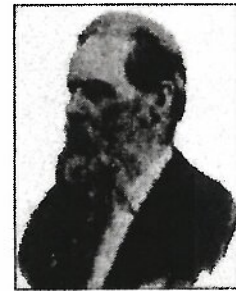


What is Culture?

The word culture has many different meanings. For some it refers to an appreciation of good literature, music, art, and food. For a biologist, it is likely to be a colony of bacteria or other microorganisms growing in a nutrient medium in a laboratory Petri dish. However, for anthropologists and other behavioral scientists, **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.



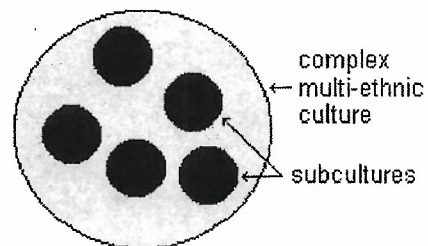
Edward B. Tylor
(1832-1917)

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 cannot 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.

Layers of Culture

There are very likely three layers or levels of culture that are part of your learned behavior patterns and perceptions. Most obviously is the body of cultural traditions that distinguish your specific society. When people speak of Italian, Samoan, or Japanese culture, they are referring to the shared language, traditions, and beliefs that set each of these peoples apart from others. In most cases, those who share your culture do so because they acquired it as they were raised by parents and other family members who have it.

The second layer of culture that may be part of your identity is a **subculture**. In complex, diverse societies in which people have come from many different parts of the world, they often retain much of their original cultural traditions. As a result, they are likely to be part of an identifiable subculture in their new society. The shared cultural traits of subcultures set them apart from the rest of their society. Examples of easily identifiable subcultures in the United States include ethnic groups such as Vietnamese Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans. Members of each of these subcultures share a common identity, food tradition, dialect or language, and other cultural traits that come from their common ancestral background and experience. As the cultural differences between members of a subculture and the dominant national culture blur and eventually disappear, the



subculture ceases to exist except as a group of people who claim a common ancestry. That is generally the case with German Americans and Irish Americans in the United States today. Most of them identify themselves as Americans first. They also see themselves as being part of the cultural mainstream of the nation.



These Cuban American women in Miami, Florida have a shared subculture identity that is reinforced through their language, food, and other traditions

The third layer of culture consists of **cultural universals**. These are learned behavior patterns that are shared by all of humanity collectively. No matter where people live in the world, they share these universal traits. Examples of such "human cultural" traits include:

1. communicating with a verbal language consisting of a limited set of sounds and grammatical rules for constructing sentences
2. using age and gender to classify people (e.g., teenager, senior citizen, woman, man)
3. classifying people based on marriage and descent relationships and having kinship terms to refer to them (e.g., wife, mother, uncle, cousin)
4. raising children in some sort of family setting
5. having a sexual division of labor (e.g., men's work versus women's work)
6. having a concept of privacy
7. having rules to regulate sexual behavior
8. distinguishing between good and bad behavior
9. having some sort of body ornamentation
10. making jokes and playing games
11. having art
12. having some sort of leadership roles for the implementation of community decisions

While all cultures have these and possibly many other universal traits, different cultures have developed their own specific ways of carrying out or expressing them. For instance, people in deaf subcultures frequently use their hands to communicate with sign language instead of verbal language. However, sign languages have grammatical rules just as verbal ones do.

Culture and Society

Culture and society are not the same thing. While cultures are complexes of learned behavior patterns and perceptions, societies are groups of interacting organisms. People are not the only animals that have societies. Schools of fish, flocks of birds, and hives of bees are societies. In the case of humans, however, societies are groups of people who directly or indirectly interact with each other. People in human societies also generally perceive that their society is distinct from other societies in terms of shared traditions and expectations.

While human societies and cultures are not the same thing, they are inextricably connected because culture is created and transmitted to others in a society. Cultures are not the product of lone individuals. They are the continuously evolving products of people interacting with each other. Cultural patterns such as language and politics make no sense except in terms of the interaction of people. If you were the only human on earth, there would be no need for language or government.

Is Culture Limited to Humans?

There is a difference of opinion in the behavioral sciences about whether or not we are the only animal that creates and uses culture. The answer to this question depends on how narrow culture is defined. If it is used broadly to refer to a complex of learned behavior patterns, then it is clear that we are not alone in creating and using culture. Many other animal species teach their

young what they themselves learned in order to survive. This is especially true of the chimpanzees and other relatively intelligent apes and monkeys. Wild chimpanzee mothers typically teach their children about several hundred food and medicinal plants. Their children also have to learn about the dominance hierarchy and the social rules within their communities. As males become teenagers, they acquire hunting skills from adults. Females have to learn how to nurse and care for their babies. Chimpanzees even have to learn such basic skills as how to perform sexual intercourse. This knowledge is not hardwired into their brains at birth. They are all learned patterns of behavior just as they are for humans.



Non-human culture?

This orangutan mother is using a specially prepared stick to "fish out" food from a crevice. She learned this skill and is now teaching it to her child who is hanging on her shoulder and intently watching.

