***What is Culture?***

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| photo of Edward. B. Tylor |
| Edward B. Tylor   (1832-1917) |

The word culture [click this icon to hear the preceding term pronounced](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/sounds/culture.mp3)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.

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](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/glossary.htm#archaeology) 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.

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| graphic representation of sub-cultures within a culture |
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The second layer of culture that may be part of your identity is a **subculture** [click this icon to hear the preceding term pronounced](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/sounds/sub-culture.mp3).  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.

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| photo of four casually dressed Cuban American women |  | 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:

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| 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 [click this icon to hear the preceding term pronounced](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/sounds/society.mp3)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?**

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|  | photo of an orangutan mother with a baby on her back |  | **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. |

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](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/glossary.htm#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.

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| ***Practice Quiz for What is Culture?*** |
| *No. of Questions=* ***7*** |
| **INSTRUCTIONS:** To answer a question, click the button in front of your choice. A response will appear in the window below the question to let you know if you are correct. Be sure to read the feedback. It is designed to help you learn the material. You can also learn by reading the feedback for incorrect answers. |

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| ***1.*** | ***Human culture is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ .*** | |  |
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|  | **a)** | partly inherited genetically |  |
|  | **b)** | entirely learned |  |
|  | **c)** | limited to relatively rich societies with sophisticated technologies |  |
|  | **d)** | all of the above |  |
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| ***2.*** | ***Which of the following statements is true of culture?*** | |  |
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|  | **a)** | Languages are cultures. |  |
|  | **b)** | Archaeologists dig up culture in their excavations. |  |
|  | **c)** | Culture is a powerful human tool for survival. |  |
|  | **d)** | all of the above |  |
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| ***3.*** | ***Who first defined culture as "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?"*** | |  |
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|  | **a)** | E. B. Tylor |  |
|  | **b)** | the author of this tutorial |  |
|  | **c)** | Tylor Edwards |  |
|  | **d)** | none of the above |  |
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| ***4.*** | ***A \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is  a regional, social, or ethnic group that is distinguishable from other groups in a society by the fact that its members share a common identity, food tradition, dialect or language, and other cultural traits that come from their common ancestral background and experience.*** | |  |
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|  | **a)** | culture |  |
|  | **b)** | subculture |  |
|  | **c)** | multi-ethnic society |  |
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| ***5.*** | ***Which of the following things would be cultural universals? (Think in term of the way "cultural universal" is used in this tutorial.)*** | |  |
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|  | **a)** | the language that you speak |  |
|  | **b)** | the kinds of clothes that you wear |  |
|  | **c)** | the specific knowledge that you acquired in school |  |
|  | **d)** | none of the above |  |
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| ***6.*** | ***Culture is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ .*** | |  |
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|  | **a)** | the same thing as society |  |
|  | **b)** | limited to humans |  |
|  | **c)** | possessed only by males |  |
|  | **d)** | none of the above |  |
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| ***7.*** | ***Societies are \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ .*** | |  |
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|  | **a)** | groups of interacting organisms |  |
|  | **b)** | only found among humans |  |
|  | **c)** | created only by technologically sophisticated peoples such as those in the industrialized nations of the world |  |
|  | **d)** | none of the above |  |
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***Characteristics of Culture***

In order to better understand culture, it is useful to closely examine its characteristics and their ramifications.  In this section of the tutorial, you will learn about the specific advantages that culture gives our species.  You will also learn about culture's limitations and shortcomings.

**Culture Is An Adaptive Mechanism**

The first humans evolved in tropical and subtropical regions of Africa about 2.5 million years ago.  Since then, we have successfully occupied all of the major geographic regions of the world, but our bodies have remained essentially those of warm climate animals.  We cannot survive outside of the warmer regions of our planet without our cultural knowledge and technology.  What made it possible for our ancestors to begin living in temperate and ultimately subarctic regions of the northern hemisphere after half a million years ago was the invention of efficient hunting skills, fire use, and, ultimately, clothing, warm housing, agriculture, and commerce.  Culture has been a highly successful [adaptive mechanism](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/glossary.htm#adaptive_mechanism) for our species.  It has given us a major selective advantage in the competition for survival with other life forms.  Culture has allowed the global human population to grow from less than 10 million people shortly after the end of the last ice age to more than 6.5 billion people today, a mere 10,000 years later.  Culture has made us the most dangerous and the most destructive large animal on our planet.  It is ironic that despite the power that culture has given us, we are totally dependent on it for survival.  We need our cultural skills to stay alive.

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| map of the world showing the expansion of humanity out of Africa into the the rest of the world as a result of new cultural technology |
| Expanding human geographic range into new environmental zones  made possible by the evolution of culture  (The ranges during later  time periods include those of earlier periods) |

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| photo of a woman and a man wearing heavy, will insulated clothing to protect them in a sub-freezing environment |
| Successful cultural technology for adapting to very cold winter environments |

Over the last several hundred thousand years, we have developed new survival related cultural skills and  technologies at a faster rate than natural selection could alter our bodies to adapt to the environmental challenges that confronted us.  The fact that cultural evolution can occur faster than biological evolution has significantly modified the effect of natural selection on humans.  One consequence of this has been that we have not developed thick fat layers and dense fur coats like polar bears in the cold regions because our culture provided the necessary warmth during winter times.

**Culture is learned**

Human infants come into the world with basic drives such as hunger and thirst, but they do not possess instinctive patterns of behavior to satisfy them.  Likewise, they are without any cultural knowledge.  However, they are genetically predisposed to rapidly learn language and other cultural traits.  New- born humans are amazing learning machines.  Any normal baby can be placed into any family on earth and grow up to learn their culture and accept it as his or her own.  Since **culture is non-instinctive**, we are not genetically programmed to learn a particular one.

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|  | photo of a woman showing her young daughter and son how to use electric tooth brushes |
| North American children informally learning the culture of their parents |
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Every human generation potentially can discover new things and invent better technologies.  The new cultural skills and knowledge are added onto what was learned in previous generations.  As a result, **culture is cumulative**.  Due to this cumulative effect, most high school students today are now familiar with mathematical insights and solutions that ancient Greeks such as Archimedes and Pythagoras struggled their lives to discover.

Cultural evolution is due to the cumulative effect of culture.  We now understand that the time between major cultural inventions has become steadily shorter, especially since the invention of agriculture 8,000-10,000 years ago.  The progressively larger human population after that time was very likely both a consequence and a cause of accelerating culture growth.  The more people there are, the more likely new ideas and information will accumulate.  If those ideas result in a larger, more secure food supplies, the population will inevitably grow.  In a sense, culture has been the human solution to surviving changing environments, but it has continuously compounded the problem by making it possible for more humans to stay alive.  In other words, human cultural evolution can be seen as solving a problem that causes the same problem again and again.  The ultimate cost of success of cultural technology has been a need to produce more and more food for more and more people.

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| **Parallel Growth of the Human Population and Cultural Technology** |
| graph of the human population size globally and the amount of cultural technology for survival over the last 2,000,000 years--there was very little population growth or signiificant cultural development until towards the end of the last ice age; after that time, there was a rapid explosion of both population and culture |

The invention of agriculture made it possible for our ancestors to have a more controllable and, subsequently, dependable food supply.  It also resulted in settling down in permanent communities.  This in turn set the stage for further developments in technology and political organization.  The inevitable result was more intensive agriculture, new kinds of social and political systems dominated by emerging elite classes, the first cities, and ultimately the industrial and information revolutions of modern times.  City life brought with it the unexpected consequence of increased rates of contagious diseases.  Large, dense populations of people make it much easier for viruses, bacteria, and other disease causing microorganisms to spread from host to host.  As a result, most cities in the past were periodically devastated by epidemics.

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| photo of the ancient Temple of Luxor at Thebes on the Nile in Upper Egypt |  | Photo of the New York City skyline with its densely packed tall buildings |
| Agriculture based ancient city (Thebes, Egypt) | Modern post-industrial city (New York) |

The rate of cultural evolution for many human societies during the last two centuries has been unprecedented.  Today, major new technologies are invented every few years rather than once or twice a century or even less often, as was the case in the past.   Likewise, there has been an astounding increase in the global human population.  It is worth reflecting on the fact that there are people alive today who were born before cell phones, computers, televisions, radios, antibiotics, and even airplanes.  These now elderly individuals have seen the human population double several times.  The world that was familiar to them in their childhood is no longer here.  It is as if they have moved to a new alien culture and society.  Not surprisingly, they often have difficulty in accepting and adjusting to the change.  The psychological distress and confusion that accompanies this has been referred to as [future shock](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/glossary.htm#future_shock).

**Cultures Change**

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| Photo of a hand holding a CD disk |
| Tool of modern technology |
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All cultural knowledge does not perpetually accumulate.  At the same time that new cultural traits are added, some old ones are lost because they are no longer useful.  For example, most city dwellers today do not have or need the skills required for survival in a wilderness.  Most would very likely starve to death because they do not know how to acquire wild foods and survive the extremes of weather outdoors.  What is more important in modern urban life are such things as the ability to drive a car, use a computer, and understand how to obtain food in a supermarket or restaurant.

The regular addition and subtraction of cultural traits results in culture change.  **All cultures change over time**--none is static.  However, the rate of change and the aspects of culture that change varies from society to society.  For instance, people in Germany today generally seem eager to adopt new words from other languages, especially from American English, while many French people are resistant to it because of the threat of "corrupting" their own language.  However, the French are just as eager as the Germans to adopt new technology.

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| photo of a uniformed policewoman and two policemen |
| North American woman in a job that formerly would not have been open to women |

Change can occur as a result of both invention within a society as well as the [diffusion](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/glossary.htm#diffusion) [click this icon to hear the preceding term pronounced](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/sounds/diffusion.mp3)of cultural traits from one society to another.  Predicting whether a society will adopt new cultural traits or abandon others is complicated by the fact that **the various aspects of a culture are closely interwoven into a complex pattern**.  Changing one trait will have an impact on other traits because they are functionally interconnected.  As a result, there commonly is a resistance to major changes.  For example, many men in North America and Europe resisted the increase in economic and political opportunities for women over the last century because of the far ranging consequences.  It inevitably changed the nature of marriage, the family, and the lives of all men.  It also significantly altered the workplace as well as the legal system and the decisions made by governments.

**People Usually are not Aware of Their Culture**

The way that we interact and do things in our everyday lives seems "natural" to us.  We are unaware of our culture because we are so close to it and know it so well.  For most people, it is as if their learned behavior was biologically inherited.  It is usually only when they come into contact with people from another culture that they become aware that their patterns of behavior are not universal.

The common response in all societies to other cultures is to judge them in terms of the values and customs of their own familiar culture.  This is **ethnocentrism** [click this icon to hear the preceding term pronounced](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/sounds/ethnocentrism.mp3).  Being fond of your own way of life and condescending or even hostile toward other cultures is normal for all people.  Alien culture traits are often viewed as being not just different but inferior, less sensible, and even "unnatural."  For example, European cultures strongly condemn other societies that practice [polygamy](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/glossary.htm#polygamy) and the eating of dogs--behavior that Europeans generally consider to be immoral and offensive.  Likewise, many people in conservative Muslim societies, such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, consider European women highly immodest and immoral for going out in public without being chaperoned by a male relative and without their bodies covered from head to toe, so as to prevent men from looking at them.  Ethnocentrism is not characteristic only of complex modern societies.  People in small, relatively isolated societies are also ethnocentric in their views about outsiders.

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| photo of a woman in the snow hugging her big dog |  | Our ethnocentrism causes us to be shocked and even disgusted at attitudes about other animals in different cultures.  This North American woman  considers her dog to be a close friend and essentially a member of her own family.  In the Muslim world, dogs are generally considered to be dirty animals that are likely to be kicked if they get in the way.  In some areas of Southeast Asia, dogs have multiple functions, including being a source of food for people. |

Our ethnocentrism can prevent us from understanding and appreciating another culture.  When anthropologists study other societies, they need to suspend their own ethnocentric judgments and adopt a **cultural relativity approach**.  That is, they try to learn about and interpret the various aspects of the culture they are studying in reference to that culture rather than to the anthropologist's own culture.  This provides an understanding of how such practices as polygamy can function and even support other cultural traditions.  Without taking a cultural relativity approach, it would otherwise be difficult, for example, to comprehend why women among the Masai [click this icon to hear the preceding term pronounced](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/sounds/Masai.mp3)cattle herding people of Kenya might prefer to be one of several co-wives rather than have a [monogamous](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/glossary.htm#monogamy) [click this icon to hear the preceding term pronounced](https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/sounds/monogamous.mp3)marriage.

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| map of Africa showing the location of the Masai in Kenya, East Africa |  | photo of two Masai women in traditional clothes  Masai women |

Taking a cultural relativity approach is not only useful for anthropologists.  It is a very useful tool for diplomats, businessmen, doctors, and any one else who needs to interact with people from other societies and even other subcultures within their own society.  However, it can be emotionally difficult and uncomfortable at first to suspend one's own cultural values in these situations.

From an objective perspective, it can be seen that ethnocentrism has both positive and negative values for a society.  The negative potential is obvious.  Ethnocentrism results in prejudices about people from other cultures and the rejection of their "alien ways."  When there is contact with people from other cultures, ethnocentrism can prevent open communication and result in misunderstanding and mistrust.  This would be highly counterproductive for businessmen trying to negotiate a trade deal or even just neighbors trying to get along with each other.  The positive aspect of ethnocentrism has to do with the protection that it can provide for a culture.  By causing a rejection of the foods, customs, and perceptions of people in other cultures, it acts as a conservative force in preserving traditions of one's own culture.  It can help maintain the separation and uniqueness of cultures.

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SOURCE: <https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/quizzes/Culquiz1.htm>

Author: Dennis O’ Neil (2012)