

Characteristics of Culture

Culture Is an Adaptive Mechanism

The first humans came from tropical regions in Africa about 2.5 million years ago. Since then, we have spread all over the world, but our bodies haven't really changed. We cannot survive outside of the warmer areas of our planet without our cultural knowledge and technology. What made it possible for our ancestors to live in colder parts of the world was the invention of hunting skills, fire use, and, ultimately, clothing, housing, farming, and trade.

Culture has been a successful **adaptive mechanism** for humans. It has given us a major advantage in the competition for survival with other animals. Culture has allowed the global human population to grow from less than 10 million people after the end of the last ice age to more than 6.5 billion people today, only 10,000 years later. Culture has made us the most dangerous and the most numerous large animal on our planet. But despite the power that culture has given us, we still depend on it for survival. We need our cultural skills to stay alive.

Culture is learned

Human infants come into the world with basic needs such as hunger and thirst, but they do not have **instincts** to satisfy these needs. We are also born without any cultural knowledge. However, our brains are wired to quickly learn language, behavior, and other cultural traits. Newborn humans are amazing learning machines. Any normal baby can be placed into any family on earth and grow up to learn their culture and accept it as his or her own. Since culture is non-instinctive, we are not **genetically predisposed** to learn a particular one.

Every human generation can discover new things and invent better technologies. The new cultural skills and knowledge are added onto what was learned in previous generations. As a result, culture is **cumulative**, it adds to what was learned before. Because of this cumulative effect, most high school students today have knowledge about the world that ancient people could not have learned in a lifetime of exploration.

Cultures Change

When new cultural traits are added to adapt to new situations, some old ones are lost because they are no longer useful. For example, most city dwellers today do not have or need the skills required for survival in a wilderness. Most would probably starve to death because they do not know how to find wild foods and survive outdoors. It is more important in modern urban life to know how to drive a car, use a computer, and to understand how to get food in a supermarket or restaurant. All cultures change over time — none are **static**.

Change can happen because of new ideas within a society, and also from the **diffusion** of cultural traits from one society to another. It's difficult to predict how cultures will change because aspects of culture are related in complex ways. For example, the increase in economic and political opportunities for women over the last century changed the nature of marriage, the family, and the roles of men. It also changed the workplace as well as the legal system and the decisions made by governments.

People are Usually not Aware of Their Own Culture

The way that we interact and do things in our everyday lives seems "natural" to us. We don't think about our own culture because we are so close to it and know it so well. It is usually only when we come into contact with people from another culture that we become aware that our way of life is not universal.

Most people judge other cultures based on their own values and customs, and believe their own culture is superior. This is called **ethnocentrism**. To like your own way of life, and to be suspicious or even hostile toward other cultures is normal. For many people, foreign cultures seem not only different, but inferior, and even "unnatural." For example, European cultures strongly condemn other societies that practice **polygamy** and the eating of dogs—behavior that Europeans generally consider to be wrong. On the other hand, many people in conservative Muslim societies, such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, consider European women immoral for going out in public without a male relative and without their bodies covered from head to toe.

Our ethnocentrism can prevent us from understanding and appreciating other cultures. When **anthropologists** study other societies, they need to suspend their own ethnocentric judgments and adopt a **cultural relativity** approach. That is, they try not to judge other cultures critically. Instead they try to see each culture as unique in its attempts to solve life's problems. Taking a cultural relativity approach is not only useful for anthropologists. It is also a useful tool for diplomats, businessmen, doctors, and anyone else who needs to deal with people from other cultures. However, it can be difficult and uncomfortable at first to ignore your own cultural beliefs in these situations.

Cultures No Longer Exist in Isolation

It is unlikely that there are any societies that are totally isolated from the outside world now. Even small, tribal societies are now being **integrated** to some extent into the world economy. That was not the case a hundred or even fifty years ago. For example, some of the Indian tribes in the Amazon area of South America didn't know anything about the outside world until explorers entered their territories in the 1950's and 1960's. Members of these same Amazonian societies today buy clothes and items made by international corporations. They are learning about the larger world through schools, radios, and even television and the Internet. As a result of this process, some are losing their languages and traditional way of life.

Even large modern societies are quickly adopting words, food, music, and other cultural traits from all over the world. Just look at the popularity of Japanese animation in the U.S. This development of a shared world culture probably won't result in large cultures disappearing in the same way many of the smaller ones are. Language differences and ethnocentrism will likely prevent that from happening.

There are powerful cultural trends in the world today pushing in opposite directions. At the same time that many people are accepting **globalism**, others are turning to **tribalism**. Europe is growing closer together with shared laws and even a common currency, but many small groups around the world such as the Kurds in the Middle East and certain tribes in Africa are pushing for their own independent countries.

Answer the following questions in complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper:

1. What does the writer mean when he says culture is an "adaptive mechanism"? Give an example of how "we need our cultural skills to stay alive."
2. Why do people today have so much more knowledge than people in the past? What does this have to do with culture?
3. Why do you think cultures change over time? How is it related to survival?
4. The author provides an example of cultural change by describing the effect of the growing power of women. Can you think of another example of cultural change in the US that is happening now? If so, do any groups resist this change?
5. Give an example of what the writer means when he says "people are not usually aware of their culture."
6. How can taking a cultural relativism approach to other cultures help you in life?
7. How can ethnocentrism lead to problems between people?
8. What are some elements of U.S. culture that have been adopted in other countries/cultures?
9. With modern communication technology, do you think cultures around the world will become more alike, or do you think people will try to hold on to their traditional cultures? Explain.