CHAPTER 2

Culture

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Introduction to Culture

In Chapter 1 we said that sociology is concerned with analyzing the contexts of human behavior and how these contexts affect our behavior. Our neighborhood, our family, and our social class provide part of that context, but the broadest context of all is our culture. **Culture** is the total way of life shared by members of a community.

In some places, a culture cuts across national boundaries. French Canadian people and culture, for example, can be found in both Canada and New England. In other places, two distinct cultures may coexist within a single national boundary, as French and English culture do within Canada. For this reason, we distinguish between cultures and societies. A **society** is the population that shares the same territory and is bound together by economic and political ties. Often the members share a common culture, but not always.

Culture resides essentially in nontangible forms such as language, values, and symbolic meanings, but it also includes technology and material objects. A common image is that culture is a "tool kit" that provides us with the equipment necessary to deal with the common problems of everyday life (Swidler 1986). Consider how culture provides patterned activities of eating and drinking. People living in the United States share a common set of tools and technologies in the form of refrigerators, ovens, cell phones, computers, and coffeepots. As the advertisers suggest, we share similar feelings of psychological release and satisfaction when, after a hard day of working or playing, we take a break with a cup of coffee or a cold beer. The beverages we choose and the meanings attached to them are part of our culture. Despite many shared meanings and values, however, this example also illustrates some of the difficulties inherent in any discussion of a single common culture: Although Mormon Americans and Muslim Americans share our American culture, the former do not drink coffee and neither group drinks alcohol.

Culture can be roughly divided into two categories: material and nonmaterial. *Nonmaterial culture* consists of language, values, rules, knowledge, and meanings shared by the members of a society. *Material culture* includes the physical objects that a society produces—tools, streets, sculptures, and toys, to name but a few. These material objects depend on the nonmaterial culture for meaning. For example, Barbie dolls and figurines of fertility goddesses share some common physical features, but their meaning differs greatly and depends on nonmaterial culture.

Theoretical Perspectives on Culture

As is true in other areas of sociology, structural functionalists, conflict theorists, and symbolic interactionists each have their own approach to the study of culture.

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A **society** is the population that shares the same territory and is bound together by economic and political ties.

The Structural-Functionalist Approach

The structural-functionalist approach treats culture as the underlying basis of interaction. It accepts culture as a given and emphasizes how culture shapes us rather than how culture itself is shaped. Scholars taking this approach have concentrated on illustrating how norms, values, and language guide our behavior. We will return to this topic later when we discuss the carriers of culture.

The Conflict Theory Approach

In contrast, conflict theorists focus on culture as a social product. They ask why culture develops in certain ways and not others, and whose interests these patterns serve. These scholars would take an interest, for example, in how the content of television shows is affected by government versus corporate ownership.

Conflict theorists also investigate how culture can reinforce power divisions within society. They argue that **cultural capital**—upper-class attitudes and knowledge—brings power and status to individuals in the same way that *financial* capital (that is, money) does (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont & Fournier 1992). If you never learned to play golf, select a red wine, appreciate an opera, or eat a five-course meal with five different forks, your cultural deficiencies will be painfully apparent to others at upper-class events. You lack some of the cultural capital needed to marry into or work in these social circles and may be ridiculed by others if you try to do so. In this way, culture serves as a *symbolic boundary* that keeps the social classes apart.

Finally, conflict theorists analyze what happens when cultures come into conflict with each other. We will explore this topic further when we discuss subcultures, countercultures, and the battles over assimilation versus multiculturalism.

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Confidently and properly ordering and eating a meal at a fine restaurant requires "cultural capital" that you may not have unless you were raised in an upper-class or at least upper middle-class home.

The Symbolic Interactionist Approach

Whereas conflict theorists often focus on *what* the media portray (How many blacks are in TV shows? Is violence portrayed as fun?), symbolic interactionists focus on how people *interpret* and *use* what they see in the media. They explore the meanings people derive from culture and cultural products, and how those meanings result from social interaction. For example, research in this tradition has documented how women find empowering messages in romance novels and horror films, how the rise of Viagra has changed the meaning of male sexuality, why people identify with pop music stars, and what "ethnic" foods (Chinese noodles, Italian pastas, southern biscuits) mean both to those who belong to ethnic groups and to outsiders (Loe 2004; Vares & Braun 2006; Vannini 2004; Bai 2003).

Bases of Human Behavior: Culture and Biology

Why do people behave as they do? What determines human behavior? To answer these questions, we must be able to explain both the varieties and the similarities in human behavior. Generally, we will argue that biological factors help explain what is common to humankind across societies, whereas culture explains why people and societies differ from one another.

Cultural capital refers to having the attitudes and knowledge that characterize the upper social classes.

Cultural Perspective

Regardless of whether they are structural functionalists, conflict theorists, or symbolic interactionists, sociologists share some common orientations toward culture: Nearly all hold that culture is *problem solving*, culture is *relative,* and culture is a *social product.*

Culture Is Problem Solving

Regardless of whether people live in tropical forests or in the crowded cities of New York, London, or Tokyo, they confront some common problems. They all must eat, they all need shelter from the elements (and often from each other), and they all need to raise children to take their place and continue their way of life. Although these problems are universal, the solutions people adopt vary considerably. For example, traditionally, the mother's brother was responsible for child rearing in the Trobriand Islands, and communal nurseries were responsible in some Israeli kibbutzim.

Whenever people face a recurrent problem, cultural patterns will evolve to provide a ready-made answer. This does not mean it is the best answer or the only answer or the fairest answer, but merely that culture provides a standard pattern for dealing with this common dilemma. One of the issues that divides conflict and functional theorists is how these answers develop. Functionalists argue that the solutions we use today have evolved over generations of trial and error, and that they have survived because they work, because they help us meet basic needs. A conflict theorist would add that these solutions work better for some people than for others. Conflict theorists argue that elites manipulate culture to rationalize and maintain solutions that work to their advantage. Scholars from both perspectives agree that culture provides ready-made answers for most of the recurrent situations we face in daily life; they disagree on who benefits from a particular solution.

Culture Is Relative

The solutions that each culture devises may be startlingly different. Among the Wodaabe of Niger, for example, mothers may not speak directly to their first- or second-born children and, except for nursing, they may not touch them. The babies' grandmothers and aunts, however, lavish affection and attention on them (Beckwith 1983). The effect of this pattern of child rearing is to emphasize loyalties and affections throughout the entire kinship group rather than just with one's own children or parent. This practice helps ensure that each new entrant will be loyal to the group as a whole.

Is it a good or a bad practice? That is a question we can answer only by seeing how it fits in with the rest of the Wodaabe culture and by taking the viewpoint of one or another social group. Does it help the people meet recurrent problems and maintain a stable society? If so, structural functionalists would say it works; it is functional. Conflict theorists, on the other hand, would want to know who is helped and who is hurt by the practice. Both sets of theorists, however, believe that each cultural trait should be evaluated in the context of its own culture. This belief is called **cultural relativity.** A corollary of cultural relativity is that no practice is universally good or universally bad; goodness and badness are relative, not absolute.

Cultural relativity requires that each cultural trait be evaluated in the context of its own culture.

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to judge other cultures according to the norms and values of one's own culture.

This type of evaluation is sometimes a difficult intellectual feat. For example, no matter how objective we try to be, most of us believe that infanticide, human sacrifice, and cannibalism are absolutely and universally wrong. Such an attitude reflects **ethnocentrism**—the tendency to use the norms and values of our own culture as standards against which to judge the practices of others. Ethnocentrism usually means

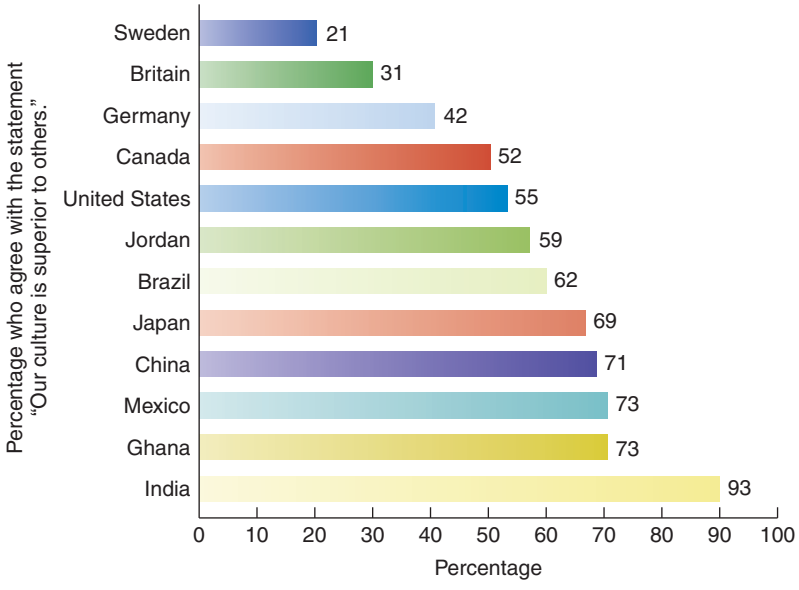


FIGURE 2.1 Ethnocentrism around the World
Ethnocentrism—the belief that one's culture is superior to other cultures—is more common in the United States than in some European countries, but much less common than in various other countries.
SOURCE: Pew Research Center (2007).

that we see our way as the right way and everybody else's way as the wrong way. When American missionaries first came to the South Sea Islands, for example, they found that Polynesians did many things differently from Americans. Rather than viewing Polynesian practices as merely different, however, the missionaries viewed those practices as wrong and probably wicked. As a result, the missionaries taught the islanders that the only acceptable way (the American way) to have sexual intercourse was in a face-to-face position with the man on top, the now-famous "missionary position." They taught the Polynesians that women and men should wear Western clothes, even if the clothes don't suit the Polynesian climate, that they should have clocks and come on time to appointments, and a variety of other Americanisms that the missionaries maintained to be morally right behavior. Figure 2.1 shows levels of ethnocentrism around the world.

Ethnocentrism is often a barrier to interaction among people from different cultures, leading to much confusion and misinterpretation. It is not, however, altogether bad. In the sense that it represents pride in our own culture and confidence in our own way of life, ethnocentrism is essential for social integration. In other words, we learn to follow the ways of our culture because we believe that they are the right ways; if we did not share that belief, there would be little conformity in society. Ethnocentrism, then, is a natural and even desirable product of growing up in a culture. An undesirable consequence, however, is that we simultaneously discredit or diminish the value of other ways of thinking and feeling. As a result, ethnocentrism can make it difficult for us to change our ways even if change would be in our best interests (Diamond 2005). For example, Norwegian explorers in Antarctica fared far better than did British explorers because the Norwegians adopted Inuit ("Eskimo") clothing, skis, and dogsleds, whereas the British considered such tactics beneath them—and sometimes died as a result (Huntford 2000).

Culture Is a Social Product

A final assumption sociologists make about culture is that culture is a social, not a biological, product. The immense cultural diversity that characterizes human societies results not from unique gene pools but from cultural evolution.

AP Images

In 1911, a British team under Robert F. Scott and a Norwegian team under Roald Amundsen raced to become the first explorers ever to reach Antarctica. The British team's ethnocentricism led to its downfall: Scott's team relied on man-hauled sleds and perished, Amundsen's team adopted Inuit dog sleds and skiing techniques and succeeded.

Some aspects of culture are produced deliberately. Shakespeare decided to write *Hamlet* and J. K. Rowling to write the *Harry Potter* books; marketing teams created the Geico gecko and the MacIntosh Apple icon. Governments, bankers, and homeowners commission designs for homes, offices, and public buildings from architectural firms, and people buy publishing empires so that they can spread their own version of the truth. Other aspects of culture—such as language, fashion, and ideas about right and wrong—develop gradually through social interaction. But all these aspects of culture are human products; none of them is instinctive. People *learn* culture, and, as they use it, they change it.

Culture depends on language. A culture without language cannot effectively transmit either practical knowledge (such as "fire is good" and "don't use electricity in the bathtub") or ideas (such as "God exists") from one generation to the next. With language, cultures can pass on inventions, discoveries, and forms of social organization for the next generation to use and improve.

Because of language, human beings don't need to rely on the slow process of genetic evolution to adapt to their circumstances. Whereas biological evolution may require literally hundreds of generations to adapt the organism fully to new circumstances, cultural evolution allows changes to occur much more rapidly.

Biological Perspective

As television programs on the Discovery Channel regularly demonstrate, clothing, eating habits, living arrangements, and other aspects of culture vary dramatically around the globe. It is tempting to focus on the exotic variety of human behavior and to conclude that there are no limits to what humankind can devise. A closer look, however, suggests that there are some basic similarities in cultures, such as the universal existence of the family, religion, cooperation, and warfare. When we focus

on these universals, cultural explanations need to be supplemented with biological explanations.

Sociobiology is the study of the biological basis of all forms of human (and nonhuman) behavior (Alcock 2001; Wilson 1978). Sociobiologists believe that humans and all other life forms developed through evolution and natural selection. According to this perspective, species change primarily through one mechanism: Some genes reproduce more often than do others. As these genes increase in number, the species takes on the traits linked to these genes.

Which genes reproduce most often? Genes will reproduce most often if the people who carry them have more children and raise more of them until they are old enough to reproduce themselves (Alcock 2001; Daly & Wilson 1983). For example, sociobiologists suggest that parents who are willing to make sacrifices for their children, occasionally even giving their lives for them, are more successful reproducers; by ensuring their children's survival, these parents increase the likelihood that their own genes will contribute to succeeding generations. Thus, sociobiologists argue that we have evolved biological predispositions toward cultural patterns that enable our genes to continue after us.

Sociobiology provides an interesting theory about how humans evolved over tens of thousands of years. Most scholars who study the effect of biology on human behavior, however, investigate more contemporary questions, such as "How do hormones, genes, and chromosomes affect human behavior today?" Joint work by biologists and social scientists helps us to understand how biological and social factors work together to determine human behavior. For example, Booth and Osgood (1993) found that men were statistically more likely to engage in deviant behavior if they had *both* high levels of testosterone *and* low levels of social integration. Research such as this suggests that only by recognizing and taking into account the joint effects of culture and biology can we fully understand human behavior.

The Carriers of Culture

In this section, we review three vital aspects of nonmaterial culture—language, values, and norms—and show how they shape both societies and individuals. We then explore how social control pressures individuals to live within the rules of their culture.

Language

The essence of culture is the sharing of meanings among members of a society. The chief mechanism for this sharing is a common language. **Language** is the ability to communicate in symbols—orally, by manual sign, or in writing.

What does *communicate with symbols* mean? It means, for example, that when you hear the word *dog* or see the curved and straight lines that represent that word in a book, you understand that it means a four-legged domestic canine. Almost all communication occurs through the use of symbols. Even the meanings of physical gestures such as touching or pointing are learned as part of culture.

Scholars of sociolinguistics (the relationship between language and society) agree that language has three distinct relationships to culture: Language embodies culture, it is a symbol of culture, and it creates a framework for culture (Romaine 2000; Trudgill 2000).

Sociobiology is the study of the biological basis of all forms of human (and nonhuman) behavior.

Language is the ability to communicate in symbols—orally, by manual sign, or in writing.

Because language is such an important carrier and symbol of culture, protests have emerged around the world whenever people feel their language is under attack.

Language as Embodiment of Culture

Language is the carrier of culture; it embodies the values and meanings of a society as well as its rituals, ceremonies, stories, and prayers. Until you share the language of a culture, you cannot fully participate in it (Romaine 2000; Trudgill 2000).

A corollary is that loss of language may mean loss of a culture. Of the approximately 300 to 400 Native American languages once spoken in the United States, only about 20 may survive much longer (Dalby 2003, 147–148). When these languages die, important aspects of these Native American cultures will vanish. This vital link between language and culture is why many Jewish and Chinese parents in the United States send their children to special classes after school or on weekends to learn Hebrew or Chinese. This is also why U.S. law requires that people must be able to speak English before they can be naturalized as U.S. citizens. To participate fully in Jewish or Chinese culture requires some knowledge of these languages; to participate in U.S. culture requires some knowledge of English.

Language as Symbol

A common language is often the most obvious outward sign that people share a common culture. This is true of national cultures such as French and Italian and subcultures such as youth. A distinctive language symbolizes a group's separation from others while it simultaneously symbolizes unity within the group of speakers (Joseph et al. 2003; Romaine 2000; Trudgill 2000). For this reason, groups seeking to mobilize their members often insist on their own distinct language. For example, Jewish pioneers who moved in the early 1900s from the ghettos of Europe to what was then Palestine declared that everyone within their communities must speak Hebrew. Yet no one had spoken Hebrew except in prayers for hundreds of years. Nevertheless, within a few decades, Hebrew became the national language of Israel.

Similarly, in the last two decades some Americans have opposed bilingual education and pushed to declare English the official language of the United States, while French Canadians have fought to make French the official language of Quebec (Dalby 2003). Meanwhile, government bureaucracies in Mexico and France fight to keep English words from creeping into Spanish and French. All these efforts are largely symbolic; in any country, both immigrants and native-born citizens will continue to use or will quickly adopt whichever language has the most social status and social utility (Ricento & Burnaby 1998).

Map 2.1 shows the percentage of people in different states who speak a language other than English at home. The percentages are high and rising. However, many of these individuals already speak English outside the home, and most who are now children will switch to speaking primarily English as they grow up. Moreover, history suggests that the children of these non-English speakers will speak only English (Dalby 2003).

Language as Framework

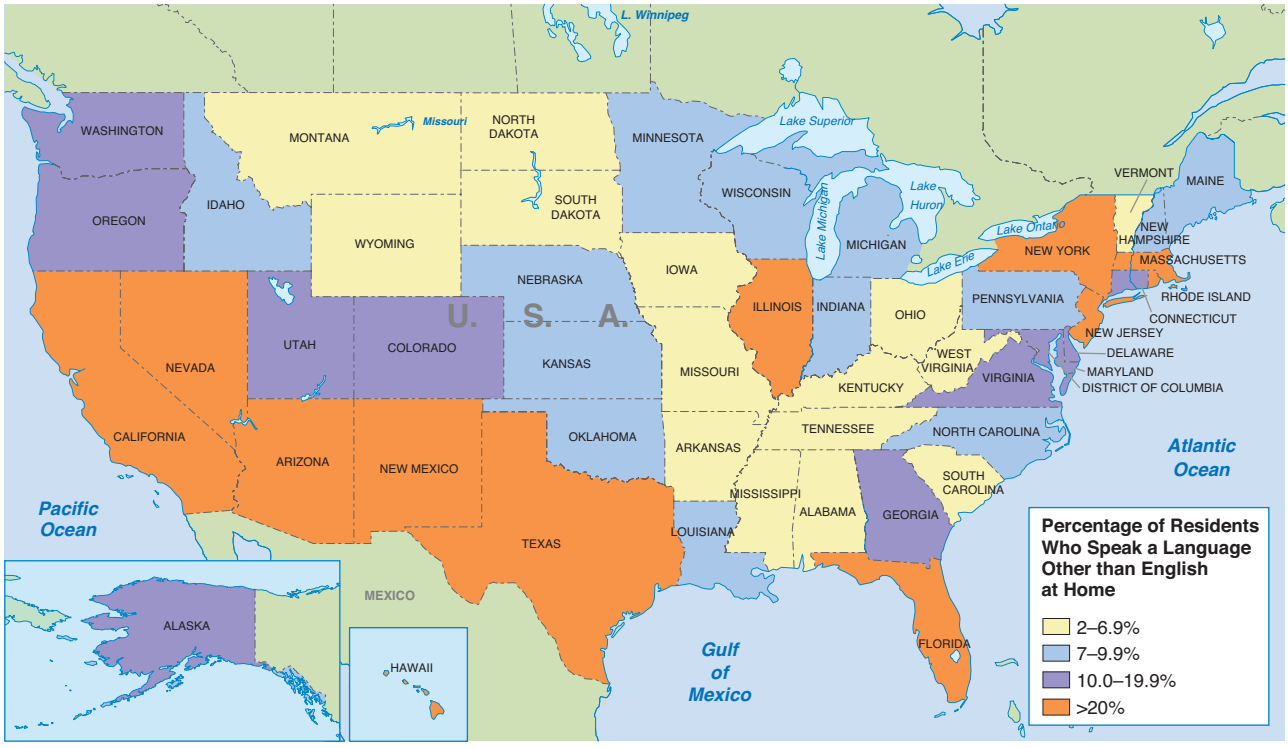
According to some linguists, languages not only symbolize our culture but also help to create a framework in which culture develops. The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** (also known as the **linguistic relativity hypothesis**) argues that the grammar, structure, and categories embodied in each language influence how its speakers see reality (Whorf 1956). According to this hypothesis, for example, because Hopi grammar does not have past, present, and future grammatical tenses (for example, "I had," "I have," "I will have"), Hopi speakers think differently about time than do English speakers.

This theory has come under attack in recent years. Most linguists now believe that although differences among languages influence thought in small ways, the

The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** argues that the grammar, structure, and categories embodied in each language affect how its speakers see reality. Also known as the *linguistic relativity hypothesis*.

MAP 2.1: Percent of U.S. Residents 5 Years and Over Who Speak a Language Other Than English at Home
Almost 20 percent of U.S. residents now speak a language other than English at home, leading some Americans to worry that American culture and the English language are at risk. But many of these foreign-language speakers also speak English, and many of their children speak only English.

SOURCE: factfinder.census.gov. Calculated from 2007 American Community Survey data set. Accessed April 2009.



universal qualities of language and human thought far overshadow those differences. The difficulties of translating from one language to another illustrate the conceptual differences among languages; that translation is nonetheless possible shows that, despite those differences, people in all cultures have essentially the same linguistic capabilities (Trudgill 2000).

Values

After language, the most central and distinguishing aspect of culture is **values**, shared ideas about desirable goals (Hitlin & Piliavin 2004). Values are typically couched in terms of whether a thing is good or bad—desirable or undesirable. For example, many people in the United States believe that a happy marriage is desirable. In this case and many others, values may be very general. They do not, for example, specify what constitutes a happy marriage.

Some cultures value tenderness and cooperation; others value toughness and competition. Nevertheless, because all human populations face common dilemmas, certain values tend to be universal. For example, nearly every culture values stability and security, a strong family, and good health. But cultures can achieve these goals in dramatically different ways. In many traditional societies, individuals try to gain security by having many children whom they can call on for aid. In our society,

Values are shared ideas about desirable goals.

Norms that govern daily life are usually not as explicit as in this classroom. Nevertheless, most of us figure out social norms without much trouble just from observing those around us.

individuals try to ensure security by putting money in the bank or investing in an education. Conversely, among the Kwakiutl tribe of the Pacific Northwest, individuals traditionally ensured economic security not by saving wealth but by giving it away in a custom called a *potlatch*. When one person gave a gift to another, the receiver was obligated to help out the giver in the future. In this way, poorer persons received needed gifts and wealthier persons could count on help if they should ever lose their wealth. As this suggests, although many cultures place a value on establishing security against uncertainty and old age, the specific guidelines for reaching this goal vary. These guidelines are called norms.

sociology and you

As you sit in your college classroom, you are following a long list of norms. Your very presence in the classroom reflects your acknowledgment that higher education is useful. No matter how bored you might be, you sit reasonably still and try not to fidget. If you are falling asleep, you pull your cap brim down to hide your droopy eyelids. You raise your hand rather than call out to demonstrate your respect for the teacher. And you write down whatever the teacher says, or at least write something down so it looks like you are taking notes.

Norms

Shared rules of conduct are **norms**. They specify what people *ought* or *ought not* to do. The list of things we ought to do sometimes seems endless. We begin the day with "I'm awfully tired, but I ought to get up," and may end the day with "I'd like to keep partying but I'd better go to bed." In between, we ought to brush our teeth, eat our vegetables, work hard, love our neighbors, and on and on. The list is so extensive that we may occasionally feel that we have too many obligations and too few choices. Of course, some pursuits are optional and allow us to make choices, but the whole idea of culture is that it provides a blueprint for living, a pattern to follow.

Norms vary enormously in their importance both to individuals and to society. Some, such as fashions, are short-lived. Others, such as those supporting monogamy and democracy, are powerful and long-lasting because they are central to our culture. Generally, we distinguish between two kinds of norms: folkways and mores.

Norms are shared rules of conduct that specify how people ought to think and act.

Folkways are norms that are the customary, normal, habitual ways a group does things.

Folkways

The word **folkways** describes norms that are simply the customary, normal, habitual ways a group does things. Folkways is a broad concept that covers relatively permanent traditions (such as fireworks on the Fourth of July) as well as passing fads and fashions (such as wearing baggy versus tight shorts).

Folkways carry no moral value. If you choose to violate folkways by having hamburgers for breakfast and oatmeal for dinner, or by sleeping on the floor and dyeing your hair purple, others may consider you eccentric, weird, or crazy, but they will not brand you immoral or criminal.

Mores

In contrast to folkways, other norms do carry moral value. These norms are called **mores** (more-ays). Whereas eating oatmeal for dinner may lead others to consider you odd, eating your dog or spending your last dollar on liquor when your child needs shoes may lead others to consider you immoral. They may turn you in to the police or to a child protection association; they may cut off all interaction with you or even chase you out of the neighborhood. Because people who break these norms are considered immoral, we know that these norms are mores, and not simply folkways. Not all violations of mores result in legal punishment, but all result in such informal reprisals as ostracism, shunning, or reprimand. These punishments, formal and informal, reduce the likelihood that people will violate mores.

Laws

When mores are enforced and sanctioned by the government, they are known as **laws**. If laws cease to be supported by norms and values, they may be overturned or the police may simply stop enforcing them. However, laws don't always emerge from popular values. New laws forbidding driving while texting, for example, were adopted to *change* existing norms, not to reflect them.

The Concept Summary on Values, Norms, and Laws compares these three important concepts.

Social Control

From our earliest childhood, we learn to observe norms, first within our families and later within peer groups, at school, and in the larger society. After a period of time, following the norms becomes so habitual that we can hardly imagine living any other way—they are so much a part of our lives that we may not even be aware of them as constraints. We do not think, "I ought to brush my teeth or else my friends and family will shun me"; instead we think, "It would be disgusting not to brush my teeth, and I'll hate myself if I don't brush them." For thousands of generations, no human considered it disgusting to go around with unbrushed teeth. For most people in the United States, however, brushing their teeth is so much a part of their feeling about the kind of person they are that they would disgust themselves if they did not do so.

Through indoctrination, learning, and experience, many of society's norms come to seem so natural that we cannot imagine acting differently. No society relies completely on this voluntary compliance, however, and all encourage conformity by the use of **sanctions**—rewards for conformity and punishments for nonconformity. Some sanctions are formal, in the sense that the legal codes identify specific penalties, fines, and punishments meted out to individuals who violate formal laws. Formal sanctions are also built into most large organizations to control absenteeism and productivity. Some of the most effective sanctions, however, are informal. Positive sanctions such as affection, approval, and inclusion encourage normative behavior, whereas negative sanctions such as a cold shoulder, disapproval, and exclusion discourage norm violations.

Despite these sanctions, norms are not always a good guide to what people actually do, and it is important to distinguish between normative behavior (what we

Mores are norms associated with fairly strong ideas of right or wrong; they carry a moral connotation.

Laws are rules that are enforced and sanctioned by the authority of government. They may or may not be norms.

Sanctions are rewards for conformity and punishments for nonconformity.

concept summary

Values, Norms, and Laws

Concept	Definition	Example from Marriage	Relationship to Values
Values	Shared ideas about desirable goals	It is desirable that marriage include physical love between wife and husband	
Norms	Shared rules of conduct	Have sexual intercourse regularly with each other, but not with anyone else	Generally accepted means to achieve value
Folkways	Norms that are customary or usual	Share a bedroom and a bed; kids sleep in a different room	Optional but usual means to achieve value
Mores	Norms with strong feelings of right and wrong	Thou shalt not commit adultery	Morally required means to achieve value
Laws	Formal standards of conduct, enforced by public agencies	Illegal for husband to rape wife; sexual relations must be voluntary	Legally required means; may or may not be supported by norms

are supposed to do) and actual behavior. For example, our own society has powerful mores supporting marital fidelity. Yet research has shown that nearly half of all married men and women in our society have committed adultery (Laumann et al. 1994). In this instance, culture expresses expectations that differ significantly from actual behavior. This does not mean the norm is unimportant. Even norms that a large minority, or even a majority, fail to live up to are still important guides to behavior. The discrepancy between actual behavior and normative behavior—termed *deviance*—is a major area of sociological research and inquiry (see Chapter 6).

Cultural Diversity and Change

By definition, members of a community share a culture. But that culture is never completely homogeneous. In the following sections, we will look at two expressions of diversity within cultures—subcultures and countercultures—and at the processes by which cultures change.

Subcultures and Countercultures

Subcultures are groups that share in the overall culture of society but also maintain a distinctive set of values, norms, and lifestyles and even a distinctive language.

No society is completely homogeneous. Instead, each society has within it a dominant culture, as well as subcultures and countercultures.

Subcultures share in the overall culture of society but also maintain a distinctive set of values, norms, lifestyles, and traditions and even a distinctive language. The "Greek life" of traditional (residential) fraternities and sororities offers an excellent

example of a subculture. To enter a fraternity or sorority, prospective members must first demonstrate that their fashion style; partying or studying habits; and attitudes toward sex, drinking, community service, and scholarship fit the culture of a particular house as well as of the Greek system as a whole. Those who are "tapped" must then go through the ritual of hazing, an experience that can range from humorous to dangerous and that cements ties to the fraternity or sorority and its culture. After initiation, members learn the special traditions of the house, which can include songs, passwords, and other rituals.

Greek subculture does not have its own language, but it does have its own slang terms for members of other houses, among other things. It also has its own values, beginning with loyalty to fellow members. Some fraternities, for example, expect their members to tutor fraternity "brothers" when needed; other fraternities expect members to help their brothers cheat on exams. Fraternities also expect members to adopt a distinctive lifestyle: living together in sex-segregated houses and cooking, eating, and socializing primarily with other house members. Those who actively participate in this subculture gain strong, supportive bonds during college and strong social networks afterward.

Subcultures differ from the dominant culture, but they are not at odds with it. In contrast, **countercultures** are groups whose values, interests, beliefs, and lifestyles conflict with those of the larger culture. This theme of conflict is clear among one current U.S. countercultural group—punkers. Some punkers are part-timers who shave their heads and listen to death rock but nevertheless manage to go to school or hold a job. Hardcore punkers, however, emphatically reject "straight" society. They refuse to work or to accept charity; they live angry and sometimes hungry lives on the streets. They cover their arms with tattoos or stick safety pins into their clothes or eyebrows because they *want* people to know they have rejected mainstream values.

Assimilation or Multiculturalism?

Until very recently, most Americans believed it would be best if the various ethnic and religious subcultures within American society would adopt the dominant majority culture. **Assimilation** refers to the process through which individuals learn and adopt the values and social practices of the dominant group, more or less giving up their own values in the process. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 12, assimilation was, and to some extent still is, one of the major goals of our educational institutions (Spring 2004). In schools, immigrant children learn not only to read and write English but also to consider American foods, ideas, and social practices preferable to those of their own native culture or subculture. Teachers encourage children named Juan or Mei Li to go by the name John or Mary. School curricula focus on the history, art, literature, and scientific contributions of Europeans and European Americans while downplaying the contributions of U.S. minority groups and non-Western cultures.

In the last quarter century, however, more and more Americans have concluded that America has always been more of a "salad bowl" of cultures than a melting pot. Many have come to believe that this "salad bowl" is one of Americans' greatest strengths and that it should be cherished rather than eliminated. These beliefs are often referred to as **multiculturalism**. Reflecting this idea, many schools and universities now incorporate materials that more accurately reflect American cultural diversity.

Countercultures are groups whose values, interests, beliefs, and lifestyles conflict with those of the larger culture.

Assimilation is the process through which individuals learn and adopt the values and social practices of the dominant group, more or less giving up their own values in the process.

Multiculturalism is the belief that the different cultural strands within a culture should be valued and nourished.

These deaf students believe that they share a common culture and should have rights like those given to any minority culture.

Case Study: Deafness as Subculture

Most people who can hear consider deafness undesirable, even catastrophic (Dolnick 1993). At best, they see being deaf as a medical condition to be remedied. However, some deaf people maintain that deafness is not a disability but a culture (Dolnick 1993; Padden & Humphries 2006). To these individuals, the essence of deafness is not the inability to hear but a valued culture based on their shared language, American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is not just a way to "speak" English with one's hands but is a language of its own, complete with its own rules of grammar, puns, and poetry. Furthermore, ASL is learned and shared. Whereas babies who can hear begin to jabber nonsense syllables, deaf babies of parents who sign begin to "babble" nonsense signs with their fingers (Dolnick 1993). This shared language encourages, in turn, shared values and a positive group identity. Studies show, for instance, that many deaf people would not choose to join the "hearing" culture even if they could.

Thinking of deafness as a culture illustrates many of the points made earlier. For instance, culture is problem solving, and deaf culture embodies a way to solve the human problem of communication. Using ASL shapes deaf people's experiences, reminding them of their common values, norms, and cultural identity. For this reason, many deaf individuals have reacted with outrage to the increasing use of cochlear implants (Arana-Ward 1997). These devices, when surgically implanted in the ear, help some otherwise deaf persons to hear sounds. Hearing sounds, however, is not the same as understanding what they mean: Many implant recipients—especially older children who were born deaf—are frustrated by a cacophony of sounds that they cannot interpret, even after months or years of training. Some deaf activists argue that most children who receive implants waste their formative years in an often futile struggle to fit into the hearing world, when they could instead have become native speakers of ASL and valued members of the deaf community. These activists, therefore, view cochlear implants not as a neutral medical technology but as an example of the ethnocentrism of hearing persons.

At the same time, because deaf Americans function *within* American culture (reading newspapers, purchasing clothes at the mall, working alongside people who can hear), it is most accurate to consider deafness a *sub*culture rather than a culture. Those who believe that even deaf children who receive cochlear implants should learn ASL are arguing in favor of a multicultural model in which children can feel comfortable in both the deaf and the hearing worlds. Those who argue that deaf children will only learn how to function in the modern world if they receive implants, receive constant training in speech and hearing, and never learn to sign are arguing that these children are best served by full assimilation into the hearing world.

Diffusion of modern technology is particularly rapid when new tools enhance a society's ability to meet basic human needs at the same time that they are consistent with existing cultural patterns. Leaders, regardless of time, place, or the cultural bases of their authority, share a common need to communicate effectively with large numbers of followers.

Sources of Cultural Diversity and Change

Culture provides solutions to common and not-so-common problems. The solutions devised are immensely variable. Among the reasons for this variability are environment, isolation, cultural diffusion, technology, exposure to mass media, and dominant cultural themes.

Environment

Why are the French different from Australian aborigines, the Finns different from the Navajo? One obvious reason is the very different environmental conditions in which they live. These conditions determine which kinds of economies can flourish, which kinds of clothes and foods are practical, and, to a significant extent, the degree of scarcity or abundance.

Isolation

When a culture is cut off from interaction with other cultures, it is likely to develop unique norms and values. Where isolation precludes contact with others (such as in the New Guinea highlands until recently), a culture can continue on its own course, unaltered and uncontaminated by others. Since the nineteenth century, however, almost no cultures have been able to maintain their isolation from other cultures.

Cultural Diffusion

If isolation is a major reason why cultures remain both stable and different from each other, then cultural diffusion is a major reason why cultures change and become more similar over time. **Cultural diffusion** is the process by which aspects of one culture or subculture become part of another culture. For example, not only have many residents of Mexico City become regular consumers of McDonald's hamburgers, but belief in the value of fast food is gradually replacing Mexicans' traditional belief in the value of long, family-centered meals. Meanwhile, salsa now outsells ketchup in the United States, and Heinz now offers a green ketchup specifically to compete with salsa.

At its broadest level, cultural diffusion becomes the globalization of culture, in which cultural elements (including fashion trends, musical styles, and cultural values) spread around the world. Nowadays, taxi drivers in Bombay, Senegal, and Peru blare U.S. popular music from their radios, while Americans relish the chance to eat in

Cultural diffusion is the process by which aspects of one culture or subculture are incorporated into another.

French and Chinese restaurants. The globalization of culture is likely to proceed even more rapidly in the future due to the Internet.

The globalization of culture is part of the broader topic of globalization, which we discuss further at the end of this chapter.

Technology

The tools available to a culture will affect its norms and values and its economic and social relationships. Facebook, for example, has dramatically changed attitudes toward privacy, especially among young people. Many young people now consider it perfectly normal to post intimate thoughts, updates on daily activities, and candid photos online, even though their parents may be horrified. At the same time, this new technology has affected not only *attitudes* toward privacy but also *access* to privacy. For example, a nude photo or description of a wild party posted for friends may later be discovered by a parent, professor, or potential employer. Finally, Facebook has increased access to social relationships ("friending") while raising delicate new questions about culturally appropriate ways to manage unwanted relationships ("unfriending").

Mass Media

The mass media are an example of **popular culture**: aspects of culture that are widely accessible and broadly shared, especially among ordinary folks. (In contrast, **high culture** refers to aspects of culture primarily limited to the middle and upper classes, such as opera, modern art, or modernist architecture.) The mass media includes movies; television; genre fiction such as romances, mysteries, or science fiction; and popular music styles like country or hip-hop.

An important question for researchers is whether the mass media simply reflect existing cultural values or whether the media can change values. The answer is that media probably do both. For example, for much of the twentieth century, movies and television usually portrayed African Americans as lazy or foolish and unmarried women as evil, disturbed, or unhappy (Entman & Rojecki 2000; Levy 1990). These depictions reflected American cultural beliefs of the time. Yet these days, Denzel Washington can play a romantic lead, an action hero, or a smart lawyer in movies. Social change in American culture allowed the actor to get these roles, but seeing him in them also creates more cultural change, by suggesting to white Americans that African Americans can be attractive, ethical, smart, and professional. White Americans' acceptance of Denzel Washington as a movie hero may thus have helped Barack Obama win election as president. As this suggests, exposure to mass media can be a source of cultural change. Focus on Media and Culture: The Media and Self-Esteem addresses how the media affect the self-concepts of young men and women.

Popular culture refers to aspects of culture that are widely accessible and commonly shared by most members of a society, especially those in the middle, working, and lower classes.

High culture refers to the cultural preferences associated with the upper class.

Dominant Cultural Themes

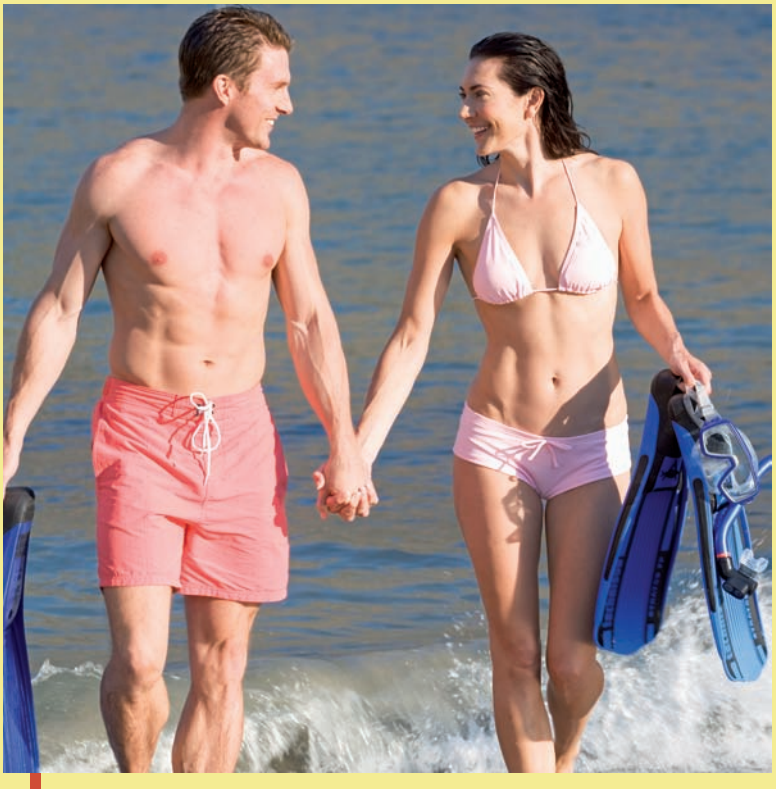
Cultures generally contain dominant themes that give them a distinct character and direction. Those themes also create, in part, a closed system. New ideas, values, and inventions can gain acceptance only when they can fit into the existing culture without too greatly distorting existing patterns. Sioux culture, for example, readily adopted rifles and horses because those tools meshed well with its hunting-based culture. But Sioux culture rejected Anglo-American cultural preferences for wood houses and private land ownership because those preferences clashed with the nomadic and communal Sioux way of life.

focus on MEDIA AND CULTURE

The Media and Self-Esteem

Over the last several decades, the average American has grown considerably heavier. Yet magazines, movies, television, and even video games increasingly celebrate an extremely rare female body type, far slimmer than that of the typical American girl or woman (Wykes & Gunter 2005; Grogan 2008). Meanwhile, media images of boys' and men's bodies also now idealize a body that is both muscular and slender-waisted, with no extra fat (Pope et al. 2000). The net result is that the gap between media images and actual male and female bodies has increased substantially. How has this affected American culture and the self-concept of young men and women? And has this had a different effect on nonwhite and Hispanic Americans, who are more rarely—and more narrowly—portrayed in the media?

Many scholars believe that unrealistic images in the media have altered cultural notions about what constitutes attractiveness and have damaged self-esteem among young men and women. As a result, they argue, young people often try to lose fat or build muscle through dangerously unhealthy eating patterns, steroid use, or exercise (Wykes & Gunter 2005; Grogan 2008). In fact, numerous surveys have shown that the more exposure individuals have to media, the more likely they are to be dissatisfied with their bodies. Males as well as females are affected, although less strongly, apparently because males realize that their appearance is less important to others than is female appearance (Wykes & Gunter 2005; Grogan 2008). Finally, surveys suggest that body dissatisfaction has also become more common among nonwhites and Hispanics. This trend seems linked to two factors: (1) Media portrayals of these groups have become more common, and (2) social interaction between these groups and white Americans has become more common (Grogan 2008).



2009/Jupiter Images

Unrealistic media images have altered our cultural ideas about attractiveness and now threaten the self-esteem of both men and women.

Other scholars argue that both culture and young people are more resilient than this. Some argue that the link between media watching and body dissatisfaction may be a spurious correlation, and that something else may cause individuals both to watch media and to be dissatisfied with their bodies. Others suggest that individuals may critically evaluate what they see and read in the media rather than adopting media values automatically.

To explore these issues, sociologists have used interviews to examine how individuals *use* media. Melissa Milkie (1999), for example, found that both African American and white girls believe the images of female beauty shown in girls' magazines are unrealistically thin. The white girls, however, tried to live up to those images because they assumed that their friends and boyfriends would judge them based on those images. In contrast, the African American girls believed that the media images reflected only white culture and assumed that *their* friends and boyfriends felt the same. As a result, they were less concerned about meeting media standards.

Taken together, Milkie's results suggest that (1) individuals are active consumers of media messages, (2) different audiences interpret the same media messages differently, and (3) media do shape both culture and individual beliefs and actions, at least in part because we judge ourselves through the "media-filled" eyes of others who matter to us.

Case Study: American Consumer Culture

U.S. culture is a unique blend of complex elements. It is a product of the United States' environment, its immigrants, its technology, and its place in history. These days, one of the ways in which U.S. culture diverges most strongly from other cultures is in its exceptionally strong emphasis on consumerism.

Consumerism is a philosophy that says "buying is good." In turn, this philosophy reflects the belief that "we are what we buy," and that through buying certain goods we can assert or improve our social status. In American consumer culture, children attempt to improve their social status by buying the "hottest" toys, teenagers by buying T-shirts from their favorite bands, and adults by buying BlackBerries. Ironically, consumers also believe they are asserting their individuality through their purchases, rarely noticing that millions of others are buying the same goods for the same reasons.

How did this consumer culture develop? The simple answer is that more consumer goods became available and affordable than ever before. But this is only a partial answer. Research suggests that the most important cause was a change in the comparisons people used in deciding whether to make a purchase (Schor 1998). Advertising now permeates our lives more than ever before—billboards adorn public buses and sports stadiums, movie theaters show advertisements before the films, ads pop up at popular Internet sites, schools broadcast television programs laced with commercials in the classroom, and so on. All of this has instilled in children and adults the belief that they need certain products to be a certain sort of person (Quart 2003).

Similarly, as the number of hours Americans watch television per week soared, so did their desire for the goods they saw on television. Instead of deciding what kind of shoes to wear or what kind of kitchen appliances to buy by looking at what their classmates or neighbors owned, Americans sought out consumer goods like those used by their favorite television characters. In fact, for every hour of television watched each week, individuals' annual spending on consumer goods increased by more than $200 (Schor 1998).

Finally, in the past, women (who do most family shopping) typically compared their belongings with those of their neighbors, whose family incomes were usually similar to their own. Now that a majority of women work outside the home, most compare their belongings with those of their fellow workers, including supervisors with much higher incomes. As a result, families now spend higher percentages of their income on consumer goods, both big and small. For example, the median house size has increased from 1500 square feet in 1973 to 2300 square feet in 2007—with prices to match (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009a).

Consumer culture affects our lives in many ways. Even though the recent downturn in the U.S. economy has reduced consumer spending, shopping (or at least window-shopping) remains a major form of recreation, and shopping malls have replaced parks, athletic fields, church basements, and backyards as popular gathering spots. College students put their grades at risk by working extra hours, in many cases to buy the latest gadgets or fashions. Moreover, despite these extra hours working, the average debt of graduating students rose (in constant dollars) by more than 50 percent between 1993 and 2007, to an average of almost $22,000 among those who had debts (Project on Student Debt 2008). Students who have $40,000 in debt must think twice before taking a job at a nonprofit organization, taking a year off to travel, or pursuing a graduate degree. Meanwhile, adults carry heavy debts and risk bankruptcy to buy expensive cars and houses as a way to "prove" their success and improve their social status. Figure 2.2 illustrates the rising gap between household debt and savings in American households between 1989 and 2007. Since then, consumer debt has held

Consumerism is the philosophy that says "buying is good" because "we are what we buy."

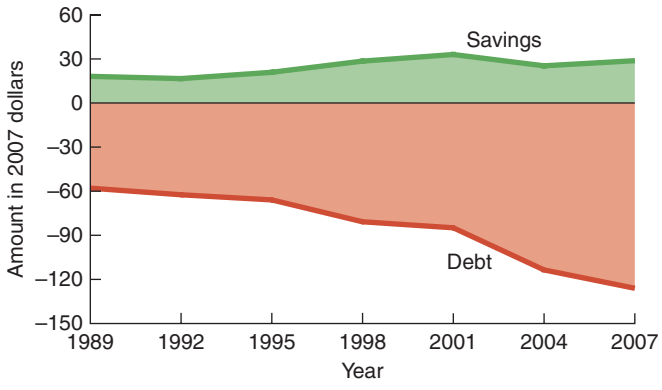


FIGURE 2.2 Debt versus Savings in U.S. Households with Savings*
Because of both economic hard times and growing consumer desires, Americans' debt has increased more rapidly than have their savings. Moreover, this chart does not include households with no savings at all, which doubled from 5 percent of households in 1989 to 10 percent in 2007. Nor does it show the many Americans who have lost their jobs and savings since 2007.

*In thousands of 2007 dollars. Mean debt and median savings.

SOURCE: Federal Reserve (2009b).

steady (Federal Reserve 2009a), but savings have fallen even further due to the many newly unemployed Americans who must use their savings to pay their bills.

Consequences of Cultural Diversity and Change

No culture remains isolated forever, and none remains forever unchanged. Although cultural diversity and change often help societies cope with existing problems, they can also create new problems. Two such problems are cultural lag and culture shock.

Cultural Lag

Whenever one part of a culture changes more rapidly than another part, social problems can arise. This situation is known as **cultural lag** (Brinkman & Brinkman 1997). Most often, cultural lags occur when social practices and values do not keep up with technological changes.

The rise in "sexting"—sending sexually suggestive photos via cell phones—illustrates the problems that occur when law, values, and social practices lag behind technological change. Sexting has become an increasingly accepted part of life for young people. According to one large (but nonrandom) survey, 20 percent of teenagers and 33 percent of young adults between the ages of 20 and 26 have engaged in sexting (Hamill 2009). But neither cultural values among older adults nor laws (as interpreted by older adults) have kept pace with this change. As a result, some young "sexters" have found themselves arrested on charges of child pornography—even if they were only sending photos of themselves to friends.

Even in the absence of legal sanctions, sexting carries risks: In the same survey, more than a third of teens and almost half of people ages 20 to 26 stated that they commonly share with others suggestive photos that are sent to them. As a result, individuals who send suggestive self-portraits often lose control over who sees the photos—and potentially over their reputations.

As this example illustrates, serious social problems can arise when technological changes leave members of a society without agreed-upon social values, clear legal decisions, or standard social practices defining how they should act.

Cultural lag occurs when one part of a culture changes more rapidly than another.

Culture Shock

In the long run, cultural diversity and cultural change often result in improvements in quality of life. In the short run, however, people often find both diversity and change unsettling. **Culture shock** refers to the disconcerting and unpleasant experiences that can occur when individuals encounter a different culture. For example, U.S. citizens who work in Greece often are surprised by the Greek customs of hugging acquaintances and standing very close (by American standards) to anyone they are speaking with. Greeks who work in the United States are similarly confused by American customs that limit greetings to simple handshakes and dictate maintaining considerable physical distance during conversations. As a result, Americans sometimes conclude that Greeks are pushy or even sexually aggressive, while Greeks sometimes conclude that Americans are elitist or emotionally cold.

sociology and you

One way cultures differ is in the value they place on competition. If you went to elementary school in the United States, your teachers likely encouraged you to compete with your peers for the highest test scores, the most home runs, or the "best" clothes. If you grew up in Africa, however, both teachers and other children may have chastised you for behaving competitively. Instead, teachers may have encouraged you to help your classmates and to work together for the good of the group. These differences can create culture shock for children who emigrate from Africa to the United States or vice versa.

Globalization

As this discussion of cultural shock suggests, cultural change can occur not only within one society but also across societies. At its broadest, this change is referred to as the **globalization of culture**. More generally, **globalization** refers to the process through which ideas, resources, practices, and people increasingly operate in a worldwide rather than local framework. Because globalization is having such an impact on the world and its cultures, we devote this section to exploring its sources and effects—economic and political, as well as cultural.

The Sources of Globalization

Globalization stems from a combination of technological and political forces. The rise of the Internet, e-mail, cell and satellite phones, fax machines, and the like all made it easier, cheaper, and faster for corporations and individuals to invest, work, and sell their goods internationally. So, too, did the decline over time in shipping and airfare costs.

Political changes also contributed to globalization. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 made it possible for the nations that emerged in its wake (like Belarus and Estonia) as well as the nations that had been restrained by its political power (like Poland and Armenia) to move toward more capitalistic economic systems. To do so, they needed to seek out economic, political, and cultural ties to other nations that could either serve as sources of raw goods and labor or markets for their products.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also reduced political tensions that had pressed nations to adopt international trade barriers. Now that the nations of Europe are no longer fearful of Soviet might, they have combined into what is in some ways a continental government, in the form of the European Union (EU). Within this Union, goods, individuals, and services can flow more freely than ever before. Polish doctors can now seek higher-paying jobs in Finland, Finnish doctors seek work in Sweden, and Swedish doctors seek work in England, with little concern about visas or immigration laws. German factories can transport and sell their products in Spain, and Spanish factories can send their products to Greece with minimal paperwork or tariffs to pay. Similarly, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was adopted in 1994 to reduce trade barriers between Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

Culture shock refers to the discomfort that arises from exposure to a different culture.

Globalization of culture is the process through which cultural elements (including musical styles, fashion trends, and cultural values) spread around the globe.

Globalization refers to the process through which ideas, resources, practices, and people increasingly operate in a worldwide rather than local framework.

Although the recent economic downturn has led some nations to *increase* trade barriers as a means of protecting farmers and manufacturers in their own countries, globalization remains a powerful force.

AP Images

As globalization spreads American products and American cultural values around the world, it can challenge the cultures of other societies. As a result, globalization can sharply increase tensions both within nations and between the United States and other nations.

The Impact of Globalization

Globalization is a powerful force. Around the world, it is affecting culture, economics, and politics, as well as other aspects of social life.

Cultural Impact

In an African urban nightclub, young people listen to American hip-hop music and drink Pepsi. In New York City, young people go to Jamaican reggae concerts and read *Harry Potter* books. In India, Hollywood films compete with "Bollywood" (Bombay-produced) films. Also, people everywhere loved the film *Slumdog Millionaire*: directed by a British citizen, filmed in India with an Indian cast, and the winner of an American Academy Award. All of these are examples of the global spread of culture, as movies, television shows, music, literature, and other arts increasingly are distributed and enjoyed around the world.

These elements of popular culture carry with them not only entertainment but also cultural values. As Indian adolescents watch American films, they not only learn about the latest U.S. fashions and music but also learn to question traditional Indian practices and beliefs like arranged marriages, the subservience of women, obedience to parents, and the idea that the family is more important than the individual. As a result, many people around the world question the impact of globalization on their—and, especially, their children's—cultural values.

Economic Impact

Globalization has also had a striking economic impact on both the selling and producing of goods. Increasingly, economic activity takes place between people who live in different nations as goods and services are sold internationally. These days, Russians and Chinese buy Coca-Cola, and Americans buy Volvos and Toyotas. Globalization also exists when goods are *produced* internationally. A transnational corporation such as Toyota, for example, may buy raw goods in one country, process them into car parts in a second country, assemble its cars in a third country, arrange for data processing to occur in a fourth country, and then sell its cars worldwide.

Observers differ greatly in their assessments of the possible effects of such international economic enterprises (Wade 2001; Bordo et.al. 2003). Some hope that ties of international finance will create a more interdependent (and peaceful) world, while stimulating economic growth and improving everyone's standard of living (Stiglitz 2003). Others argue that transnational corporations are harming poorer nations by extracting their raw materials, paying substandard wages to local people, and sending all the profits to the wealthier nations (Petras & Veltmeyer 2001; Wallerstein 2004). In addition, these critics allege that moving labor-intensive work to less developed nations exposes workers in those countries to dangers banned by law in Western nations (Moody 1997).

Critics have also raised questions about the impact of economic globalization even within the developed nations. In the United States, hundreds of thousands of workers lost their jobs when corporations found it cheaper to move those jobs overseas

decoding the data

International Disapproval of Aspects of Globalization

SOURCE: Pew Research Center (2007).

	Percentage who agree		
	Growing trade and business ties between other countries and our country is bad for our country	**Large companies from other countries are having a bad influence on things in our country**	**Our way of life needs to be protected against foreign influence**
Americas			
United States	36%	45%	62%
Canada	15	44	62
Argentina	19	47	70
Brazil	25	25	77
Mexico	19	32	75
Peru	15	28	50
Europe			
Britain	15	41	54
France	21	55	52
Germany	13	48	53
Italy	20	49	80
Sweden	9	39	29
Poland	15	31	62
Slovakia	15	24	69
Middle East & Asia			
Lebanon	15	24	75
Pakistan	4	26	81
Malaysia	5	11	85
China	5	22	70
India	8	24	92
Japan	17	32	64
Africa			
Ghana	4	8	80
Senegal	4	9	85
South Africa	9	18	85

Explaining the Data: Based on these data, which citizens are more likely to disapprove of trade ties with other countries: those in wealthy countries or those in poor countries? Which citizens are more likely to fear the impact of large companies from other countries? to fear foreign influence on their way of life? What might explain these patterns?

Critiquing the Data: Researchers collected these data through telephone and face-to-face interviews. Can you think of any reasons why, within each country, poor people would have been less likely to participate in the interviews? How might this affect the findings?

("NAFTA" 2003). Other workers have been forced to accept cuts in benefits or pay to keep their jobs (Bonacich et al. 1994). The question is whether this global movement of jobs raises incomes overall by shifting work from wealthier to poorer countries or merely depresses incomes overall to the level of the cheapest bidders. Decoding the Data: International Disapproval of Aspects of Globalization presents attitudes towards globalization around the world.

Political Impact

How has globalization affected the balance of political power within and across nations? Some observers have noted that transnational corporations now dwarf many national governments in size and wealth. Their ability to move capital, jobs, and prosperity from one nation to another gives them power that transcends the laws of any particular country (Sassen 2001). When a nation's economy depends on a transnational corporation, that nation can't afford to alienate the corporation. For example, Guatemala has limited ability to constrain the labor practices of the United Fruit Company because the corporation could cripple the country's economy if it wanted to (Amaro et al. 2001).

Another aspect of globalization is the sharp increase in the number of international organizations (such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nation's International Criminal Court). The underlying premise of these organizations is that they will diminish the independent power of national governments and press nations to conform to international goals (such as promoting free markets, ending torture of political prisoners, prosecuting war criminals, or reducing trade barriers). Many individuals in both wealthier and poorer nations have questioned the impact of these organizations. The data suggest that the poorer nations have indeed lost some of their political and economic autonomy and occasionally have suffered as a result (Stiglitz 2003; Khor 2001; Wade 2003; Rajagopal 2003).

Where This Leaves Us

Most of the time, we think of culture simply as something that we have, in the same way that those of us who have a home or two arms take them for granted. As this chapter has shown, though, culture is dynamic: constantly changing as the world—and the balance of power within that world—changes around us. Languages, eating habits, fashions, and the rest evolve, spread, or die: Ask your parents about the clothing they wore as children, the slang they spoke as teenagers, or the first time they ate a bagel or a tortilla.

Culture is also active, a force that changes us as it changes the world in which we live. The rise of American consumer culture is only one example of how culture changes and of how cultural changes affect all aspects of our lives, from how many hours we work each day to how we define ourselves as individuals.

Summary

1. Culture is a design for living that provides ready-made solutions to the basic problems of a society. Some describe it as a tool kit of material and nonmaterial components that help people adapt to their circumstances. Because of this, as the concept of cultural relativity emphasizes, cultural traits must be evaluated in the context of their own culture.
2. Most sociologists emphasize that culture is socially created. However, sociobiologists emphasize that human culture and behavior also have biological roots.
3. Language, or symbolic communication, is a central component of culture. Language embodies culture, serves as a framework for perceiving the world, and symbolizes common bonds among a social group.
4. Values spell out the goals that a culture finds worth pursuing, and norms specify the appropriate means to reach them.
5. The cultures of large and complex societies are not homogeneous. Subcultures and countercultures with distinct lifestyles and folkways develop to meet unique regional, class, and ethnic needs.
6. The most important factors accounting for cultural diversity and change are the physical and natural environment, isolation from other cultures, cultural diffusion, level of technological development, mass media, and dominant cultural themes.
7. Cultural diversity and change can lead to culture shock and cultural lag. Culture shock refers to the disconcerting experiences that accompany rapid cultural change or exposure to a different culture. Cultural lag occurs when changes in one part of the culture do not keep up with changes in another part.
8. Consumer culture—the philosophy that buying is good, and we are what we buy—now plays a major role in American culture.
9. Globalization refers to the process through which ideas, resources, practices, and people increasingly operate in a worldwide rather than local framework. Globalization has had enormous political, cultural, and economic effects.

Thinking Critically

1. What features of U.S. society might explain why children are raised in small nuclear families rather than in extended kin groups?
2. Can you think of an example from U.S. culture for which values, norms, and laws are not consistent with each other? What are the consequences of these inconsistencies?
3. How do environment, isolation, technology, and dominant cultural themes contribute to the maintenance and diffusion of youth subcultures?
4. Identify three white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) American ethnic foods. (If you have trouble conceptualizing this, think about why this is difficult.) If you are not a WASP, also identify a favorite ethnic food from your own culture. What do these foods mean to you? What do they mean to others? When and where do you feel comfortable eating and talking about these foods? Why?

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