

# Culture (from the Encarta Encyclopedia)

## 1. Introduction

Culture, in anthropology, is the patterns of behavior and thinking that people living in social groups learn, create, and share. Culture distinguishes one human group from others. It also distinguishes humans from other animals. A people's culture includes their beliefs, rules of behavior, language, rituals, art, technology, styles of dress, ways of producing and cooking food, religion, and political and economic systems.

Culture is the most important concept in anthropology (the study of all aspects of human life, past and present). Anthropologists commonly use the term *culture* to refer to a society or group in which many or all people live and think in the same ways. Likewise, any group of people who share a common culture—and in particular, common rules of behavior and a basic form of social organization—constitutes a society. Thus, the terms *culture* and *society* are somewhat interchangeable. However, while many animals live in societies, such as herds of elk or packs of wild dogs, only humans have culture.

Culture developed together with the evolution of the human species, *Homo sapiens*, and is closely related to human biology. The ability of people to have culture comes in large part from their physical features: having big, complex brains; an upright posture; free hands that can grasp and manipulate small objects; and a vocal tract that can produce and articulate a wide range of sounds. These distinctively human physical features began to develop in African ancestors of humans more than four million years ago. The earliest physical evidence of culture is crude stone tools produced in East Africa over two million years ago.

## II. The Characteristics of Culture

Culture has several distinguishing characteristics. (1) It is based on *symbols*—abstract ways of referring to and understanding ideas, objects, feelings, or behaviors—and the ability to communicate with symbols using language. (2) Culture is shared. People in the same society share common behaviors and ways of thinking through culture. (3) Culture is learned. While people biologically inherit many physical traits and behavioral instincts, culture is socially inherited. A person must learn culture from other people in a society. (4) Culture is adaptive. People use culture to flexibly and quickly adjust to changes in the world around them.

### A. Culture Is Symbolic

People have culture primarily because they can communicate with and understand symbols. Symbols allow people to develop complex thoughts and to exchange those thoughts with others. Language and other forms of symbolic communication, such as art, enable people to create, explain, and record new ideas and information.

A symbol has either an indirect connection or no connection at all with the object, idea, feeling, or behavior to which it refers. For instance, most people in the United States find some meaning

in the combination of the colors red, white, and blue. But those colors themselves have nothing to do with, for instance, the land that people call the United States, the concept of patriotism, or the U.S. national anthem, *The Star Spangled Banner*.

To convey new ideas, people constantly invent new symbols, such as for mathematical formulas. In addition, people may use one symbol, such as a single word, to represent many different ideas, feelings, or values. Thus, symbols provide a flexible way for people to communicate even very complex thoughts with each other. For example, only through symbols can architects, engineers, and construction workers communicate the information necessary to construct a skyscraper or bridge.

People have the capacity at birth to construct, understand, and communicate through symbols, primarily by using language. Research has shown, for example, that infants have a basic structure of language—a sort of universal grammar—built into their minds. Infants are thus predisposed to learn the languages spoken by the people around them.

Language provides a means to store, process, and communicate amounts of information that vastly exceed the capabilities of nonhuman animals. For instance, chimpanzees, the closest genetic relatives of humans, use a few dozen calls and a variety of gestures to communicate in the wild. People have taught some chimps to communicate using American Sign Language and picture-based languages, and some have developed vocabularies of a few hundred words. But an unabridged English dictionary might contain more than half-a-million vocabulary entries. Chimpanzees have also not clearly demonstrated the ability to use grammar, which is crucial for communicating complex thoughts.

In addition, the human vocal tract, unlike that of chimpanzees and other animals, can create and articulate a wide enough variety of sounds to create millions of distinct words. In fact, each human language uses only a fraction of the sounds humans can make. The human brain also contains areas dedicated to the production and interpretation of speech, which other animals lack. Thus, humans are predisposed in many ways to use symbolic communication.

## B. Culture Is Learned

People are not born with culture; they have to learn it. For instance, people must learn to speak and understand a language and to abide by the rules of a society. In many societies, all people must learn to produce and prepare food and to construct shelters. In other societies, people must learn a skill to earn money, which they then use to provide for themselves. In all human societies, children learn culture from adults. Anthropologists call this process *enculturation*, or cultural transmission.

Enculturation is a long process. Just learning the intricacies of a human language, a major part of enculturation, takes many years. Families commonly protect and enculturate children in the households of their birth for 15 years or more. Only at this point can children leave and establish their own households. People also continue to learn throughout their lifetimes. Thus, most societies respect their elders, who have learned for an entire lifetime.

Humans are not alone in their ability to learn behaviors, only in the amount and complexity of what they can learn. For example, members of a group of chimpanzees may learn to use a unique source of food or to fashion some simple tools, behaviors that might distinguish them from other chimpanzee groups. But these unique ways of life are minor in comparison to the rich cultures that distinguish different human societies. Lacking speech, chimps are very limited in what they can learn, communicate to others, and pass on from generation to generation.

### C. Culture Is Shared

People living together in a society share culture. For example, almost all people living in the United States share the English language, dress in similar styles, eat many of the same foods, and celebrate many of the same holidays.

All the people of a society collectively create and maintain culture. Societies preserve culture for much longer than the life of any one person. They preserve it in the form of knowledge, such as scientific discoveries; objects, such as works of art; and traditions, such as the observance of holidays.

#### C.1. Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

Self-identity usually depends on culture to such a great extent that immersion in a very different culture—with which a person does not share common ways of life or beliefs—can cause a feeling of confusion and disorientation. Anthropologists refer to this phenomenon as culture shock. In *multicultural societies*—societies such as the United States into which people come from a diversity of cultures—unshared forms of culture can also lead to tension.

Members of a society who share culture often also share some feelings of *ethnocentrism*, the notion that one's culture is more sensible than or superior to that of other societies. Ethnocentrism contributes to the integrity of culture because it affirms people's shared beliefs and values in the face of other, often contradictory, beliefs and values held by people of other cultural backgrounds. At its worst, ethnocentrism has led people to commit *ethnocide*, the destruction of cultures, and genocide, the destruction of entire populations. This happened, for example, to Jews living in Nazi Germany in the 1940s (*see* Holocaust; National Socialism).

Anthropologists, knowing the power of ethnocentrism, advocate cross-cultural understanding through a concept known as *cultural relativism*. Someone observing cultural relativism tries to respect all cultures equally. Although only someone living within a group that shares culture can fully understand that culture, cultural relativists believe that outsiders can learn to respect beliefs and practices that they do not share.

However, most anthropologists believe that cultural relativism has its limits. In theory, an extreme relativist would uncritically accept the practices of all cultures, even if those practices harm people. For example, anthropologists have debated over whether they should accept or approve of the practice of female circumcision, performed in many African societies. Female circumcision involves removing part or all of a woman's labia and clitoris and is usually performed on girls entering adolescence. This practice is painful, and often harmful, to the

women of societies that perform it, but many of those societies claim that the practice is important and deeply rooted in their culture.

## C.2. Sharing Culture Across Societies

Since no human society exists in complete isolation, different societies also exchange and share culture. In fact, all societies have some interactions with others, both out of curiosity and because even highly self-sufficient societies sometimes need assistance from their neighbors. Today, for instance, many people around the world use similar kinds of technology, such as cars, telephones, and televisions. Commercial trade and communication technologies, such as computer networks, have created a form of global culture. Therefore, it has become increasingly difficult to find culture that is shared within only a single society.

Cultural exchange can provide many benefits for all societies. Different societies can exchange ideas, people, manufactured goods, and natural resources. Such exchanges can also have drawbacks, however. Often the introduction of aspects of another society's culture can disrupt the cohesive life of a people. For example, the introduction of consumerism into many small societies has led to what anthropologists refer to as *cargo cults*. In cargo cults, people focus much of their religious energy and time on trying to magically acquire commercial goods.

Cross-cultural exchange often results in what anthropologists call acculturation, when the members of one culture adopt features of another. This has happened, for example, when indigenous peoples in the western hemisphere adopted the language and many of the customs of Spain, which colonized South and Central America beginning in the 1500s.

## C.3. Subcultures

Some groups of people share a distinct set of cultural traits within a larger society. Such groups are often referred to as subcultures. For instance, the members of a subculture may share a distinct language or dialect (variation based on the dominant language), unique rituals, and a particular style of dress. In the United States and Canada, many strongly integrated religious groups, such as rural Mennonite communities, have the characteristics of subcultures.

## D. Culture is Adaptive

Culture helps human societies survive in changing natural environments. For example, the end of the last Ice Age, beginning about 15,000 years ago, posed an enormous challenge to which humans had to adapt. Before this time, large portions of the northern hemisphere were covered in great sheets of ice that contained much of the earth's water. In North America, large game animals that roamed the vast tundra provided people with food and materials for clothing and simple shelters. When the earth warmed, large Ice Age game animals disappeared, and many land areas were submerged by rising sea levels from melting ice. But people survived. They developed new technologies and learned how to subsist on new plant and animal species. Eventually some people settled into villages of permanent, durable houses and farms.

Cultural adaptation has made humans one of the most successful species on the planet. Through history, major developments in technology, medicine, and nutrition have allowed people to reproduce and survive in ever-increasing numbers. The global population has risen from 8 million during the Ice Age to almost 6 billion today (*see Population: World Population Growth and Distribution*).

However, the successes of culture can also create problems in the long run. Over the last 200 years, people have begun to use large quantities of natural resources and energy and to produce a great amount of material and chemical wastes. The global population now consumes some crucial natural resources—such as petroleum, timber, and mineral ores—faster than nature can produce them. Many scientists believe that in the process of burning fuels and producing wastes, people may be altering the global climate in unpredictable and possibly harmful ways (*see Global Warming*). Thus, the adaptive success of the present-day global culture of production and commerce may be temporary.

Culture must benefit people, at least in the short term, in order for it to be passed on to new generations. But it can clearly also harm some people. The number of people living in severe poverty near the end of the 20th century was larger than the entire population of the world in AD 1500.

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