

Culture: The Meaning, Characteristics, and Functions

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CULTURE - The customs, traditions, attitudes, values, norms, ideas and symbols govern human behavior pattern.

The members of society not only endorse them but also mold their behavior accordingly. They are the members of the society because of the traditions and customs which are common and which are passed down from generation to generation through the process of socialization. These common patterns designate culture and it is in terms of culture that we are able to understand the specific behavior pattern of human beings in their social relations. Cultural ideas emerge from shared social life.

Meaning of Culture:

Sometimes an individual is described as “a highly cultured person”, meaning thereby that the person in question has certain features such as his speech, manner, and taste for literature, music or painting which distinguish him from others. Culture, in this sense, refers to certain personal characteristics of a individual. However, this is not the sense in which the word culture is used and understood in social sciences.

Sometimes culture is used in popular discourse to refer to a celebration or an evening of entertainment, as when one speaks of a ‘cultural show’. In this sense, culture is identified with aesthetics or the fine arts such as dance, music or drama. This is also different from the technical meaning of the word culture.

Culture is used in a special sense in anthropology and sociology. It refers to the sum of human beings’ life ways, their behavior, beliefs, feelings, thought; it connotes everything that is acquired by them as social beings.

Culture has been defined in number of ways. There is no consensus among sociologists and anthropologists regarding the definition of culture. One of the most comprehensive definitions of the term culture was provided by the British anthropologist Edward Tylor. He defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”.

There are some writers who add to these definitions some of the important “other capabilities and habits” such as language and the techniques for making and using tools. Culture consists of all learned, normative behavior patterns – that is all shared ways or patterns of thinking and feeling as well as doing.

Some of the thinkers include in culture only the nonmaterial parts. For instance, Sutherland and Wood word say, “If culture exists only where there is communication

then the content of culture can be ideas or symbol patterns. Culture is then an immaterial phenomenon only, a matter of thoughts and meanings and habits and not of visible and touchable material things or objects”.

The “material elements that are made and used in accordance with socially inherited tradition” should be called culture objects. Others include in culture all the major social components that bind men together in society. For instance, the British anthropologist Malinowski included ‘inherited, artifacts, implements and consumer goods’ and ‘social structure’ within his definition of culture.

It is, Cooley, Argell and Car say,

“The entire accumulation of artificial objects, conditions, tools, techniques, ideas, symbols and behavior patterns peculiar to a group of people, possessing a certain consistency of its own, and capable of transmission from one generation to another.”

Some of the other important definitions of culture are as follows. “Culture is the expression of our nature in our modes of living and our thinking. Intercourse in our literature, in religion, in recreation and enjoyment, says Maclver.

According to E.A. Hoebel,

“Culture is the sum total of integrated learned behavior patterns which are characteristics of the members of a society and which are therefore not the result of biological inheritance.”

“Culture is the complex whole that consists of everything we think and do and have as members of society”, says Bierstedt. “Culture is the total content of the physio-social, bio-social and psycho-social universe man has produced and the socially created mechanisms through which these social products operate”, According to Anderson and Parker.

Malinowski defines culture “as the handiwork of man and the medium through which he achieves his ends.”

According to H.T. Mazumadar,

“culture is the sum total of human achievements, material as well as non-material, capable of transmission, sociologically, i.e., by tradition and communication, vertically as well as horizontally”.

Combining several of these definitions, we may define culture as the sum-total of human achievements or the total heritage of man which can be transmitted to men by communication and tradition. It is a way of life of the people in a certain geographical area. Life style and social pattern of a society being the direct consequence of the accumulated heritage of ages past distinguish and differentiate one community from another.

Culture therefore, is moral, intellectual and spiritual discipline for advancement, in accordance with the norms and values based on accumulated heritage. It is imbibing and making ours own, the life style and social pattern of the group one belongs to. Culture is a system of learned behavior shared by and transmitted among the members of the group.

Culture is a collective heritage learned by individuals and passed from one generation to another. The individual receives culture as part of social heritage and in turn, may reshape the culture and introduce changes which then become part of the heritage of succeeding generations.

Characteristics of Culture:

From various definition, we can deduce the following characteristics:

1. Learned Behavior:

Not all behavior is learned, but most of it is learned; combing one's hair, standing in line, telling jokes, criticizing the President and going to the movie, all constitute behaviors which had to be learned.

Sometimes the terms conscious learning and unconscious learning are used to distinguish the learning. For example, the ways in which a small child learns to handle a tyrannical father or a rejecting mother often affect the ways in which that child, ten or fifteen years later, handles his relationships with other people.

Some behavior is obvious. People can be seen going to football games, eating with forks, or driving automobiles. Such behavior is called "overt" behavior. Other behavior is less visible. Such activities as planning tomorrow's work (or) feeling hatred for an enemy, are behaviors too. This sort of behavior, which is not openly visible to other people, is called Covert behavior. Both may be, of course, learned.

2. Culture is Abstract:

Culture exists in the minds or habits of the members of society. Culture is the shared ways of doing and thinking. There are degrees of visibility of cultural behavior, ranging from the regularized activities of persons to their internal reasons for so doing. In other words, we cannot see culture as such we can only see human behavior. This behavior occurs in regular, patterned fashion and it is called culture.

3. Culture is a Pattern of Learned Behavior:

The definition of culture indicated that the learned behavior of people is patterned. Each person's behavior often depends upon some particular behavior of someone else. The point is that, as a general rule, behaviors are somewhat integrated or organized with related behaviors of other persons.

4. Culture is the Products of Behavior:

Culture learnings are the products of behavior. As the person behaves, there occur changes in him. He acquires the ability to swim, to feel hatred toward someone, or to sympathize with someone. They have grown out of his previous behaviors.

In both ways, then, human behavior is the result of behavior. The experience of other people are impressed on one as he grows up, and also many of his traits and abilities have grown out of his own past behaviors.

5. Culture includes Attitudes, Values Knowledge:

There is widespread error in the thinking of many people who tend to regard the ideas, attitudes, and notions which they have as “their own”. It is easy to overestimate the uniqueness of one’s own attitudes and ideas. When there is agreement with other people it is largely unnoticed, but when there is a disagreement or difference one is usually conscious of it. Your differences however, may also be cultural. For example, suppose you are a Catholic and the other person a Protestant.

6. Culture also includes Material Objects:

Man’s behavior results in creating objects. Men were behaving when they made these things. To make these objects required numerous and various skills which human beings gradually built up through the ages. Man has invented something else and so on. Occasionally one encounters the view that man does not really “make” steel or a battleship. All these things first existed in a “state nature”.

Man merely modified their form, changed them from a state in which they were to the state in which he now uses them. The chair was first a tree which man surely did not make. But the chair is more than trees and the jet airplane are more than iron ore and so forth.

7. Culture is shared by the Members of Society:

The patterns of learned behavior and the results of behavior are possessed not by one or a few people, but usually by a large proportion. Thus, many millions of persons share such behavior patterns as Christianity, the use of automobiles, or the English language.

Persons may share some part of a culture unequally. For example, as Americans do the Christian religion. To some persons Christianity is the all-important, predominating idea in life. To others it is less preoccupying/important, and to still others it is of marginal significance only.

Sometimes the people share different aspects of culture. For example, among the Christians, there are – Catholic and Protestant, liberal or conservatism, as clergymen or as laymen. The point to our discussion is not that culture or any part of it is shared identically, but that it is shared by the members of society to a sufficient extent.

8. Culture is Super-organic:

Culture is sometimes called super organic. It implies that “culture” is somehow superior to “nature”. The word super-organic is useful when it implies that what may be quite a different phenomenon from a cultural point of view.

For example, a tree means different things to the botanist who studies it, the old woman who uses it for shade in the late summer afternoon, the farmer who picks its fruit, the motorist who collides with it and the young lovers who carve their initials in its trunk. The same physical objects and physical characteristics, in other words, may constitute a variety of quite different cultural objects and cultural characteristics.

9. Culture is Pervasive:

Culture is pervasive it touches every aspect of life. The pervasiveness of culture is manifest in two ways. First, culture provides an unquestioned context within which individual action and response take place. Not only emotional action but relational actions are governed by cultural norms. Second, culture pervades social activities and institutions.

According to Ruth Benedict, “A culture, like an individual is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. With each culture there come into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by other types of society. In obedience to these purposes, each person further consolidates its experience and in proportion to the urgency of these drives the heterogeneous items of behavior; take more and more congruous shape”.

10. Culture is a way of Life:

Culture means simply the “way of life” of a people or their “design for living.” Kluckhohn and Kelly define it in his sense, “A culture is a historically derived system of explicit and implicit designs for living, which tends to be shared by all or specially designed members of a group.”

Explicit culture refers to similarities in word and action which can be directly observed. For example, the adolescent cultural behavior can be generalized from regularities in dress, mannerism and conversation. Implicit culture exists in abstract forms which are not quite obvious.

11. Culture is a human Product:

Culture is not a force, operating by itself and independent of the human actors. There is an unconscious tendency to defy culture, to endow it with life and treat it as a thing. Culture is a creation of society in interaction and depends for its existence upon the continuance of society.

In a strict sense, therefore, culture does not ‘do’ anything on its own. It does not cause the individual to act in a particular way, nor does it ‘make’ the normal individual into a maladjusted one. Culture, in short, is a human product; it is not independently endowed with life.

12. Culture is Idealistic:

Culture embodies the ideas and norms of a group. It is sum-total of the ideal patterns and norms of behavior of a group. Culture consists of the intellectual, artistic and social ideals and institutions which the members of the society profess and to which they strive to confirm.

13. Culture is transmitted among members of Society:

The cultural ways are learned by persons from persons. Many of them are “handed down” by one’s elders, by parents, teachers, and others [of a somewhat older generation]. Other cultural behaviors are “handed up” to elders. Some of the transmission of culture is among contemporaries.

For example, the styles of dress, political views, and the use of recent labor-saving devices. One does not acquire a behavior pattern spontaneously. He learns it. That means that someone teaches him and he learns. Much of the learning process both for the teacher and the learner is quite unconscious, unintentional, or accidental.

14. Culture is Continually Changing:

There is one fundamental and inescapable attribute (special quality) of culture, the fact of unending change. Some societies at sometimes change slowly, and hence in comparison to other societies seem not to be changing at all. But they are changing, even though not obviously so.

15. Culture is Variable:

Culture varies from society to society, group to group. Hence, we say culture of India or England. Further culture varies from group to group within the same society. There are subcultures within a culture. Cluster of patterns which are both related to general culture of the society and yet distinguishable from it are called subcultures.

16. Culture is an integrated system:

Culture possesses an order and system. Its various parts are integrated with each other and any new element which is introduced is also integrated.

17. Language is the Chief Vehicle of Culture:

Man lives not only in the present but also in the past and future. He is able to do this because he possesses language which transmits to him what was learned in the past and enables him to transmit the accumulated wisdom to the next generation. A specialized language pattern serves as a common bond to the members of a particular group or subculture. Although culture is transmitted in a variety of ways, language is one of the most important vehicles for perpetuating cultural patterns.

To conclude culture is everything which is socially learned and shared by the members of a society. It is culture that, in the wide focus of the world, distinguishes individual from individual, group from group and society.

Functions of Culture:

Among all groups of people, we find widely shared beliefs, norms, values and preferences. Since culture seems to be universal human phenomenon, it occurs naturally to wonder whether culture corresponds to any universal human needs. This curiosity raises the question of the functions of culture. Social scientists have discussed various functions of culture. Culture has certain functions for both individual and society.

Following are some of the important functions of culture:

1. Culture Defines Situations:

Each culture has many subtle cues which define each situation. It reveals whether one should prepare to fight, run, laugh or make love. For example, suppose someone approaches you with right hand outstretched at waist level. What does this mean? That he wishes to shake hands in friendly greeting is perfectly obvious – obvious, that is to anyone familiar with our culture.

But in another place or time the outstretched hand might mean hostility or warning. One does not know what to do in a situation until he has defined the situation. Each society has its insults and fighting words. The cues (hints) which define situations appear in infinite variety. A person who moves from one society into another will spend many years misreading the cues. For example, laughing at the wrong places.

2. Culture defines Attitudes, Values and Goals:

Each person learns in his culture what is good, true, and beautiful. Attitudes, values and goals are defined by the culture. While the individual normally learns them as unconsciously as he learns the language. Attitudes are tendencies to feel and act in certain ways. Values are measures of goodness or desirability, for example, we value private property, (representative) Government and many other things and experience.

Goals are those attainments which our values define as worthy, (e.g.) winning the race, gaining the affections of a particular girl, or becoming president of the firm. By approving certain goals and ridiculing others, the culture channels individual ambitions. In these ways culture determines the goals of life.

3. Culture defines Myths, Legends, and the Supernatural:

Myths and legends are important part of every culture. They may inspire, reinforce effort and sacrifice and bring comfort in bereavement. Whether they are true is sociologically unimportant. Ghosts are real to people who believe in them and who act upon this belief. We cannot understand the behavior of any group without knowing something of the myths, legends, and supernatural beliefs they hold. Myths and legends are powerful forces in a group's behavior.

Culture also provides the individual with a ready-made view of the universe. The nature of divine power and the important moral issues are defined by the culture. The individual does not have to select, but is trained in a Christian, Buddhist, Hindu,

Muslim or some other religious tradition. This tradition gives answers for the major (things imponderable) of life, and fortuities the individual to meet life's crises.

4. Culture provides Behavior Patterns:

The individual need not go through painful trial and error learning to know what foods can be eaten (without poisoning himself), or how to live among people without fear. He finds a ready-made set of patterns awaiting him which he needs only to learn and follow. The culture maps out the path to matrimony. The individual does not have to wonder how one secures a mate; he knows the procedure defined by his culture.

If men use culture to advance their purposes, it seems clear also that a culture imposes limits on human and activities. The need for order calls forth another function of culture that of so directing behavior that disorderly behavior is restricted and orderly behavior is promoted. A society without rules or norms to define right and wrong behavior would be very much like a heavily travelled street without traffic signs or any understood rules for meeting and passing vehicles. Chaos would be the result in either case.

Social order cannot rest on the assumption that men will spontaneously behave in ways conducive to social harmony.

Culture and Society:

The relationship between society, culture and personality is stressed by Ralph Linton: "A society is organized group of individuals. A culture is an organized group of learned responses. The individual is living organism capable of independent thought, feeling and action, but with his independence limited and all his resources profoundly modified by contact with the society and culture in which he develops.

A society cannot exist apart from culture. A Society is always made of persons and their groupings. People carry and transmit culture, but they are not culture. No culture can exist except as it is embodied in a society of man; no society can operate without, cultural directives. Like matter and energy, like mind and body, they are interdependent and interacting yet express different aspects of the human situation.

One must always keep in mind the interdependence and the reciprocal relationship between culture and society. Each is distinguishable concept in which the patterning and organization of the whole is more important than any of the component parts.