

Definitions of Culture

Unscientific Definitions

[Culture is to] know the best that has been said and thought in the world.

-- Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), English poet

Culture is everything. Culture is the way we dress, the way we carry our heads, the way we walk, the way we tie our ties -- it is not only the fact of writing books or building houses.

-- Aimé Césaire (1913-), Caribbean poet

Culture is like the sum of special knowledge that accumulates in any large united family and is the common property of all its members. When we of the great Culture Family meet, we exchange reminiscences about Grandfather Homer, and that awful old Dr. Johnson, and Aunt Sappho, and poor Johnny Keats.

-- Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), English novelist

Culture is an instrument wielded by professors to manufacture professors, who when their turn comes will manufacture professors.

-- Simone Weil (1909-1943), French philosopher

Scientific Definitions

Culture... consists in those patterns relative to behavior and the products of human action which may be inherited, that is, passed on from generation to generation independently of the biological genes.

-- Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), U.S. sociologist

A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members.

-- Ward Goodenough (1919-), U.S. anthropologist

[M]an is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun... I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.... Once human behavior is seen as . . . symbolic action -- the question ... to ask [of actions] is what their import is.

-- Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), U.S. anthropologist

Culture involves... what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce.... It is shared... it is a social phenomenon.... Culture is learned, not biologically inherited, and involves arbitrarily assigned, symbolic meanings.... The human ability to assign arbitrary meaning to any object, behavior or condition makes people enormously creative and readily distinguishes culture from animal behavior. People can teach animals to respond to cultural symbols, but animals do not create their own symbols.

-- John H. Bodley (1943-), U.S. anthropologist

Related Terms

ACCULTURATION: the process by which a culture is transformed due to the massive adoption of traits from another culture

CULTURAL DETERMINISM: the belief that what people learn (culture) determines what they are and can become (nature)

CULTURAL DIFFUSION: the process by which cultural traits migrate from one human group to another

CULTURAL RELATIVISM: the belief that cultures cannot be judged as superior or inferior to one another – only as different

CULTURE SHOCK: the feelings of confusion, distress, and/or depression that can result from the stress of rapidly adjusting to an alien culture

CULTURAL UNIVERSALS: the cultural traits shared by all human beings, such as spoken language, age and gender hierarchies, and family systems

EMIC: a term that describes the perspective of “insiders” relative to a particular culture

ENCULTURATION: the process by which a human being is socialized into a culture

ETIC: a term that describes the perspective of “outsider” relative to a particular culture

ETHNOCENTRISM: the belief that one’s own culture is superior to other cultures

“MELTING POT”: a metaphor for the belief that immigrants and minorities should be assimilated into the dominant culture of the society in which they live

MULTICULTURALISM: the belief that immigrants and minorities need not be assimilated into the dominant culture of the society in which they live; associated with the “fruit salad” metaphor

SOCIETY: a group of human beings whose regular interaction and shared practices distinguishes it from other groups

SYNCRETISM: the process by which elements of other cultures are combined with elements of one’s own culture, often as a means of coping with acculturation pressures