

Unit 9 – Culture

Podcast text

Hello and welcome to the podcast for Unit 9 of Sociology 1101. Today, we will be discussing culture. Culture is a fascinating topic for sociologists, given that it has such a strong influence on our lives. Many of the things that people do can only be explained by looking at issues of culture. To take an easy example, why do people in Canada pay so much attention to hockey, while people in other parts of the world pay equally exclusive attention to other sports like soccer, cricket, and rugby? For one reason or another, people identify with these sports. When enough people identify with something, it becomes a **cultural icon**. That's one of the most interesting things about culture – it exists only when it is shared. There is no such thing as a “culture of one”, and cultures that are too small and insular invariably disappear. Cultures exist because they occupy “the space between us”. They are one of the purest expressions of people's drives to build things together.

So, what exactly *is* culture? Culture refers to the values, beliefs, behaviours, symbols, and modes of expression that together form a people's way of life. A “people” can be anything from a small group to a nation or a continent. Cultures are **permeable**, which means that they can borrow things from other cultures, branch off into subcultures, and change over time. In fact, one of the most frequent sources of political conflict is disagreement about whether and how much cultures should change. Some people think that their cultures are sacred or **inviolable**, and should not accept influence from other cultures. Others see their culture as being a work in progress that should be open to new ideas, technologies and influences. In Canada, we have an official policy of multiculturalism, which is an open culture model (at least in theory). Other countries are less accommodating. In the United States, for instance, the federal government will not provide information or services in any language other than English, even though there are 45 million Spanish speakers living the US. Many Americans believe that the English language is too central to their heritage to officially recognize other languages.

Culture is also interesting to sociologists because it is a key source of **difference**. Remember that none of us chooses the time and place of our birth. Any one of us could have been born at any different time or place, which means that many of the differences we observe across societies are due to culture. Even many of the things that some people argue are universal – like marriage and the family – vary tremendously over time and across space. In Western culture, up until very recently, an “acceptable” family could only be made up of two adults of the opposite sex. This has begun to change, and today it is more acceptable to be a single parent, or to be in a same-sex relationship. It is still unacceptable, however, to be in a polygamous family structure.

But in some parts of the world that is acceptable and even encouraged under certain circumstances.

Given these differences, sociologists avoid drawing conclusions about the “right” way to live. Instead, sociologists spend a lot of time looking at how people’s lives are affected by culture. For example, women’s rights are severely restricted in many parts of the world due to cultural expectations and traditions. Sociologists try to understand how these ideas persist (they are often reinforced by economic, political, and religious institutions), and the effect they have on women’s lives.

There are several reasons why cultural differences persist. One of the reasons is that culture is tightly bound to issues of identity. Because culture is shared, people become very attached to it as a symbol of their group. According to the structural functionalist paradigm, culture acts like a social glue to keep members of a group together even if they’ve never met. By sharing symbols such as a common language, way of dressing, dietary preferences, customs, holidays, and so on, members of a group reaffirm their commitment to each other. From a sociological perspective, it is no accident that many of the conflicts of the world are **ethnic conflicts**, as members of a cultural group rally around one another.

Another reason why cultural differences persist is because of a phenomenon sociologists call **ethnocentrism**. Ethnocentrism refers to the tendency of people to view the world through the lens of their own cultural perspective – complete with biases and omissions. One of my favourite examples of this comes from the chapter assigned for this unit, and involves the map of the world. We live on a globe, which means that the directions north, south, east and west are relative and not absolute. Nevertheless, we think of north as being “up”, and south as being “down”. Why? Well, it’s because the people who drew the first world maps – Europeans – naturally thought themselves to be superior to other people and thus naturally “on top”. Here’s a more serious example of ethnocentrism: Recall the news coverage that recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan has elicited. Nearly all the focus was on deaths and injuries to Western soldiers, and almost none on the (much higher) casualties among Iraqis and Afghans. Why? Like most institutions, the news media are ethnocentric, and they reflect people’s own ethnocentrism – specifically their tendency to relate more closely to people who are like themselves. One of the most telling things about ethnocentrism is that people don’t notice it most of the time. When the news network *al-Jazeera* began covering the Iraq and Afghan wars – and emphasizing the deaths of civilians – many people in the West reacted as though *al-Jazeera* was doing something wrong. This shows the power of ethnocentrism – that many people couldn’t even imagine seeing these conflicts from the perspective of others.

Finally, recent changes in technology and global integration have raised interesting questions about the future of culture. The Internet, along with the globalization of certain cultural products – like TV shows, music, and movies – have made some people afraid that we are headed towards a more homogeneous “global culture”. In the eyes of some scholars and political leaders, the worldwide spread of English-language pop culture is a threat to cultural distinctions. If you’ve ever travelled internationally, you’ve probably seen some evidence of this. It is admittedly a strange feeling to be in some other part of the world – immersed in another culture – and yet see Bart Simpson t-shirts on children and hear American hip-hop blaring in the streets.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that these new technologies are in fact contributing to a cultural renaissance. For example, while the Internet began as a largely English-language technology, it is now very multi-lingual. Whereas you used to have to know some English to use the web, today you don’t. More importantly, the Internet can connect people who are far away, thus helping to keep cultures alive that might have difficulty doing so. For example, the Gaelic language – which originated in Ireland and the Scottish Highlands, and then spread to Canada, especially in the Maritimes – has been making a remarkable comeback in recent years as Gaelic groups and communities have sprung up online.

Another significant change is to how cultures develop. Throughout most of human history, new cultures could develop only when people were in close physical proximity. Creating commonalities meant living together – or close to each other. The web changes this because it allows people to come together without being together. This means infinite opportunities for sub-cultures to emerge. According to this view, we are in for more cultural diversity in the future – not less.