

The Components of Culture

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about some of the basic building blocks of culture. You will be introduced to some of the ways in which cultural artifacts are interpreted by people living within a given culture, and how they might be harder to interpret from the outside. You will also see how the components of culture strengthen self and social awareness. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Material and Nonmaterial Culture

Almost every human behavior, from shopping to playing to expressing love, is learned. As we discussed in the previous tutorial, there are some cultural universals that can be found in nearly all societies, such as having rituals and traditions around major life-stage transitions. But even these universals are learned by the people in each society. Culture is not something we are born with, although we are all born with the capacity to participate in a culture.

But what exactly does culture consist of? Let's narrow it down and think about the culture around commuting, the practice of traveling from one's home to one's place of employment. In New York City, most people ride the subway to work. They use a transit pass to enter the transit system, wait on the platform for their train, board the train, transfer to a different line if needed for their journey, and depart nearer to their place of work. While on the train, New Yorkers usually sit quietly, reading a book or looking at their phone, even though they are surrounded by other people engaged in the same activity as they are. In Mexico City, people also use the metro system to get to work. During rush hour, though, people will separate on the platform by gender as they wait for their trains because some trains offer a separate car reserved exclusively for women and children for reasons of safety and comfort. In Berlin, commuters don't pass through a fare gate to enter the system, but if a transit official boards the train every passenger will have to show proof of payment. And a tourist from the suburbs in the southern United States visiting either New York City or Mexico City might be surprised at how people avoid making eye contact and keep to themselves while in transit.

In this example of commuting, culture consists of both intangible things like beliefs and thoughts (expectations about behavior while in transit, methods of fare collection) and tangible things (trains, platforms, transit passes).

The objects or belongings of a group of people are considered **material culture**.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Metro passes and bus tokens are part of material culture, as are automobiles, stores, and the physical structures where people study and work, or engage in other recognizable patterns of behavior.

Nonmaterial culture, in contrast, consists of the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of a society. Material and nonmaterial aspects of culture are linked, and physical objects often symbolize cultural ideas.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A metro pass is a material object, but it represents a form of nonmaterial culture, namely capitalism, and the acceptance of paying for transportation.

Clothing, hairstyles, and jewelry are part of material culture, but the appropriateness of wearing certain clothing for specific events reflects nonmaterial culture. A school building belongs to material culture, but the teaching methods and educational standards within it are part of education's nonmaterial culture. These material and nonmaterial aspects of culture can vary subtly or greatly from region to region. Examining our material and nonmaterial culture through an objective, non-judgmental lens, is a foundation of **self and social awareness skills**.



BIG IDEA

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

As people travel farther afield, moving from different regions to entirely different parts of the world, certain material and nonmaterial aspects of culture become dramatically unfamiliar. What happens when we encounter different cultures? As we interact with cultures other than our own, we become more aware of the differences and commonalities between others' symbolic and material worlds and our own.



TERMS TO KNOW

Material Culture

The physical items created and used by a society.

Nonmaterial Culture

The ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of a society.

2. Symbols

Humans, consciously and subconsciously, are always striving to make sense of their surrounding world. **Symbols**—such as gestures, signs, objects, signals, and words—help people understand that world. They provide clues to understanding experiences by conveying recognizable meanings that are shared by societies.

The world is filled with symbols. Sports uniforms, company logos, and traffic signs are symbols. In some cultures, a gold ring on the fourth finger of the left hand is a symbol of marriage. Some symbols are highly functional; stop signs, for instance, provide useful instruction. As physical objects, they belong to material culture, but because they function as symbols, they also convey nonmaterial cultural meanings. Some symbols are valuable only in what they represent. Trophies, blue ribbons, or gold medals, for example, serve no other purpose than to represent accomplishments. But many objects have both material and nonmaterial symbolic value.

IN CONTEXT

It's easy to take symbols for granted. Some people never think about stick figure signs on the doors

of public bathrooms. But those figures are more than just functional symbols that tell people which bathrooms to use. They also tell you something about the intentions and beliefs of the people who decided to put those symbols on the doors. The presence, absence, and type of bathroom signs can indicate whether the owner, management, or occupants of a building think that these bathrooms need to be segregated by gender, and what they think about gender.

Someone putting signs on the bathroom doors in a theater might have just picked out the two most familiar signs in the store — one of a stick figure with separated legs to indicate a man, and one of a stick figure with a triangle for legs to indicate a woman — without giving it a second thought. But another person might have considered the needs of theater patrons of minority genders who don't feel comfortable with segregated bathrooms and just chosen signage that indicates whether the bathroom has stalls or urinals. Or they might have been aware of debates around segregated bathrooms and chosen to parody these debates with signs that show a dragon and a unicorn. Or they might not have thought about gender at all but realized that the line for a women's bathroom was always longer at intermission than the line for the men's bathroom, and decided to institute unisex bathrooms to make the lines fairer. It takes a great deal of inside cultural knowledge and understanding to translate simple bathroom symbols into these loaded interpretations, and most of us do it unconsciously all the time.



BRAINSTORM

Can you think of other common signs that have both a functional meaning and a symbolic cultural meaning? As you go about your day, make note of the signs and symbols that you see. What are they trying to tell you? What do they tell you beyond the intentional meaning?



TERM TO KNOW

Symbols

Forms of visual communication including gestures, signs, objects, signals, and words, which help people understand that world.

3. Language

While different cultures have varying systems of symbols, one symbol is common to all: language. **Language** is a symbolic system through which people communicate and through which culture is transmitted. Some languages contain a system of symbols used for written communication, while others rely on only spoken communication and nonverbal actions. Language, both verbal and nonverbal, is the catalyst for improving **relationship building skills** with others.

Societies often share a single language, and many languages contain the same basic elements. Some languages use an alphabet, which is a written system made of symbolic shapes that refer to spoken sound. Taken together, these symbols convey specific meanings. The English alphabet uses a combination of twenty-six letters to create words; these twenty-six letters make up over 600,000 recognized English words. Other languages use logograms, which is a character-based writing system where individual characters each represent a single syllable, and words are formed by combining these syllables.

Rules for speaking and writing vary even within languages, most notably by region or by social class.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Do you refer to a can of carbonated liquid as “soda,” “pop,” or “Coke?” Is a household entertainment room a “family room,” “rec room,” or “den?” When leaving a restaurant, do you ask your server for a “check,” the “ticket,” or your “bill?”

Language is also constantly evolving as societies create new ideas.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In this age of technology, people have adapted almost instantly to new nouns such as “email” and “Internet,” and verbs such as “download,” “Tweet,” and “blog.” Thirty years ago, the general public would have considered these to be nonsense words.

In addition to using language, people communicate without words. Nonverbal communication is symbolic, and, as in the case of language, much of it is learned through one’s culture. Some gestures are nearly universal: crying often represents sadness. Other nonverbal symbols vary across cultural contexts in their meaning.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A thumbs-up indicates positive reinforcement in the United States, whereas in Russia and Australia, it is an offensive curse.

Other gestures vary in meaning depending on the situation and the person.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A wave of the hand can mean many things, depending on how it’s done and for whom. It may mean “hello,” “goodbye,” “no thank you,” or “I’m royalty.” Winks convey a variety of messages, including “We have a secret,” “I’m only kidding,” or “I’m attracted to you.”

From a distance, a person can understand the emotional gist of two people in conversation just by watching their body language and facial expressions. Furrowed brows and folded arms indicate a serious topic, possibly an argument. Smiles, with heads lifted and arms open, suggest a lighthearted, friendly chat.



Self and Social Awareness: Skill Reflect

Consider your own cultural norms, as well as other cultural norms to which you’ve been exposed: material culture, nonmaterial culture, language, and symbols. What have you learned about yourself and others from these norms?



TERM TO KNOW

Language

A symbolic system through which people communicate and through which culture is transmitted.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you saw how the artifacts of culture can be classed as either **material or nonmaterial culture**. You began to explore how material cultural artifacts can serve as **symbols**, and how the nonmaterial cultural artifact of **language** gives us the tool to interpret these symbols.

Best of luck in your learning!



TERMS TO KNOW

Language

A symbolic system through which people communicate and through which culture is transmitted.

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