

Is “Culture” the Challenge of Our Time?

Culture, a term we all know and use frequently, is basic to our own sense of self and group identity. It is so common that we rarely stop to examine what we mean when we use it or what it means to others. We frequently talk about “having” culture and “losing our culture” as if it’s a possession that we carry in a tote bag or wear like a coat.

Yet viewing culture as something people possess actually contributes to many conflicts and misunderstandings. These can be avoided if only we update how we view culture. Fortunately, that approach is now available in the **new book *Culture as Comfort – Many Things You Know about Culture (But Might Not Realize)* written by cultural anthropologist Dr. Sarah J. Mahler.** It is slim book (140 pages) that discusses the latest scholarship on how people learn culture yet makes the ideas engaging for a wide audience through current examples and personal stories.

Culture is What We Do - Not What We Have!

Professor Mahler offers a contemporary approach to culture that centers on how we *learn* cultural practices and ideas in childhood. She argues that “*Culture isn’t really something we have, but rather, it is what we do.*” She is passionate about updating our understanding of culture so that we can *do culture more mindfully.*

Why do we talk about “having” and “losing” culture but never about “doing” or “gaining” culture? *Culture as Comfort* explains culture and identities not as things we possess, but as patterned ways of thinking and behaving absorbed early in life and continuously expressed in how we act and believe. The book offers a profound yet accessible way for people to comprehend culture by exploring how we actually learn and practice “it,” not just in infancy but across our lifespan. That is, although we learn culture largely in childhood, we still can and should continue learning how to interrelate with people throughout life. It just gets harder to change our cultural comforts as adults unless we learn to do culture more mindfully.

We Can Be Constantly Learning Culture

Why does it matter that people understand how we learn culture? The rituals of early childhood are stored in our brains’ neural pathways where they continue to subconsciously shape our everyday behaviors and cultural patterns. We automatically repeat these as cultural comforts, as ways of interrelating with others like us, reinforcing our own sense of who we are and accentuating differences in others. When we encounter people who are different, we feel a strangeness, a cultural discomfort that we may not comprehend, but we definitely *feel*. Most of us then shy away from those who are different—but we don’t have to.

Mahler urges us to welcome these encounters, because it is precisely these moments of cultural discomfort that challenge us to grow culturally. **Given our diverse, globalizing world, cultural discomforts are inevitable. But because culture is something we do, it is by embracing these encounters that we open opportunities to expand our comfort zones and improve our relations with others.** *Culture as Comfort* explains how our earliest experiences translate into life-long cultural comforts, and encourages us to flex our own cultural muscles by becoming active and imaginative cultural practitioners throughout our lives.

- During early childhood, whatever infants and toddlers are exposed to becomes “normal,” and they learn the particular ways of the people around them as if they were true for everyone everywhere. These patterned ways of thinking and behaving become built into our brains’ wiring, so we never have to think about how to do culture—we simply do what we have learned.
- Learning culture so early in life means we become experts in “it” before starting kindergarten. We never recall learning culture, so “it” feels like it’s universal to everyone—our possession—not ways of thinking and behaving we acquire. This is inevitable, but it is also a source of much cultural misunderstanding.



- We all *feel* culture as comfort because the brain lays down neural connections via the limbic system, the emotional center in the brain. This helps explain why we have such deep, enduring memories from childhood and feel our cultural belonging so strongly.
- Our cultural comforts are established when our brains become imprinted with patterned ways of thinking and behavior in childhood. These become habitual, subconscious. Habits, even bad habits, are comfortable because they are predictable. When we encounter people who do things differently, however, our brains pay attention to these differences (and overlook what is familiar). Consequently, we notice and cannot help noticing what seems “strange” even if as adults we try to hide those discomforts.
- **We all stereotype others.** “Identities” such as gender, race, nationality, and religion are also learned and internalized at an early age. Thus, when we encounter people whose identities are different from ours, our brain immediately categorizes them by these identities. It does this subconsciously and irrepressibly.
- There is good news: *When we become familiar with how our brains work as we learn and practice culture, we are no longer bound by our comfortable patterns. Instead, we are able to do culture with deliberate awareness. We can approach culture with greater understanding so we can do culture more mindfully.*

An Eye-Opening and Brain-Stimulating Book!

Culture is at the core of many contemporary conflicts, reinforced by outdated views that culture is something that can be lost, stolen or conquered. We can't change these attitudes until we understand culture better. *Culture as Comfort* emphasizes that we should view culture as *processes of learning* and offers a wealth of applications demonstrating how this can transform readers' lives.

- *Culture as Comfort* is a slim yet authoritative book written in an engaging, conversational style. It is a unique resource written for many audiences—from college students to corporate, medical and diversity trainers, and from educators at all levels to parents of all ages and age-groups.
- Ideal as a social science undergraduate text, it will also appeal to readers unfamiliar with social science concepts who, nonetheless, want to be culturally fluent in a global world.
- It integrates a wide variety of cutting-edge scholarship in the rapidly expanding fields of neuroscience and cultural and developmental psychology, as well from anthropology and beyond—all the while delivering the ideas in prose which is accessible to and enjoyable for broad audiences.
- Readers are invited to apply the book's lessons immediately through interactive “Planned Pauses,” simple exercises written throughout the narrative.
- An excellent guide for multicultural trainings, teachers, and others working with diverse populations, ***Culture as Comfort* provides an enjoyable journey to enhanced cultural competence.**
- The book is available in traditional print as well as e-book versions. There is also a dynamic website where new ideas and applications are constantly shared and discussed: **cultureascomfort.com**

Culture as Comfort: Engaged and Engaging Anthropology for all Levels and Ages

Today, the U.S. and other countries are experiencing tremendous demographic and cultural shifts. As cross-cultural encounters increase, we are witnessing greater conflicts based on such loaded concepts as “Cultural Diversity” and “Multiculturalism. *Culture as Comfort* presents a clear, thoughtful guide to enable us to embrace our cultural discomforts and transform them into cultural comforts, benefitting society as well as ourselves. It is a bold challenge to meet, but *Culture as Comfort* provides the right tools for success.

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