

Culture and Society

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the related topics of culture and society, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Society and Culture
2. Non-Material and Material Culture
3. Culture Shock

1. SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Society and culture are two closely related ideas--in fact, almost inseparable. **Society** is a group of people who live in a delineated space, such as a nation with shared common symbols, languages, and beliefs.

Culture comes with society--it helps to 'glue' everyone together. Culture is learned sets of behaviors and ideas that are acquired by members of society.

We learn culture and how to be a member of society as we're growing up, through socialization, or inculturation, which is the term anthropologists use for growing up and learning how to be an adult member of society.

When you are born, you are surprisingly devoid of survival instincts. Humans don't have them like animals do--these pre-programmed instincts that teach you how to survive, get food, and reproduce. Your instincts are much more fluid, and culture steps in and shows you how to do all of these things.

You don't get culture automatically transmitted to you. You learn it from being in society, from observing other people, and from being in groups. It's important to recognize the social aspects of this process. Without anybody to teach you these learned behaviors and culture, you're not 'civilized.'

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Genie was a girl who was kept in captivity by her parents in a dark room her entire life, before being rescued at the age of 13 by social services in California. When they found her, Genie could barely walk or talk. She was literally a vessel devoid of any kind of sentiment that makes you human. She was what is known as a feral, or wild, child.

Without learned cultural transmission, you would be a human in your natural state, like Genie. In that state, you're not imbued with any culture that makes you civilized.

**Society**

A group of people who live in a delineated space such as a nation and share common symbols, language, and culture.

Culture

Learned sets of behaviors and ideas that are acquired by members of society.

2. NON-MATERIAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE

There are two aspects of culture: non-material culture and material culture.

Non-material culture comprises ideas, beliefs, thoughts, and spoken languages. It represents things that are non-tangible, things that aren't objects.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Your economic ideas, political ideas, religious beliefs, day-to-day cultural thoughts and worldviews, and how you look at the world are all examples of non-material culture.

Material culture are buildings, tools, or artifacts--what you leave behind, the objects that archaeologists would find if they were to excavate your society.

IN CONTEXT

How can you distinguish between non-material and material culture? Think about the idea of an artifact.

Suppose something catastrophic happens to American society and 500 years from now, archaeologists excavate one of our cities. Among the things left behind, they uncover some pots and pans. They find old collapsed houses filled with objects. These are considered material culture.

The archaeologists use that material culture, those objects that they find, to infer things about our ideas, what we did with the items, what we thought of them, what they meant in our society, etc. From there, they might get to our beliefs, our language, possibly even read it. These are all elements of non-material culture.

**BIG IDEA**

Can you see how material culture and non-material culture are related? You have objects, and you have ideas about the objects.

IN CONTEXT

One concept that relates non-material and material culture is technology. **Technology** is simply any useful tool or skill. Often, when you hear the term technology, you commonly think of something high-tech, like computers, but that's not always the case.

Technology has a historical component. It evolves, as do our notions of technology. At one point in time, a hammer and nail was a revolutionary technology. It was a useful tool or skill that increased the standard of living, but now, it's so mundane and everyday that we hardly think of a hammer and nail as technology. When you look at it broadly like this, though, technology has a historical element.



TERMS TO KNOW

Non-Material Culture

The elements of culture that are intangible; i.e. ideas, languages, customs, and beliefs.

Material Culture

The physical "artifacts" of our culture like our buildings, highways, food production systems, household objects, and technologies.

Technology

Any useful tool or skill. Technology is more than just "high tech" computers and electronics, which are things that we commonly think of today when we hear the term. A simple hammer and nail was at one point a revolutionary technology. Looking at technology as any useful tool or skill introduces a historical component to the concept.

3. CULTURE SHOCK

You're born into a system of non-material culture and material culture. You learn how to exist in it and how to use it. You make it your own as you grow up in society--in fact, you naturalize it. However, if you step outside of it, you can experience **culture shock**.

Culture shock is adjusting to a new culture. It takes time because it challenges your familiar understandings and causes you to rethink your own cultural practices.



THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever experienced culture shock when you go to a foreign country?

If the system is radically different there from what you're used to--and it can be, depending on how far away in terms of culture the different society is--you might have to negotiate a new meaning system and culture. This 'shocks' you because it's different from your own and causes you to reflect on your own cultural practices as well.



TERM TO KNOW

Culture Shock

Feeling confused, threatened, disoriented, or even angered by contact with an unfamiliar culture.



SUMMARY

Today you explored an introduction to **society and culture**, highlighting the differences between **non-material culture** and **material culture**, as well as learning about **culture shock**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Culture

Learned sets of behaviors and ideas that are acquired by members of a society.

Culture Shock

Feeling confused, threatened, disoriented, or even angered by contact with an unfamiliar culture.

Material Culture

The physical "artifacts" of our culture like our buildings, highways, food production systems, household objects, and technologies.

Non-Material Culture

The elements of culture that are intangible; i.e. ideas, languages, customs, and beliefs.

Society

A group of people who live in a delineated space such as a nation and share common symbols, language, and culture.

Technology

Any useful tool or skill. Technology is more than just "high tech" computers and electronics, which are things that we commonly think of today when we hear the term. A simple hammer and nail was at one point a revolutionary technology. Looking at technology as any useful tool or skill introduces a historical component to the concept.