

Culture is everything made, learned, or shared by the members of a society, including values, beliefs, behaviours, and material objects.

Culture is learned, and it varies tremendously from society to society. We begin learning our culture from the moment we're born, as the people who raise us encourage certain behaviours and teach their version of right and wrong.

Although cultures vary dramatically, they all consist of two parts: **Material Culture** and **Nonmaterial Culture**.

Material Culture consists of the concrete, visible parts of a culture, such as food, clothing, cars, weapons, and buildings. Aspects of material culture differ from society to society. Here are a few features of modern material culture in the United States:

- CD burners
- Running shoes
- iPods
- Lifestyle magazines
- Organic vegetables
- Sport utility vehicles

***Example:** One common form of material culture is jewellery that indicates a person's status as married. In American culture, people wear a metal band on the ring finger of the left hand to show that they are married. In smaller, non-industrialized societies, everyone knows everyone else, so no such sign is needed. In certain parts of India, women wear a necklace to indicate that they are married. In Northern Europe, married people wear wedding bands on the right hand.*

Nonmaterial Culture consists of the intangible aspects of a culture, such as values and beliefs. Nonmaterial culture consists of concepts and ideas that shape who we are and make us different from members of other societies.

- A **Value** is a culturally approved concept about what is right or wrong, desirable or undesirable. Values are a culture's principles about how things should be and differ greatly from society to society.

***Example:** In the United States today, many women value thinness as a standard of beauty. In Ghana, however, most people would consider American fashion models sickly and*

undesirable. In that culture and others, robustness is valued over skinniness as a marker of beauty.

Culture Lag

In 1922, the sociologist **William Ogburn** coined the term *culture lag*. **Culture Lag** refers to the tendency for changes in material and nonmaterial culture to occur at different rates. Ogburn proposed that, in general, changes in nonmaterial culture tend to lag behind changes in material culture, including technological advances.

Technology progresses at a rapid rate, but our feelings and beliefs about it, part of our nonmaterial culture, lag behind our knowledge of how to enact technological change.

***Example:** Though the technology that allows people to meet online has existed for years, an understanding of what the proper conduct is in an online “dating” situation lags behind the knowledge of how to use the technology. No definite answers exist to many important questions: How long should people talk over the internet before meeting in person? What is the right interval of response time between emails? New technology has brought with it new questions and uncertainties.*

Cultural Diffusion is the process whereby an aspect of culture spreads throughout a culture or from one culture to another.

***Example:** In the United States in the early 1990s, only people who needed to be available in emergencies, such as doctors, carried cell phones. Today, every member of a family may have his or her own cell phone. In some developing nations, where standard telephone lines and other communications infrastructures are unreliable or nonexistent, cell phones have been welcomed enthusiastically, as they provide people with an effective communication tool.*

Global Diffusion

Many aspects of American culture, such as McDonald’s hamburgers and Coca-Cola, have been diffused to other countries, and food items from other countries have become diffused throughout the United States. Sushi, for example, is now available in grocery stores in many parts of the country, and pizza can be found almost everywhere in the United States.