

## Defining Characteristics of Culture

Culture, basically defined, consists of the various groups to which a person belongs. It is not inherited or scientific. It is a social concept, unique to the human race. In order to better understand the concept of culture, one can break it down into several defining characteristics. Though culture has many characteristics, let us focus on three main ideas: that culture is dynamic, that it is multifaceted, and that culture is learned.

When looking at any culture, one must understand that the view is always changing. Culture is not static. It is ever changing, growing, morphing into something new. Culture is dynamic because people are dynamic. Since a culture is made up of the people that belong to it, it is constantly reformed by those individuals.

From one generation to the next, ideas are transmitted and translated. Sometimes an idea can stay quite similar as it is handed down to the next generation. More often, there are subtle changes that creep into the ideology of a group. What worked in the past may not work as well in the future. What seemed so certain before can now appear somehow flawed.

Subtle changes occur often, but radical changes can also take place. These great leaps may seem to happen overnight, but like the eruption of a volcano, more likely they are the release of tension that has been building over time. However small or magnificent, changes in culture must be recognized. Educators must be aware, to their best capability, of the dynamics of a culture in order to best serve students within that culture.

One major example of a dynamic cultural idea is that of race differences. From a personal perspective, generations before me have expressed the idea that non-whites are markedly different from white people, and that they must be approached as such.

Growing up in an all-white affluent suburb, I was not exposed personally to people of other races. Yet somehow, through my education outside of home, the idea was instilled in me that race should not be such a divisor in society. Somewhere along the way, educators shared with me their belief that we are one global society.

Moving from that isolated suburb to the university setting, I had the opportunity to put those beliefs to use in real life. The adjustment came easy, and race was just one of many varying characteristics that defined my classmates and me.

As an education candidate, I have had occasion to observe classrooms in urban settings that are unlike the one in which I was raised. Whites are the minority in these classrooms. Though my personal beliefs allow me to look at these students without a great bias due to race, I sometimes find myself imagining how my viewpoint would differ from that of the generation before me. Not only has experience shown that previous generations have a different outlook, but within my own generation I have found people whose stance on racial issues is vastly different than mine.

The dynamics of culture are not absolute. It is not an all or none situation. There is a gradation of values within any culture. Referring to the dynamics of racial bias, as previously mentioned, my beliefs may be similar but not the same as my classmates'. If we can recognize our differences of opinion and discuss them when appropriate, then we stand a better chance of finding common ground as we work toward giving our students the best educational experience we can offer.

Just as there are dynamics within one culture, it is also true that a person can belong to more than one culture. That is to say, culture is multifaceted. We are never

defined by just one characteristic. People belong to many different cultural groups at any given time.

I am currently a member of the culture of college students. I am also a member of my family, a Caucasian, a musician, and a female. I could fill this page with a list of cultures to which I belong. Just as I would not wish for someone to judge me solely by my membership to one culture, educators must remember to consider the whole picture when working with students.

As another example of culture being multifaceted, I offer the case of a man nicknamed T. T is a friend of mine, whom I met through mutual acquaintances. Like me, he is a member of the culture of college students, musicians, and his own family. Unlike me, he is an international student, hailing from a rural area near Tokyo, Japan. Though we share the culture of musicians, he belongs to the subculture of percussionists, while I play other instruments. Yet we both belong to the subculture of the band in which we perform.

In the future, along with the other members of my teacher candidate culture, I must remember to never judge my students based on one particular culture. Educators must get to know their students and the cultures to which they belong. We may not understand all the intricacies of each culture, but we can learn more every day. This will not only help us relate to our students, but it will help us develop appropriate lessons and teaching techniques.

The fact that we can learn more about our students' cultures brings up the point that a third major characteristic of culture is that it is learned. Children are not born with knowledge of culture. They are raised by adults who guide them in their own cultural

ways and instill those beliefs that they deem to be important. The process of living day to day is based heavily on learning what is proper and improper in terms of the cultures in which we live.

Not only is culture learned from family members, but friends, teachers, media, and even strangers influence our cultural learning. We constantly take in information from the outside world through observation, process it, and make decisions about what is good and bad. We reject certain beliefs and adopt others. This process begins in early childhood and continues throughout our entire lives.

In the classroom setting, the teacher plays a major role in demonstrating the educational culture. Everything from classroom rules, to academic content, to life skills is taught as part of the culture of a well-educated student.

One current example to which I am exposed is that of the pre-kindergarten classroom. As part of my own education, I am enrolled in a class in which I both observe and interact with students in a pre-kindergarten class. The children in the class learn the culture of the specific classroom to which they have been assigned. This includes such things as classroom safety rules, daily routines, and academic content.

In being taught certain life skills, the children are learning yet another culture. For example, when they arrive in the morning, they must wash their hands, get their forks and napkins, and take a seat at the table for breakfast. From this daily routine, they are being taught to be members of a culture that places value on things like washing hands and eating with a fork. In contrast, members another culture might not see the need for washing hands before eating, or they might use chopsticks instead of forks. This breakfast routine, along with several other cultural routines, is reinforced daily.

By examining some of its defining characteristics, we can begin to paint a general picture of the concept of culture. No person can ever be absolutely defined by a single culture. Yet as we take into view the multitude of cultures to which any given person belongs, we can gain some insight into their beliefs and lifestyle. Furthermore, just as we must consider the multiple cultures to which a person belongs, we must also consider the dynamics of each of those cultures. Lastly, we should keep in mind that culture is learned, and each of us is constantly in a position of being exposed to new ideas and integrating them into our personal cultures, in our own ways. From an educator's standpoint, grasping the concept of culture can help us understand, relate to, and better serve our students.