

Introduction to Sociology of Culture

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Key concepts, theories, and analytical tools for understanding how culture shapes social life.

1. What Is “Culture” in Sociology?

Dimension	Description	Example
Material Culture	Tangible objects, technology, built environment.	Smartphones, architecture, clothing.
Symbolic/Ideational Culture	Language, symbols, values, beliefs, norms, myths.	National flag, religious rituals, gender roles.
Cultural Systems	Organized patterns of meaning that guide behavior.	Legal codes, educational curricula, popular music genres.
Cultural Practices	Everyday actions that reproduce or transform culture.	Cooking meals, celebrating holidays, online memes.

Key point: Culture is **shared**, **learned**, **symbolic**, and **dynamic**—it both constrains and enables human action.

2. Core Theoretical Perspectives

Perspective	Main Assumptions	How It Views Culture
Structural Functionalism (Parsons, Durkheim)	Society is a system of interdependent parts that maintain stability.	Culture provides social cohesion (shared values) and social control (norms).
Conflict Theory (Marx, Gramsci, Bourdieu)	Social life is shaped by power struggles and inequality.	Culture is a tool of dominant groups to legitimize their interests (e.g., ideology, cultural capital).
Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, Mead)	Meaning emerges through interaction.	Culture is produced and reproduced in everyday face-to-face encounters (e.g., language, rituals).

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Perspective	Main Assumptions	How It Views Culture
Interpretive Anthropology / Cultural Sociology (Geertz, Swidler)	Culture is a “web of meaning” that individuals interpret.	Focus on thick description of symbols, narratives, and collective representations.
Post-Structural / Post-Modern (Foucault, Hall)	Power is diffuse; meanings are contested.	Culture is a site of discursive struggle ; identities are fluid and constructed.

3. Key Concepts & Analytical Tools

Concept	Definition	Analytical Use
Norms	Expected patterns of behavior.	Identify social regulation mechanisms.
Values	Broadly shared ideas about what is desirable.	Gauge cultural priorities and conflicts.
Symbols	Objects or gestures that carry particular meanings.	Decode meaning in rituals, media, branding.
Cultural Capital (Bourdieu)	Non-economic assets (education, taste, credentials).	Explain class reproduction and status distinctions.
Habitus (Bourdieu)	Deeply internalized dispositions shaping perception & action.	Analyze how social structures become embodied.
Hegemony (Gramsci)	Consent to dominant ideology through cultural institutions.	Study media, education, religion as sites of consent.
Cultural Lag (Ogburn)	Delay between material innovation and corresponding changes in norms/values.	Track societal adjustment to new technologies.
World-Systems & Global Culture (Wallerstein, Appadurai)	Flow of cultural products across core-periphery relations.	Examine globalization, cultural hybridity, diaspora.

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Concept

Definition

Analytical Use

Encoding/Decoding (Hall)

Production of media messages
(encoding) and audience
interpretation (decoding).

Analyze media reception
and resistance.

4. The Relationship Between Culture and Social Structure

1. Reciprocal Influence

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