

# Culture

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Scholars and laypersons alike use the words *culture*, *race*, *nationality*, and *ethnicity* interchangeably, as if they were all terms denoting the same concepts. They are not. Clearly, we use the word culture in many different ways in everyday language and discourse. Culture can be used to describe activities or behaviors, refer to the heritage or tradition of a group, describe rules and norms, describe learning or problem solving, define the organization of a group, or refer to the origins of a group. Culture can refer to: general characteristics; food and clothing; housing and technology; economy and transportation; individual and family activities; community and government; welfare, religion, and science; and sex and the life cycle. Thus, the concept of culture is used to describe and explain a broad range of activities, behaviors, events, and structures in our lives. It is used in many different ways because it touches on so many aspects of life.

People have needs that must be met in order to survive. They come to the world equipped with a universal psychological toolkit that gives them the tools to address those needs. But they also live in groups, and the groups exist in different ecologies, with different resources. Thus, groups of people need to adapt their behaviors to their ecologies in order to maximize the use of their available resources to meet their needs; the abilities and aptitudes in their psychological toolkits give them the tools to adapt. These adaptations produce behaviors, ways of living, ways of thinking, and ways of being. These ways of living, thinking, and being become the contents of a group's culture. The term "culture," in fact, is an abstract metaphor for these ways. Culture per se cannot be observed; only the ways can be observed,

and culture is inferred as a concept to help explain and describe those ways.

Living in groups requires social coordination. If we are coordinated, then people are efficient in doing their part for their group to survive well. But if we are not coordinated, there is social chaos. Thus we need to keep social order, and be coordinated, so we can accomplish tasks efficiently and survive. To achieve social order and coordination and to avoid chaos, we create rules of life, or systems of living, or ways of being. This is culture. Culture provides guidelines or roadmaps on what to do, how to think, and what to feel. Those guidelines are passed along from one generation to the next, so that future generations don't have to keep reinventing the wheel. In fact, cultural products are always improved; that is, they are always ratcheted up, never down. Computers and cell phones always get better, not worse. The same for raising crops, making cars, and all other cultural products. Those ways of living that groups create take advantage of our universal psychological toolkits to meet our basic human needs.

Over the years many scholars have attempted to define culture. For example, culture has been defined in these following ways (for specific citations and extended discussion, see Matsumoto & Juang, 2013):

- all capabilities and habits learned as members of a society;
- social heredity;
- patterns of behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinct achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts;
- the totality of equivalent and complementary learned meanings maintained by a human population, or by identifiable segments of a population, and transmitted from one generation to the next;
- a descriptive term that captures not only rules and meanings but also behaviors;

- shared symbol systems transcending individuals;
- the shared way of life of a group of people.

To be sure, there is no one accepted definition of culture in the social sciences. One of the problems with definitions of culture that revolve around the concept of “shared behaviors” is the fact that many nonhuman animals also share behaviors. Lions roam in prides and fish swim in schools, which are adaptive responses to the environment that aid in survival. Thus to some extent nonhuman animals also have culture, or a rudimentary form of culture. Something must differentiate human cultures from nonhuman cultures.

We define human culture as *a unique meaning and information system, shared by a group and transmitted across generations, that allows the group to meet basic needs of survival, pursue happiness and wellbeing, and derive meaning from life* (Matsumoto & Juang, 2013). What makes human cultures unique and different from nonhuman cultures is the meaning and information that is accumulated in a social system. Meaning is imparted to social roles, contexts, and behaviors, and the set of meanings comprise the informational systems of human cultures (see entry on *context differentiation*, this *Encyclopedia*).

Human cultures exist first to enable us to meet basic needs of survival. Human cultures help us to meet others, to procreate and produce offspring, to put food on the table, to provide shelter from the elements, and to care for our daily biological essential needs. But human culture is so much more than that. It allows for complex social networks and relationships. It allows us to enhance the meaning of normal, daily activities. It allows us to pursue happiness. It allows us to be creative in music, art, and drama. It allows us to seek recreation and to engage in sports and organize competition, whether in the local community Little League or the Olympic Games. It allows us to search the sea and space. It allows us to create

mathematics, an achievement no other species can claim, as well as an educational system. It allows us to go to the moon, to create a research laboratory on Antarctica, and send probes to Mars and Jupiter. Unfortunately, it also allows us to have wars, create weapons of mass destruction, and produce terrorists.

Human culture does all this by creating and maintaining complex social systems, institutionalizing and improving cultural practices, creating beliefs about the world, and communicating the meaning system to other humans and subsequent generations. It is the product of the evolution of the human mind, increased brain size, and complex cognitive abilities, in response to the specific ecologies in which groups live and the resources available to them to live.

Culture is a solution to the problem of individuals’ adaptations to their contexts to address their social motives and biological needs. As adaptational responses to the environment, cultures help to select behaviors, attitudes, values, and opinions that may optimize the tapping of resources to meet survival needs. Out of all the myriad behaviors possible in the human repertoire, cultures help to focus people’s behaviors and attention on a few limited alternatives in order to maximize their effectiveness, given their resources and their environment.

**SEE ALSO:** Context Differentiation; Cultural Transmission; Figurative Cultures: Postfigurative, Cofigurative, and Prefigurative

## Reference

Matsumoto, D., & Juang, L. (2013). *Culture and Psychology* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Cengage.

## Further Reading

Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1952/1963). *Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.