

Civic and Community Engagement-Lecture #6

What is Culture?

Culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, customs, and behaviors of a group of people. It encompasses language, food, art, music, religion, traditions, and history that define a community's way of life. Culture influences how individuals experience the world, make decisions, interact with others, and define their quality of life. It is dynamic and constantly evolving.

One of the most significant aspects of culture is what is not immediately visible, values and thought patterns that influence behavior and interactions. Cultural factors include geography, age, socioeconomic status, religion, gender, education, language, and politics.

Culture: An Iceberg Metaphor

Culture is often compared to an iceberg to illustrate the complexity of cultural influences. At the surface, above the waterline, are the visible elements of culture that can be easily observed, such as language, clothing, food, art, and customs. These aspects of culture are outward expressions of deeper cultural beliefs and traditions.

However, beneath the surface lies the vast, unseen portion of culture that is not immediately visible. These hidden elements include deeply rooted beliefs, values, thought patterns, communication styles, social norms, and perceptions of time and space. These aspects are often more significant than the visible ones, as they shape the way individuals interpret and interact with the world around them.

The iceberg metaphor helps us understand that while we may be able to recognize certain aspects of a culture through observable behaviors, there is much more beneath the surface that requires deeper understanding and cultural awareness. Misinterpretations and misunderstandings often occur when individuals judge a culture solely based on its visible aspects, without considering the deeper values and belief systems that drive behavior.

For example, in some cultures, maintaining direct eye contact is seen as a sign of confidence and respect, whereas in others, it may be considered rude or confrontational. Without understanding the deeper, hidden aspects of culture, individuals may misinterpret behaviors and form incorrect assumptions about others.

Recognizing that culture is multi-layered and deeply ingrained allows for better cross-cultural communication, empathy, and respect. By looking beyond the surface and seeking to understand the underlying values and beliefs of different cultures, individuals and societies can foster more meaningful and harmonious interactions.

Key Aspects of Culture:

- **Values:** The beliefs and ideals that a group shares.
- **Language:** Words and symbols used for communication.
- **Customs:** Traditions and ways of life unique to a culture.
- **Material Objects:** Tools, technology, and works of art shared within a culture.
- **Practice:** Ways in which people act, think, and behave based on cultural norms.

Types of Culture

Culture can be understood in different forms, each shaping how individuals think, behave, and identify themselves within society. These types of culture highlight the various ways people create meaning, express values, and live their daily lives.

Material Culture

Material culture refers to the physical and tangible objects that people create and use in their everyday lives. These include clothing, buildings, tools, artwork, and technology. For instance, the design of a smartphone, the style of clothes people wear, or even the type of houses they live in all represent material culture. These objects not only serve practical purposes but also reflect the values, history, and level of technological advancement of a society.

Non-Material Culture

Non-material culture includes the intangible elements of culture, such as beliefs, traditions, customs, language, and social norms. These are the ideas and practices that guide how people interact and make sense of the world. For example, the importance of hospitality in

many societies, the practice of shaking hands to greet someone, or the moral belief that honesty is a virtue all fall under non-material culture. Unlike material culture, these are not physical objects but shared meanings and values that bind people together.

High Culture

High culture refers to cultural products and practices that are often associated with educated or elite groups in society. It usually involves forms of expression that require specialized knowledge or appreciation. Examples include attending an opera, reading classical literature, or visiting an art gallery to admire paintings from the Renaissance period. High culture is often seen as refined or sophisticated, though it is not always accessible to everyone due to differences in education or social class.

Popular Culture (Pop Culture)

Popular culture, or pop culture, represents the mainstream cultural trends that are widely shared and practiced by the general public. This includes movies, fashion, television shows, social media trends, and popular music. For example, following a global football tournament, watching trending media series, or wearing the latest sneaker styles are all expressions of pop culture. It is highly dynamic and changes rapidly with new influences from media and technology.

Subculture

A subculture is a smaller cultural group that exists within a larger, dominant culture but has its own unique set of beliefs, styles, or behaviors. Members of a subculture often identify strongly with their group while still being part of the wider society. For instance, skateboarders, anime fans, or hip-hop communities develop their own fashion styles, slang, and values that set them apart from the mainstream. Subcultures provide members with a sense of belonging and identity.

Counterculture

Counterculture refers to cultural groups that actively reject or challenge the dominant values and norms of society. These groups often promote alternative lifestyles or political views in opposition to mainstream culture. A well-known example is the hippie movement of the 1960s, which rejected materialism and war, promoting peace and communal living instead. More recently, some environmental activist groups can also be seen as countercultural, as they oppose consumerism and advocate for sustainable living.

What is Cultural Diversity?

Cultural diversity refers to the variety of cultural expressions, practices, and identities that exist within a society or community. It encompasses different backgrounds, languages, traditions, and beliefs that shape individuals and groups.

Cultural Diversity and Multiculturalism

Cultural diversity is synonymous with multiculturalism, which is the acknowledgment and respect of multiple cultural traditions within a dominant culture. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, multiculturalism is the belief that minority cultures deserve recognition and support in society.

The Beauty of Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity can be seen in various forms, such as:

- **Architecture** – The use of design elements to reflect, celebrate, and honor the cultural identities of different communities.
- **Art and Calligraphy** – Expression of cultural traditions through artistic elements, including Muslim calligraphy.
- **Historical Structures** – Examples include:
 - **The Taj Mahal**, a masterpiece of Mughal architecture.
 - **Jaipur's City Palace**, which reflects Rajasthani heritage.

- **The Alhambra Palace in Granada**, a prime example of medieval Islamic architecture.

Cultural diversity in design and art helps preserve traditions and provides a visual representation of a community's identity and values.

Four Types of Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity refers to the variety of differences within and among groups of people. These differences shape how individuals understand themselves, relate to others, and participate in society. Cultural diversity can be understood in four main categories: internal, external, organizational, and worldview diversity.

Internal Cultural Diversity

Internal cultural diversity includes the characteristics people are born with and generally cannot change. These include aspects such as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, assigned sex at birth, and physical ability. For example, being born as a male or female, or belonging to a certain ethnic group like Punjabis in Pakistan or Kurds in the Middle East, shapes one's sense of identity and influences personal experiences in society. Since these traits are innate, they often play a central role in how people are perceived and treated by others.

External Cultural Diversity

External cultural diversity refers to characteristics that individuals acquire over time and can often change throughout their lives. These include factors such as education, religion, socioeconomic status, family structure, marital status, and geographic location. For instance, a person may grow up in a rural village but later move to an urban city for education or work, which changes their lifestyle and perspectives. Similarly, people may adopt a different religion, improve their economic conditions, or change family roles, all of which reflect external diversity. These aspects are strongly influenced by environment and personal experiences.

Organizational Cultural Diversity

Organizational cultural diversity is related to differences found within workplace or institutional settings. This includes variations in job roles, work experience, age, gender, race, and ethnicity among employees. For example, a company that employs men and women of different ages, from different ethnic backgrounds and with varying levels of education, reflects organizational diversity. Such diversity can lead to inclusivity, broader perspectives, and innovation because employees bring unique ideas and problem-solving approaches based on their diverse backgrounds.

Worldview Cultural Diversity

Worldview cultural diversity refers to the differences in political beliefs, moral values, ethical philosophies, and religious perspectives that influence how individuals see the world. These differences affect how people interpret events, make decisions, and interact with communities around them. For example, some people may view social justice issues primarily through religious values, while others may approach them from a human rights or political perspective. Similarly, individuals with liberal and conservative ideologies may interpret the same political event in very different ways. Worldview diversity highlights how personal beliefs shape not only individual choices but also community interactions and social harmony.

Conclusion

Cultural diversity is a fundamental part of human society that enriches communities, workplaces, and global interactions. By embracing cultural differences, individuals and organizations can foster understanding, collaboration, and inclusivity. Recognizing and respecting cultural diversity helps build a more harmonious and innovative world.