

Culture and Society

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Our relationships with each other, how we define outsiders, our norms, and our values are largely dependent on what we call our “culture.” However, this term is often misunderstood. The simplest definition of culture is that it is the collection of language, knowledge, values, norms, beliefs, habits, and objects that are passed down from one generation to the next. What may be considered normal or acceptable in one society may be inappropriate in another.



Symbols in Culture

Symbols are a very important part of the culture. A symbol is meaningless when taken out of context, however, or it may have a completely different meaning in another culture. **Gestures, flags, or symbols of love and hate** are all symbols. A symbol is something that has a different meaning than its abstract meaning.

Flags can symbolize religion, nationalism, or patriotism depending on the context and what meaning is conferred by a flag in a particular culture. And gestures can have very different meanings, depending on the cultural context. For example, certain hand gestures can mean you are excited in one culture but simply that you received a phone call in another!

Language and Culture

Another important part of every culture is language. While different societies can share a language, certain **slang** and **expressions** are usually specific to particular cultures and societies. Language is defined as a group of symbols that people use to communicate with each other. Language can be either **verbal, written, or sign language**.

When someone visits a society and does not use their language, it becomes very easy for the society to mark that individual as an outsider.

In certain cultures, **language and gender** interact with each other. A woman uses certain pronouns, suffixes, and prefixes that are different from those a man uses. Additionally, certain expressions and idioms can be gender-specific. These differences are an important part of the culture. Someone who learns a new language might understand the basics of it, but would understand the cultural differences only if they visit the society that uses that language, and interact with the people who live there.

In societies that predominantly speak English, such differences are minimal. Most words come in a neutral form that is genderless. For instance, “policeman” and “policewoman” are words that can be gender-specific in English, while the term “police officer” is neutral.

Language differences can also be related to **race or ethnicity**. For example, slang words referring to people from specific backgrounds or cultures may be common among people from those cultures, but are considered disrespectful if used by a person of a different background.

Values in Culture

Values are what we define as **right or wrong** and what govern our moral compass. Values can be defined as a collective of shared ideas, norms, and morals that differentiate right from wrong. Values can also include what is good or bad for you, what is desirable, and what you should avoid.

In the United States, sociologists have identified 10 important values that define what they call the **American set of shared values**. However, these values can be generalized to any society; indeed, one can argue that for a society to be functional, its citizens must share at least these 10 values, and often more.

Individualism is the first and perhaps most important value. It simply means that everyone is responsible for their own actions, decisions, and successes in life.

Achievement and success are highly valued in American society. These are gained through **activity and work** and rewarded by engaging in **leisure activities**.

Belief in science is more important than one's **opinion or religion** because science can be easily examined, proved, or disputed.

People in developed societies also seek **comfort** and prize **efficiency** because they live in competitive societies, and want advancement and convenience.

People in the United States also share the value of **equality**—to be moral and humane, and to help those in need. Relatedly, Americans seek **freedom** and the **right to express themselves**.

Finally, and unfortunately, the feeling of **superiority** is shared by Americans and also by those in many other countries. It can drive wedges between cultures and societies, and lead to bigotry and, sometimes, conflict.

Norms in Culture

When values are strong enough to have a guiding role in one's daily life, they become norms. Norms can sometimes be violated without serious consequences.

Mores are values that are based on a culture's moral and ethical beliefs. **Taboos** are very strong mores that if violated can be extremely offensive to people in that culture. These norms are part of **informal values**.

Laws are formal norms that cannot be violated in the society without legal consequences. For example, stealing violates the formal norms of most societies and is punishable by law.

Cultural Change and Cultural Shock

While cultural values, norms, and beliefs may seem difficult to change, it has been proven that culture does, in fact, change over time. However, **non-material culture**—i.e.,

norms, values, and beliefs—takes a long time to change than does **material culture**—i.e., the objects related to culture—which change more quickly when a society changes.

People who travel a lot can sometimes develop what is called **culture shock** when they enter a society with a completely new and different culture. The differences in cultures can make it difficult for these people to integrate and socialize in the new society. What is considered a complete aberration in their own culture might be considered as completely normal in a different society. Sometimes, culture shock can make a person anxious, frustrated, or depressed.

Culture shock often initially manifests as a feeling of freedom from one's own values and norms; this stage is called the **honeymoon phase**. This is usually followed by a **frustration phase**, where the individual experiences a difficult time integrating into the new society.

The individual then undergoes an **adjustment phase** where their norms, values, and beliefs start to change. Eventually, the individual enters the **mastery phase**, where they become completely integrated into the new society and culture.

Diverse societies are becoming more common around the world because of increased immigration and transportation. Different ethnicities and cultures learn to work, live, and accept each other. Eventually, however, **cultural dilution** often happens, in which minorities adopt the culture of the majority in the new society.

References

Kendall, D. Sociology in Our Times. 10th Edition. Chapter 3: Culture.

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