

The Characteristics of Culture

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What is culture? How do cultures develop over time? Why are some cultural groups similar to one another? How does one explain human cultural diversity? And, perhaps most importantly, how do anthropologists define culture. These are just a few of the questions that cultural anthropologists ask, and attempt to answer. Culture is everywhere we look. It includes such things as how people dress, the hairstyles we wear, and how we decorate our bodies. Do you have a tattoo, an ear or some other kind of body piercing? If so, when did you get this body decoration, and why? And why are tattoos and body piercings so much more common among certain groups today than even in the relatively recent past? As anthropologists, we seek to understand how culture is taught and learned by a cultural group, and how culture is passed down from one generation to the next. To accomplish this, it is important to define the basic characteristics of culture, and to see how these characteristics are learned and shared. This process of learning culture is called **enculturation**. In addition, when thinking about this process of enculturation, consider how cultural characteristics are sometimes contested, and how are they maintained over time? Finally, humans also create what are referred to as **mental maps of reality**. This helps us to categorize things, which makes it easier to organize the tremendous quantity of data that we deal with.

When thinking about cultural development, let's look at a key characteristic of American culture. A somewhat unique phenomenon is the issue of gun violence in America. As with any issue, try to think about the issues related to guns and gun violence by "thinking like an anthropologist." No other modern, technologically advanced society is even remotely similar to the U.S. when it comes to the level of gun violence. Why is this the case? How is the United States different from many other societies when it comes to gun ownership and gun rights? Are there gun subcultures? If so, what are some of the key characteristics of these subcultures? Even though political polling indicates that a majority of Americans support more gun regulation and control, the efforts of reformers has been resulted in limited success, especially in some parts of the country. In fact, in recent years, people who support expanding access to guns and the right to carry guns, have been more successful at the state and local level, and to some extent even at the federal level. These gun rights advocates believe in their cause, and point to the 2nd Amendment in support of their rights.

Cultural norms are a culture's basic rules and behaviors. American ownership and use of guns, and American attitudes toward guns, are a key aspect of American culture. But, just what are our **cultural norms** when it comes to the issues of guns and gun violence? As an anthropologist, looking at issues such as gun rights and gun reform, it is important to consider just how complex this issue is. This requires extensive research and study – and a **holistic approach**. In a somewhat related issue, a few years ago a professional quarterback, Colin Kaepernick left the NFL after failing to secure a contract. This happened after he began to kneel during games as a form of protest against police violence. Many Americans saw this as a protest against the flag, and in a sense a protest against what they believe the

flag stands for. The American flag is an important cultural **symbol**. A symbol is anything that represents something else. What does the flag represent for most Americans? What does protesting during the playing of the national anthem, and taking a knee say to many Americans? Does the flag mean the same thing to all Americans? More recently, the issue of police violence once again captured the attention of America following a video showing another black male dying at the hands of the police. Attitudes towards the BLM movement, and toward protestors such as Kapaernick are changing. Are Americans in the process of developing new cultural norms when it comes to this, and other issues? As Americans, we share many ideas, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs. However, Americans also have considerable differences. As an anthropologist, what does this topic tell us about American culture, how it developed, and how it continues to change over time?

Cultures are not static. Attitudes and behaviors related to issues surrounding guns are changing. Cultures naturally change over time, and in the modern era the pace of cultural change may be even more dramatic than in the past. At least in part, this is a result of globalization and the increasing interaction between cultural groups. Although there remain a few relatively isolated cultures, even these remote peoples are undergoing changes as a result of their contact with more technologically advanced societies. Within cultural groups there always exists those who attempt to maintain cultural ideas, beliefs and traditions from one generation to the next. This process is typically led by the older generations, while younger generations are more apt to embrace new ideas and practices. Cultures tend to develop a set of core **values**. As Americans, do we have commonly shared values? If so, what are these values? Some cultures are more static than others. However, cultural norms around the world are undergoing changes as people adapt to new technologies, and new ideas, at an increasingly unprecedented pace.

Just consider the incredible transformation of American culture over the past century. Although many of the changes can be attributed to technological innovations and the impact they have on societies, other changes have more to do with changing attitudes and behaviors. With the development of the internet, enhanced access to knowledge and unfortunately, and unfortunately misinformation, is having an impact. The popularity of social media is also influencing the pace, and nature, of cultural change.



This is a typical American suburb in Kentucky. The growth of suburbia was a defining characteristic of American culture in the post-WWII era.

American culture is unique. Every society has its own distinctive cultural characteristics. This cultural variety is a result of many factors, including the distinctive environments in which societies develop, and the different political, economic and religious institutions that individuals and cultures embrace. Cultures also set limits on the individuals within societies, and help to guide individual and group behavior. It is how we come together and cooperate ensuring our survival, not only as individuals, but as societies.



Gender roles can change over time and according to circumstances. During World War II, women performed roles some of which would otherwise have been considered male jobs.

The modern concept of culture developed in the late 19th century. Sir Edward Taylor 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.” Culture

has also been defined as “A society’s shared and socially transmitted ideas, values, and perceptions- which are used to make sense of experience and generate behavior and which are reflected in behavior.” So, culture encompasses the totality of how we live and what we believe - the entirety of our way of life.

Culture is how we all make sense of what we’re doing. It is how a society organizes itself as a group or groups of people that share a common territory, customs and language. It is how people organize themselves to work together to ensure the survival of the group. What exactly constitutes a culture is complex, and as a result, rarely do people share exactly same perceptions of what their culture is. The differences between men and women are biological, but the sexual roles they adopt are determined by their culture as well. Gender roles are a cultural concept that can vary greatly between cultures. In modern societies it is no longer as much of a necessity to differentiate what are the appropriate gender roles for men and women. This has been, and will continue to be a source of conflict and controversy between those who stress a more traditional role for the sexes, and those who see the effort to maintain such strict adherence to gender specific behaviors as a roadblock in the way of societal progress.

The strict differentiation in sexually determined behaviors is something anthropologists believe developed in new ways with the advent of “civilization.” Interestingly, in the “less-advanced” hunter-gatherer societies, one can often find societies that are much more egalitarian, rather than patriarchal. It is only recently that modern Western societies have begun to accept the concept of equality between the sexes, and many still openly embrace a less than egalitarian outlook. Those who embrace separate “spheres” for men and women, continue to

A generic symbol for gender equality.



base their assumptions on the biological differences between the sexes. This is certainly easier to understand and embrace than a cultural system that does not attempt to define behavior along these lines. Those who reject this more open framework for their society may be fearful of the consequences of the cultural uncertainty that could result.



An Amish couple in rural Ohio.

Within most modern societies one can easily identify many subcultures. One that is familiar to most Americans is that of the Amish. The Amish are like many other groups, people who collectively and publicly identify themselves as distinctive based on what they share with one another, such as a common ancestry, origin, language, and beliefs. The Amish, or as they are known in the Eastern US,

the Pennsylvania Dutch, are a religious minority who have maintained much of their original German cultural heritage, including continuing speak to a distinctive version of the German language. As with other subcultures, they are able to maintain their identity through enforcing separation from the dominant American mainstream culture. This is an example of how a subculture can continue to exist.

As we learn about some of the many cultures and subcultures around the world, it is important to remember that all cultures are to some degree **ethnocentric**. As we think about what is acceptable, or preferable behavior, it is important to think about the concept of **cultural relativism**. What is acceptable in one cultural context may be totally unacceptable within another. Although it is difficult to do, when studying other cultures, it may be useful to one to suspend judgment on their behaviors, or attempt to only judge others within their own cultural concept of what's right or wrong. Despite this, one can also maintain that there are certain things that Western society has decided are basic human rights that no culture has a right to ignore. Some may not agree, but it is okay to criticize some cultural practices, such as female circumcision. However, it is also important to investigate how a practice like this develops, and why and how it is maintained. People mistakenly use term of cultural relativism to say that if something is okay in one cultural context must be okay in others. This is not true, but it does help to try to understand the actions of others within their own cultural context, and avoid judging others by your own cultural standards.

Because of cultural misconceptions, subcultures are often persecuted in varying degrees by the members of the dominant cultural group. A lack of tolerance toward minorities, or the members of subcultures is unfortunately one of the legacies of modern societies. Sometimes this can be a result of religious differences, such as the persecution of Jews by Christians. At other times it can result for ethnic, language or political differences between groups. Having negative attitudes toward individuals,

or groups, that are somehow different from the cultural norm, are an example of **ethnocentrism** at work. Ethnocentric attitudes can sometimes have disastrous consequences.

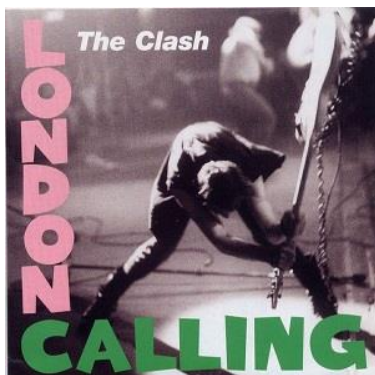


Kristallnacht, or the night of broken glass serves as an example of extreme persecution of one culture by another. German Nazis destroyed Jewish businesses in the 1930s before the outbreak of WWII.

People have a tendency to believe that the way their group does things, is the norm, and is preferred. Therefore, people who look, think, or act differently, or outside the norm are in some manner unacceptable. In the

modern era, especially in countries like the United States, this is somewhat problematic. America is a pluralistic society. In fact, there are very few societies that do not include numerous ethnic, religious or cultural sub-groups. Intolerance and persecution of sub-groups is still common around the world. Through study, understanding and cooperation could replace intolerance. So, in response to the tendency toward ethnocentrism, Anthropologists developed the research approach known as **cultural relativism**. This approach requires the researcher to work on understanding the beliefs and practices of a group within their own cultural reality. Rather than discount a particular belief just because it is different, an anthropologist tries to understand why a particular belief or practice developed, and what purpose it serves for the group.

Maintaining a subculture within a dominant cultural tradition is not easy. For example, many Native American subcultures have disappeared, and the effort of others to maintain their separate identity is a difficult struggle. Often, physical separation can enhance the ability of a group to survive, but it is not always enough. It is also common for members of the dominant culture to have misperceptions, or a general lack of understanding of the subcultures that exist within their midst. For example, consider the case of an architect who is trying to design appropriate housing for an ethnic or tribal group. It may be necessary to learn about the cultural attitudes of this people before an architect could successfully design living quarters that would fulfill not only all of their physical needs, but their cultural requirements as well.



Punk rockers are one of many musical subcultures that have developed in the Western world.

This approach is beneficial to anthropologists as they study subcultures around the world, and within the United States. Let's consider some other examples of subcultures in the US. For instance, young people often develop subcultures around certain styles of music, and wear distinctive clothing as a means of group identification. Punk rockers, Grunge or Goth, as well as Hip-hop are all musical styles that arose in conjunction with a sub-culture. Why do these groups dress the way they do, listen to a particular style of music, and develop and maintain certain attitudes and behaviors? Another distinctive sub-culture that exists in America, is commonly known as Survivalists. These groups are convinced that the world as we know it is about to come to a climatic end. In an uncertain and rapidly changing world, the development of survivalist groups should not be a surprise. Nudist's colonies and hippie communes provide further examples of sub-cultures. Religious belief systems are also an important factor in the development and maintenance of a distinctive sub-cultures. Once again, the Amish certainly provide an example of this phenomenon.



A survivalist fallout shelter built in the 1950s.

Every culture has individuals who behave oddly or differently as compared to the majority of the population. But, especially in pluralistic societies like the US, there are many different conceptions of what constitutes odd behavior. Most Americans base their conception of gender roles on their cultural traditions. But, there are other

cultural traditions that have a much different, (although not incorrect) conception of gender appropriate roles and behaviors. For example, some Native American societies embrace as many as four different gender identities. Acceptance of more than two genders is also common in many other cultures around the world.

Again, embracing varying ideas and practices related to gender identity is something that individuals and groups do through the process that is called **enculturation**. This includes many of the everyday behaviors we embrace, including such things as what time of day do we eat, how we behave when we eat, and of course, what foods we eat. The mealtime may include many rituals. Although perhaps not as common as it once was, waiting for everyone to be seated and praying before beginning to eat, is but one example of the many different rituals that help people identify as a cultural group.

In addition to studying human behavior, Anthropologists also try to enhance their understanding by studying the behavior of other animals. Bees and ants are social insects, but their cooperative behavior

is chemically induced, rather than learned. Primates however, our genetic cousins, also have their own distinctive culturally learned behaviors. Learning to fish for termites is something some chimpanzees have accomplished. Other primates have learned to wash their food, while still others have adopted very complex cooperative hunting activities. There is perhaps, less of a gap between humans and animals than some would prefer to believe.



A Chimpanzee using a stick to extract termites from a mound.

Human behavior is also mediated by symbols, but the meanings of our symbols can be arbitrary. What a symbol means to one person may not mean same thing to another. The most important symbolic aspect of our culture is our language. Languages are the primary method people utilize to transmit culture from one person to another, and from one generation to the next.

Human cultures also have distinctive social structures, the concerns and rules governing the relationships between the members of a society. In addition, each culture has an infrastructure, or the economic foundations upon which it exists. A common worldview or ideology also serves to hold societies together. This worldview, or superstructure includes religious beliefs, national or ethnic identity, ideas, beliefs and attitudes a group might share. Although continuity is an important aspect of

any society, cultures also need the ability to adjust to changing circumstances. Change can be internally driven, but often comes from outside sources. If a culture is too rigid, it may fall apart.

In studying how cultures develop, are maintained, and change, Anthropologists use the following methods: observation, watching, questioning, listening and analyzing. Anthropologists also attempt to uncover universal laws of behavior. As we study different cultures and examine how they grow and develop, and change over time, we should keep in mind that how anthropologists define culture has changed from the early days of the growth of the discipline. Anthropologists such as Edward Bennett Tylor, James



A 19th century village in Papua New Guinea.

Frazer, and Henry Morgan, contributed

research in the 19th century. Many anthropologists embraced the idea of **unilineal cultural evolution**.

This theory of cultural evolution embraced the belief that Western cultures were more civilized than other cultures around the world. In the 20th century, Franz Boaz and Bronislaw Malinowski were influential in transforming how anthropologists viewed the issue of cultural development. The notion of Western cultural superiority as a result of natural cultural evolution is overwhelmingly rejected by anthropologists today. Boaz and Malinowski developed an approach to cultural development called **historical particularism**, a belief that cultural development is not a uniform process, and that how cultures arise is a result of many different factors. British anthropologists also developed a research method known as **structural functionalism**, a way analyzing societies and controlling experiments. More recently, an **interpretivist approach** for the study of human cultures has developed. This method encourages researchers to examine cultural symbols. Clifford Geertz, an important individual in the development of the interpretivist approach, also argues that anthropologists need to explore the **thick description**, to uncover the many layers of meaning that are sometimes hidden within cultural activities. A recent challenge of the assumptions of anthropologists has come from the work of the feminist anthropologist, Eleanor Burke Leacock, who critically examined anthropological writings from a woman's perspective.

Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) is another key resource that an anthropologist may use to facilitate comparative research of societies. Scientists have accumulated a data bank that classifies more than 700 cultural characteristics from 400 societies. Although the data allows anthropologists to determine correlations between cultural features, this data does not imply a direct cause and effect relationship.

Another important tool enhancing our comprehension of cultures is the field of Ethno history, which can be a valuable asset in understanding cultural change over time.

In the course of evolution, humans faced the challenge of adapting to the environment. The development of culture allowed humans to move into a wide range of natural environments. Although modern societies have proven to be incredibly successful at maximizing the exploitation of their environment, in more recent times some have begun to question whether modern societies are sustainable for a longer period of time. How a society adapts in the short term may not be sustainable. There are many examples of how societies have grown and prospered, but ultimately failed. For example, Mayan civilization may have collapsed because their natural environment changed, and fresh water sources for their agriculture became scarce.



**The ruins of the
Mayan city of
Palenque**

Cultures have always changed, but the pace of change today is unprecedented. This can contribute to an increase in economic, political and social conflict, as societies attempt to adjust to new realities. The most rapid change of

the past two centuries has been in the West, but today every culture around the globe is now subject to rapid change. As an example consider that a couple decades ago cell phones did not exist. Today, there are billions of cell phones in use. Only slightly more than 100 years ago, American culture was going through an era of conservative social mores, known as the Victorian Era. This was followed by the more revealing clothing styles of the flapper era, a reflection of cultural change in early 20th century America. The more sexually revealing clothing of today would have been scandalous even just a few decades ago.

**Victorian Era fashion**

The rapidly changing culture of the West, and the influence of Western cultural ideas, attitudes, behaviors and technology, has also contributed to a

growing conflict with some more culturally conservative groups. For example, many Muslims perceive the sexual attitudes and behaviors of the West as immoral, and as a threat to their cultural norms. Other cultures, although few in numbers, such as the hunter-gatherer societies and the pastoral nomads in Africa and Asia, have also not been fully integrated into the modern world. These societies face many challenges as they adjust to contact with more powerful, and more technologically advanced cultures.

Societies are a union of individuals, each with their own needs and interests. For a society to survive, it must achieve a balance between the interests of the individual and the interests of the group. For example, how a society deals with the issue of sexual relationships is very important to that society's long-term stability. In general, a society will reward those who conform and punish those who rebel. An important feature of every culture is how that culture determines who gets to have sex, who has sex with whom, and how often individuals get to have sex. There are a wide range of alternatives reflecting how this works among the many cultures in the world. Some have a strict dictate that prohibits any sex before marriage, while there are other cultures that allow almost everyone to have sex with everyone else. As anthropologists examine the issue of human sexuality as an aspect of cultural development, they also consider who holds and wields power within a society. How does power reflect status, privilege and resource distribution? Anthropologist Antonio Gramsci emphasized two key features of power, **material power** and **hegemony**.

In examining how cultures develop, anthropologists also consider the nature vs nurture debate. Think about what kind of a person you are. What are your interests, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors? Are these things more a reflection of biology, or culture, or a unique mixture of both for all individuals?

Finally, when considering the viability of a culture, it may be helpful to look at such things as societies' malnutrition rates, levels of violence, crime and delinquency statistics, suicides, levels of emotional disorders, and environmental degradation. In an era of globalization, and rapid technological and cultural transformation, cultures around the world are beset with many challenges in their struggle to survive.

The burqa is a full body covering worn by some Muslim women

