

Definitions and Models of Culture

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the various definitions and models of culture, and how they relate to conflict. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Cultural Norms and Expression
2. Cultural Differences and Conflict
3. Cultural Evolution

1. Cultural Norms and Expression

As human beings, we depend on **culture** to know how to behave. We organize ourselves into social groups based on common:

- Languages (both verbal and nonverbal)
- Traditions
- Ways of seeing the world

Thus, culture becomes like an instruction manual for us. Unlike animals, we don't rely on instinct to figure out what to do; we're not born with these instincts.

Instead, we need to learn the proper ways of behaving from our family members, people in our communities, and people within our own culture.

This is how we develop cultural **norms**, or the way we perceive the world, and the way we behave based on what we think is right, true, and proper.

We can therefore see culture expressed in many ways.

IN CONTEXT

Food is a very popular way of expressing culture. You don't have to go far to see different kinds of food preferences, even here within the United States. You can have Mexican food, Italian food, Chinese food, etc., depending on your preferences. Each culture has a food preference; some like spicy foods, and some like food that's a little bit more bland.

You can also see how culture is expressed through music. There is Latin music, Asian music,

European classical music, the Indian sitar. All very different expressions, but they each say something about the culture.

The same is true with art. When you go to an art museum, you can walk through the different rooms to see African art, Asian art, European art. You'll notice how different the art is, and how different the expressions of the culture are.

So we see expressions of culture around us all the time, and another interesting way we see this is through proverbs. All cultures have proverbs, and they actually do reflect something about the culture.

IN CONTEXT

This is a Native American proverb from the Arapaho: "Take only what you need and leave the land as you found it." This reflects a cultural view that the land is sacred.

Many Japanese proverbs are about morals, such as, "An evil deed remains with the evil doer."

Here in the United States, you may have heard proverbs such as, "The early bird gets the worm," or, "A stitch in time saves nine." These really reflect an industrious work ethic; you have to get going if you're going to be successful.



TERMS TO KNOW

Culture

A form of human social organization in which people identify themselves as members of a group sharing symbol systems, norms, traditions, and viewpoints towards the world.

Norms

The variety of behaviors and perceptions considered "right", "true" or "proper" by a culture.

2. Cultural Differences and Conflict

When we look at all of these elements, we can see that there are **cultural differences**. Some of them might seem a little trivial, like food preference, but they can also be more fundamental.

IN CONTEXT

One of these differences is language. Some cultures are going to be more demonstrative in the way they speak verbally, perhaps in tone of voice or volume level. This is also true with non-verbal communication, such as eye contact. In American culture, making direct eye contact with people is considered a sign of being respectful and present. In some cultures, it's a sign of disrespect to make direct eye contact.

Therefore, you can see how there could be some cultural misunderstandings that might lead to miscommunication just based on those differences in verbal and nonverbal ways of communicating. In some

cases, this might be trivial; in some cases, it may not be.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** This can also happen with dress. We're pretty casual here in the U.S. If we go to some other countries and dress in a more casual way that may be appropriate here, this could be considered very inappropriate and disrespectful in certain contexts.

Some of these differences are more fundamental, such as differences related to family or traditions.

IN CONTEXT

Family differences could be in child rearing practices, age, or gender. There are cultures that really revere their ancestors and consider the elderly to be the wise keepers of what the culture needs. They will consult the older people in the culture for advice. In Mexico specifically, they celebrate a holiday known as Day of the Dead, which honors ancestors and those who have come before.

Conversely, in the United States, we've become a more youth-dominated culture. You can see this in our popular culture; the ads in newspapers and magazines put an emphasis on looking younger. Youth is venerated here, while age is more respected in other cultures.

This extends to the different traditions surrounding how people care for family.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** In some cultures, you would always care for the elderly at home. The idea of putting an older relative in a nursing home or some other kind of institution would be considered culturally wrong.

Family-related cultural differences can also manifest themselves in the way we perceive family role or even status. There are differences with gender, particularly in male and female roles. Some of the roles are more rigid in particular cultures than they are in other cultures.



TERM TO KNOW

Cultural Differences

Differences between people caused by membership in different cultures; may range from trivial to fundamental.

3. Cultural Evolution

Although some traditions and norms are more rigid, culture does evolve over time.

IN CONTEXT

Consider dress in the United States. Not that long ago, women would never wear trousers or pants; they always wore dresses. This began to change in the 20th century when women began to wear pantsuits. Now, you see women wearing pants all the time. Gender roles have changed in terms of women's presence in the workforce as well.

These changes occur over time, and the way we express culture can show that.

IN CONTEXT

In terms of musical expression in the United States, rock 'n' roll was a change that was considered to be the advent of a whole era because it represented a cultural change in the way we were behaving and looking at the world. Likewise, hip hop was a way of expressing another cultural phenomena. Both genres of music were driven by youth culture and a freedom and style of expression that hadn't been seen before.



BIG IDEA

It's important to understand that we all come from cultures, and growing up within a culture and accepting the norms of that culture make it really easy for us to believe that what we think is right, proper, and true is universal.

However, you can see that this is not the case when you realize that other cultures may have some fundamental differences from the way you see the world through your particular cultural viewpoint. Coming to recognize and understand this is a very important step in preventing miscommunication and conflict.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **cultural norms and methods of expression** are not innate; we learn them from other members of our culture. However, not all cultures express themselves the same way, and these **cultural differences can lead to conflict** if there's been a misunderstanding based on these differences.. Some cultural difference may be differences in communication, dress, or tradition. You now understand that **culture evolves** over time, and when you realize that your worldview is not universal, and that other cultures may be fundamentally different from yours in any number of ways, you have taken an important step toward preventing miscommunication and conflict. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from tutorial by Sophia author Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

Cultural Differences

Differences between people caused by membership in different cultures; may range from trivial to fundamental.

Culture

A form of human social organization in which people identify themselves as members of a group sharing symbol systems, norms, traditions, and viewpoints towards the world.

Norms

The variety of behaviors and perceptions considered "right", "true" or "proper" by a culture.