaterial culture is a continuous and complex process, primarily occurring through socialization. Socialization is the lifelong process through which individuals learn the norms, values, beliefs, and social skills appropriate to their society. From early childhood, through family, education, peer groups, and mass media, individuals are taught what is considered right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, and how to behave in various social contexts. Language plays a critical role in this transmission, as it is the vehicle through which narratives, moral lessons, and behavioral instructions are conveyed across generations. This process ensures cultural continuity, allowing societies to maintain their distinctive nonmaterial characteristics over time.

While socialization emphasizes the continuity of nonmaterial culture, it is also subject to constant adaptation and change. No culture is static; it evolves in response to internal dynamics and external influences. Cultural diffusion, the spread of cultural elements from one society to another, can introduce new ideas, values, and practices, leading to modifications in existing nonmaterial culture. For example, global communication technologies facilitate the rapid exchange of beliefs and norms, often leading to hybridization or syncretism where elements from different cultures merge. Internal factors such as technological innovation, social movements, or demographic shifts can also prompt changes in a society's values, beliefs, and norms.

The adaptability of nonmaterial culture is crucial for a society's resilience and survival. As environmental, social, or political circumstances change, societies must be able to adjust their collective understandings and practices. This adaptation can manifest in shifts in moral codes, the emergence of new social norms, or re-evaluations of traditional values. For instance, growing awareness of climate change has led many societies to develop new environmental values and norms related to sustainability and conservation. This capacity for adaptation ensures that nonmaterial culture remains relevant and functional in guiding human behavior within evolving contexts.

7. Debates and Criticisms

The study of nonmaterial culture, while foundational, is not without its debates and criticisms, particularly concerning methodological challenges and conceptual ambiguities. One significant area of discussion revolves around the inherent difficulty in empirically measuring and studying intangible phenomena. Unlike material culture, which can be cataloged and analyzed physically, beliefs, values, and norms exist primarily in the realm of human consciousness and social interaction, making them challenging to observe directly or quantify objectively. Researchers must rely on interpretation of language, behavior, and self-reports, which can be subject to bias, misinterpretation, and the complexities of human subjectivity.

Another critical debate centers on cultural relativism versus universalism. Cultural relativism posits that a person's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood based on that person's own culture, rather than be judged against the criteria of another. While this perspective promotes tolerance and understanding of diverse nonmaterial cultures, critics argue it can lead to moral relativism, where all cultural practices, even those deemed harmful by universal human rights standards, are seen as equally valid. Conversely, universalist perspectives, which seek to identify common values and norms across all cultures, are sometimes criticized for potentially imposing ethnocentric views or undermining cultural distinctiveness.

Furthermore, the concept of nonmaterial culture is sometimes criticized for potentially oversimplifying the complex reality of cultural dynamics. Critics argue that lumping together diverse elements like language, beliefs, and norms under one umbrella term might obscure the unique ways each component functions and interacts within a specific social context. There are also ongoing discussions about the degree to which nonmaterial culture is a product of individual agency versus collective social forces, and how power structures influence which values and beliefs become dominant within a society. These debates highlight the ongoing intellectual dynamism within the fields of sociology and anthropology as scholars continue to refine their understanding of the intricate and pervasive nature of nonmaterial culture.

Further Reading

[Culture - Wikipedia](#)

[Non-material culture - Wikipedia](#)

[Material culture - Wikipedia](#)

[Sociology - Wikipedia](#)

[Anthropology - Wikipedia](#)

[Value \(ethics\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Belief - Wikipedia](#)

[Norm \(social\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Language - Wikipedia](#)

[Cultural relativism - Wikipedia](#)