



DP IB Psychology: HL



Your notes

The Role of Culture in Psychology

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* The Role of Culture in Human Life



The role of culture in human life

What is culture?

- **Culture** refers to the shared rules, norms, values, and customs of a group, society, or nation.
 - These are the **products of socialisation** — what people learn as members of a group
- Culture is **active**, not passive
 - People help shape the culture they live in, and that culture in turn shapes them — this is a **two-way (bi-directional)** process
- Culture is **not fixed**
 - It changes over time due to new technologies, social and political movements, and even geography

Deep and surface culture

- **Deep culture** includes the **beliefs, values, and attitudes** that underlie people's daily lives
- It's often invisible because it feels "normal" to those within that culture
- Examples of deep culture include:
 - belief in life after death
 - belief that cows are sacred
 - belief in freedom of speech
- **Surface culture** is how deep culture is **expressed outwardly** — in visible customs, rituals, and everyday behaviour
- Examples of surface culture include:
 - eating with chopsticks
 - performing traditional dances at festivals
 - living in houses built on stilts

What is enculturation?

- **Enculturation** is a type of **socialisation** — it's how we learn and absorb the norms, traditions, and practices of the culture we grow up in
- It usually happens **unconsciously**: people rarely realise they're being enculturated; it's simply part of growing up



- As people get older, they may **question or challenge** some aspects of their enculturation, but most cultural influences become deeply embedded and hard to change

How enculturation is transmitted

- **Vertically**: from parents and caregivers (the most influential figures)
- **Horizontally**: from siblings and peers
- **Obliquely**: from other adults, teachers, celebrities, media, and institutions
- Enculturation is **adaptive** — it helps individuals survive and function effectively within their culture and ensures that traditions and practices are passed down through generations

Challenges of research in this area

Culture and psychological research

- Early psychology research mostly took place in **Western, individualistic cultures** (e.g., the USA, the UK, and Western Europe)
- Findings from these studies were often treated as **universal truths**, even though they only reflected Western experiences — this is known as an **etic approach**
- The etic approach can lead to **ethnocentrism** — judging other cultures by the standards of one's own, which reduces the **external validity** of research

Etic vs emic approaches

- **Imposed etic**: when a researcher from one culture studies another using their own cultural standards (e.g., applying Western ideas to non-Western participants)
- **Emic approach**: studies behaviour **from within the culture**, using concepts that make sense to people in that setting.
 - This aligns with **cultural relativism** — the belief that behaviour can only be understood in its cultural context

Common research challenges

- **Cultural unfamiliarity**: researchers may misunderstand or misinterpret unfamiliar behaviours or norms
- **Training and cost**: developing cultural competence takes time and resources
- **Unconscious bias**: researchers may unknowingly allow their own cultural assumptions to influence data collection or interpretation — practising **reflexivity** can help reduce this
- **Inappropriate methods**: standard tools (e.g., written questionnaires) may not suit all cultures
 - Some participants may have lower literacy levels, making interviews or oral storytelling more effective

- **Language barriers** can lead to mistranslation or loss of meaning



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