

Lecture 4 Notes: Culture

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1 What Is Culture?

Definition 1: Culture

The totality of beliefs, artifacts, behaviours, values, norms, and practices shared by a social group; the social environment in which individuals are raised and continue to be socialized.

Culture is both a *public issue* and a *personal orientation*. By situating personal actions within collective cultural meanings, we link individual troubles to broader social structures.

2 Values and Norms

Definition 2: Values

Collectively shared ideas about what is right and wrong, defining goals and purposes within a culture.

Definition 3: Norms

Expectations for how members of a culture should act, think, and look; norms translate values into behavioural rules.

2.1 Types of Norms

- **Prescriptive norms:** behaviours we are expected to perform.
- **Proscriptive norms:** behaviours we are expected to avoid.
- **Formal norms:** codified rules, laws, and policies.
- **Informal norms:** unwritten, learned by observation and imitation.

Example 1: Public Transportation Norms

Values of efficiency and courtesy yield: prescriptive norms (offer your seat), proscriptive norms (no loud music), formal rules (no smoking), and informal etiquette (stand right on escalators).

3 Folkways, Mores, and Taboos

Definition 4: Folkways

Informal norms rooted in tradition and daily practices; violations carry mild social sanction.

Definition 5: Mores

Norms embodying a culture's fundamental values; violations produce serious consequences, often codified as laws.

Definition 6: Taboos

Strongly held mores so sacred that their violation is deemed unthinkable (e.g., incest, cannibalism).

Norms are *contextual*: behaviours acceptable in one setting may be deviant in another, as analyzed by symbolic interactionists.

4 Paradigms on Culture

4.1 Functionalism

Culture (values and norms) functions as a social fact that promotes cohesion and order via internalized symbols (Parsons) and shared moral frameworks (Durkheim).

4.2 Symbolic Interactionism

Culture emerges through micro-level interactions: individuals use symbols (language, gestures, clothing) to negotiate shared meanings and construct reality.

4.3 Critical Approaches

Culture is contested: power relations and inequalities are reproduced through cultural practices, privileging dominant groups (class, race, gender).

5 Material and Nonmaterial Culture

Definition 7: Material Culture

Tangible artifacts created by a society (e.g., clothing, buildings, tools).

Definition 8: Nonmaterial Culture

Intangible elements such as beliefs, norms, language, symbols, and values.

5.1 Symbols and Meaning

Definition 9: Symbol

An object, gesture, or sign that stands for something else within a culture.

Common symbol types: gestures, signs, objects, signals, words.

5.2 High Culture, Popular Culture, and Omnivorousness

Definition 10: High Culture

Cultural forms associated with elites (opera, classical music); requires cultural capital.

Definition 11: Popular Culture

Cultural forms consumed by the masses (movies, mass media, branded goods).

Definition 12: Cultural Omnivores

Individuals who consume both high and popular culture, signaling broad cultural capital and status.

6 Status Symbols

Material indicators (luxury cars, designer goods) and emergent middle-class markers (Carhartt, artisanal products) that convey prestige.

7 Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

Definition 13: Ethnocentrism

Judging other cultures by one's own standards, assuming one's culture is superior.

Definition 14: Cultural Relativism

Understanding beliefs and practices in their own cultural context, suspending judgment.