

Topic 3.1

Geographic Data

You Will Learn to:

- Define what culture is.
- Describe how culture is transmitted through a society.
- Explain how culture includes shared practices.
- Explain how cultural traits impact places.
- Explain how cultural identities are made up of language, religion, and ethnicity.

Introduction to culture

Culture includes a group's actions, beliefs, physical items, and learned behavior, which leave an imprint on the landscape. This imprint is seen in housing communities, city infrastructure, and leisure places. As the foundation of society, culture reflects how people identify themselves and build connections with others through shared traditions, customs, and belief systems that are passed down through experience.

Societies transmit shared attitudes, cultural behaviors, and traditions

Culture can be either material or nonmaterial.

- Material culture consists of anything that is physically seen. Elements of material culture include food, housing, and clothes.
- Elements of nonmaterial culture include religion, language, and events.

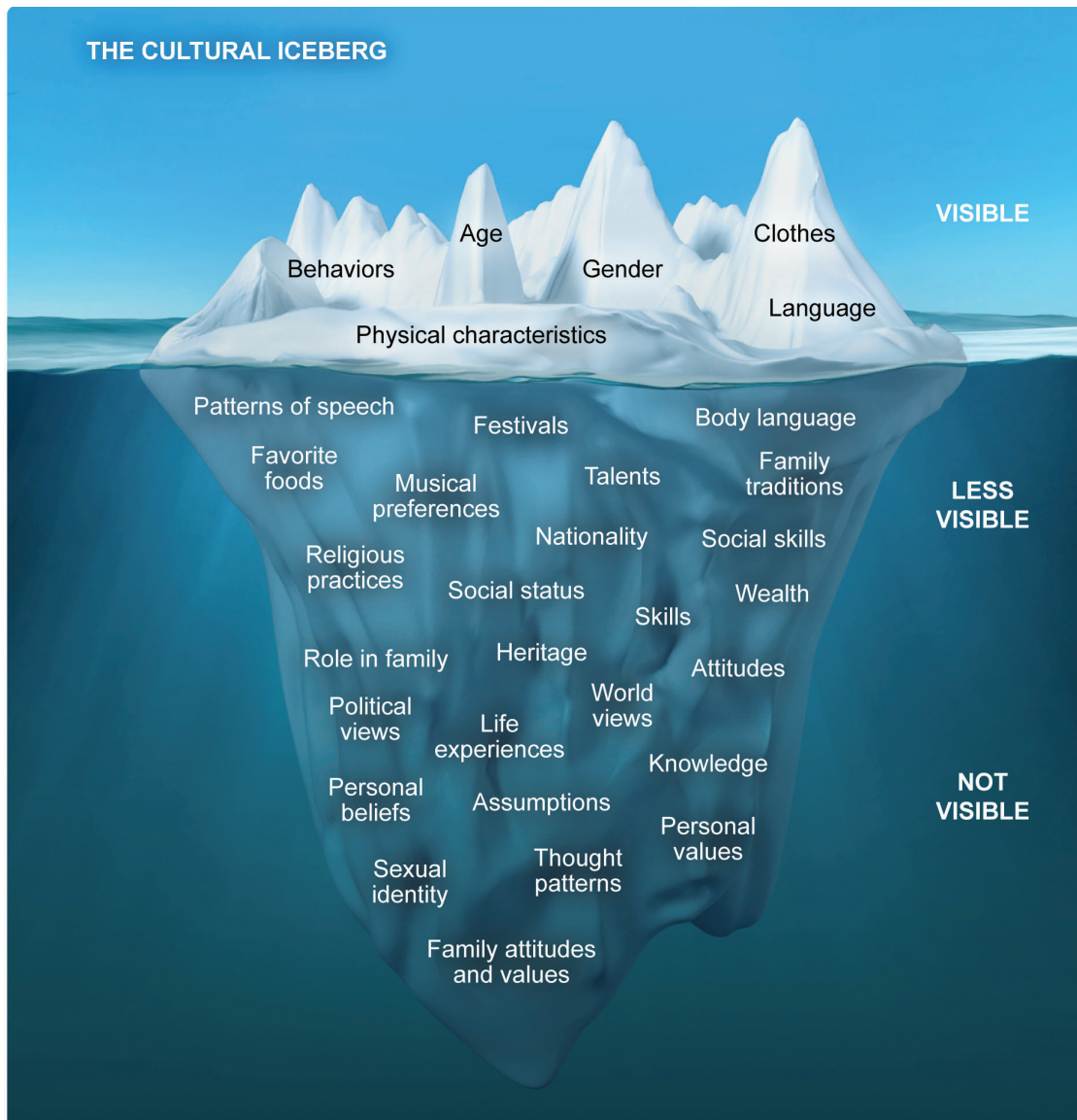
Culture is transmitted through generations and tends to stay the same over time, although certain cultural elements evolve. Culture can be expressed in native food dishes that vary between regions depending on the resources available. For example, the *pupusa* from El Salvador and Honduras contains ingredients similar to those in the *gordita* from Mexico, but the two dishes are prepared and served differently.



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The El Salvadorian *pupusa* (left) is made from rice or corn flour and grilled.
The Mexican *gordita* (right) is made from corn flour and deep-fried.

Cultural attitudes, behaviors, and traditions (such as language or clothing) are often easily identifiable in a society. Other cultural elements—like rules, beliefs, and values—aren't as easily recognized. Whether familiar or not, these elements of society are part of what geographers call a cultural iceberg.



Like an iceberg with its visible section, a culture has elements that are visible on the surface and are easily learned and changed. Cultural celebrations, such as a Latin American *quinceañera* or a Jewish *bar mitzvah*, are coming-of-age events that are ingrained in the respective societies. These long-standing traditions enable young people to become closer to their cultural community.

Culture is often expressed in shared social practices that increase a community's connectedness. Religion is one way that a society can build cultural connections, eventually leading to a combination of religious and cultural elements. This combination may occur slowly over time or it can be purposefully established by an individual or group.

For example, Hinduism and Islam are two of India's major religions that have been practiced in the country for centuries. Hinduism is an ancient indigenous religion that is closely connected to the people of India. Islam, however, diffused from the Middle East during the 7th century and arrived in India in the 10th century.

In northern India, elements of Hindu and Islamic cultures mixed to create a syncretic religion known as Sikhism. Established by Guru Nanak at the end of the 15th century, Sikhism blended Hindu rebirth and Karma concepts with monotheistic elements of Islam.



Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar

Cultural traits

Attributes of culture are known as cultural traits, which include artifacts, sociofacts, and mentifacts. Cultural traits vary depending on the region, but they can also differ within a society.

- Artifacts are physical objects created within a culture, such as houses, religious buildings, tools, and clothing.
- Sociofacts are institutions within a society that influence individual actions, such as family, government, educational systems, and religious organizations. The Roman Catholic Church is one example of a sociofact.
- Mentifacts are important, long-lasting parts of a culture that reflect its values, philosophies, ethics, and principles. The national motto of the Republic of France, "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*," is an example of a mentifact.

Cultural relativism and ethnocentrism

Cultural relativism is a theory that seeks to understand each culture's beliefs and practices from that culture's point of view. This attitude requires people to not judge other cultures based on their ideas of right and wrong. Critics of cultural relativism believe this theory leads to the acceptance of cultural practices that are dangerous and could violate the human rights of others.

In contrast, ethnocentrism judges the practices of other ethnic groups or cultures without trying to understand the origin or reason for those practices. Ethnocentrism leads people to believe their own culture or ethnic group is superior to another—an attitude that can lead to discrimination and violence. At various times in history, ethnocentrism has led to the "ethnic cleansing" (forced removal) of certain groups from an area, typically minorities that larger, more powerful groups consider racially inferior.

The contrast between cultural relativism and ethnocentrism can also be seen in traditions of marriage. Some cultures still arrange the marriage of their children, which may be frowned upon as an old-fashioned ritual by individuals or groups in other cultures who consider themselves superior to this practice. However, a respect for the beliefs of other people is vital to the success of the world's multicultural areas and communities.

3.1 Vocabulary

Artifacts	The physical objects created within a culture, such as houses, religious buildings, tools, and clothing.
Culture	The customs, beliefs, traditions, and material traits of a group of people.
Cultural complex	Cultural traits associated with specific activities or other aspects of life, such as the dress, customs, and objects associated with fine dining.
Culture hearth	The region or area where ideas or traits come from.
Cultural landscape	The relationship between society and the physical environment in a given area.
Cultural relativism	The examination of a culture based solely on that culture's distinctive standards.
Culture trait	A single element of normal practice in a culture.
Ethnocentrism	The belief that one ethnic group is superior to another ethnic group based on predetermined views about one's own culture.
Folk (traditional) culture	Cultural traditions that are practiced primarily in homogenous rural communities isolated from others. Examples include dress, home design, and religious and institutional practices.
Habit	An action or behavior pattern that a person engages in and repeats out of personal custom.
Material culture	Aspects of a society's culture that can be physically seen, including food, housing, and clothes.
Mentifact	A central, long-term part of a culture that reflects its standards, philosophies, ethics, and principles.
Nonmaterial culture	The behaviors, ideas, norms, values, and beliefs that contribute to a society's culture. These cultural elements include religion, language, and events.
Popular culture	A collection of items, activities, beliefs, norms, and attitudes that are shared and featured throughout society to the point that they become universal.
Sociofact	The institutions within a society, such as family, government, education systems, and religious organizations, that influence individual actions.

3.1 Check for Understanding

- 1. Which of the following are aspects of material culture?**
 - A. Home, car, education
 - B. Food, home, clothing
 - C. Car, education, religion
- 2. The cultural iceberg illustrates that many important traits of a culture are not immediately apparent to people of other cultures.**
 - A. True
 - B. False
- 3. Sociofacts are the institutions within a society that influence individual actions. Which of the following is an example of a sociofact?**
 - A. A religious building
 - B. A language
 - C. A family
- 4. Rice cultivation in South Asia is an example of a cultural trait.**
 - A. True
 - B. False
- 5. The idea that one racial group is better than another is known as**
 - A. cultural relativism
 - B. ethnocentrism
 - C. mentifact