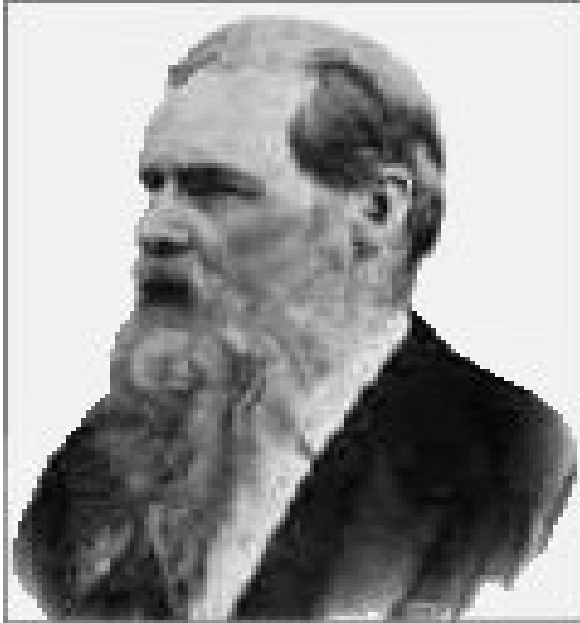


## What is Culture?



Edward B. Tylor  
(1832–1917)

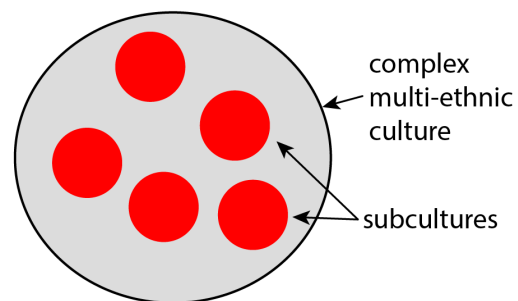
The word culture has many different meanings. For some it refers to an appreciation of good literature, music, art, and food. For a biologist, it is likely to be a colony of bacteria or other microorganisms growing in a nutrient medium in a laboratory Petri dish. However, for anthropologists and other behavioral scientists, culture is the full range of learned human behavior patterns. The term was first used in this way by the pioneer English Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871. Tylor said that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Of course, it is not limited to men. Women possess and create it as well. Since Tylor’s time, the concept of culture has become the central focus of anthropology.

Culture is a powerful human tool for survival, but it is a fragile phenomenon. It is constantly changing and easily lost because it exists only in our minds. Our written languages, governments, buildings, and other man-made things are merely the products of culture. They are not culture in themselves. For this reason, archaeologists cannot dig up culture directly in their excavations. The broken pots and other artifacts of ancient people that they uncover are only material remains that reflect cultural patterns – they are things that were made and used through cultural knowledge and skills.

### Layers of Culture

There are very likely three layers or levels of culture that are part of your learned behavior patterns and perceptions. Most obviously is the body of cultural traditions that distinguish your specific society.

When people speak of Italian, Samoan, or Japanese culture, they are referring to the shared language, traditions, and beliefs that set each of these peoples apart from others. In most cases, those who share your culture do so because they acquired it as they were raised by parents and other family members who have it.



The second layer of culture that may be part of your identity is a subculture. In complex, diverse societies in which people have come

from many different parts of the world, they often retain much of their original cultural traditions. As a result, they are likely to be part of an identifiable subculture in their new society. The shared cultural traits of subcultures set them apart from the rest of their society. Examples of easily identifiable subcultures in the United States include ethnic groups such as Vietnamese Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans. Members of each of these subcultures share a common identity, food tradition, dialect or language, and other cultural traits that come from their common ancestral background and experience. As the cultural differences between members of a subculture and the dominant national culture blur and eventually disappear, the subculture ceases to exist except as a group of people who claim a common ancestry. That is generally the case with German Americans and Irish Americans in the United States today. Most of them identify themselves as Americans first. They also see themselves as being part of the cultural mainstream of the nation.



These Cuban American women in Miami, Florida, have a shared subculture identity that is reinforced through their language, food, and other traditions.

The third layer of culture consists of cultural universals. These are learned behavior patterns that are shared by all of humanity collectively. No matter where people live in the world, they share these universal traits. Examples of such “human cultural” traits include:

1. communicating with a verbal language consisting of a limited set of sounds and grammatical rules for constructing sentences
2. using age and gender to classify people (e.g., teenager, senior citizen, woman, man)
3. classifying people based on marriage and descent relationships and having kinship terms to refer to them (e.g., wife, mother, uncle, cousin)
4. raising children in some sort of family setting
5. having a sexual division of labor (e.g., men’s work versus women’s work)
6. having a concept of privacy
7. having rules to regulate sexual behavior
8. distinguishing between good and bad behavior
9. having some sort of body ornamentation
10. making jokes and playing games
11. having art
12. having some sort of leadership roles for the implementation of community decisions

While all cultures have these and possibly many other universal traits, different cultures have developed their own specific ways of carrying out or expressing them. For instance, people in deaf subcultures frequently use their hands to communicate with sign language instead of verbal language. However, sign languages have grammatical rules just as verbal ones do.