



Defining Culture: technical access has never been greater; cultural access never poorer.

What is culture? This is hard to answer when you consider everything that it encompasses.

According to British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, "Culture [...] is 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."

Rather than defining culture top-down, then, do the reverse: identify a person's most fundamental needs, then observe how they lead that person to interact with others. This cooperation is the basis of culture.

W.C. McGrew lists six steps in the development of culture:

1. A new pattern of behavior is invented or an existing one is modified.
2. Its inventor transmits the pattern to another person.
3. Transmission of the new pattern is consistent within and across performers, often even in recognizable stylistic features.
4. The one receiving the new pattern can perform it long after receiving it.
5. The pattern spreads via families, clans, troops, or bands.
6. The pattern endures across generations.

Consider the word "culture" itself.

When survival was humanity's first concern, it referred to the process of cultivating food or *agriculture*.

The industrial revolution changed that. For people with more time for other pursuits, *culture* came to represent individual growth and refinement.

In the Information Age, *culture* is used to identify the commonalities of different groups of people: a handful of employees, a body of students, the population of an entire country or continent.

In short, whenever people cooperate in order to address a pressing need, they develop culture; they establish rules, methods of communicating or behaving, systems that benefit all involved.

While it may be true that all human beings share the same basic needs, beginning with food, clothing, and shelter—all groups have not addressed those needs in the same way. This is largely due to physical isolation, the distance between us. We have all developed different languages, for example. Many of the same types of food sources exist here and in other countries, but we have all developed different

ways of preparing them. In the end, what matters is that cultural norms help us survive, learn, grow, and thrive.

With modern technological advancements, we can interact with people around the world in ways that were unavailable to us in the past. So, now our challenge is to bridge the gap of understanding, to create an even larger cooperative, a more harmonious world.

Cultural differences can be treacherous to negotiate, however, and fluency in a foreign language is only one tool of many needed to do so with success. Attentiveness, patience, and respect for others' practices—however strange or objectionable we may consider them—is essential. As they say, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do." When you enter someone else's home or homeland, you must follow their rules.

Before you venture out into the world, consider the differences between other cultures and your own. How can you adapt to a new cultural reality? Consider the scenario described in [How the Chinese Say "No,"](#) or the significance of [physical gesture](#) used in different countries.

Much of the time, cultural differences are not apparent or tangible. Certain aspects of a culture are learned consciously, like ways to greet people—but others are subconsciously acquired, like some methods of problem solving. It is always a good idea to try to see things from different perspectives—as Stephen R. Covey emphasized in the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People—"seek first to understand, then to be understood." It is wise to avoid unwarranted stereotypes. Don't go around smashing plates just because you're in Greece!

Building cultural awareness is not easy, but it makes all the difference. In 1983, a civil war began in the Sudan. Desperate to escape the bloodshed, many people walked over a thousand miles to refugee camps in neighboring countries. Some were able to leave these camps and emigrate to other countries, but found it hard to [adapt to their new environments](#).

Spanish is the official language of twenty-one different countries, all of which were conquered and colonized by Spain. Nevertheless, each has its own unique culture. A high school Spanish course cannot hope to adequately prepare a student to assimilate all Hispanic culture—time and resources are too scarce—but because something is difficult does not mean the attempt should not be made.

Experiencing art, music, film, food, and other objects of cultural significance is instructive, as Beeban Kidron explains in her TED address, ["The Shared Wonder of Film."](#) Discussion of social issues in other countries is likewise enlightening. Learning about what makes others "tick" helps us relate to them more effectively... and to better understand ourselves.

Culture Study Sheet

According to British anthropologist Edward Tylor, culture is a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, capabilities and habits of a group of people.

With this definition in mind, cultural fluency is a daunting goal. Perhaps the sheer magnitude of the task is what causes so many people to rely on generalizations or stereotypes, or to define culture as something other than what it actually is.

Culture, contrary to popular belief, is not race or ethnicity. **It is not who or what people are but what they do.**

Culture is how people come together to solve problems.

The word *culture* literally means *growth*. In the educational sphere, this means *study* and the resulting knowledge and skills acquired. The poet W.B. Yeats once called culture “the sanctity of the intellect.”

So, a practical approach for the student of culture is to identify the most fundamental human needs, then observe how those lead a person to interact with other members of his or her society. This cooperation is the basis of all human culture.

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The freedom to innovate guaranteed by our Declaration of Independence and Constitution makes America unique and prosperous. The assimilation of the best talent from around the world also contributes to our cultural (remember: not ethnic or racial, but technological) advancement, whether military, economic, scientific, artistic, or other areas.

Many people around the world live in poor conditions or under oppressive governments. So, they may not be as prosperous or culturally advanced, but their stoicism and resourcefulness—the ways they thrive even in very difficult circumstances—is admirable and interesting.

Our purpose as a class is to discover what makes various Spanish-speaking peoples special, i.e.

- how culture has developed around the Spanish-speaking world
- how this has shaped their beliefs, values and way of life
- how this knowledge is useful in one's interactions with Spanish speakers
- what opportunities or advantages [a particular level of] cultural fluency offers

Consider, for example, aspects of culture represented in a film you have seen in this class. What does the film teach us about the people in question? How might that information be useful should you have the opportunity to travel to their region or country?