



What Is a Culture?

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THE GREAT DEBATE

There is a great debate in social science about what it is that shapes us both as individuals and as members of society. With regard to individuals, this debate is about "[nature versus nurture](#)," meaning whether it is our inherited genetic predisposition ("nature") or what we learn as we grow up ("nurture") that predominantly shapes us and our differences as individuals. Similarly, [anthropologists](#) ask how much of our behavior as a group is pre-determined by geography, culture, or history. Studies increasingly indicate what most of us know from common sense: these differences between us as individuals and those between groups of people can be explained by no single factor alone, but by the complex interaction between them.

Great differences, as well as startling similarities, can be seen when comparing world cultures. People around the globe are similar in their essential humanity: we communicate with each other, we sustain ourselves with food, and when we sleep we often dream. Yet we speak different languages, eat different foods, and dream different dreams. These are what we call cultural differences. What causes them is not always obvious to the ordinary person.

I remember being on a train many years ago, before many Westerners traveled in China, riding through Gansu Province in western China with an Australian Chinese friend who spoke no Chinese. I was often overheard translating for her. People on the train, mostly ethnic Han and Hui (Chinese Moslems), were as startled to see a Chinese face without the language that usually accompanies it, as they were to see my Caucasian face speaking Chinese. One man in particular kept insisting that there must be a Chinese relative on my father's side of the family (sic); otherwise, how could I have learned the language? The assumption was that one's ability to speak a particular language (like an individual's physical characteristics) is genetically and not culturally transmitted...and that genetics somehow mirrors social organization (i.e., everything is transmitted through the male's family line).

Similarly, as an English teacher that same year, in class with my students (all of whom were male teachers of English from outlying provinces), I was told authoritatively by one of my students that although he did not doubt my learning, I was a woman, and somewhere in America there must be a man who was more knowledgeable than I. "Everyone," he went on to say, "knows that, worldwide, men as a group are smarter than women." He pointed to the fact that men in every culture held more powerful positions than women as proof. What he was not aware of was how his Confucian ideas about gender and the superiority of males influenced the way he thought about men's and women's roles.

Each of these incidents illustrates the fact that, for many people, culture is so internalized that we take it as a given - as something we are born with. But both language and gender categories are elements of culture and, as such, are transmitted from generation to generation. As children, we are taught language, gender roles, how to behave, what to believe (religion), what foods taste good, and so on. If, as an infant, you or I had been transported to another culture to be raised in that culture, that culture would be ours today, rather than the American one we share.

CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

What exactly does culture mean? Is it something material you can touch? Or is it something immaterial, such as values and beliefs? Or is it our customs and traditions, our festivals and celebrations? While anthropologists have vacillated between material and nonmaterial definitions of [culture](#), today most would agree with a more inclusive definition of culture: the thoughts, behaviors, languages, customs, the things we produce and the methods we use to produce them. It is this, the human ability to create and transmit culture, that differentiates us as humans from the rest of the animal world.

The essential feature of culture, that it is learned and transmitted from one generation to the next, rests on the human capacity to think [symbolically](#). Language, perhaps the most important feature, is a symbolic form of communication. The word table, for example, is nothing other than a symbol for the actual thing, a table. Language is a form of communication. Without language, culture could not be transmitted, people could not learn from one another across generations, and there would be no cultural continuity.

Simply because culture is transmitted through symbols whose meanings remain more or less constant doesn't mean that cultures are static and don't change. On the contrary, cultures are never truly static. Which of us does not remember a grandparent comparing life today with the one s/he grew up in? The changes that took place between his/her lifetime and ours represent subtle cultural shifts in values, the things we use, and the way we use language.

What causes [cultural change](#)? Outside influences, through a process known as [cultural diffusion](#), may stimulate cultural change. An example of this is commercial or [cross-cultural contacts](#) like the Silk Road, which brought silk to the West and Buddhism into China. Inventions and technological developments from within a society, such as the steam engine or the automobile, can also have an impact on culture. "Car culture," for example, is a term describing people's dependence on the automobile. This dependence gave birth to the concept of "fast-food restaurants" such as McDonald's, where people get inexpensive hot food delivered to eat on the go. "Fast-food restaurants" have spread through cultural diffusion to many parts of the world.

CULTURAL FORMATION

How do cultures form in the first place? Groups of people living in specific ecological niches interacted with their [environments](#) over long periods of time. Given a certain degree of isolation, they developed adaptations to their environment, methods of survival, and ways of [organizing themselves socially](#), and came to share beliefs and symbols that explained their world. They also developed a language they used to communicate with each other that enabled them to transmit learning to future generations.

Over time, increasing communication between early human groups broke down geographic isolation. Gradually, through cultural diffusion, linkages were formed and many different specific cultures evolved into larger groupings called culture areas - regions with shared cultural traits. An example of a [culture area](#) is sub-Saharan Africa. While there are many different tribal groups speaking many different languages, and today many nation-states, there are features such as social structures that most of the tribes share. Another example is East Asia: China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. While speaking different languages and having very differently organized societies, these four nation-states, each with its own specific culture, share such [features](#) as patriarchal social organization, Confucian values, the Buddhist religion, an emphasis on the family, and ancient Chinese as the classical language. Other culture areas include Latin America, northern Europe, southern Europe, South Asia, etc.

CULTURE VS. CIVILIZATION

Also, over time, a culture may evolve into what is termed a [civilization](#). A civilization is generally understood as a more advanced form of organized life: civilizations usually have more complex forms of social, political, military, and religious life. Writing and the use of metals are also features of some civilizations.

Examples of great civilizations are Egyptian, Mughal, and Shang Dynasty China. The last of these is often cited as the oldest continuous civilization in the world (Egyptian civilization is older, but it disappeared and is not continuous with Egyptian society today.) But there is no absolute threshold after which we can firmly state that a culture has evolved into a civilization. Nor do all cultures necessarily become civilizations. We need to be mindful of the fact that the term civilization is often a loaded one, used to contrast so-called civilized societies with so-called primitive ones. While these adjectives (civilized, primitive) may refer to the level of complexity of a society, they do not define the quality of life, the values, or the mores of the societies they describe.

RACE AND CULTURE

[Race](#) is an often misunderstood concept. Racial features are genetic and inherited. Features such as skin, hair, and eye color, susceptibility to specific diseases, and some other factors are aspects of race. But given the overall trend toward increasing globalization and the fact that peoples are no longer isolated from each other but increasingly intermarry and thereby share their gene pools, "races" that may have once been distinguishable are less so today. For these reasons, many social scientists now doubt whether race is a useful concept at all.

However, how we view race, how we categorize people, and whether we value or devalue specific racial features, are a part of culture. An example of how value is ascribed to race is the way people of different skin colors in Brazil or New Orleans were given different social standing in the community and until relatively recently were encouraged not to intermarry.

RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND CULTURE

Religion, ethnicity, and culture are among the most difficult concepts to disentangle. The United States is home to many different [ethnic groups](#), perhaps more than are in any other nation. This is due in part to our history as a nation. We are a land of immigrants - a new country built upon immigration. Immigrants bring with them the special features of their cultures of origin and strive to maintain culture ties to their places of origin while at the same time becoming American. We speak of Italian-

American, Irish-American, and Jewish-American cultures, for example. These ethnic groups form subcultures within the (larger) American culture.

Religion, however, is not the same as culture or ethnicity; it can overlap either. Technically, religion is defined as a set of beliefs. But while some religions confine themselves to the realm of ideas or beliefs, other religions extend into the realm of behavior and prohibit or mandate certain actions as well. The Ten Commandments identify behaviors prohibited by the Judeo-Christian religions. For Orthodox Jews, kosher rules are an example of behavior that is required. For Moslems, eating during daylight during Ramadan is prohibited behavior.

All religions that accept or desire converts have had to adapt themselves to the cultures where they spread or they would not have been accepted. Catholicism's spread into South America was facilitated by its willingness to incorporate native religious practices into its canons there, as with the many feasts for saints that are particular to the region. Similarly, as Islam spread in Asia and Africa, it incorporated specific [cultural practices](#) peculiar to the areas it reached. For example, Moslem women in sub-Saharan Africa do not wear veils, while those in rural Afghanistan cover themselves with the burka. Female circumcision is practiced in Moslem sub-Saharan Africa, but not anywhere else in the Islamic world. This adaptability of religion to local cultures sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish culture from religion - but they are not the same.

DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

Anthropologists have been discussing and debating definitions of culture since the origin of the discipline in the 19th century. In 1952 two prominent American anthropologists, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, published an entire volume cataloging different definitions of culture. A useful summary of that discussion, grouping their 160 different definitions into eight categories, is provided by John Bodley in his *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States and the Global System* (1994). Bodley goes on to distill what is useful in these categories and to define culture in a useful way. Culture, he suggests, is made up of at least three components: what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce. The problem with defining culture as shared values and beliefs, as some anthropologists do, is that there can be a vast difference between what people think they ought to do (value) and what they actually do (behavior). Moreover, we get much of our evidence for what people do from what people make - that is, from material things (what archaeologists study). So we really need to include all three components in a definition of culture.

Besides these components, culture has several properties: to quote Bodley, it is "shared, learned, symbolic, transmitted cross-generational - as discussed above - adaptive, and integrated." For example, there is common agreement in a culture on what things mean. Members of a culture share specific symbolic meanings, including (but not limited to) language. In America, for example, brides wear white as a symbol of purity. In China, red is worn by a bride as a celebratory or "happy" color, while white is the color of mourning. Thus colors take on symbolic meaning, as do religious symbols (icons), art, etc. All culture is learned; none is inherited. And it is passed on from one generation to the next, which is why schools and families are so important in cultural transmission.

Culture is furthermore adaptive, which harkens back to how cultures - and subcultures - are formed. Modes of behavior, social institutions, and technologies all foster our adaptation to the particular niche of the ecological world we inhabit. That is what is meant by adaptive: if you live in a cold climate, you will learn to make shelter and clothing that keep you warm. If you are part of an island culture, most likely your diet will consist of fish and the local technology will include boat making and the making

of fishing gear. Culture is also integrated; that is, each aspect of a culture is consonant with every other. If not, there is [cultural dissonance](#) that risks a tearing apart. We speak of, in Clifford Geertz's terms, a "web of culture." It is like a woven cloth, a fabric.

THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

In our modern world, however, there is much cultural dissonance. We have only to think of how complicated things become in a nation of immigrants such as ours. We are all Americans, and partake of American culture, yet in many ways we do not fit Bodley's description: we do not all speak the same language or eat the same foods. What we do have in common, on the other hand, besides our essential humanity, is our acknowledgment and acceptance of difference. In other words, we share our [diversity](#) and that has become a hallmark of our culture.

This diversity extends into today's classrooms. In teaching about culture, "other" cultures are not perhaps so far removed from our daily lives as perhaps before. Teachers will increasingly need to find ways of talking about culture that take into account the [multicultural](#) classroom or community in which they teach. This requires a different kind of sensitivity, different tools, and different approaches. The shrinking globe means that we have to find ways of discussing differences that include the "different" in the discussion. Talking about Chinese culture with children from China in the classroom is different from talking about it in the context of reading a popular children's story such as "The Five Chinese Brothers."

In *Teaching and Learning in a Diverse World: Multicultural Education for Young Children*, Patricia Ramsey specifically addresses these issues. She points out how teachers can sometimes use the different cultural elements found in their classrooms as starting points to discuss the basic concepts of culture: language, intergenerational transmission, cultural artifacts, etc. She further draws attention to the discontinuities experienced by recent immigrants from other cultures, both linguistic and behavioral. The unconscious reactions of peers and teachers to unfamiliar behaviors of children in the classroom can also be stressful. Teachers and peers, she says, often misinterpret and underestimate immigrant children's behaviors at school.

Culture, here understood as the totality of what a group of people think, how they behave, and what they produce that is passed on to future generations, is what binds us together as human beings but also separates us into our different communities. In today's world, understanding both our similarities and our diversity becomes increasingly important. Through an understanding and appreciation of cultural difference, children will be better prepared to live in an ever-shrinking global community. And increasingly, our classrooms are becoming miniature models of the global community itself.

