

# CULTURE

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## Culture in Psychology

### The Core Definition of Culture

The concept of culture, within the context of psychological study, refers to the sophisticated and dynamic system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and which are transmitted from generation to generation. It is not merely a collection of traditions or aesthetic practices, but rather an encompassing framework that profoundly shapes how individuals perceive reality, interpret experiences, and express emotions. Psychologists view culture as a learned, rather than innate, mechanism--a collective mental programming that distinguishes members of one group or category of people from another, influencing everything from basic sensory perception to complex moral reasoning. This shared programming provides the essential scripts and schemas necessary for social interaction and societal functioning, making it the invisible architecture of human thought and behavior.

The fundamental mechanism through which culture operates is socialization, the lifelong process by which individuals internalize the norms and ideologies of their society. This internalization process ensures that cultural meanings become deeply embedded in the individual's cognitive structure, often operating outside conscious awareness. Culture acts as a powerful filter, determining which stimuli are attended to, how events are categorized, and what actions are considered appropriate or desirable in any given situation. Furthermore, culture is inherently regulatory; it provides the psychological tools--language, mathematical systems, memory strategies--that mediate human interaction with the environment, thereby enabling coordinated effort and the perpetuation of the group's unique way of life. Understanding culture is therefore critical to understanding individual psychology, as the self is always situated within a specific cultural matrix.

### Fundamental Mechanisms and Dimensions

Psychological research often attempts to map the vast complexity of cultural differences onto quantifiable dimensions, thereby providing a structured way to compare and contrast societies. One of the most influential frameworks in this area is the differentiation between high-context and low-context cultures, which describes variation in communication styles. In high-context cultures, meaning is heavily derived from implicit cues, shared history, and relational understanding, requiring less explicit verbal communication. Conversely, low-context cultures rely on direct, explicit verbal messages, where the meaning is contained primarily in the words themselves. These mechanisms illustrate how culture dictates not only what is said, but how it is interpreted, leading to potential friction or harmony in cross-cultural encounters.

Perhaps the most studied cultural dimension in psychological literature is the continuum of Individualism-Collectivism. Individualistic cultures, typically found in Western nations, emphasize the independence, self-reliance, and personal achievement of the individual. The self is defined autonomously, separate from the group. Conversely, collectivistic cultures, often prevalent in East Asia, Latin America, and Africa, prioritize group harmony, interdependence, adherence to social norms, and the needs of the larger collective over individual desires. This core difference impacts cognitive styles, motivation (personal achievement versus fulfilling duty), and relational dynamics, illustrating that cultural dimensions are powerful predictors of psychological outcomes across populations.

## Historical Development of Cross-Cultural Psychology

While the systematic study of culture's influence on the mind is a relatively modern endeavor, its roots can be traced back to the early 20th century, particularly within the field of anthropology. Early pioneers like Franz Boas and Margaret Mead conducted extensive ethnographic work, highlighting the vast diversity of human behavior and challenging the then-prevalent notion that Western civilization represented the universal peak of human development. However, psychology as a discipline largely operated under the assumption of psychic unity--the idea that fundamental psychological processes were universal and unaffected by cultural context--until the mid-20th century.

The formal emergence of Cross-Cultural Psychology as a distinct subdiscipline occurred primarily in the 1960s and 1970s. Driven by the increasing globalization and a critical awareness of the ethnocentric biases inherent in Western-centric research, scholars began systematically testing psychological theories in non-Western populations. Researchers sought to determine which psychological phenomena were truly universal (etics) and which were culturally specific (emics). This period marked a crucial shift from merely describing cultural differences to actively measuring their impact on established psychological variables, such as perception, moral judgment, and personality structure, leading to a much richer, more nuanced understanding of human variation.

## Key Pioneers and Theoretical Shifts

The theoretical landscape of cultural studies in psychology was profoundly shaped by figures such as Geert Hofstede, whose pioneering work in the 1970s and 1980s developed comprehensive cultural dimensions based on massive organizational surveys. His model provided the first widely adopted, empirical framework for quantifying national cultural differences, moving the study of culture beyond qualitative description into quantitative analysis. Equally important was the work of Harry Triandis, who refined and expanded the concept of Individualism and Collectivism, differentiating it into horizontal (equality-focused) and vertical (hierarchy-focused) forms, thereby demonstrating that even within broad cultural categories, significant variation exists.

A significant theoretical shift occurred with the rise of Cultural Psychology, which contrasts slightly with Cross-Cultural Psychology. While the latter often uses standardized measures to compare different groups, Cultural Psychology posits that the mind and culture are inseparable and mutually constitutive. Scholars like Richard Shweder argued for the concept of cultural relativism in psychological inquiry--the idea that psychological phenomena must be understood within the specific cultural context in which they arise. This view challenges the assumption that any psychological process can be truly "culture-free," emphasizing instead the co-creation of mental processes through culturally mediated practices and institutions. This paradigm shift encouraged researchers to engage in deeper, more qualitative ethnographic work to uncover the local meanings of behavior.

### **The Practical Application: Understanding Cultural Norms**

To illustrate the profound impact of culture on everyday interaction, consider the practical application of cultural norms regarding emotional expression and conflict resolution in a professional setting. Imagine an international team comprised of members from a highly expressive, Mediterranean culture and members from a reserved, Northern European culture. In the Mediterranean context, raising one's voice, using expansive gestures, and displaying strong emotions during a disagreement may signal passionate commitment and serious intent, and is often viewed as a normal, healthy part of vigorous debate.

However, if a Mediterranean team member exhibits this behavior in a meeting with Northern European colleagues, whose culture typically values emotional restraint, stoicism, and rational, modulated discourse, the behavior may be interpreted entirely differently. The Northern European colleagues might perceive the emotional display as aggression, lack of professionalism, or an inability to control oneself, leading them to withdraw from the interaction and potentially undermining trust. This real-world scenario highlights how different cultural scripts dictate the appropriate display rules for emotions--what is considered respectful and productive in one setting can be deemed disruptive and inappropriate in another.

The "how-to" step-by-step application in this example involves recognizing that the psychological principle at play is the difference in affect valuation and display rules. Firstly, one must identify the underlying cultural dimension (e.g., preference for high versus low emotional arousal). Secondly, one must decouple the behavior (a raised voice) from the typical Western interpretation (anger or threat). Finally, effective communication requires adapting one's expectations and seeking clarification, perhaps by explicitly stating that emotionality does not equate to hostility, thereby managing the cognitive dissonance caused by conflicting cultural norms and facilitating productive cross-cultural collaboration.

## Significance for Psychological Theory and Practice

The study of culture is perhaps the single most important corrective factor for modern psychological theory. For decades, the foundation of psychological knowledge was derived predominantly from studies conducted on populations described by Joseph Henrich and colleagues as WEIRD: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. The overwhelming reliance on this narrow demographic led to the tacit assumption that findings--particularly those concerning motivation, perception, and moral development--were universally applicable. Cultural psychology exposes this ethnocentric bias, demonstrating that many foundational psychological effects, such as the Müller-Lyer illusion or the nature of self-concept, vary dramatically across different cultural contexts.

The significance of integrating cultural variables is profound, as it forces researchers to reassess the validity and generalizability of their theories. If a psychological principle holds true only for 5% of the global population (the approximate proportion represented by WEIRD societies), it cannot be considered a fundamental law of human behavior. This realization has spurred methodological improvements, emphasizing the need for robust cross-cultural validation studies and promoting culturally sensitive research designs. Furthermore, the integration of culture enriches psychological models by accounting for the incredible plasticity of the human mind, showcasing how environmental and social pressures shape cognitive architecture.

## Connections to Related Psychological Concepts

Culture is inextricably linked to several other core psychological concepts. Foremost among these is **socialization**, which is the mechanism by which culture is transmitted and internalized. While culture is the content (the shared knowledge system), socialization is the process (the teaching and learning). Another closely related concept is **social norms**, which are the explicit or implicit rules that a group uses to govern the behavior and interactions of its members; these norms are the behavioral manifestations of underlying cultural values. For example, a cultural value of collectivism manifests as social norms dictating deference to elders.

In the realm of cognitive psychology, culture heavily influences the formation of **schemas** and **scripts**. Schemas are mental frameworks that organize and interpret information; culture provides the raw material for these frameworks, determining how individuals categorize objects, people, and events. Similarly, cultural scripts are internalized sequences of actions expected in specific situations (e.g., how one conducts a job interview or a funeral). Finally, culture sits at the intersection of several major psychological subfields: it is the primary subject of Cross-Cultural Psychology and Cultural Psychology, but it also forms a critical component of Social Psychology (studying group influence), Developmental Psychology (studying how development is shaped by cultural practices), and Organizational Psychology (studying workplace dynamics across global

markets).

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