

Cultural Awareness for Peace Operations Personnel



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SERIES EDITOR

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The village of Ogossagou is located 144 kilometres from the town of Sévaré in the Mopti region of central Mali. Ogossagou had been the site of two massacres between local ethnic groups in the space of two years, resulting in numerous casualties. For two years peacekeepers from Senegal serving with the Quick Reaction Force (QRF) of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) had secured a temporary operational base (TOB) in the village. Calm returned to Ogossagou with the signing of local agreements between the two communities. 31 August 2022. UN Photo by Harandane Dicko.

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About the Authors

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"The views expressed here are solely those of the author in her private capacity and do not in any way represent the views of the U.S. Naval Academy, U.S. Navy, or the U.S. Government."

Method of Study

This self-paced course aims to give students flexibility in their approach to learning. The following steps are meant to provide motivation and guidance about some possible strategies and minimum expectations for completing this course successfully:

- Before you begin studying, first browse through the entire course. Notice the lesson and section titles to get an overall idea of what will be involved as you proceed.
- The material is meant to be relevant and practical. Instead of memorizing individual details, strive to understand concepts and overall perspectives in regard to the United Nations system.
- Set personal guidelines and benchmarks regarding how you want to schedule your time.
- Study the lesson content and the learning objectives. At the beginning of each lesson, orient yourself to the main points. If possible, read the material twice to ensure maximum understanding and retention, and let time elapse between readings.
- At the end of each lesson, take the End-of-Lesson Quiz. Clarify any missed questions by rereading the appropriate sections, and focus on retaining the correct information.
- After you complete all of the lessons, prepare for the End-of-Course Examination by taking time to review the main points of each lesson. Then, when ready, log into your online student classroom and take the End-of-Course Examination in one sitting.

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- A note about language: This course uses English spelling according to the standards of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (United Kingdom) and the *United Nations Editorial Manual*.

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LESSON

1

Understanding Culture



UN Photo by Albert Gonzalez Farran.

One definition can never do justice to the concept of culture in all its complexity.

In this lesson »

- Section 1.1 Introduction
- Section 1.2 Approaches to Culture
- Section 1.3 Different Domains of Culture
- Section 1.4 Characteristics of Culture
- Section 1.5 Introducing Culture for Peacekeeping Personnel

Lesson Objectives »

- Define culture.
- Recognize common approaches to understanding culture.
- Learn how to place your “self” in culture.
- Describe the importance of respecting other cultures.
- Understand the importance of culture in peacekeeping.



The Civil Affairs section of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) conducts sensitization sessions for feuding tribal communities in the Ituri Province. 20 February 2025. UN Photo.

Section 1.1 Introduction

Let's begin this course by looking at the first word in the title of this course: culture. It is a word you surely have heard before and one you probably know a bit about. Culture is a frequently used word in many situations. Typical sentences you may have heard include: "It's important to respect other cultures," or "In my culture we..." or "I love to travel and learn about foreign cultures," or "Trying different food is the best way to learn about a culture". While these phrases may ring true, you might ask yourself: "What do we really mean by culture?". We use it to encompass much of what is significant to ourselves, to others, and to human beings in general. Yet when asked to define it, we are often tongue-tied.

What is culture?

There is a good reason why we use the word but don't feel comfortable defining it. It is important and fundamental to being human. Yet, defining culture can seem reductionist. Over time, scholars have attempted to define the concept for philosophical, social scientific, and practical purposes, giving the word its rich history. However, no one definition ever seems to satisfy all disciplines. This makes our task of defining it for you and this course challenging. One definition can never do justice to the concept of culture in all its complexity. Despite this, one thing is clear, definitions across disciplines can agree on some basic principles:

- Culture is not one thing;
- All humans share in the experience of culture and cultures; and
- It is dynamic, contested, and prone to change.

Below, we will discuss each of these characteristics of culture. Before doing so, however, it is essential to gain a general sense that understanding these dimensions of culture is important, as all human activity is embedded in culture. This is an axiom, or generally accepted truth, among those who study human social life. This means that even the simplest things we do daily are influenced by the cultural context in which they happen. As you move through this course, you will meet both simple and more complex examples of this axiom, some relating to ordinary activities, others to more specialized activities related to peacekeeping.

Here is a simple example. In March of 2022, a young woman visiting the United Kingdom from the United States was killed when she was struck by two cars while crossing a street. As reported in the news, "tragedy struck when Selena was hit by two cars traveling at 30 mph after she looked to the right, as she would safely in the US, before crossing the road. During an inquest, the driver of one car recalled the crash saying, 'She seemed to be looking the wrong way.'"¹



London Tower Bridge. Dronepicr, CC BY 3.0 <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tower_Bridge_London_\(193364901\).jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tower_Bridge_London_(193364901).jpeg)>, via Wikimedia Commons.

1) Megan Hinton, "American woman, 23, visiting British boyfriend killed looking wrong way crossing road", London Broadcasting Company, 30 March 2022. Available from: <<https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/american-woman-killed-looking-wrong-way-crossing-road>>.

This is an interesting example for three reasons. First, the direction one first looks to see that it is safe to cross a street on which motor vehicles are moving is part of learning to be a culturally competent member of society. We learn this through formal instruction and by observing our surroundings. For example, in the United States, parents and teachers of young children might sing to them a song about how to safely cross a street, which includes the lyrics, “Stop at the curb, that’s where you begin. Look left, look right, then look again.”² This cultural knowledge becomes so ingrained that once learned, it is taken for granted. It becomes part of who we are and how we act, and it takes a strong conscious effort to act differently.

The second reason this example is illuminating is that the news report of her death unintentionally shows us how strong a hold cultural knowledge has on us. Reading the news report closely, you will note that it says that she “looked right, as she would safely in the US.” However, in the US, the safe way to look first is *left* because traffic drives on the right-hand side of the road. Cultural knowledge seems so natural to us that even while writing about the mistake that Selena made, the author of the article has difficulty accurately describing what happened because she writes from the perspective of her own culture.

The third reason is that this is an interesting example lies in how it begins to show us how culture literally becomes part of us. By this, we mean that culture becomes part of our bodily experience. In the language of social science, culture is embodied. When she turned her head to look for oncoming traffic, she likely did it naturally. She likely gave no explicit thought to her action. As we will see later in this course, the embodied nature of culture presents both opportunities and challenges as we move through our lives. It affects peacekeeping activities as well.

Culture is not one thing

When we say, “culture is not one thing,” we mean a number of things, including that culture is a complex tapestry of interrelated elements, rather than a singular entity. It is dynamic and universal to all human societies. It is not a monolith, and it varies in space and time.

Perhaps foremost, we can acknowledge that we cannot encapsulate culture tangibly. Artefacts and objects may represent aspects of a culture or cultures in the same way a place of worship may symbolize a certain belief system. However, these are symbolic representations. They are not the entirety that exists in the beliefs and values shared and transmitted over time from one generation to another. We cannot reach out and touch an entity called culture.

Just as an object can only represent an aspect of culture, one person cannot encapsulate everything about an entire culture. Given the degree to which humans interact with people from different kin, backgrounds, and experiences, it is not expected that people belong to a single culture; rather, we embody what linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar called hybrid cultures.³ For example, many people may identify as Nepali, Rwandan, British, South African, or Canadian. However, each individual is more complex than carrying the name of their particular citizenship. Additionally, many people from a certain culture may disagree on what it means to carry the label of being a citizen of their particular country.

For example, a person may consider themselves to represent American culture. They may be proud of being born in a Mid-Atlantic state or of their Japanese and German ancestors. Likewise, other US citizens may consider themselves to embody US culture while practicing Buddhism. They may feel more at home in Hawaii than in Maryland or Texas. Another American may feel proud of their Irish heritage and feel most at home in New York. Others may not be aware or proud of any heritage per se, just of being American, without being able to define it.

2) Patty Shukla, “Crossing the Street”, 25 September 2023. Available from : <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/L13g-sOy4_A>.

3) Michael H. Agar, *Culture: How to Make It Work in a World of Hybrids* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

Words themselves limit the deeper meaning culture holds in the hearts of humans. To grasp the full extent of the meaning of culture requires continuous curiosity, experience, interaction, and learning — a combination of knowledge, skills, aptitudes, attitudes, and abilities.

Culture is universal to all human societies

Culture is a universal aspect of humanity. It connects people across time and space. That being said, cultures take many forms and shape how individuals interact with each other and their environment, influencing values, traditions, and behaviours. While specific practices, perspectives, and cultural world views vary, the existence of culture itself is a common thread, reflecting humanity's need to communicate, cooperate, and make meaning from the world around them. This shared capacity for culture is what binds us together as a species.

Everyone you meet has developed the way they are because of the interactions they have had in the context of their cultural worlds. Cultural contexts could include the country in which they were born. This may include any number of other groupings, such as minority communities or ethnic groups. It may mean they learned or were exposed to one or more different languages. This could also include the subcultures with which they identify, including those based on belief systems, work, education, generational groupings, extracurricular activities, and more. Indeed, to say that a person is a representative of only one culture is misleading, as most of us are cultural hybrids. Virtually no one belongs simply to one isolated culture.

In Michael Agar's view, culture is not a fixed, homogenous entity, but a dynamic, fluid process shaped by interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds. Throughout our lives, we are continuously influenced by various cultural forces, including education, migration, media, social networks, and travel, among others, which create a blend of cultural influences within us. Agar argues that everyone carries multiple layers of cultural experiences, even within a single community or identity. These overlapping influences shape our perception of the world. As a result, we integrate various cultural perspectives into our everyday lives.⁴ A distinguishing feature of what it means to be human: to be human is to have culture.

Culture is dynamic, contested, and prone to change.

All cultures are fluid and continuously evolving as people interact and adapt to the sets of beliefs, values, norms, and other systems of meaning that shape their cultural surroundings. Meaning systems — sets of beliefs, values, symbols, and norms — are used by individuals to make sense of the world around them. For example, a spiritual meaning system might explain the purpose of life. The dynamic nature of culture can be explained by the fact that within a culture, people engage with and adjust the cultural elements around them, including their beliefs, values, and expected behaviours. As individuals develop and interact with people in their own or other cultures and experience new situations with different people and a variety of information, they may adopt or challenge certain cultural aspects and meaning systems. The process of interacting and challenging meaning systems in culture can involve contesting and negotiating the status quo, leading to cultural change over time.

A contemporary example of culture being contested is the ongoing debate over gender identity and rights. In many societies, traditional views of gender have been based on binary classifications of male and female, often tied to specific roles, behaviours, and expectations. However, in recent times, movements advocating for gender equality have challenged these norms. This cultural contestation and negotiation involve cultural beliefs, values, and norms, as societies grapple with how to define and respect diverse gender identities.

4) Michael H. Agar, *Culture: How to Make It Work in a World of Hybrids*.

Jacinda Ardern, former Prime Minister and Minister for National Security and Intelligence, Child Poverty Reduction, and Ministerial Services of New Zealand, addresses the general debate of the General Assembly's seventy-seventh session. 23 September 2022. UN Photo by Cia Pak.



Continuing with the above theme of gender as a contested aspect of culture, we can look more specifically at the transformation of gender roles in many Western societies. In the early twentieth century, women were largely confined to domestic roles, with limited access to higher education, employment, and leadership roles, including political power. Over the decades, social movements like women's suffrage pushed for equal rights and helped reshape the norms. By the twenty-first century, women in most countries worldwide had not only gained the right to vote and work in professions once dominated by men but also began rising to leadership positions in the workplace, including business and government. This shift reflects broader changes in values and expectations regarding gender equality, illustrating how culture evolves in response to social, economic, and political pressures.

An example of a woman rising to power as a reflection of changing cultural values is Jacinda Ardern, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand. Elected as the leader of the Labour Party in 2017, and subsequently becoming Prime Minister at just 37 years old, Ardern represented a shift toward greater gender equality in leadership. She was respected for the compassion she gave throughout her leadership, expressed in her progressive policies of inclusivity and her ability to navigate crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Christchurch Mosque attacks. Ardern's rise reflected cultural changes in New Zealand, where gender equality, inclusivity, and progressive values have gained prominence and where women in leadership roles are more normalized in politics and other professions.

As we can see from the above examples, culture, which includes shared sets of beliefs, values, practices, customs, and behaviours, changes over time. These are contested, negotiated, and communicated to affect values, beliefs, and expectations of cultural aspects such as power relations and social roles.

Section 1.2 Approaches to Culture

Historically, scholars and others have considered culture and its role in human society in various ways. In this section, we briefly describe seven such approaches. We introduce these to show you that there are several ways to think about culture, depending upon the scale and scope in which one is interested. Some of the approaches we describe below have been supplanted as scholars and practitioners have worked to refine the concept of culture to make it more useful for purposes like peacekeeping.

Culture as found in artefacts

For a long time, when people discussed different cultures, they generally focused on the ways in which different societies utilized different materials. Artefacts provide insight into cultures' values, beliefs, practices, and ways of life, serving as windows to cultural understanding. If we look at clothing, we can find information on social structures, climate adaptations, and aesthetic preferences, including concepts of beauty. Architecture reflects environmental conditions, social organization, and spiritual beliefs. Like architecture, art, such as paintings, sculptures, or crafts, communicates symbolic meanings, spiritual beliefs, and historical narratives, among other important cultural information. Other important materials to be aware of include functional and technological artefacts, which includes cooking utensils, agricultural tools, and transportation methods. These artefacts can reveal technological sophistication, economic systems, social relationships, and interaction with the environment.



Terracotta bell-krater (mixing bowl). Attributed to Python, ca 350-325 BCE, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Categorizing material artefacts is complex. Some are obviously handmade. Other material artefacts are produced in a wide variety of ways. This could include communicative artefacts, such as expressions of language found in recordings, written documents, music, and the performing arts. These convey communication styles, philosophical perspectives, and collective memory, to mention a few. In short, artefacts are like cultural DNA. They encode complex information about human societies, preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations.

As an example of the value of artefacts, we can look at pottery from Ancient Greece to learn about cultural narratives and myths. Cultural narratives and myths were preserved by being depicted on their pottery. Pottery was not simply functional as a utensil. It was also informative to communicate culture, values, beliefs, and aesthetic sensibilities. Greek pottery not only provides us with insights into the designs of antiquity, but also provides a window into the lives, practices, and beliefs of a culture. These everyday objects bridge the gap where no other historical record exists, allowing us to understand the lives of ordinary people in the ancient world.⁵

Culture as an organism

We have approached understanding what culture is by how it works in human society or life in general. Some have understood culture as a system comprised of many parts. These parts function in an interlocking fashion as a means to achieve an end and ultimately fulfill the needs of people and create their society. These parts include characteristics of culture such as values, beliefs, and norms (to mention a few), all of which contribute to the functioning of society and help people make decisions and choices in their lives.

5) Mark Cartwright, "Ancient Greek Pottery," *World History Encyclopedia*, March 16, 2018. Available from: <https://www.worldhistory.org/Greek_Pottery/>.

This approach has been criticized for a number of reasons, three of which we note here. First, this view treats culture using the metaphor of a living organism, in which the whole thrives because of its various bodily functions. Second, this approach does not allow one to account for variation in the ways that different members partake in cultural knowledge. This obscures the fact that within cultures there is a considerable amount of variation about what is shared. Third, this approach to culture does not take into consideration the effects individuals' have on social change.

Culture is a product of history and circumstance

Rather than looking at what purpose cultural components serve in creating a form of culture, another approach has been to examine how particular cultures evolve to engender behaviours and develop over time. A founder of American anthropology, Franz Boas, developed a theory that differences in people's behaviour were due to how they were socialized in their culture. Furthermore, we learn from Boas that cultures change over time due to their interactions with other cultures and circumstances, a theory we refer to as historical particularism. We can see this today in our increasingly globalized world, where cultures learn from one another.

Culture is a set of rules

Culture is also understood as a set of rules. The theory describing culture as a set of rules is often referred to as the cultural grammar perspective.⁶ Following these rules allows a person to interact appropriately with other members of their society and with their physical environment. From this perspective, the task of understanding culture is a matter of making explicit the cultural rules that people follow, largely without thinking about them. According to this theory, once one knows the cultural rules, one can behave appropriately, as a native would.

Culture is symbolic

Culture is fundamentally symbolic, operating through a complex network of shared meanings, representations, and interpretations that go far beyond literal, tangible experiences. Cultural meaning can be found in symbolism represented in language. Language includes words, metaphors, idioms, and a variety of symbolic frameworks found in different languages. Cultural meaning can also be found in rituals. Rituals include symbolizing commitments, rites of passage, and cultural beliefs about death and spirituality. Social interactions also contain symbolic cultural meaning as they structure negotiations and relationships. The symbolism and roles of artefacts have been previously discussed above. Power and social structures that reinforce social hierarchies, authority, and norms also hold symbolic cultural meaning.

Cultures are multidimensional

Cultures are multidimensional. They can be understood through various interconnected layers and perspectives. We have previously discussed some of these. The structural dimensions include social hierarchy, economic systems, political organization, and kinship structures. The material dimensions include artefacts and technology. The symbolic dimensions include language, rituals, and art. The normative dimensions include values and social expectations, while the relational dimensions include social networks and community structures. These dimensions overlap and influence one another, creating complex and multifaceted cultural systems.

Cultures are interconnected

The impact cultures have on one another can be discovered in studies of popular culture. Popular culture can serve as a means of expressing the developing autonomy of a minority culture (whether ethnic or generational, for example) from the larger, dominant culture. In some cases, popular culture can take on elements of a foreign

6) Ward H. Goodenough, *Culture, Language and Society* (Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings Publishing, 1981).

culture to bring about this autonomy, here are two examples. There is an influx of American popular culture in many countries, ultimately affecting and changing the dominant culture, as it has done, for instance, in Germany. Similarly, for many decades, the Egyptian film industry was the main source of movies and television shows throughout the Middle East. This resulted in the spread of linguistic and other practices throughout the region.

At the same time, we should also recognize that American popular culture is in and of itself a hybrid. It is a result of multiethnic creativity. For example, popular music is comprised of global sounds coming from African, Latino, European, and other traditions. The resulting “American” music is embraced by many countries. In Germany, since World War II, it has been welcomed with its characteristics of anti-authoritarianism, youth rebellion, and contesting and negotiating established cultural norms of aesthetics and behaviour. This influx of American popular culture has caused German citizens to worry about the Americanization of their culture and the potential demise of their traditional German culture, including the language.⁷

Section 1.3 Different Domains of Culture

Now, we will examine how cultures differ. They share characteristics, although they implement these in different ways. While all cultures share some elements, they can vary widely based on geography, history, social structures, and cross-cultural influences. We can find similarities across cultures that include, but are not limited to, the following categories: approaches to or attitudes about gender, kinship organization, socialization, education, spirituality, customs, social norms and values, social institutions, language and communication, artistic impressions, and symbolic systems. However, each of these, and many others, are only general cultural categories. These general categories are defined differently depending on the specific culture in question. Differences can be manifested in such domains as (but not limited to):



7) Winfried Fluck, “The Americanization of German Culture? The Strange, Paradoxical Ways of Modernity” in Agnes C. Mueller ed. *German Popular Culture: How American Is It?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). p. 24–25.

» Values and beliefs

Some cultures tend to prioritize individualism. For example, personal achievement and autonomy are emphasized in the United States. Other cultures tend to value collectivism. For example, group harmony and social roles are highly valued in Japan.

» Communication Styles

High-context cultures tend to rely on indirect communication, where much is understood through context and nonverbal cues. China is an example of a high-context culture. Low-context cultures prefer direct communication. Germany is an example of a low-context culture.

» Social Hierarchies

Cultures can differ in their power distance. For example, in India, hierarchy and respect for authority are valued. Other cultures promote egalitarianism and the freedom to question authority. Scandinavian countries are an example of a culture that promotes egalitarianism.

» Gender Roles

Some cultures value more traditional gender roles, distinguishing between the rights and expectations of how men and women interact with each other, serve within the family, and participate in the workforce. Other cultures may embrace gender equality. For example, gender equality is embraced in Scandinavian countries.

» Time Perception

In some cultures, there is a tendency to follow a monochronic approach to time, wherein time is perceived as linear and timeliness is valued. Other cultures follow a polychronic approach to time, wherein time is seen as more fluid and an emphasis is placed on relationship building over personal desires.

» Festivals, Rituals, and Celebrations

Different cultures have distinct ways of marking important life events or holidays. For example, Thanksgiving is celebrated in the United States and the Lunar New Year is celebrated in China and East Asian cultures.

» Food and Cuisine

Different cultures have unique cuisines. These cuisines are influenced by beliefs, climate, geography, and ideas about what is considered edible and what is considered sacred. Cultures also differ in terms of the etiquette for eating in a community, the methods of food preparation, the ingredients used, and the meanings associated with these practices.

» Worldview

Different cultures have distinct ways of perceiving the world around them and beliefs about the nature of existence and humans' relationship with nature. Some cultures value domination of nature while others value a balance between human existence and nature.⁸

The iceberg metaphor

Some of these cultural categories are immediately apparent upon first encounter with a person or people from different backgrounds. To visualize how cultural categories are often depicted, we can think about an iceberg. At the tip of the iceberg, we place the visible categories such as dress, the arts, and food. We can label this as surface culture. Underneath surface culture, we can find shallow culture. Shallow culture encompasses the cultural

8) Some of the categories discussed here are taken from the Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck Value Orientations Method and Hofstede's value dimensions, which can be found in Larry Samovar et. al., *Communication Between Cultures*, 10th Edition (Mason, OH: Cengage. 2025), p. 164–170.

categories found in every society that may or may not be visible to an outsider, such as courtesies, culturally specific behaviours, and traditions. Finally, underneath it all is deep culture. Deep culture encompasses the underlying motivations and reasons, such as core values, perceptions, and assumptions. A further point about the iceberg model is that the shape and content change over time, just like an iceberg. When encountering a new culture for the first time, always remember that what you see, what is obvious to you, such as the food or dress, is determined by a much deeper, complex culture of values, motivations, and beliefs. It is this deep culture that we need to discover to truly understand why people in society behave and interact the way they do, and the meanings they assign to their lives and activities.



Adapted from Thomas J. J and Fujimura C. K. Developing Cross-Cultural Competence for Leaders: A Guide (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), p. 17.

Section 1.4 Characteristics of Culture

Culture is learned

It is important to understand that no human is born with culture. Rather, it is learned through a process of enculturation. Enculturation refers to the process by which we learn culture, helping to shape a person's sense of identity and worldview. It involves learning both explicit aspects of culture, such as language, etiquette, rituals, and laws (found in the surface culture of the iceberg model), and implicit aspects, including beliefs, values, social roles, and attitudes (found in the deep culture of the iceberg model). As we learn culture, we can pass it on to subsequent generations, just as we learn much from previous generations. We not only learn culture, but we also share it with others. We share culture with generations to come and oftentimes with other cultures with whom we interact.

Culture affects how people think and behave. It is learned both explicitly and implicitly. Some aspects of culture are learned because you are told that this is how to behave or think about certain issues (direct or explicit learning). Some aspects of culture are simply learned subconsciously or implicitly. Culture is learned subconsciously through everyday interactions defined by social norms and other repeated behaviours in specific contexts that individuals observe and absorb from their environment. From a young age, people internalize cultural values, customs, language, and ways of thinking simply by engaging with family, peers, media, and institutions. This process of enculturation occurs without explicit teaching, as individuals naturally mimic behaviours and adopt societal expectations. Over time, these learned behaviours and norms become ingrained. They guide how people perceive the world, make decisions, and interact with others, often without conscious awareness.

Both implicit and explicit cultural learning also occur throughout our lives. For example, implicit and explicit cultural learning occurs when we enter new cultural contexts, including educational settings or professional institutions. The United States Naval Academy (USNA) is an undergraduate military school that prepares midshipmen to serve as officers in the United States Navy or Marine Corps. Students, called midshipmen, learn from the day of arrival that, in order to be a part of this new culture, Naval Academy culture, and ultimately Navy culture, there are specific ways of being. There are correct and incorrect ways of dressing that depend on orders and events. There are expectations for walking that depend on context. There are expectations for talking, such as responding to superiors, as well as keeping rooms and beds in order, eating, and general behaviour throughout the day.

While the time it takes to be enculturated into becoming a member of a culture generally begins at birth and continues beyond childhood, becoming a member of USNA culture begins on the first day of enrolment, Induction Day (I-Day), when midshipmen suffer the initial and intensive learning in one summer, and continues throughout freshman (fourth class) year, a time during which they are referred to as "plebes." Midshipmen are taught explicitly. They are told, reminded, and tested on their ability to integrate into USNA culture. However, they also learn the culture implicitly.

Midshipmen at USNA implicitly and explicitly learn how to be a midshipman through a process of immersion in the Academy's structured environment, traditions, and expectations. From the moment they arrive, the intent is for them to observe and mimic the actions, attitudes, and discipline of upperclassmen, as well as the military officers who serve as role models. They should absorb key values like honour, leadership, and teamwork through daily routines, physical training, and academic rigor. The Academy seeks to create a culture that values quality output and discipline. This is reinforced through unspoken cues — how peers conduct themselves, respond to challenges, and maintain military bearing. Over time, these behaviours become second nature, shaping midshipmen into leaders without explicit instruction.

Culture is shared

Learning does not end with the individual but rather is shared between individuals. Culture continues to thrive and develop over time through both learning and sharing, which involves the transmission of beliefs, customs, values, and behaviours from one individual or group to another. This process occurs through various means, including verbal and non-verbal communication, rituals, traditions, education, and social interactions. Whether consciously taught or implicitly learned, culture spreads across generations and communities, shaping how people think, act, and relate to one another. It can be passed down within families, reinforced in schools or religious institutions, and shared more broadly through media, art, and technology. In this way, culture serves as a social glue, connecting individuals to their heritage and to one another in a shared understanding of the world.

At the Naval Academy, learning and sharing culture occur through a combination of structured programs and informal peer interactions. Midshipmen learn the Academy's values, discipline, and traditions through rigorous training, academic courses, and leadership development, all underpinned by the Academy's honour code. This formal learning is reinforced through daily routines, physical challenges, and the mentorship of upperclassmen and officers. Beyond formal structures, such as classroom learning and military instruction in the dormitory or during specific activities that teach midshipmen the Naval Academy culture, midshipmen share their culture through informal peer relationships. Through informal peer relationships, they can pass down traditions, behaviours, and the ethos of the Academy to new classes. They should model appropriate conduct, mentor younger midshipmen, and promote values like integrity and accountability in group settings. Additionally, shared experiences, such as plebe summer and military training, foster a sense of unity that can create a cycle where midshipmen can absorb and propagate the Academy's culture in every aspect of their daily lives.

Noon formation at Bancroft Hall, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland. Acroterion, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/37/Noon_formation_Bancroft_Hall_USNA_MD1.jpg>, via Wikimedia Commons.



Culture is symbolic

Culture is symbolic in that it relies on symbols — objects, actions, words, or gestures — that represent and convey deeper meanings and shared beliefs within a society. These symbols serve as a shorthand for complex concepts, values, or emotions, allowing people to communicate and connect through common understanding. For example, a national flag symbolizes a country's identity, unity, and history. Religious symbols represent spiritual beliefs and practices. Language itself is a symbolic system where words represent objects, actions, and ideas. Symbols in culture help create meaning and allow people to express shared experiences, values, and social norms, reinforcing a group's collective identity.

Let us return to our example of the United States Naval Academy culture, which is deeply symbolic with many traditions, rituals, and values representing the institution's commitment to leadership, honour, and service. Symbols such as the Academy's motto, "*Ex Scientia Tridens*," Latin for "Through Knowledge, Sea Power," reflect the blending of intellectual rigor with naval strength, reinforcing the idea that knowledge is key to leadership and naval prowess. The plebe summer initiation symbolizes the transformation from civilian to military life, teaching discipline, teamwork, and resilience. The iconic Navy blue and gold uniforms, the hymn, and historic locations like Bancroft Hall serve as physical and cultural symbols, representing the history, unity, and ethos of the Academy. These symbols create a shared identity and can instill pride and a sense of belonging among midshipmen, while also communicating the Academy's core values to the outside world.

Culture is integrated

When we say that culture is integrated, we are referring to how aspects of culture are interconnected and affect one another. There are no truly isolated aspects of culture, such as customs or traits; rather, culture is a system of interconnected parts like those depicted in the iceberg model. As previously discussed, this includes, but is certainly not limited to: language, religion, norms, values, and social and economic institutions. All these work together to create what we then call a culture, with the understanding that it can change over time. This implies that changes to one aspect of culture are likely to affect other aspects. As the anthropologist Edward T. Hall put it, "You touch a culture in one place and everything else is affected."⁹

In some societies, religious beliefs influence daily life, how people think about the world, their customs, moral values, laws, family relationships, education, and economy. The integration of these aspects offers cohesion and a sense of stability, helping people act and interact in ways that meet their expectations. If one aspect of the system changes, other areas can be affected as well.

For example, in traditional farming communities or agrarian societies, the economic system, social structures, and family roles are integrated. The economic system, based on agriculture, requires that the community work together at a high level of cooperation and labor. This labour may be offered by family members, which in turn influences the social structure in several ways:

- Family roles are typically divided by gender and age. Men often work in the fields while women manage the household, including small gardening, food preparation, and childcare. Children may also cooperate and work in smaller roles, such as helping with child rearing and looking after animals. These gendered roles are deeply embedded in the cultural norms of such societies.

9) Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Press, 1976).

- Social values and customs may emphasize community cooperation since the survival of the community depends on everyone working together and contributing. In a tight-knit community, customs around marriage and inheritance are shaped to some extent by economic needs. Family roles would most likely be affected if a shift or change occurs, such as transitioning from a farming economy to an industrial economy. Social values may shift from a community orientation to an individualistic orientation.

The integrated nature of culture is an important consideration when interacting with people within their cultural context. When we encounter a cultural feature, it should be viewed as part of a larger context and as interwoven with other related aspects.

Culture is dynamic

As we have previously mentioned, culture is dynamic and shaped by the continuous interaction of people, ideas, and environments. Culture encompasses beliefs, practices, customs, and values shared by a group. All of these elements are not static. Instead, culture adapts to social, political, economic, and technological changes. As societies evolve, cultural traditions are reinterpreted or transformed, blending the old with the new to reflect current realities and contexts. This process of change ensures that culture remains relevant and responsive to the needs and experiences of its people.

One example of this dynamic nature is the effect of globalization on food culture. Global ingredients and cooking techniques influence traditional cuisines, creating fusion dishes that blend diverse culinary traditions. For instance, sushi burritos combine elements of Japanese sushi and Mexican burritos, reflecting how cultural exchange through globalization leads to the creation of new cultural expressions. Culture is continuously reinvented in response to changing circumstances and interactions.

Section 1.5 Introducing Culture for Peacekeeping Personnel

A working definition of culture

For the purpose of this course, anthropologist Roy D'Andrade offers a foundational definition of culture. We will refer to his definition as we move through this course. According to D'Andrade, culture consists of "learned systems of meaning, communicated by means of natural language and other symbol systems, having representational, directive, and affective functions, and capable of creating cultural entities and a particular sense of reality. Through these systems of meaning, groups of people adapt to their environment and structure interpersonal activities."¹⁰

Placing "self" in culture

By placing your "self" in culture, we are referring to the importance of seeing yourself as a cultural being, that is, recognizing that your identity, values, beliefs, and behaviours are shaped by the cultural contexts you inhabit. To place yourself in culture, reflect on how factors like family traditions, community norms, language, religion, and even media influence your worldview and sense of who you are. This involves understanding and reminding yourself that culture is not static but a dynamic, evolving part of who you are that shapes how you interact with others and interpret the world. This perspective encourages both self-awareness and empathy as you begin to see cultural influences in your own life and appreciate the unique cultural backgrounds of others. By actively reflecting on these cultural layers, you can better understand how they affect your sense of identity and behaviour.

10) D'Andrade, R.G. "Cultural meaning systems," in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984) p. 88-119.



Nepalese peacekeepers serving with the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) conduct an Area Domination Patrol in Djaiba to address ongoing security concerns within the area of operations. During the patrol, they engaged with over 100 individuals, including local authorities, community leaders, and civilians, to assess the security situation, identify potential threats, and implement measures aimed at ensuring the safety of the region. 23 March 2025. UN Photo.

Respecting other cultures

Respecting other cultures is important because it fosters a more inclusive, empathetic, and connected world. When we acknowledge and appreciate cultural differences, we broaden our own perspectives, learning from the diverse experiences, values, and traditions that shape human societies. Cultural respect reduces stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination by challenging assumptions and helping us see the world through others' eyes. It also allows for more meaningful, cooperative relationships across communities, contributing to social harmony. On a personal level, respecting other cultures enriches our lives, enhances our understanding of humanity, and helps build a foundation for peaceful coexistence and global collaboration.

Respecting other cultures in peacekeeping operations is crucial because it builds trust, fosters mutual understanding, and helps reduce tensions among different groups. Peacekeepers are often placed in diverse settings where local customs, beliefs, and values differ significantly from their own. By demonstrating cultural respect, peacekeepers can create an environment where communities feel acknowledged and valued, thereby increasing their likelihood of cooperation and constructive engagement. This respect helps prevent misunderstandings that could lead to conflict and enables peacekeepers to mediate more effectively. Ultimately, honouring cultural differences is essential for achieving long-lasting peace, as it lays the foundation for open dialogue, collaboration, and reconciliation between groups.

Culture and peacekeeping, in general

In peacekeeping, culture has many important roles. Among the things that culture affects are the ways in which organizations and agencies in a mission area understand and structure their work. Culture is also important to peacekeeping because a deeper understanding of the local culture is crucial for building trust, fostering cooperation, and ensuring sustainable peace. Relying on stereotypes or superficial knowledge can lead to misunderstandings, resentment, and conflict. A nuanced understanding of the local culture allows peacekeepers to engage with communities more respectfully, adapt strategies to fit cultural contexts, and anticipate potential conflicts rooted in cultural or historical grievances. In contrast, stereotypes oversimplify complex social dynamics, risk alienating local populations, and can lead to decisions that exacerbate tensions or reinforce divisions.

In the following lessons, we delve more deeply into the many ways that culture matters to peacekeeping missions and to the peacekeeping enterprise as a whole.

End-of-Lesson Quiz »

1. **Which of the following is NOT a basic principle of culture that definitions across disciplines can agree on?**
 - A. Culture is static.
 - B. Culture is not one thing.
 - C. Culture is universal to all human societies.
 - D. Culture is dynamic, contested, and prone to change.
2. **Given how humans interact with others from different ancestry, backgrounds, and experiences, we embody what linguistic anthropologist _____ called _____ cultures.**
 - A. Roy D'Andrade; sub
 - B. Franz Boas; hybrid
 - C. Michael Agar; sub
 - D. Michael Agar; hybrid
3. **Culture is _____ to all human societies.**
 - A. irrelevant
 - B. universal
 - C. homogeneous
 - D. contested
4. **The theory describing culture as a set of rules is often called the _____.**
 - A. cultural relativism
 - B. historical particularism
 - C. cultural grammar perspective
 - D. symbolic interactionism
5. **In the iceberg metaphor, _____ culture encompasses the underlying motivations and reasons, such as core values, perceptions, and assumptions.**
 - A. sub
 - B. shallow
 - C. surface
 - D. deep
6. **_____ is the process by which we learn the culture that shapes our sense of identity and worldview.**
 - A. Enculturation
 - B. Socialization
 - C. Globalization
 - D. Maturation
7. **By placing your " _____" in culture, we are referring to the importance of seeing yourself as a cultural being, that is, recognizing that your identity, values, beliefs, and behaviours are shaped by the cultural contexts you inhabit.**
 - A. worldview
 - B. identity
 - C. avatar
 - D. self
8. **Culture can be understood as fundamentally _____, operating through a complex network of shared meanings, representations, and interpretations that go far beyond literal, tangible experiences.**
 - A. historical
 - B. universal
 - C. symbolic
 - D. material
9. **Culture, which includes shared sets of beliefs, values, practices, customs, and behaviours, _____ over time.**
 - A. changes
 - B. remains constant
 - C. requires participation
 - D. trends toward a dominant power

Answer Key provided on the next page.

End-of-Lesson Quiz »

10. _____ provide insight into cultures' values, beliefs, practices, and ways of life, serving as windows to cultural understanding.

- A. National archives
- B. Fossils
- C. Excavations
- D. Artefacts

Answer Key »

- 1. A
- 2. D
- 3. B
- 4. C
- 5. D
- 6. A
- 7. D
- 8. C
- 9. A
- 10. D