

Meaning and Characteristics of Culture

In this assignment, students will examine the meaning and importance of culture. Culture is a notoriously difficult term to define. The word "culture" derives from a French term, which in turn derives from the Latin "colere," which means to tend to the earth and grow, or cultivation and nurture. It shares its etymology with a number of other words related to actively fostering growth.

At the completion of this assignment, students will:

Learning Objectives

- Define culture and determine how it provides our basic orientations to life.
- Compare and contrast values, norms, and sanctions. Understand how they are related to moral holidays.
- Explain how culture and experience influence people's perceptions of traditions, beliefs, values, attitudes, etc.

Key Terms

Review the definition for the following terms:

- core values: the values that are central to a group, those around which it builds a common identity.
- counterculture: a group whose values, beliefs, and related behaviors place its members in opposition to the values of the broader culture.
- cultural diffusion: the spread of cultural characteristics from one group to another.
- cultural relativism: not judging a culture but trying to understand it on its own terms.
- culture: the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, and even material objects that are passed from one generation to the next.

- culture shock: the disorientation that people experience when they come in contact with a fundamentally different culture and can no longer depend on their taken-for-granted assumptions about life.
- ethnocentrism: the use of one's own culture as a yardstick for judging the ways of other individuals or societies, generally leading to a negative evaluation of their values, norms, and behaviors.
- folkways: norms that are not strictly enforced.
- ideal culture: the ideal values and norms of a people, the goals held out for them.
- language: a system of symbols that can represent not only objects but can be combined in an infinite number of ways for the purpose of communicating abstract thought.
- material culture: the material objects that distinguish a group of people, such as their art, buildings, weapons, utensils, machines, hairstyles, clothing, and jewelry.
- mores: norms that are strictly enforced because they are thought essential to core values.
- new technology: the emerging technologies of an era that have a significant impact on social life.
- nonmaterial culture: a group's ways of thinking (including its beliefs, values, and other assumptions about the world) and doing (its common patterns of behavior, including language, gestures and other forms of interaction).
- norms: the expectations, or rules of behavior, that reflect and enforce behavior.
- pluralistic society: a society made up of many different groups.
- real culture: the norms and values that people actually follow.
- sanctions: expressions of approval or disapproval given to people for upholding or violating norms.
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf's hypothesis that language creates ways of thinking and perceiving.
- subculture: the values and related behaviors of a group that distinguish its members from the larger culture; a world within a world.
- symbol: something to which people attach meaning and then use to communicate with others.

- symbolic culture: another term for nonmaterial culture.
- taboo: a norm so strong that it brings revulsion if it is violated
- technology: in its narrow sense, tools; its broader sense includes the skills or procedures necessary to make and use those tools.
- value cluster: a series of interrelated values that together form a larger whole.
- value contradictions: values that contradict with one another; to follow the one means to come into conflict with the other.
- values: the standards by which people define what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad, beautiful or ugly.

Meaning of Culture

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century the description of culture not only included intellectual, aesthetic, juridical and moral phenomena, but also eating habits, clothing, housing, etc., In a restrictive, mainly Eurocentric, discourse only those languages which had produced outstanding poets and thinkers – whose writings were accessible to Europeans. In contrast to this Eurocentric image all people have culture, and the European concept of culture only glorified many of the traits which were luxury and decadence. A central concept of this kind of elitist understanding is a tragedy. The study of culture can be traced to prehistoric human life. Ancient societies traded with distant partners because they interested in other cultures and were trying to survive. The close contact with other cultures gives rise to open-mindedness, to the idea that humanity was a unity, despite all superficial differences.

Renowned British Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture* (1870), referred to culture as a quality possessed by all people in all social groups, who nevertheless could be arrayed on a development (evolutionary) continuum from “savagery” through “barbarism” to “civilization”. Tylor’s definition of culture includes “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society”.

The Center for Advance Research on Language Acquisition goes a step further, defining culture as shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus, it can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group. Other scientist agree that culture is one of the keys to understanding human life and behavior. Still many social scientists assert that culture is learned patterns of perceptions, values, and behaviors, shared by a group of people, transmitted through learning and helps shape behavior and beliefs that are dynamic and heterogeneous.

All human groups possess culture, which consists of the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviors and even material objects that are passed from one generation to the next. Culture is universal—all societies develop shared, learned ways of perceiving and participating in the world around them.

Culture can be viewed as practices and pattern of organized social life that represent some form of authority and exhibit some kind of hierarchy. The following descriptions provides information about some of the practices, patterns, and functions of culture.

Culture is heterogeneous this refers to the presence of multiple differences in cultural identity in a given population. This can include factors such as people from multiple ethnicity, languages, education, traditions, religious backgrounds, and other cultural aspects.

Culture is dynamic. This means that cultures interact and change. Because most cultures are in contact with other cultures, they exchange ideas and symbols. The human species are equipped with fewer instincts than may non-human species, and they are born without culture. Therefore, culture is not biological, and we do not inherit it. We learn culture from families, peers, institutions, and media.

Language is the basis of culture and all human groups have language. It is critical to human life and essential for cultural development. Language

allows human experience to be cumulative; gives people the capacity to share understandings about the past and develop complex, shared, goal-directed behavior, and common perceptions about the future.

According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language not only expresses our thinking and perceptions but also shapes them. The “descriptive terms” that we use can and do influence how we see other objects, other people, and ourselves.

Culture derives from one’s social environment and is constantly changing and easily lost because it exists only in our minds. Culture is learned from the people we interact with as we are socialized. The process of learning culture is known as enculturation. While all humans have basic biological needs such as food, sleep, and sex, the way we fulfill those needs varies cross-culturally. The learned nature of culture serves as a reminder that since we have mastered our own culture through the process of learning, it is possible to *learn* to function in other cultures as well. For example, a human infant must learn and acquire a number of conditioned reflexes, habits, and patterns in order to live effectively, not only in society but also in any sociocultural system. This process is called socialization and a secondary socialization in another culture is called acculturation.

Education in its broadest sense is regarded as the process by which the culture of a sociocultural system is impressed or imposed upon the pliant, receptive infant. It is this process that makes continuity of culture possible. Education, formal and informal, is the specific means of socialization. Informal education is the way a child learns to adapt their behavior to that of others, and to become a member of a group. Formal education is the intentional or systematic effort to affect the behavior of others by transmitting elements of culture to them, be it knowledge or belief, patterns of behavior, or ideals and values. The growing child is immersed in informal education constantly, whereas the formal education tends to be periodic. For example, during infancy it is the most profound and enduring influences of a person’s life are implanted.

All cultures are based on traditions and rituals that organize our lives and give them meaning. Culture is synonymous with “tradition”, or customary ways of behaving. Tradition comes from a Latin word meaning to ‘drag along.’ Tradition is stimulated in an unobtrusive way and is what gets carried on from one generation to the next. Very often rituals are accompanied by explicit instruction based in the mythology and ethical codes “handed down” or passed on from elders, parents and relatives, teachers, priests and clerics, and peers. For example, puberty rites are practiced that transform children into young men and women. These rites or rituals vary in emphasis and content. Sometimes they include whipping, isolation, or circumcision. Certain rites or rituals are inscribed, others are deplored or denounced. The impressionable child acquires ideals and values, an image of the good or bad. For example, why a bad day is a “black day” or a bad person is a “black sheep” or why is “angel food cake” white and “devil’s food cake” is black? Myths, legends, supernatural beliefs, and good vs evil are powerful forces in a culture, providing the individual with a ready-made view of the universe. The nature of divine power, supernatural beings, and the importance of moral issues are defined by the culture.

Individuals are organized in many potentially different ways in a population, by many different criteria: for example, by kinship into families or clans; by language, ethnic groups; by socio-economic characteristics; religions and geographical region; political parties or interest groups; and by occupation or institutional memberships, industries, and militaries. Culture is shared by at least two or more people, and of course real, live societies are always larger than that. As almost everyone belongs to a number of different groups and categories of people at the same time, people unavoidably carry several layers of mental programming within themselves, corresponding to different levels of culture. If you act in accordance with those values or behaviors, then that culture resides in you; if you do not share those values or behaviors, then you do not share that culture. Individual differences in culture can be observed among people in the degree to which they adopt and engage in

the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors that constitute a particular culture.

Cultures may contain numerous subcultures and countercultures. A subculture is a group whose values and related behaviors set it apart from the larger culture; a counterculture is a group whose values and related behaviors may stand in opposition to the dominant culture. Individual differences in culture can be observed among people in the degree to which they adopt and engage in the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors that, by consensus, constitute their culture.

Culture can be subdivided into material culture and nonmaterial culture. Material culture consists of the tools and technology required to use them that members of society create and utilize. This includes art, buildings, weapons, jewelry, and all other man-made objects. Nonmaterial culture includes a group's ways of thinking (beliefs, values, and other assumptions about the world) and patterns of behavior (language, gestures, and other forms of social interaction). All groups have values (beliefs regarding what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad, beautiful or ugly), which they channel into norms (expectations, or rules of behavior, that develop from values). Norms include folkways (norms that are not strictly enforced), mores (norms that are strictly enforced), and taboos (norms so strong that the thought of violating them is universally revolting). Norms can be enforced through both positive sanctions (rewards that range from approving looks and gestures to material compensation) and negative sanctions (punishment that ranges from disapproving looks and gestures to imprisonment and execution).

Cultural innovation (is the introduction of new thoughts, norms, or material items) occurs as a result of both internal and external forces. Most innovations introduced into a culture are the result of borrowing from other cultures. This process is known as cultural diffusion, the spreading of cultural items from one culture to another. Technology is central to material culture – it is the framework for its nonmaterial culture. With the emergence of new technologies the world is becoming

more interconnected. This has resulted in more cultural diffusion (the spread of characteristics from one culture to another).

Ethnic group is another term often used interchangeable with culture. Ethnicity is actually a term that is used to refer to a wide variety of groups who might share a language, historical origins, religion, identification with a common nation-state.

Race is a social construct based on color of skin or other similarities among people, which are distinguishable and unique to mark or separate groups of people from one another. Race is a political or social term and not a biological term. Race is often used for prejudicial communication that can be a major obstacle to intercultural communication. Many Spanish-speaking nations are considered part of the Latin culture, while the geographic region is widespread. Latin America is typically defined as those parts of the Central America, South America and Mexico where Spanish or Portuguese are the dominant languages. Originally, the term "Latin America" was used by French geographers to differentiate between Anglo and Romance (Latin-based) languages. While Spain and Portugal are on the European continent, they are considered the key influencers of what is known as Latin culture, which denotes people using languages derived from Latin, also known as Romance languages.

The continent of Africa is essential to all cultures. Human life originated on this continent and began to migrate to other areas of the world around 60,000 years ago, according to the Natural History Museum in London. Other researchers, like those from Estonian Biocentre in Tartu, believe that the first migration may have been much earlier, as early as 120,000 years ago. Situated between Africa, Asia, and Europe, the Middle East has been a crossroads for traders, travelers, and empire builders for thousands of years. Africans, Central Asians, and Celts have all added to the ethnic mix. Approximately 20 countries, according to PBS make-up the countries of the Middle East and they have some but not all things in common. Major ethnic groups in the Middle East today include Arabs, Iranians (also known as Persians), Turks, Jews, Kurds, Berbers,

Armenians, Nubians, Azeris, and Greek. The Arabic language is one thing that is common throughout the region; however, the wide variety of dialect can sometimes make communication difficult. Religion is another cultural area that the countries of the Middle East have in common. The Middle East is the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Given this diversity, we should not be surprised to find a multitude of different cultures coexisting in the region.

The term "Western culture" has come to define Western civilization or European civilization; it is a term used very broadly to refer to a heritage of social norms, ethical values, traditional customs, belief systems, political systems, and specific artifacts and technologies that have some origin or association with the culture of European countries as well as those that have been heavily influenced by European immigration.

Western culture has its roots in the Classical Period of the Greco-Roman era. Values of Western culture have, throughout history, been derived from war, conquest, and political power. Western culture promoted Christianization during the Middle Ages, the reform and modernization triggered by the Renaissance, and with globalization by successive European empires, that spread European ways of life and European educational methods around the world between the 14th and 20th centuries. Other drivers of Western culture include Latin, Celtic, Germanic and Hellenic ethnic and linguistic groups.

Characteristics of Culture

Context

The most important feature of culture is that it can be transmitted. Thus the young can acquire adaptive repertoires through the learning process or, in sociological terms, the socialization process.

— David Mechanic

As we investigate the meaning and characteristics of culture, we must come to understand ourselves and how our perspectives have been socially constructed over time. Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky believed that we learn and develop within specific cultural backgrounds. In any given context, many levels of cultural influence play out at once like concentric circles beginning with the individual, in interaction with others, and within the cultural institutions, communities, and shared culture of that specific time. All these influences come into play as we actively construct our understanding of one's cultural identity.

People are not born into the world with opinions or judgments; instead, these opinions or views are "constructed" by both visible and hidden messages in our environment. These messages occur in various cultural contexts and through our life experiences within our family, community, schools, media exposures, etc.

According to Dr. Marybeth Peebles, there are several micro-cultures (Peoples, 2007). For example: socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender/sexual orientation, language, religion, age, and religion. Examine your placement in any of these micro-cultures and your roles within them. The following are micro-cultures and social influences that are in play as we actively construct our identity:

- ❖ **Family Background:** Describe your family of origin. Discuss the cultural history of your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. What is the primary language, religion of your culture? Discuss your family/individual values, beliefs, goals regarding success/failure in life.
- ❖ **Individual Identity:** Who are you as a person? What are your interests, talents, and most significant achievements? What are your innate

capacities, including learning preferences, personality traits, etc.? How have these influenced you? What seems to be the most exciting or unique about you?

- ❖ **Interaction with significant others:** How have you come to know yourself? (Example: how do you see yourself in the world?) Who are the family, friends, and concerned others who have influenced you most? How have they affected you? What generalized experiences have you had with people who are different from yourself?
- ❖ **Race:** This is not a biological reality (e.g., all humans are genetically mixed, though few of us might know this or acknowledge it). Recent research in mapping the genetic code demonstrates that the concept of “race” has no scientific basis (Akron Beacon Journal, 2000). In the United States, the social construct of race is an important category based mainly on skin color. Technically, race is not part of the culture, yet in this country, people define their race as their culture. Is race something you think about daily? What benefits do you have in this country because of your race? How have you addressed the concept of privilege, particularly White, (upper) middle class, and language privilege?
- ❖ **Gender:** Generally, a person's gender is a particular set of physical characteristics related to male and female reproduction (be aware that one's reproductive organs can be surgically changed). Cultural meanings associated with gender are expressed in terms of socially valued behaviors according to gender. What benefits do you have in society due to your gender?

Social class: Social stratification ranks people or social groups. Common terms you might have heard are "working class," "poor," "middle class," "rich," etc. Some identify class membership primarily in terms of wealth. Other criteria may include one's education, power, and influence. What are the benefits you reap because of your social class?

Ethnicity/Nationality: Ethnicity defines an individual or group according to the location, knowledge, beliefs, history, language, and behavior patterns shared. Nationality is determined based on shared

citizenship that may or may not include a shared ethnicity. How did you learn about your ethnicity and nationality?

❖ **Religion and Spirituality:** Refer to a shared set of ideas about the relationship of the earth and the people on it to a deity or deities and a shared set of rules for living moral values that will enhance that relationship. Spirituality identity may include a large variety of spiritualistic practices, which may or may not be connected to a religious institution, deity or deities. Spirituality includes a sense of connection to something bigger than us.

❖ **Age:** In most western societies, age is defined according to the length of time one has lived and the state of physical and mental development one has attained. Most people view such development as a matter of "stages." Different societies place a different value on age. How has age affected your life experience/s?

Language: The cultural definition of language is "a shared system of vocal sounds and nonverbal behaviors by which members of a group communicates with one another" (Gollnick & Chin, 1990). Language is meaningful in terms of both its verbal properties (what we "name things, people, ideas). How has language affected your life experience/s?

Community: Describe your upbringing regarding your neighborhood, city, school, church, clubs, etc. What did these experiences teach you about people who are different from you? What formal or informal organizations (consider: schools, churches, sports, clubs, military, gangs, etc.) have you participated in, and how have they influenced? How have you come to view religion, and why?

❖ **Historical:** How you see the world is a product of where you come from, and the times you lived through. Understanding the role history plays will provide insight into why we do the things we do as well as provide a new perspective into why others are the way they are.

References

Hofstede, G. (1991/1994) *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. London: Harper Collins Business.

Hofstede, G. (2001) *Culture's Consequences. Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Logan, Peter Melville. "On Culture: Edward B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, 1871." *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*. Ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*.

Matsumoto, D. (1996) *Culture and Psychology*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2008) *Culturally Speaking. Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*. 2nd edition. London: Continuum.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford UP, 1983.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.