

# Culture

## Introduction

Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to the question of what is culture. Culture is a complicated phenomenon to understand because it is both distinct from but clearly associated with society. Also, different definitions of culture reflect different theories or understandings, making it difficult to pin down exact definitions of the concept.

Generally speaking, the following elements of social life are considered to be representative of human culture: "stories, beliefs, media, ideas, works of art, religious practices, fashions, rituals, specialized knowledge, and common sense" (Griswold 2004:xvi). Yet, examples of culture do not, in themselves, present a clear understanding of the concept of culture; culture is more than the object or behavior. Culture also includes norms, values, beliefs, or expressive symbols. Roughly, norms are the way people behave in a given society, values are what they hold dear, beliefs are how they think the universe operates, and expressive symbols are representations, often representations of social norms, values, and beliefs themselves. (Griswold 2004:3)

To summarize, culture encompasses objects and symbols, the meaning given to those objects and symbols, and the norms, values, and beliefs that pervade social life.

**Culture is the full range of learned human behavior patterns.** The term was first used in this way by the pioneer English Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871. Tylor said that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Of course, it is not limited to men. Women possess and create it as well. Since Tylor's time, the concept of culture has become the central focus of anthropology.

Culture is a powerful human tool for survival, but it is a fragile phenomenon. It is constantly changing and easily lost because it exists only in our minds. Our written languages, governments, buildings, and other man-made things are merely the products of culture. They are not culture in themselves. For this reason, archaeologists can not dig up culture directly in their excavations. The broken pots and other artifacts of ancient people that they uncover are only material remains that reflect cultural patterns--they are things that were made and used through cultural knowledge and skills.

## The Changing Concept of Culture

Today most social scientists reject the cultured vs. uncultured concept of culture and the opposition of culture to human nature. They recognize that non-elites are as cultured as elites (and that non-Westerners are just as civilized); they are just cultured in a different way. By the late 19th century, anthropologists had changed the concept of culture to include a wider variety of societies, ultimately resulting in the concept of culture outlined above - objects and symbols, the meaning given to those objects and symbols, and the norms, values, and beliefs that pervade social life. This new perspective has also removed the evaluative element of the concept of culture and instead proposes distinctions rather than rankings between different cultures.

## The Origins of Culture

Attentive to the theory of evolution, anthropologists assumed that all human beings are equally evolved, and the fact that all humans have cultures must in some way be a result of human evolution. They were also wary of using biological evolution to explain differences between specific cultures - an approach that either was a form of, or legitimized forms of, racism. They argued that through the course of their evolution, human beings evolved a universal human capacity to classify experiences, and encode and communicate them symbolically. Since these symbolic systems were learned and taught, they began to develop independently of biological evolution (in other words, one human being can learn a belief, value, or way of doing something from another, even if they are not biologically related). That this capacity for symbolic thinking and social learning is a product of human evolution confounds older arguments about nature versus nurture.

This view of culture argues that people living apart from one another develop unique cultures. However, elements of different cultures can easily spread from one group of people to another. Culture is dynamic and can be taught and learned, making it a potentially rapid form of adaptation to change in physical conditions. Anthropologists view culture as not only a product of biological evolution but as a supplement to it; it can be seen as the main means of human adaptation to the natural world.

This view of culture as a symbolic system with adaptive functions, which varies from place to place, led anthropologists to conceive of different cultures as defined by distinct patterns (or structures) of enduring, although arbitrary, conventional sets of meaning, which took concrete form in a variety of artifacts such as myths and rituals, tools, the design of housing, and the planning of villages. Anthropologists thus distinguish between **material culture** and **symbolic culture**, not only because each reflects different kinds of human activity, but also because they constitute different kinds of data that require different methodologies to study.

In summary, culture is a complex component of social life, distinct from the interactions of society in particular because it adds meanings to relationships. Culture is also multi-leveled in that it can range from concrete cultural objects to broad social norms.

### **Subcultures & Countercultures**

A **subculture** is a culture shared and actively participated in by a minority of people within a broader culture. A culture often contains numerous subcultures. Subcultures incorporate large parts of the broader cultures of which they are part, but in specifics they may differ radically. Some subcultures achieve such a status that they acquire a name of their own. Examples of subcultures could include: bikers, military culture, and Star Trek fans (trekkers or trekkies). A **counterculture** is a subculture with the addition that some of its beliefs, values, or norms challenge those of the main culture of which it is part. Examples of countercultures in the U.S. could include: the hippie movement of the 1960s, the green movement, and feminist groups.

### **Ethnocentrism & Cultural Relativism**

**Ethnocentrism** is the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one's own culture. Many claim that ethnocentrism occurs in every society; ironically, ethnocentrism may be something that all cultures have in common. The term was coined by William Graham Sumner, a social evolutionist and professor of Political and Social Science at Yale University. He defined it as the viewpoint that one's group is the center of everything," against which all other groups are judged.

Ethnocentrism often entails the belief that one's own race or ethnic group is the most important and/or that some or all aspects of its culture are superior to those of other groups. Within this ideology, individuals will judge other groups in relation to their own particular ethnic group or culture, especially with concern to language, behaviour, customs, and religion. It also involves an incapacity to acknowledge that cultural differentiation does not imply inferiority of those groups who are ethnically distinct from one's own.

**Cultural relativism** is the belief that the concepts and values of a culture cannot be fully translated into, or fully understood in, other languages; that a specific cultural artifact (e.g. a ritual) has to be understood in terms of the larger symbolic system of which it is a part.

### **The Function of Culture**

Culture can also be seen to play a specific function in social life. According to Griswold, "The sociological analysis of culture begins at the premise that culture provides orientation, wards off chaos, and directs behavior toward certain lines of action and away from others" (Griswold 2004:24). Griswold reiterates this point by explaining that, "Groups and societies need collective representations of themselves to inspire sentiments of unity and mutual support, and culture fulfills this need" (p. 59). In other words, culture can have a certain utilitarian function as the maintenance of order as the result of shared understandings and meanings (this understanding of culture is similar to the Symbolic Interactionist understanding of society).

## **Cultural Change**

The belief that culture is symbolically coded and can thus be taught from one person to another means that cultures, although bounded, can change. Cultures are both predisposed to change and resistant to it. Resistance can come from habit, religion, and the integration and interdependence of cultural traits. For example, men and women have complementary roles in many cultures. One sex might desire changes that affect the other, as happened in the second half of the 20th century in western cultures (see women's movement), while the other sex may be resistant to that change (possibly in order to maintain a power imbalance in their favor).

Cultural change can have many causes, including: the environment, inventions, and contact with other cultures. For example, the end of the last ice age helped lead to the invention of agriculture. Some inventions that affected Western culture in the 20th century were the birth control pill, television, and the Internet. Several understandings of how cultures change come from Anthropology. For instance, in diffusion theory, the form of something moves from one culture to another, but not its meaning. For example, the ankh symbol originated in Egyptian culture but has diffused to numerous cultures. Its original meaning may have been lost, but it is now used by many practitioners of New Age Religion as an arcane symbol of power or life forces. A variant of the diffusion theory, stimulus diffusion, refers to an element of one culture leading to an invention in another.

Contact between cultures can also result in acculturation. Acculturation has different meanings, but in this context refers to replacement of the traits of one culture with those of another, such as what happened with many Native American Indians. Related processes on an individual level are assimilation and transculturation, both of which refer to adoption of a different culture by an individual. One sociological approach to cultural change has been outlined by Griswold (2004). Griswold points out that it may seem as though culture comes from individuals which, for certain elements of cultural change, is true but there is also the larger, collective, and long-lasting culture that cannot have been the creation of single individuals as it predates and post-dates individual humans and contributors to culture. The author presents a sociological perspective to address this conflict; Sociology suggests an alternative to both the unsatisfying it has always been that way view at one extreme and the unsociological individual genius view at the other. This alternative posits that culture and cultural works are collective, not individual, creations. We can best understand specific cultural objects... by seeing them not as unique to their creators but as the fruits of collective production, fundamentally social in their genesis. (p. 53) In short, Griswold argues that culture changes through the contextually dependent and socially situated actions of individuals; macro-level culture influences the individual who, in turn, can influence that same culture. The logic is a bit circular, but illustrates how culture can change over time yet remain somewhat constant.

It is, of course, important to recognize here that Griswold is talking about cultural change and not the actual origins of culture (as in, "there was no culture and then, suddenly, there was"). Because Griswold does not explicitly distinguish between the origins of cultural change and the origins of culture, it may appear as though Griswold is arguing here for the origins of culture and situating these origins in society. This is neither accurate nor a clear representation of sociological thought on this issue. Culture, just like society, has existed since the beginning of humanity (humans being social and cultural). Society and culture co-exist because humans have social relations and meanings tied to those relations (e.g. brother, lover, friend; see, for instance, Leakey 1994). Culture as a super-phenomenon has no real beginning except in the sense that humans (*homo sapiens*) have a beginning. This, then, makes the question of the origins of culture moot it has existed as long as we have, and will likely exist as long as we do. Cultural change, on the other hand, is a matter that can be questioned and researched, as Griswold does.