**SOCIETY AND CULTURE**

**Introduction**

More often than not, the concepts: Society and Culture are often misconstrued to mean the same thing. Even though they are closely related and one cannot do without the other, they have very different meanings. Humans are social beings, hence the need live with each other in societies, interact at various levels and forge social bonds and relationships. Every social group or society has a culture; some cultures may be simple, while others complex, but basically all societies have a culture which is shared and learned through the process of socialization.

**Society**

The term “Society” can be traced to the Latin word”socius” which means companionship, friendship. According to George Simmel, the element of sociability or companionship is what defines the true essence of society. Aristotle stated centuries ago: Man is a Social animal, this quite explains why man always lives in the company of other men. Society or human society is a group of people related to each other through persistent relations such as kinship, marriage, social status, roles and social networks. Also society denotes the people of a region or country, sometimes even the world, taken as a whole.

McIver (1931) understood society as a web of social relationships. August Comte viewed society as a social organism possessing a harmony of structure and function. Emile Durkheim regarded society as a reality in its own right. Talcott Parsons defined Society as a complex of human relationships in so far as they grow out of the action in terms of means-end relationships intrinsic or symbolic. G.H Mead a Symbolic Interactionist, conceived Society as an exchange of gestures which involves the use of symbols.

The definition of Society has been summed up into 2, the Functional and the Structural definitions. From the functional point of view society is defined as a complex of groups in reciprocal relationships, interacting with each other, enabling human organisms to carry on their life activities and helping each person to fulfill his wishes and accomplish his interests in association with his fellows. The Structural point of view, sees society as a total social heritage of folkways, mores, and institutions, of habits, sentiments and ideals.

Having considered a plethora of definitions, we can describe Society as a group of people who share common culture, who often occupy the same territorial space and are related to each other through associations in terms of occupational roles, academic affiliations, religious subscriptions etc.

**Characteristics of Society**

1. **Likeness**: McIver posited that society means likeness. Hence Likeness is a Prerequisite for every society. There has to be some sort of similarity, formerly this likeness used to be limited to descent or kinship but it has extended to other aspects such as occupational roles etc.
2. **Difference**: all social systems involve relationships in which differences complement one another e.g. the family institution relies on the biological differences between sexes for the purpose of procreation. McIver observed that primary likeness and secondary differences created the greatest element of social institutions-division of labour.
3. **Interdependenc**e: the basic unit of the society (family) depends on biological interdependence of both sexes for its existence. Also Social organisation diversifies the work of each, making each more dependent on others.
4. **Cooperation**: cooperation is also essential to constitute society. Without cooperation no society can exist. Unless people cooperate with each other, they cannot live a happy life. All social institutions rest on cooperation.

Sociologist Gerhard Lenski based on the level of technology, communication and economy had differentiated societies into: a) hunters and gatherers, b) simple agricultural, c) advanced agricultural d) industrial, and e) special (e.g. fishing societies or maritime societies). This classification is more or less similar to the system earlier developed by anthropologists like Fried and Service. They classified societies as foraging or hunter gatherer, horticultural, agricultural, industrial, and then information-age (post-industrial) societies.

**Culture**

Culture exists in all facets of life, and basically entails the set of established modus operandi of a society. Anthropologist Edward Tylor (1870) defined culture as” that complex whole which include knowledge, belief arts, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. All humans have culture which they acquire by virtue of belonging to a social group. A whole lot of things make up culture, from norms, values, to dressing to cuisine, to ideologies and dispositions, hence the reference to culture as a “complex” whole..

Also, Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952) opined that culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts. Culture can be seen as a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions, that are shared by a group of people and that influence (but do not determine) each man’s behaviour and his/her interpretations of the meaning of other people’s behaviour .

Practically all modern definitions share key features. Anthropologists say that culture is –

* Learned, as each person must learn how to “be” a member of that culture
* Shared, as it offers all people ideas about behaviour
* Symbolic, as it is based on the manipulation of symbols
* Systemic and integrated, as the parts of culture work together in an integrated whole.

It is not possible for human beings to live without the minimum material objects (tangible). Without a network of social relations among people, human life is impossible. Human existence is impracticable without ideas, rules, ideals, symbols and patterns of thinking (intangible).Therefore we have material and non-material aspects of culture.

**Elements of Culture**

1**. Values**: what is considered as good, proper and desirable, or bad, improper or undesirable, in a culture can be called as values. It influence people’s behaviour and serve as a benchmark for evaluating the actions of others. There is often a direct relationship between the values, norms, and sanctions of a culture.

2. **Norms**: norms refers to a standard pattern of behaviour that is accepted by a society. Norms may differ from society to society. Generally there are two types of norms formal norms and informal norms. Norms that are written down and violation of which can lead to punishment is referred to as formal norms. By contrast, informal norms are generally understood and followed by a society followed by a society though not recorded in black and white.

3. **Sanctions**: sanctions consist of both rewards and penalties. It includes rewards for conducting the norms of the society as prescribed or penalties for defying the concerned social norms. Adherence to a norm can lead to positive sanctions such as a medal, a word of gratitude, or a pat on the back. Negative sanctions include fines, threats, imprisonment, and even unpleasant stares for contempt. The most cherished values of a culture will be most heavily sanctioned, whereas matters regarded as less critical will carry light and informal sanctions

4. **Culture Traits**: culture traits are the smallest (simplest) units of a particular culture. They are the building blocks of culture. Each trait can be material or non-material and it can be compared to the unit of the human body, the cell. Each cultural trait has a form, use, function and meaning. As several cells form a tissue, several traits form a complex culture.

**Characteristics of Culture**

* **Culture is socially learned**. Culture is a natural outgrowth of the social interactions that constitute human groups whether in societies or organisations. Whenever and wherever people come together over time, culture develops. Culture is learned from our parents, surroundings, and friends and others through enculturation. And the learned behaviour is communicated in the group through forms of socialization such as observation, instruction, reward, punishment and experience. The learning takes place in individual situation of experiences, social situation of imitating others and cultural situation of symbolic communication.
* **Culture is symbolic** .Symbolic thought is unique and crucial to humans and to culture. It is human ability to give a thing or event meaning and grasp and appreciate that meaning. Symbols are the central components of culture. Symbols refer to anything to which people attach meaning and which one uses to communicate with others. More specifically, symbols are words, objects, gestures, sounds or images that represent something.
* **Culture is integrated**. Elements or traits that make up a culture are not just a random assortment of customs but are mostly adjusted to or consistent with one another. Traits of a culture are attitudes, values, ideals, and rules for behaviour. All aspects of culture function as an inter-related whole. If one part of a culture changes it tends to affect another part.
* **Culture is adaptive and maladaptive** People adapt themselves to the environment using culture. The ability to adapt themselves to practically any ecological condition, unlike other animals, makes humans unique. This ability is attributed to human’s capacity for creating and using culture. Culture has also maladaptive dimensions. That is, the very cultural creations and achievements of people may turn out to threaten their survival. When we see the contemporary problems of the environments, the side effects of rapid growth and in science and technology, etc., we see that culture is also maladaptive.
* **Culture is all-encompassing** Culture encompasses all aspects, which affect people in their everyday lives. Culture comprises countless material and non-material aspects of human lives; thus, it includes man- made objects, ideas, activities whether those of traditional, of the past or those created lately. Culture is the sum total of human creation: intellectual, technical, artistic, physical, and moral.
* **Culture is inculcated** All animals are capable of learning but humans alone seem to have considerable measure to pass on their acquired habits to their children.
* **Culture is gratifying** Culture always and necessarily satisfies the basic biological and social needs of human beings. Cultural elements continue so long as they satisfy the needs of humans. If they fail to fulfill the wants of humans, they may be changed or replaced by new ones to secure the satisfaction of human wants. Gratification of needs reinforces, strengthens and perpetuates cultural elements.
* **Culture is patterned** According to Ruth Benedict cultures are not haphazard collection of customs and beliefs, but are integrated, patterned systems. The parts are interrelated. Culture is an integrated whole, that is the parts of culture are interrelated to one another. No one single cultural trait has its meaning outside of its integrated context. People use culture creatively there is difference between ideal culture and real culture. What culture-rules say and what people do may be different; cultural rules tell us what to do and how to do it, but we don’t always do what the rules dictate. We use culture creatively.
* **Culture is dynamic**. Culture is stable when we consider what people hold valuable and are handing over to the next generation in order to maintain their norms and values. Cultures are dynamic they are ever-changing. The change in a society can be of two types: internal changes (invention) and external changes (cultural diffusion).
* **Culture in Region** .Socio-cultural anthropologists talk about culture region which is the geographical territory in which a particular culture prevails. It is marked by all the characteristics of a culture, including modes of dress, building styles, farms and field and other material manifestation. That is there are sub-cultures, regional cultures, national cultures, and international cultures.

**Culture Related Concepts**

**Culture Shock**

All of us, to some extent or other, take for granted the cultural practices of our society. As a result, it can be surprising and disturbing to realize that other cultures do not follow the same way of life. Culture shock can be set off either by the physical items of an unfamiliar culture or by the ways that people act. Yet we can experience culture shock even in our own society. Culture shock is the psychological and social maladjustment at micro or macro level that is experienced for the first time when people encounter new cultural elements such as new things, new ideas, new concepts, seemingly strange beliefs and practices. No person is protected from culture shock. However, individuals vary in their capacity to adapt and overcome the influence of culture shock.

**Ideality and reality**

Ideality of culture refers to how people say they should behave, or the way they would like to live. Reality is the actual way people behave. There is generally a discrepancy between ideality and reality

**Ethnocentrism**

The general pattern is to judge the behaviour of other people in other groups by the standards of our own culture. In his book “Folkways” Sociologist William Graham Sumner coined the term ethnocentrism to refer to the tendency to assume that one’s culture and way of life are superior to all others. (Sumner 1906). The ethnocentric person sees his or her own group as the center or defining point of culture and views all other cultures as deviations from what is “normal.” Anthropologists endeavor as far as possible to avoid ethnocentrism.

**Cultural Relativism**

Cultural Relativism/ Cultural determinism approach was first formulated by Franz Boas in North America in 19th century. He says no culture should be judged by the standards of another. Cultural relativism views people’s behaviour from the perspective of their own culture. It places a priority on understanding other cultures, rather than dismissing them as “strange” or “exotic.” Any part of a culture must be viewed from within its cultural context-not that of the observer or the notion that there are no universal standards by which all cultures may be evaluated. Cultures must be analyzed with reference to their own histories and culture traits understood in terms of the cultural whole.

**Subculture**

A subculture is a segment of society that shares a distinctive pattern of mores, folkways, and values that differ from the pattern of the larger society. In a sense, a subculture can be thought of as a culture existing within a larger dominant culture. Members of a subculture participate in the dominant culture while at the same time engaging in unique and distinctive forms of behaviour. **Mores** are strongly accepted and strongly prescribed forms of behaviour within any society and community. **Folkways** are the everyday customs of a social group or community.