# Lesson Element

# Culture, Norms and Values

## Task 1 – What is culture?

In small groups discuss the following questions and make notes.

1. What is culture?

1. Using your own words, define culture.
2. How does someone acquire culture?
3. How might a person express their particular culture?

The word ‘culture’ comes from the Latin *cultura*, meaning ‘cultivation’. Through the Middle Ages it was used as an agricultural term. In the seventeenth century the term ‘culture’ began to be used in relation to the betterment of individuals through education. It was later used to refer to peoples or nations. Today, the concept has become broader still and is now used widely in everyday life to refer to a way of life.

One possible sociological definition might be:

**The ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society.**

## Task 2 – Norms and values

**Norms** can be defined as what is considered to be normal behaviour.

**Values** are beliefs, which a person feels are important to them.

**Norms** and **values** are present in all societies and play a large role in shaping the culture of a group.

Sort the following statements into norms, values or both.

1. Waiting in a queue rather than simply pushing to the front.

2. Holding the door open for someone.

3. The idea that it is wrong to kill another person.

4. Boys wearing trousers and not skirts.

5. The belief that it is wrong to take other people’s property.

6. Good manners, for example, saying thank you for something.

7. Using a knife and fork to eat with.

Next, take three examples from the list above and explain what happens if these norms or values are ignored by individuals. What are the consequences?



1. What does this activity tell us about the importance of norms and values in society?
2. Does everyone in your own society agree on shared norms and values?
3. What are some of the possible consequences of there not being agreement over shared norms and values?
4. What might shape a person’s beliefs and values?
5. What is the relationship between norms, values and culture?

### Task 3 – Cultural universals, cultural differences

Consider your own culture and make notes on the following table. Then using the summary information below, complete the table for the cross-cultural examples. See how many you can fill in and carry out research into any missing boxes. Then answer the questions beneath.

| **Cultural characteristic** | **Your culture** | **The Na** | **The San** | **Papua New Guinea** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Norms** |  |  |  |  |
| **Values** |  |  |  |  |
| **Dress** |  |  |  |  |
| **Relationships** |  |  |  |  |
| **Economic system** |  |  |  |  |
| **Language** |  |  |  |  |
| **Diet** |  |  |  |  |

**Cross Cultural example 1: The Na of China**

Otherwise known as the Mosuo, this society of farmers is found in the Himalaya region of China. They speak the Naxi language. Religion is very important to the Na. It is made up of two forms of religion; their own belief system known as Daba and the Na is also influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. The Na used to use a bartering exchange system but now cash is being used in some cases. They have a good diet based on smoked and salted meat; as there is no refrigeration, food has to be preserved in different ways.

The women wear long white pleated skirts folded into a waist sash. They wear different coloured long sleeve mandarin collared shirts. They usually wear an ornament in their hair. Young women adorn their hair with many flowers and attractive ornaments. Women start to wear the traditional dress and hair when they reach the age of thirteen. Both men and women choose to wear brightly coloured traditional dress for important events that involve the whole community.

There is no tradition of marriage within this culture. Living arrangements are organised around siblings; brothers and sisters live together in the same houses. These siblings raise the women’s children together. Incest is forbidden. Relationships take place through a system of secret visits during the night, where a man from another house will visit a woman’s home. Both men and women may have a number of lovers. These relationships are begun by a man taking an object that a woman has chosen. If the woman responds by smiling, then this means that the woman agrees to the relationship. The man will return the object to the woman that night or the next night. Everyone has the right to accept or refuse, and women are able to initiate relationships in the same way.

**Cross Cultural example 2: The San**

The San are one of the last remaining hunter-gatherer societies based in Southern Africa. They have an excellent knowledge of their environment, understanding different plants and how to use them as well as having the ability to track and hunt animals. The San feel a special connection to their land, regarding it as being connected to their ancestors.

This society is based upon the principles of equality. Decisions are made as a group and disputes are resolved through lengthy discussions. There are no formal leaders, people are only distinguished if they excel in particular areas such as healing or hunting.

Sharing is considered very important and individuals having more than they need are frowned upon. The San live in relatively small groups and within these societies, nuclear families. Men hunt for meat and women generally forage. The San consume a wide range of animals and plants and move around to make sure that they can eat what is available according to the season.

Healing dances are seen to be a very important part of culture, a way to resolve problems. All the adults share responsibility for the children, regardless of whether someone is their biological parent or not. Women's traditional gathering clothing is simple and effective: A hide sling, a blanket and a cloak in which they carry food, firewood, smaller bags, a digging stick, and perhaps, a baby in a sling. Men’s clothes are simple wraps and made out of animal skins.

There has been a tendency for Europeans to regard this society as simple or inferior, childlike even. Interestingly the San have one of the most complex languages in the world, known as Khoisan. The San use a highly complex set of clicking sounds in their language. Sadly, because of western attitudes towards this culture, this group have nearly all been forced to move from their land and their way of life is in danger of being lost forever.

**Cross Cultural example 3: Papua New Guinea**

Found in the Pacific, north of Australia, there are an estimated one thousand different cultural groups that make up Papua New Guinea, each with its own dress, art and clothing amongst other things. There are over 850 languages in Papua New Guinea. Over 80% of the population lives in the country in widely dispersed societies, which often have very little contact with other societies. Many societies are based on subsistence farming, growing enough to survive. Many areas of Papua New Guinea still do not have a cash economy.

There are strong concerns about human rights in Papua New Guinea, particularly in relation to gender-based violence, which is widespread. Corruption is also rife and crime rates are very high. There is a strong belief in witchcraft amongst many cultural groups within Papua New Guinea. If a person is suspected of being a witch they are treated very severely, often beaten or killed. Conflict between groups in some parts of Papua New Guinea has been a regular occurrence. In the past, headhunting and cannibalism have been practised although these have since been banned for some time.

Marriage plays an important role in maintaining alliances between different families, or clans. These families together may share a common spiritual ancestor and this connection can reduce the potential for conflict between groups. Polygamy, where a husband can marry more than one wife, is also practised in some parts of Papua New Guinea.

**Questions**

1. Are there any norms or values that appear to exist in all cultures?
2. What are the key similarities and differences between the cross-cultural examples and your own culture?
3. What is your reaction to the values expressed in each cross-cultural example?
4. What problems do you think a sociologist might have in trying to understand another culture?
5. ‘Culture can vary within and between societies.’ Explain what is meant by this quote.