

So, What Is Culture, Exactly?



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Culture is a term that refers to a large and diverse set of mostly intangible aspects of social life. According to sociologists, culture consists of the values, beliefs, systems of language, communication, and practices that people share in common and that can be used to define them as a collective.

Culture also includes the material objects that are common to that group or society. Culture is distinct from social structure and economic aspects of society, but it is connected to them—both continuously informing them and being informed by them. Common cultures include those shaped by regional traditions, religious beliefs, and historical experiences.

How Do Sociologists Define Culture?

Culture is one of the most important concepts within sociology because sociologists recognize that it plays a crucial role in our social lives. It is important for shaping [social relationships](#), maintaining and challenging social order, determining how we make sense of the world and our place in it, and shaping our everyday actions and experiences in society. It is composed of both non-material and material things.

In brief, sociologists define the non-material aspects of culture as the values and beliefs, language, communication, and practices that are shared in common by a group of people. Expanding on these categories, culture is made up of our knowledge, common sense, assumptions, and expectations. It is also the rules, norms, laws, and morals that govern

society; the words we use as well as how we speak and write them (what sociologists call "[discourse](#)"); and the symbols we use to express meaning, ideas, and concepts (like traffic signs and emojis, for example). Culture is also what we do and how we behave and perform (for example, theater and dance). It informs and is encapsulated in how we walk, sit, carry our bodies, and interact with others; how we behave depending on the place, time, and audience; and how we express identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality, among others. Culture also includes the collective practices we participate in, such as religious ceremonies, the celebration of secular holidays, and attending sporting events.

What Is Material Culture?

Material culture is composed of the things that humans make and use. This aspect of culture includes a wide variety of things, from buildings, technological gadgets, and clothing, to film, music, literature, and art, among others. Aspects of material culture are more commonly referred to as cultural products.

Sociologists see the two sides of culture—the material and non-material—as intimately connected. Material culture emerges from and is shaped by the non-material aspects of culture. In other words, what we value, believe, and know (and what we do together in everyday life) influences the things that we make. However, it is not a one-way relationship between [material](#) and non-material culture.

Material culture can also influence the non-material aspects of culture. For example, a powerful documentary film (an aspect of material culture) might change people's attitudes and beliefs (i.e. non-material culture). This is why cultural products tend to follow patterns. What has come before in terms of music, film, television, and art, for example, influences the values, beliefs, and expectations of those who interact with them, which then, in turn, influence the creation of additional cultural products.

Why Culture Matters to Sociologists

Culture is important to sociologists because it plays a significant role in the production of [social order](#). The social order refers to the stability of society based on the collective agreement to rules and norms that allow us to cooperate, function as a society, and live together (ideally) in peace and harmony. For sociologists, there are both good and bad aspects of social order.

History of Culture

Rooted in the theory of classical French sociologist [Émile Durkheim](#), both material and non-material aspects of culture are valuable in that they hold society together. The values, beliefs, morals, communication, and practices that we share in common provide us with a

shared sense of purpose and a valuable collective identity. Durkheim revealed through his research that when people come together to participate in rituals, they reaffirm the culture they hold in common, and in doing so, strengthen the social ties that bind them together. Today, sociologists see this important social phenomenon happening not only in religious rituals and celebrations like (some) weddings and the Indian festival of Holi but also in secular ones—such as high school dances and widely attended, televised sporting events (for example, the Super Bowl and March Madness, both of which one could consider part of American culture).

Famous Prussian social theorist and activist [Karl Marx](#) established the critical approach to culture in the social sciences. According to Marx, it is in the realm of non-material culture that a minority can maintain unjust power over the majority. He reasoned that subscribing to mainstream values, norms, and beliefs keeps people invested in unequal social systems that do not work in their best interests, but rather, benefit the powerful minority. Sociologists today see Marx's theory in action in the way that most people in capitalist societies buy into the belief that success comes from hard work and dedication and that anyone can live a good life if they do these things—despite the reality that a job which pays a living wage is increasingly hard to come by.¹

Both theorists were right about the role that culture plays in society, but neither was exclusively right. Culture can be a force for oppression and domination, but it can also be a force for creativity, resistance, and liberation. It is also a deeply important aspect of human social life and social organization. Without it, we would not have relationships or society.

What Is Culture?

1. Culture is a dynamic and integral aspect of society that encompasses both non-material aspects like values and beliefs, and material aspects such as objects and technology, all of which shape and are being shaped by society.
2. Sociologists value culture for its role in maintaining social order and collective identity, as well as its influence on everyday actions and societal norms.
3. Influential sociologists like Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx highlighted culture's dual role in fostering social cohesion and perpetuating power dynamics.

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