

Cultural norms

There are many different definitions of culture. Matsumoto (2004) mentions a book from 1998 that analysed 128 different definitions of culture. Culture is a complex concept that is used in many different ways (e.g. to describe food and eating habits, clothing, rituals, communication patterns, religion, and status behaviour). It is often used to describe what could be called “surface culture” because it is so visible. For example, people notice that food is different when they travel to another country and they say that this is due to cultural differences. Or they notice that in some countries women are covered and in others they are not. According to Kuschel (2004) culture cannot be seen but we can see the manifestations of culture. However, there is “deep culture” which is related to beliefs, attitudes, and values that underpin cultural manifestations. Kuschel claims that culture should not be used as an explanation of behaviour. Instead, descriptions of cultural factors can be used to understand how people have survived in their environment, how they have organized life in social groups, and what beliefs, attitudes, and norms influence behaviour in the social and cultural groups. These cultural factors may lead to specific kinds of behaviour. According to Kuschel you should ask questions related to how specific factors in the culture result in behaviours such as, for example, infanticide, initiation rites, rain dance, or honour killing. If culture is simply used as an explanation of behaviour, it will lead to circular arguments according to Kuschel, who also warns against generalizations. Since the concept of culture is so vague and includes so many variables, it should never be used as an explanation in itself.

According to Lonner (1995) culture can be defined as common rules that regulate interactions and behaviour in a group as well as a number of shared values and attitudes in the group. Hofstede (2002) described culture as “mental software”, that is, cultural schemas that have been internalized so that they influence thinking, emotions, and behaviour. According to Hofstede, the mental software is shared by members of a sociocultural group. It is learned through daily interactions and by the feedback from other members of the group.

Understanding the role of culture in human behaviour is essential in a diverse, multicultural world. Many of the founding theorists of psychology took a solely western view. They attempted to find universal behaviours—that is, they were looking for “rules” of human behaviour that could be applied to all cultures around the world. This is an **etic** approach to psychology. Etic approaches are typically taken within cross-cultural psychology where behaviour is compared across specific cultures. Etic study involves drawing on the notion of universal properties of cultures, which share common perceptual, cognitive, and emotional structures. The **emic** approach looks at behaviours that are culturally specific. Emics have challenged psychologists to re-examine their ideas of “truth” with regard to culture. In most cases, truth may be relative, based on the culture in which one is raised. In that case, it is important for psychologists to recognize these cultural variations in order to best understand members of other cultural groups.

TOK: ethics

- 1 Which of the arguments regarding female genital mutilation do you find most persuasive, and why?
 - It is moral because it is a cultural practice and different cultural practices should be respected.
 - It is immoral because it is known how it inflicts pain on girls and removes their potential for pleasure. I disagree with this cultural norm.
 - It is immoral and there is a need for social action to change this practice.
- 2 Can the values of one society ever be judged with any validity by applying the values of another culture?

The anthropologist Mead (1935) documented many instances of cultural variations in gender in her study of three different cultures living close to each other in New Guinea. The Arapesh people were characterized by women and men having the same sensitive and non-aggressive behaviour, as well as “feminine” personalities; among the Mundugamor, both men and women were ruthless, unpleasant, and “masculine”; in the Tchambuli community, women were dominant and men were more emotional and concerned about personal appearance—an apparent reversal of western norms. Mead’s demonstration of cultural differences—while perhaps exaggerated—is in many respects a valid indication of how society can powerfully influence gender-role development, which has been shown in many other studies. Studies like these, by anthropologists, inspired psychologists to consider the role of culture in human behaviour.

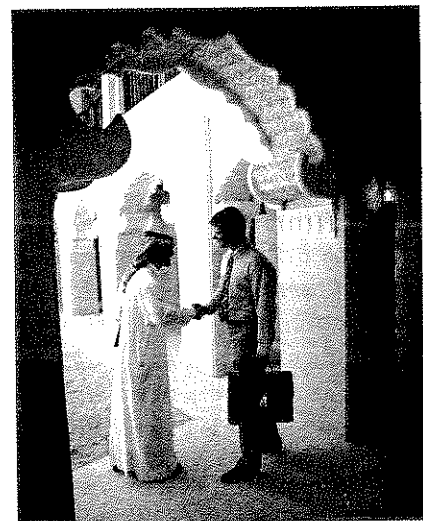
Culture is defined by Matsumoto (2004) as “a dynamic system of rules, explicit and implicit, established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviours”. This is a complex definition, so we will look at it piece by piece. Culture is *dynamic*—it changes over time in response to environmental and social changes. It also exists on many levels. One could talk about US culture, but also the culture of an individual school. A school or other large institution can have a set of guidelines that it works by—some of which are written (*explicit*) and some of which are simply understood (*implicit*). Though anthropologists often study the *objects* which make up a culture—for example, the foods, religious buildings, and grave sites—psychologists mainly focus on the subjective elements of culture. The group’s attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms are the social representation which has been internalized by its members.

Cultural norms are behaviour patterns that are typical of specific groups. They are often passed down from generation to generation by observational learning by the group’s gatekeepers—parents, teachers, religious leaders, and peers. Cultural norms include such things as how marriage partners are chosen, attitudes towards alcohol consumption, and acceptance (or rejection) of spanking children.

Cultural dimensions of behaviour

In addition to cultural norms, another component of culture is **dimensions**—the perspectives of a culture based on values and cultural norms. Hofstede’s classic study (1973) involved asking employees of the multinational company IBM to fill in surveys about morale in the workplace. He then carried out a content analysis on the responses he received, focusing on the key differences submitted by employees in different countries. His research looked at the 40 most represented countries in the surveys. The trends he noticed he called “dimensions”.

Hofstede argues that understanding cultural dimensions will help facilitate communication between cultures. This is important in international diplomacy as well as international business. Hofstede gives the example of cultural differences in business in Middle



Understanding and respect of cultural norms can promote successful interactions