

**SOCI 101**  
**INTRODUCTION TO**  
**SOCIOLOGY**

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**(DR. K)**

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**C. What is Culture?**

**Sociology is largely the study of the process of society, which is culture.**

**Culture** refers to the symbols, values, behavior and material objects (artifacts) that together form a people's way of life.

1. "Culture is to people like water is to fish."  
 Culture ≠ Nature  
 Culture ↔ Nature

**Key concepts:**  
 Ethnocentrism: privileging one's own culture / ethnicity  
 Xenocentrism: centered on another culture / ethnicity  
 Culture Shock: cultural disorientation  
 Subculture: a smaller cultural group

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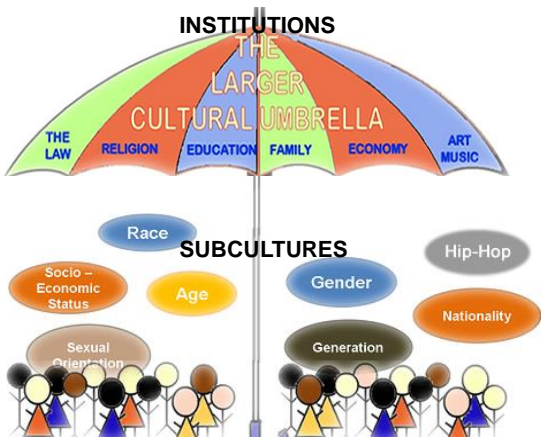
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## C. What is Culture?

2. How can we better understand the idea of **culture**? **Culture is BOTH:**

a. **Material culture** – physical artifacts.

Example: *paper money*  
(*Things*)

b. **Non-material culture** – mental cultural meanings.

Example: *value of a "dollar"*  
(*Thoughts*)

(roles)  
**ACTION**

CULTURAL  
INSTITUTIONS

**THOUGHT**  
(norms)

It is through **CULTURE** that human thought and action come together socially.

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## C. What is Culture?

### 3. Elements of Culture

There are four main elements to culture:

a. **Symbols**

b. **Language**

c. **Values, Beliefs and Norms**

d. **Artifacts**

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## C. What is Culture?

### a. Symbols

A symbol is **anything that carries a particular meaning recognized by people who share a culture.**


Each of our social institutions is populated with a vast number of symbols which hold specific meaning to us.

Examples: economic institutions = \$ € £ ¥

religious institutions = ☪ ✠ ☪ ☪

political institutions = U.S. England Germany Barbados Azerbaijan

language = W Ω ρ

people =  Prince



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## C. Components of Culture

### b. Language and Communication

A system of symbols that allows people to communicate with one another.

*Do Other Animals Talk Using Language?*

Language or "symbols" involve a meaning structure.

- **Discreteness** (sounds and words);
- **Grammar** (rules);
- **Productivity** (infinite messages);
- **Displacement** (past, future)



i. **Non-verbal communication: signs & signals**

ii. **Writing origins: 3500 BC, the Near East civilizations (Sumeria)**

*Written language* developed with civilization. The origins of spoken language are unknown.

iii. **Purpose: cultural transmission**

Language passes on cultural ideas. *How?* Through "mediation."

SELF ← language → SOCIETY

iv. **Language Changes**

*Evolutionary linguistics* is the scientific study of the psychosocial development and **cultural evolution** of languages. A sub-branch of this is the field of *memetics*.

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## C. Components of Culture

### c. Values, Norms, and Beliefs

i. **Values are culturally defined standards of desirability, goodness, and beauty**, which serve as guidelines for social living. In an open society, **values are always being debated**. Variation exists in the meaning of values; these differences can lead to "**Culture Wars**".

*For example, contemporary arguments over political loyalty.* Are fears of a "rigged election" (it was not "rigged") threatening our American values of democracy?



ii. **Norms = IDEALS for social behavior; formal or informal** (William Graham Sumner)

**"Folkways": informal everyday conventions**  
(ex: saying "good afternoon" – enforced only informally)

**"Mores": deeper ideals**  
(ex: virtue, justice, law – more strictly enforced)

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## C. Components of Culture

### c.iii. Beliefs

**Belief comes from four different sources:**

- |                            |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| IDEAL<br>SCIENCE           | } | 1) <b>Observation</b> ("empirical evidence")  |
|                            |   | PERCEPTION ..... BELIEF<br>(I see a chair. I believe it exists.)  |
| X                          | } | 2) <b>Reason / Logic</b> ("rationality")  |
|                            |   | PRINCIPLE ..... BELIEF<br>( <i>"It is logical that is a chair, because this is a classroom and classrooms have chairs."</i> (If A then B).) |
| FUNDAMENTALIST<br>RELIGION | } | 3) <b>Intuition / Faith</b>   |
|                            |   | PERSUASION ..... BELIEF<br>( <i>"I have a deep faith that is a chair."</i> )  |
|                            |   | 4) <b>Authority</b>   |
|                            |   | POLITICS ..... BELIEF<br>( <i>"I know more about chairs than anyone else, believe me."</i> – Donald Trump)                                  |

**IDEOLOGY: a non-scientific system of belief, often religious or political; NOT objectively truthful, yet thought to be "gospel" (absolute truth)**

**BEWARE OF THOSE CLAIMING TO TELL YOU THE ABSOLUTE TRUTH**

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## C. Components of Culture

### d. **Artifacts** are:

the wide range of material human creations that **reflect underlying cultural values**.



We place **MEANING** into artifacts (all **material** artifacts are also symbolic and hold **immaterial value**).



Cultural communication transmits meaning between significant others through more or less successful units of cultural information, or **memes**.

**Non-material cultural values are reflected in the material culture we create, value, and possess.**



"I like it, but I'm looking for more of a status symbol. Any way you can double the price?"

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## C. Globalization of Culture

### 4. Is there a developing "global culture?"

A **global culture** may be developing in **three ways**:



#### a. The flow of goods

- Material product trading has never been as important



#### b. The flow of information

- There are few, if any, places left on earth where worldwide communication is not possible



#### c. The flow of people

- Flow of information means people learn about places on earth where they feel life may be better



*Manuel Castells writes about this "space of flows" in his turn-of-the-century trilogy "The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture"*

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Transportation networks crisscross the globe. Their impacts include pollution, the spread of invasive species and habitat destruction.

Airline Networks  
Shipping Networks  
Road Traffic

Map compiled by Tristram Beecher/TNC. Data sources: Digital Chart of the World, ESB, 1999; National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 2005; Spatial Ecology & Epidemiology Group, University of Oxford, 2006.

Just about every place on Earth has been altered in some way by human actions, according to a new study in the journal Science by Nature Conservancy researchers.

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