



Society and Culture

*America is the only culture that
went from barbarism to decadence
without civilization in between.*

—Oscar Wilde

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- 01** Define society and culture and give examples of different types of societies.
- 02** List and give examples of the major components of culture.
- 03** Define and give examples of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism.
- 04** Explain globalization and cultural diversity.
- 05** Discuss society and culture from each of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology.

The request “May I take your order, please?” is familiar to everyone in the world today. Obviously you are in a McDonald’s, Burger King, Starbucks, or some other fast-food restaurant, where global corporations have programmed worker greetings, worker routines, and even worker attitudes to a standardized formula. You can be assured that the menu, the food, and the service will be the same no matter where the particular restaurant is located, but *things are not what they seem*. Many people believe that McDonald’s, for instance, is such a potent source of American fast-food culture and American culture in general that when it transplants itself overseas, “American values” are widely disseminated. In effect, this thesis holds that no matter the cultural setting, the arrival of the Golden Arches inevitably leads to cultural homogenization on the American model, a trend that is supposedly sweeping the globe (Ritzer, 2018). Once again, however, *things may not be what they seem*. Although McDonald’s relies on standardization and emphasizes that a person always knows what to expect from McDonald’s anywhere in the world, local franchises also adapt to local cultural customs, biases, and traditions (Watson, 1997). One of the authors of this book was surprised to find both

fried and boiled chicken feet on the menu of a McDonald's in Shanghai. Today, virtually all East Asian McDonald's restaurants have added features to accommodate local cultures. Teriyaki burgers are popular from Japan to China, and local owner-operators are the norm. Likewise, Ronald McDonald is known throughout much of the region as "Uncle McDonald," a wise and understanding figure—not unlike similar figures in traditional Chinese folklore. Another novel twist that reflects a long-standing East Asian value is the nature of staff–customer interactions. In Beijing, for example, each restaurant has between five and ten female "receptionists" who talk to parents and care for their children during their visits. One receptionist in Beijing had more than a hundred young friends. Moreover, borrowing from traditions that value close and long-term personal interactions in business and elsewhere, the receptionists' care goes well beyond company time. Many visit children's homes and classes after work, send cards on their birthdays and holidays, and otherwise become part of their families. Because of this, they are called "Aunt McDonald" in many parts of East Asia (Watson, 1997).

Even in the United States, McDonald's makes cultural adaptations for local purposes. For example, Jennifer Talwar (2002) found that in places in New York City such as Chinatown and Little Dominican Republic, McDonald's combines rigid standardization with remarkable flexibility to market its products. In Chinatown, for example, consumer marketing strategies present McDonald's as an "authentic Chinese" fast-food restaurant. The sign outside is in Chinese, a two-story Chinese arch inside is painted red for good luck, and the "front wall displays four Chinese characters that symbolize long life, happy marriage, lots of children, and lucky money" (Talwar, 2002:22–23). Mandarin Chinese is spoken in addition to English, and just as in Beijing, China, the outlet hires "hostesses" to greet families and entertain children. "Cultural managers" represent the neighborhood and most workers are from China, although a "United Nations staff" (from more than a dozen countries, including Malaysia, Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Togo, Africa) pool their talents to portray McDonald's as an "American and Chinese eatery"—all in one (Talwar, 2002:18). Likewise, select "Chinese values" including teamwork and loyalty are emphasized at some restaurants, "United Nations" potluck dinners are held to promote "organizational unity," and employees—regardless of ethnicity—"are more apt to be dismissed or suspended . . . for having poor school grades than for refusing to work when not scheduled" (Talwar, 2002:140).

Restaurants in Little Dominican Republic demonstrate similar sensitivity to ethnic heritage and community life, and the McDonald's in the very heart of the neighborhood has almost completely reinvented itself as a "Latino-American" experience. Spanish is spoken almost exclusively by workers and customers alike, and ironically, McDonald's has redefined itself as a place of "leisure," rather than "fast food," where Dominicans and other Latinos can munch on a chicken fajita and chat with friends for long periods. Talwar (2002:34) remarks that she "stood on line at one McDonald's in Little Dominican Republic for twenty minutes . . . and then waited another ten minutes for a table." Employees have been instructed to say "permisso," not "excuse me," and "honor and respect" have infiltrated worker–customer relations, with some managers instructing employees on how to tactfully "defend themselves" against rude customer behavior and insults.

Not to be outdone by its rival, Burger King launched an advertising and marketing campaign in 2009 in which it introduced "Whopper virgins"—people who lived in remote tribes and villages around the world and had never seen or heard of McDonald's or Burger King—to their menu staple, the Whopper. People were asked to sample a Big Mac and a Whopper for the first time and choose which one they preferred. Perhaps one of the most telling responses came from an Inuit tribe member, who indicated that both were okay, but he much preferred the taste of seal meat.

GLOCALIZATION

The interdependence of the global and the local, resulting in standardized values producing unique outcomes in different geographic areas and cultural settings.

GROBALIZATION

The imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, and organizations and their desire to impose themselves on various societies and cultures.

SOCIETY

People who live in a specific geographic territory, interact with one another, and share many elements of a common culture.

This opening vignette not only illustrates the impact of globalization on society and culture but also demonstrates an example of **glocalization**, *the interdependence of the global and the local, resulting in standardized values producing unique outcomes in different geographic areas and cultural settings*. It also reflects what George Ritzer (2007) calls **grobalization**, *or the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, and organizations and their desire to impose themselves on various societies and cultures*.

Because of the media and globalization, few people are unaware of the extraordinary diversity of societies and cultures in the world. They can be seen in television shows, movies, and on the Internet on any given day. Or they can be experienced during a walk through almost any large city and many small towns throughout the world. Far-reaching global changes have tremendous local impact (Savage et al., 2005), and today, few people have much difficulty comprehending how different cultures and societies affect others. However, most of us find it much harder to understand how culture and society affect our thoughts and behaviors. Even seasoned teachers of culture acknowledge that they have learned a great deal about their own values and cultural assumptions by teaching in undergraduate classrooms in diverse cities such as Hong Kong, New York City, London, and others. This is because culture is so pervasive and taken for granted that it rarely enters into our consciousness. But more is involved: if asked, most people around the world would probably agree that their societies and cultural **beliefs** and values are either “natural” or the “best.”

WHAT IS SOCIETY?

For much of history, people lived in small, relatively autonomous societies and made their living by hunting and farming. The traditional definition of **society**, *as people who live in a specific geographic territory, interact with one another, and share many elements of a common culture*, was well suited to these lifestyles. Today, any definition of society must be broader and more flexible.

Until about ten thousand years ago, all societies were hunting-gathering societies, and they were pretty much alike with respect to size, structural complexity, technology, and other aspects of social and cultural life. In the first great technological revolution, which sociologists call the agricultural revolution, however, farming societies emerged. Farming societies were more complex, more technologically sophisticated, more densely populated, and far more competitive than hunting-gathering societies, which they began to supplant.

These trends, in turn, accelerated in the late eighteenth century as part of a second great revolution, the Industrial Revolution, which produced much larger

populations, many more goods and services, urbanization, militarization, and the erosion and disappearance of thousands of rural communities. Today, many sociologists believe computers and other advanced technologies have produced a third major revolution—the information revolution—that is generating two very different social trends. On the one hand, new information technologies encourage greater social consolidation, perhaps the beginning stages of life in a truly “global village,” where patterns of social interaction instantaneously crisscross the globe. On the other hand, new technologies encourage a more privatized and individualistic society, where more people

Early hunting and gathering societies tend to be small and nomadic, with a subsistence economy.

HOW does the evolution of societies affect their population size and culture?



may work, socialize, and spend much of their lives at home. These technologies are also creating many more flexible and tentative statuses and identities than in any previous period (Caplow, 1991; Kumar, 1995; Turkle, 2011). Some neurological research even suggests that the continued use of computers from childhood through adulthood may literally “rewire” parts of the brain affecting the way people process information (Carr, 2011).

These great transformations are all part of what sociologists call **sociocultural evolution**, *in a process in which societies grow more complex in terms of technology, social structure, and cultural knowledge over time*. Although there is nothing inevitable about this process, and at any given time a society may decline or collapse, in the course of human history there has been a progressive trend toward more complex and more geographically far-reaching sociocultural arrangements.

SOCIOCULTURAL EVOLUTION

In a process in which societies grow more complex in terms of technology, social structure, and cultural knowledge over time.

TYPES OF SOCIETIES

The type of society in which we live helps determine who we are, what we become, what is expected of us, and what we expect from others. In fact, it has a profound impact on every aspect of our lives. Nevertheless, society is taken for granted, and we seldom contemplate it unless forced to do so. Sociologist Charles Lemert (2011) asserted that most of the time, people have no reason to think about society until all of

TABLE 3.1 Types of Societies

	Hunting-Gathering	Horticultural	Pastoral	Agrarian	Industrial	Postindustrial
Period of Historical Dominance	10,000–50,000 years ago	5,000–10,000 years ago	5,000–10,000 years ago	5,000 years ago to A.D. 1750	18th–20th century	Late 20th and early 21st centuries
Population Size	50–150	150–3,000	150–10,000	Millions	Millions to over a billion	Millions to over a billion
Technology	Stone, wood	Sickle, hoe	Domesticated Animals	Animal-drawn plow agriculture; irrigation agriculture; animals	Machine power; electric, petroleum, nuclear power	Computer information technologies; photonics; robotics; biogenetics
Economy	Subsistence; several-week surplus	Horticulture; several-month surplus	Surplus on the hoof	Agriculture; market exchange surplus	Industrial; mass production and market economy	Global information—service economy
Settlement Pattern	Nomadic	Semipermanent villages	Nomadic; seminomadic camps	Cities and empires; large rural populations	Majority of the population in cities	Megalopolises
Social Organization	Family or kin bands	Chiefdoms; specialized religious-military roles	Chiefdoms and marked inequality	Complex division of labor; complex economic, military, and religious institutions; marked social inequality	Distinct institutions; growth of state power	Growth of scientific and technical institutions; emerging global classes; social networks and power structures
Contemporary Examples	Mbuti of Central African Republic; Ju/'hoansi of South Africa prior to 1970	Yanomamo of Brazil; Dani of New Guinea highlands	Masai of Kenya and Fulani of Nigeria; Navajo of American Southwest	Ancient Egypt; feudal Europe; most Less Developed nations; rural China	Brazil; Eastern Europe; urban Russia	United States; Canada; Japan; much of Western Europe

Source: Based on “A Nip Here and Tuck There.” From the March 2003 issue of *American Demographics*. Copyright, Crain Communications, Inc. 2003.

HUNTING-GATHERING SOCIETY

A society in which people make their living by hunting, collecting wild foods, and fishing with simple technologies.

PASTORAL SOCIETY

A society that depends on domestic animals for its livelihood.

HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

A society in which hand tools are used to grow domesticated crops.

AGRARIAN SOCIETY

A society that depends on crops raised with plows, draft animals, and intensive agricultural methods.

INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

A society that relies on machines and advanced technology to produce and distribute food, information, goods, and services.

POSTINDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

A society where service industries and the manufacture of information and knowledge dominate the economy.

a sudden some unusual occurrence arises out of what is usually considered to be a very ordinary circumstance, causing them to recognize and try to explain the social reality of what has taken place and how it affects their lives. In that situation, they become amateur sociologists as best they can.

Because of globalization, social boundaries among groups and societies are much harder to define, and cultural complexity, rather than homogeneity, is the rule everywhere. All contemporary societies, however, share one common element: they all are characterized by large-scale social structures that span the globe and link billions of people. Let's take a closer look at some major kinds of societies, from the simplest societies of the past to today's complex postindustrial societies. Table 3.1 lists six major types of societies and some of their defining characteristics:

1. A **hunting-gathering society** is a society in which people make their living by hunting, collecting wild foods, and fishing with simple technologies.
2. A **pastoral society** is a society that depends on domestic animals for its livelihood.
3. A **horticultural society** is a society in which hand tools are used to grow domesticated crops.
4. An **agrarian society** is a society that depends on crops raised with plows, draft animals, and intensive agricultural methods.
5. An **industrial society** is a society that relies on machines and advanced technology to produce and distribute food, information, goods, and services.
6. A **postindustrial society** is a society where service industries and the manufacture of information and knowledge dominate the economy.

MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY, AND POSTINDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

Many sociologists believe that the postmodern condition has generated new social structures, with most people having multiple, often temporary, connections to groups and organizations (Bell, 1973; Pescosolido and Rubin, 2000). Postindustrial societies require the most advanced technologies in order to function. High-tech computers, robotics, biogenetic engineering, laser technology, and other high-cost, high-return industries are basic to life in postindustrial societies. Transnational corporations, which link the world in a global market economy, become dominant, and corporate giants such as Toyota, McDonald's, and Walmart relinquish their national identities and assume global ones in pursuit of profit.

The influence of several institutions expands dramatically in postindustrial societies. Science is the cornerstone of the new order, for it produces both the technology and the technical skills necessary for the efficient functioning of postindustrial societies. The educational institution is no less important; in postindustrial society, education becomes a lifelong process, as ideas rapidly become obsolete and new forms of knowledge must be learned. The media, however, become the central institution, affecting all other institutions—everywhere on earth.

In postindustrial society, mass media, social media, and technology move from the background to

Media, social media, and technology have become an integral part of children's everyday lives.

HOW has that affected interpersonal and group relationships in the United States and around the globe?



center stage and become vitally linked to all social institutions. The media are key parts of life in the United States, and it is impossible to think of sports, medicine, politics, the economy, and even religion without television, computers, and social media. Today, e-mail, teleconferencing, Instagram, blogs, and other forms of interactive media expand individual and group contacts and make it possible for a growing segment of the population to hear the perspectives of many groups—from people with diverse sexual orientations to people with disabilities—whose voices formerly were ignored by the mainstream media.

Some scholars contend that instead of creating a global village, new technologies promote trends already evident in most postindustrial societies: (1) a polarization of society into “haves” and “have-nots” in terms of both wealth *and* information; (2) a growing individualism and widespread disengagement from face-to-face social interactions and collective action; and (3) **neotribalism**, in which *people retreat into groups, social networks, and organizations that share similar values and beliefs*. As opposed to enhancing diversity and critical thinking, these trends may serve to reinforce social stereotypes and social conflict.

For many people—from children and teenagers to urban professionals and retirees—*virtual communities* and popular websites have supplanted local community life (see Focus box 3.1). For reasons of convenience and safety, many people shop at home and spend a great deal of leisure time in front of a computer or television monitor.

NEOTRIBALISM

People retreat into groups, social networks, and organizations that share similar values and beliefs.

VIRTUAL SOCIETY

A social network of individuals who interact through social media to pursue common interests or mutual goals.



SOCIOLOGICAL FOCUS 3.1

Virtual Societies

Anthropologists who identified the six types of societies—hunting-gathering, pastoral, horticultural, agrarian, industrial, and postindustrial—could never have imagined that as a result of media and technology, a seventh type—the virtual society—would emerge, linking millions of people of all ages, races, sexes, ethnicities, and nationalities around the globe through cyberspace. A **virtual society** is a *social network of individuals who interact through social media to pursue common interests or mutual goals*.

SimCity, a computer simulation game first released in 1989 and designed by Will Wright, allowed participants to create and build imaginary cities and communities modeled after real-life major cities around the world. It was one of the first virtual communities. *Second Life* is a much more sophisticated 3-D virtual world that opened to the public in 2003 and by 2013, had over a million regular users (Second Life, 2018). Anyone with a personal computer can enter *Second Life*, create an avatar (their persona in the virtual world), and interact with millions of other inhabitants from around the globe. For a

modest monthly fee, residents can purchase land, build a home, or start a business in *Second Life*’s “Marketplace,” which supports millions of real U.S. dollars in monthly transactions. All commercial business is conducted in *Second Life*’s own currency, the “Linden dollar,” which can easily be translated into legal U.S. dollars at an online exchange (Second Life, 2018). In early 2009, *Second Life* had almost seventeen million residents and boasted a thriving economy with over five billion Linden dollars in circulation—this at a time when the real U.S. and world economies were floundering.

Popular apps such as *Farmville* create a fictional world where people can create farms and watch them grow. They can go on Facebook and share seeds, ask for lives, and interact with friends who also play the game. People can play these apps from their smartphones and tablets at any time during the day. They can tend their farms on the subway, in a meeting, or from the comfort of their living room couch.

The massive online game *EVE* takes a more political approach to virtual societies and has its own elected

officials, who have created a political structure that is influential offline, too (O’Brien, 2015). The activities of *EVE* community members in real life are an example of how an online game can evolve into another type of simulation. In this case, the game becomes a kind of political simulation that starts to manifest itself more off the screen than it does within the virtual society. Elected online players actually meet to discuss and vote on adding new features or rules to the online game. In the game, players voice some of the same political grievances that exist in real life, where they feel their views are not being adequately acknowledged or represented (O’Brien, 2015).

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

Do virtual communities such as *SimCity*, *Second Life*, *Eve*, and others fit sociology’s definition of a society? Why do you think so many people are eager to join and participate in a virtual world? How might “living” in a virtual society affect, help shape, and even change a person’s real society and culture?

CULTURE

The learned set of beliefs, values, norms, and material goods shared by group members.

MATERIAL CULTURE

Artifacts, art, architecture, and other tangible goods that people create and to which they assign meanings.

NONMATERIAL CULTURE

Mental blueprints that serve as guidelines for group behavior.

Some sociologists go further and argue that proliferating virtual communities are in reality “lifestyle enclaves” that provide isolated individuals with a sense of community and unique **subcultures** that may begin even in early childhood. This leads us to a discussion of culture.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is the learned set of beliefs, values, norms, and material goods shared by group members. On the surface, the concept of culture is not difficult to understand. Culture consists of everything we learn in groups during the life course—from infancy to old age. Culture therefore includes ideas about what is real and what is not, what we may and may not eat, the clothing we wear, the music we listen to, and the games we play. Culture shapes our understandings of good and evil, health and sickness, and life and death. It lays down rules for serious social concerns as well as guidelines for everyday life. Culture is much more than ideas and rules of behavior, however. It gives our lives meaning, telling us why we should get out of bed each morning, obey the rules, and live from infancy to old age. Culture provides rewards for proper behavior and may promise that these rewards will continue beyond this physical world.

Material and Nonmaterial Culture

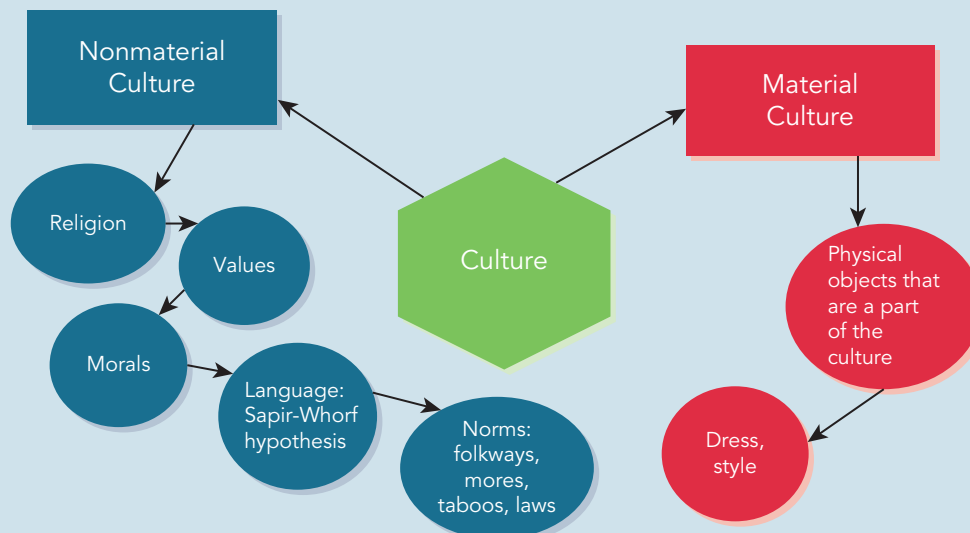
Culture has two major components: material and nonmaterial. **Material culture** includes *artifacts, art, architecture, and other tangible goods that people create and to which they assign meanings*. Technology, art, architecture, clothing, television sets, and consumer goods at malls and supermarkets are all part of material culture in advanced industrial societies. **Nonmaterial culture** refers to *mental blueprints that serve as guidelines for group behavior*. They include the collective assumptions, **languages**, beliefs, **values**, **norms**, and attitudes of groups (see Figure 3.1).

Symbols are humans’ greatest achievement. The application of symbols to the physical world—specifically, the inventions of material culture and technology—follows closely. Material and nonmaterial culture are interrelated in that all societies express their beliefs, values, and understandings in artifacts, architecture, and art. In simple societies, material culture usually supports a consistent view of reality.

For example, the Lakota (Sioux) and other traditional Plains Indians believed that everything that was vitally important in nature—the sun, moon, earth, and stars—was round,

FIGURE 3.1

Material/Nonmaterial Culture



and the “sacred circle” represented completeness, wholeness, health, and harmony with nature. Much of their material culture reflected this ideology: their houses (tepees) were circular and were always placed in a circle; battle shields and drums were circular; circular objects were used to process the bison; circular amulets ward off evil spirits; and hoops, rings, and spinning tops were favored for recreation and sport (Geertz, 1968; Neihardt, 1984; Hand, 2010; Wishart, 2016).

In modern industrial societies, values and norms are expressed in technology, architecture, and art, although the relationship is more complex than in simple societies. A century ago, Max Weber ([1904–1905] 1958a) demonstrated how values such as thrift, hard work, individuality, and savings, part of what he called the “Protestant ethic,” played a central role in the birth and expansion of industrial capitalism. Mass production and the proliferation of objects, gadgets, implements, and devices of every type reflect American values, norms, and “mass society.” For example, can you describe the nonmaterial and material cultural elements of a McDonald’s or other fast-food restaurant and show how they are interrelated?

If values and beliefs influence material culture, the reverse is equally true. Material culture, especially technological innovations, can have dramatic and often unintended effects on values, beliefs, and social relationships. The invention of the automobile provides a classic example. Originally seen as little more than a convenience, cars revolutionized almost every aspect of American life. They provided people with economic opportunities, more personal freedom, and easy access to the bright lights of the city. Even those who thought it might be dangerous, however, could never have envisioned the forty thousand or more traffic fatalities in America each year, the smog and pollution, and the auto’s role in the destruction of thousands of rural villages and later in the devastation of the central city. Automobiles also expanded people’s social worlds by providing increased mobility, became new status symbols, and even altered the dating patterns and sex lives of teenagers. In recent years, new technologies and globalization have brought even greater changes and challenges to material culture, as well as to nonmaterial culture. Let’s look at how culture has evolved and proliferated over millions of years, enabling people to survive virtually everywhere on earth.



Source: S. Harris/CartoonStock.Com

The Origin of Culture

A little more than a century ago, biologist Charles Darwin’s essay titled *On the Origin of Species* ([1859] 1964) brought about a revolution in scientific thinking about all living things. Borrowing ideas from biology, paleontology, and natural history, Darwin proposed a radical new view of our relationship to animals and the rest of the natural world.

The Evolution of Culture First, Darwin observed that species produce far more offspring than can be supported by the environment. Second, he found that while offspring closely resemble their parents and each other, they differ in some traits. He proposed that it is from this pool of sibling differences that new life is formed; according to the *theory of evolution*, the environment, or “nature,” selects those traits that are advantageous and rejects those that are not. This endless process of adaptation and competition and the “survival of the fittest” have generated the great diversity of life on earth, from the simplest bacteria to more complex creatures, including humans.

From the beginning of life on earth, the success of animal species has depended on instincts or genetic programming. Humans are believed to be the only species that combines genes and culture to solve the problems of living. For example, higher primates, such as chimpanzees, our closest relatives in the animal world, sometimes use stones to process

food or defend themselves, but these rudimentary forms of culture are not essential for species survival. For humans, both material and nonmaterial culture clearly are necessary.

The first clear evidence of culture is from about two million years ago on the plains of Africa. Crude stone tools found at several sites show that our prehuman ancestors gradually adapted to the environment with tools and traditions that were passed on from generation to generation. In this sense, technology helped transform human biology, with each small technological advance altering both the structure and size of the brain, until learning and cultural solutions became the primary way that all humans adapt to the world.

Nature and Nurture Today, most human behaviors are learned and culturally patterned within groups. Only a handful of behaviors are genetically determined, and in the course of our everyday lives we hardly consider them important. For example, humans are born with the ability to grasp, suck, and cry, but “even these elementary responses in newborns fade after a few weeks and must . . . [be] replaced by learned responses if infants are to survive” (Schultz and Lavenda, 2017:32). Likewise, we inherit simple reflexes, such as blinking, and drives, which include self-preservation, sex, and the need for nourishment. But even powerful drives can be delayed or overridden by rules for proper behavior; people may willingly sacrifice their lives for others, abstain from sex for religious and other reasons, and diet for days, weeks, or a lifetime. The influence of nature and nurture on human behavior is explored further in Chapter 4, “Socialization.”

Cultural Worlds Everywhere on earth, groups transform nature into “cultural worlds” that guide their members’ understandings of reality. In this sense, when one of the authors was in Nigeria standing side by side with a cattle-herding friend, each person could be said to inhabit different “sensory worlds.” Each had been taught to look for, hear, and experience different things, and this affected how they perceived the environment. The same is true of their ideas of space and time. The Western visitor operated “by the clock” and perceived time as linear, which meant it could be divided up, “lost,” or squandered. His cattle-herding friend, by contrast, saw time as more circular, consisting of natural rhythms and seasons that repeated themselves.

Is a smile universally recognized as a sign of friendly intentions? Sociologists caution that, like most human behaviors, smiles are complex, and groups may interpret them in various ways. For example, think of the possibilities of a smile in interactions with your friends. When you smile, it may reflect friendliness, but it may also express uncertainty, derision, or even contempt. And, of course, your friends may or may not agree with your interpretation. Add to that the ways various groups from around the world may interpret a smile, and you have some idea of the complexity of what is popularly assumed to be a “universal behavior.”

Beauty is often described as universal as well—especially by the media. For example, *Newsweek* reported that research had shown that “body symmetry and a .7 waist-hip ratio” were universally recognized as “beautiful” (Cowley and Hager, 1996). Are they, indeed, essential to *every group’s* standard of beauty? Knowing the extraordinary variation in people’s ideas of beauty around the world and even in the United States, where ethnicity, sex, and other factors influence people’s ideas of beauty, beauty treatments, and cosmetic surgery, most sociologists doubt it. In some cultures, women are seen as beautiful; in others, it is men. Some associate ideal beauty with facial and body scarification. Others—including Americans a hundred years ago—consider plumpness and obesity marks of beauty. Today, models are mostly tall, thin, and athletic-looking, and in the United States, the “multiracial look” has become increasingly popular; it, too, is becoming a popular standard of beauty in the United States and worldwide (Halter, 2000). Nevertheless, research indicates that standards of attractiveness and beauty vary across cultures (Sugiyama, 2004).

COMPONENTS OF CULTURE

Although different groups and societies around the world may have very different cultural understandings, all create worlds of meaning with the same basic components: symbols, language, beliefs, values, norms, and material culture. Let’s take a closer look at each of these elements and how they affect people’s thoughts and actions.

Symbols

For animals, information is conveyed almost exclusively through *signs*, which are biological forms of communication. Animals use signs to express fear, hostility, and other emotional states. For example, when a dog bares its teeth and raises the hair on its back, every dog from California to China knows it is a threat. But animal communication has a very narrow range of expression: animals cannot combine signs, nor can they use signs to refer to the past or the future (Schultz and Lavenda, 2017).

Humans, of course, also use signs to express emotions, but somewhere in antiquity, we began to convert them to symbols to communicate messages about emotional states and everything else. A **symbol** is *anything to which group members assign meaning*. It may be an object, color, sound, gesture, person, or anything else. The important difference between signals and symbols is that the latter are purely arbitrary. For example, water has real physical properties, but as a symbol, the same water may be defined as pure water, dirty water, holy water, or spring water with curative powers. With only a slight chemical change, the same water may also be transformed into an expensive beverage that may be used to express one's social standing.

Colors also may be interpreted in diverse and even opposite ways because of symbolic behavior. In the United States and other Western cultures, white is a symbol of life, purity, and goodness. "Good guys" wear white hats. Black can symbolize something serious and solemn. For example, black is worn at graduation ceremonies and in courts of law by judges. But black in Western culture more generally symbolizes evil and death: people wear black at funerals, "bad guys" wear black hats, and football teams with black uniforms have menacing reputations. In China and many other parts of Asia, many of these meanings are reversed. White is a symbol of mourning and death, and people wear white, not black, to funerals (Rosman, 2017). Wearing a green baseball cap, a symbol of a sports team in the West, might cause embarrassment in China, because there it mocks a man's masculinity and is a symbol for a cuckold (Smith, 2002).

Clothing is symbolic as well, although most of the time we hardly notice what classmates, professors, and our friends wear. But look more carefully at the symbolic messages people convey through clothing. Some t-shirts carry obvious messages, but every item of apparel makes some kind of statement. Of course, symbols may change over time. Today, blue jeans are so common on campus that few people notice them. Had you worn jeans to class a century ago, however, you would have shocked and angered almost everyone, because they were "working-class" apparel. And only a few decades ago, jeans were considered appropriate for males but not females.

Harley-Davidson motorcycles were once significant symbols as well—of deviance and an "outlaw biker" mentality. Today, most Americans consider them socially acceptable, because in the past few decades, stockbrokers, attorneys, dentists, and other Harley enthusiasts have redefined the term "Harley-Davidson" to mean "mainstream." And because they are as expensive as some luxury automobiles, they now are status symbols to the rich and successful (Thompson, 2012). Of all the symbols that people use, language is by far the most important in preserving and transmitting the cultural heritage of groups.

Language

A **language** is a complex system of symbols with conventional meanings that people use for communication. Language is often thought to include only the spoken word, but in its broadest sense, language contains verbal, nonverbal, and written symbols.

SYMBOL

Anything to which group members assign meaning.

LANGUAGE

A complex system of symbols with conventional meanings that people use for communication.

Professional and college football teams often select black and other dark uniform colors to symbolize their toughness and intimidate opponents.

WHICH of these players looks the most intimidating? Why?



Spoken Language There are an estimated three thousand to five thousand languages worldwide, and within these languages, there is often linguistic variation based on regional, class, ethnic, and other subcultural differences. Most spoken languages make use of fifteen to sixty distinct sounds to communicate messages. English, for example, uses forty-four distinct sounds. These few sounds and the rules for combining them into words, sentences, and more complex structures are the primary basis of all social traditions (Howard and Dunaif-Hattis, 1992).

Humans are biologically predisposed to learning language. Infants are born with the ability to produce many sounds, hear subtle differences among these sounds, and process this information in the brain. As with all symbols, the sounds chosen by a culture and how they are arranged to produce meaning is decided by social convention. Every healthy four-year-old child who is a member of the Hausa ethnic group in West Africa knows the meaning of the phrase *na sayi abinci* (“I bought food”). To a visiting American who does not know Hausa, of course, the phrase means absolutely nothing.

Nonverbal Communication Not all language is spoken. To be an effective speaker in any society or group, it is not enough to know the sounds and arrangement of its words and sentences. We also must learn the nonverbal symbols—the proper uses and the meanings of gestures, eyes, posture, and space. *Body language* is often used to reinforce spoken messages, but at times it may be used independently. For example, many Americans shake their head from side to side when they mean “no,” whereas Greeks express “no” with a sudden upward jerk of the head. Likewise, while raised eyebrows is an appropriate way to greet another in American culture, it is considered “indecent” in Japan and is rarely used, except as an insult (Haviland et al., 2016). Moreover, every culture has clear rules about touching—some are deemed high-touch cultures, others low-touch (Ferraro and Andreatta, 2018). Nonverbal communication is explored further in Chapter 5, “Social Interaction in Everyday Life.”

Not all language is spoken, as illustrated by Colin Kaepernick, who knelt during the national anthem to protest violence against minorities. Because it is nonverbal, the symbolism was interpreted to have different meanings to different groups and organizations.

WHAT types of nonverbal communication do you use in your everyday life? Do others always interpret it the way you intend?

The Power of Language Language, thought, and culture are interrelated (Kottak, 2015). Without language, there would be no culture, for language enables groups to store meanings, communicate with one another, and transmit knowledge between generations. Moreover, language plays an important role in how various cultures think about their “worlds.” According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the language of each culture does not merely influence how people understand the world; it shapes perceptions and leads people to think in particular ways (Sapir, 1929, 1949; Whorf, 1956). From this perspective, people who speak different languages live in different sensory

worlds, for the structure and words of each language highlight some things and ignore others. This theory has generated much controversy among scholars, but research suggests that languages do facilitate particular ways of thinking, by making it easier to code or symbolize some events and objects, which as a result are easier to remember (DeLamater et al., 2015).

While each language shapes reality, it does not, however, imprison its speakers in a narrow and changeless world. This is because all languages are flexible and acutely sensitive to change. New words and ideas are regularly adopted by speakers of any language to fill various cultural needs. For example, computers and other technology have influenced our speech and thoughts noticeably.



We speak of sound bites, nanoseconds, networking, interfacing, and texting, and such computer terminology is commonly used on the nightly news to describe everything from business transactions to politics. Similarly, people who do not use technology would find it mystifying—if not almost impossible—to understand the abbreviations and symbols that appear regularly in e-mails, chat rooms, and texting conversations.

At the same time, most people speak “many languages” each day, altering forms of communication to suit the needs of business, family, and other groups. For example, even well-advertised soft drinks are referred to differently in various regions of the United States. And in the past few decades, not only in Texas and California but also throughout the United States, Spanish and Latino cultural themes have proliferated as well. Spanish-speaking America is already the world’s fifth-largest Hispanic nation (Wallraff, 2000). With these trends in mind, what do you think is the likelihood that the growing use of Spanish will profoundly influence U.S. culture—not only the media and popular culture, but also the nation’s most deeply felt beliefs and values?

BELIEFS

Assertions about the nature of reality.

VALUES

Shared ideas about what is socially desirable.

Beliefs

Beliefs are *assertions about the nature of reality*. They provide groups with a fundamental orientation to the world and answer questions about good and evil, proper relations among people, and the destiny of humans and the universe.

Unlike scientific knowledge, which is based on empirical understandings, many beliefs may be seen as “truths” by group members; they are based not on objective reality but on social agreement. Moreover, yesterday’s beliefs and the common sense of the moment are the falsehoods and “myths” of tomorrow. For example, the word *lunatic* is derived from the popular nineteenth-century belief that a full moon caused madness, a belief that had folk origins in European farming and hunting societies. Today, such thinking is derisively labeled “superstition”—although police officers, mental health professionals, and emergency room personnel tell of bizarre happenings during full moons. Most elementary school teachers can tell you when it’s a full moon without even referring to a calendar.

Belief systems in complex societies—particularly advanced industrial and postindustrial societies—include multiple and competing belief systems that often contain many contradictions. Think about your membership in family, school, and peer groups alone. Do they all share a common vision of reality and have similar goals? For example, scientific knowledge and religious beliefs present very different approaches to reality. One demands that we consider only what is empirical and observable in the “natural world.” The other stresses a world beyond nature, and how the “supernatural” affects our lives. Cultural contradictions often require that people rationalize one set of beliefs in order to accommodate others. Likewise, beliefs typically change at a rapid rate. So do values.

Values

Values are *shared ideas about what is socially desirable*. For all groups, values define what is desirable by ranking behaviors, people, events, objects, and social arrangements. These rankings define what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, moral or immoral, just or unjust, and desirable or undesirable. In modern

Football star J. J. Watt used his celebrity status to raise millions of dollars for flood and disaster relief after Hurricane Harvey struck the Gulf Coast.

WHAT role do media and celebrities play in promoting a sense of community in times of disaster? What role do they sometimes play in helping divide communities?



pluralistic societies, such as the United States with its many ethnic, religious, and other groups, value orientations are complex. Some values may be widely shared, but others may be hotly disputed by various groups. Sociologist Robin Williams (1970) charted several core values that he maintained exert a particularly strong influence on the national culture and are especially prominent in the popular media.

U.S. Core Values According to Williams (1970), the following values are widely shared in the United States:

1. **Individualism and Freedom.** Self-reliance, individualism, and the freedom to achieve whatever goals we may set for ourselves are particularly important. Americans value their independence and the ability to make personal choices that are free of social constraints. Hollywood has made a fortune portraying “rugged individualists” who pay a heavy price for resisting conformity to the group but in the end prove to be “right” and prevail over “society.”
2. **Equality.** According to the American definition of equality, people should be able to compete openly and have a fair chance to achieve society’s rewards. This definition stresses “equality of opportunity” and does not require “equality of outcome”—for example, that people have similar amounts of wealth, power, and prestige.
3. **Achievement.** Most people desire to get ahead and to better the circumstances of their birth. This requires that each person compete with others for society’s limited prizes. Consequently, we expect that there will be “winners” and “losers”; most attribute success or failure to personal talent, intelligence, and “character.”
4. **Efficiency and Practicality.** People value a simple and direct approach to life and what are understood as “commonsense,” “down-to-earth” approaches to problem solving. In organizations of every type—especially those of business and government—these values are evoked with terms such as “streamlining,” “downsizing,” and the “elimination of fat and waste.”
5. **Progress and Technology.** Americans value what is new and progressive and place a high value on technology as a solution to the problems of modern life. They demand “state-of-the-art” products and believe that, as a general rule, future products will be superior to those manufactured today and the future will be brighter than the past.
6. **Material Comfort and Consumerism.** In the United States, success and personal worth are measured in large part by the quality and quantity of material possessions. For many, material possessions such as autos, homes, and clothes are important measures of personal identity and self-worth.
7. **Work and Leisure.** Americans value hard work and labor and laud the efforts of those who put in long hours to accomplish goals and “make something of themselves.” However, Americans also value leisure and periods of “free time” in which to relax with family and friends and get away from work and its stresses.

For many, work and leisure are related, as is suggested by the phrase “work hard and play hard.”

Do you agree that these values are shared by most people in the United States? If you answered yes, did you consider the values of minority groups? Are there other core values that you think might be added to this list?

In all complex societies, there are many inconsistencies and conflicts in cultural values. In addition to conflicting ideas based on ethnicity, religion, and other social divisions, there are conflicts in core values themselves. Some U.S. values—for example, freedom, achievement, progress, and individuality—may be logically consistent. Many others, however, are inconsistent and may even be contradictory. For example, while most Americans value work, they also value leisure; consequently, people may simultaneously resent and admire lottery winners and people with inherited wealth.

This sign appears at a strip mall in a small town in East Texas.

WHAT values and potential value conflicts are reflected?



“Pro-life” advocates may see no contradiction in their positions on abortion and capital punishment: that it is always wrong to kill (the unborn) yet appropriate and just to kill people for certain offenses. An environmentalist may protest the destruction of the tropical rain forest on Monday and purchase mahogany and rattan furniture on Tuesday without the slightest pang of guilt.

Conflicts in core values are but one aspect of value conflict in complex modern societies. According to the conflict perspective, social class, age, occupation, gender, race, and ethnicity all influence a person’s value orientation. Because each of us is a member of many social categories, at any given moment our values may or may not all be in agreement. For example, the same elderly farmer who is opposed to “welfare handouts” may expect and demand federal farm subsidies and protest even the slightest changes in Social Security policy. We also regularly choose among alternative values in the course of our daily lives. In some social situations, total honesty may be required. In others—for example, when acquaintances casually ask how you are doing and you are in a terrible mood—they neither expect nor desire the truth.

Often, social situations demand that we choose a particular value over others, and there are many ways to justify our decisions. At times we may rank certain values, believing that in a particular context one value is more appropriate than another. We may rationalize why we have chosen one value or another or even deny that our values conflict. Sometimes powerful groups decide issues for us, or in some cases, public opinion may resolve difficult issues. If the issue is sufficiently important, the vague abstractions and guidelines that are the basis of all values may be converted into specific rules, or norms.

Norms

Norms are *expectations and rules for proper conduct that guide the behavior of group members*. Among all groups, norms provide guidelines that tell members how they should think and act in any given social situation. There are four major kinds of norms: folkways, mores, laws, and taboos.

Folkways The most common norms are **folkways**, *informal rules and expectations that guide people’s everyday behavior*. They include etiquette, table manners, proper appearance, and many other simple, everyday behaviors that in American culture are indicators of “self-control.” While people find violations of folkways annoying, they typically tolerate them. Moreover, when **sanctions** are applied, they are usually *informal sanctions* that are loosely defined and applied by individuals rather than by an authorized social body. When a child holds a fork in the proper hand, a parent may sanction the behavior with praise. Conversely, if the child spreads butter on bread using fingers instead of an appropriate utensil, negative sanctions may be applied; the child may be ridiculed, threatened, or sent away from the table.

A breach of folkways is not ordinarily considered a threat to society, nor is the individual who occasionally violates them subjected to serious penalties. Nevertheless, the persistent violation of folkways may be interpreted by others as evidence of social deviance, and this could have serious consequences (see Chapter 7). The cumulative effect of many violations may be recognized as sufficient grounds for divorce, termination of employment, incarceration, or even confinement to a mental institution.

How would you and your classmates respond if, at the end of your Introduction to Sociology class, a student in the front row stood and began to applaud? It is likely that you and your classmates would become mildly annoyed, but the first time it happened you would be surprised by the student’s behavior and you might not respond. If the same student were to repeat the applause after the following class, the second episode would almost certainly be met with “dirty looks.” A third incident probably would elicit even stronger sanctions, possibly including sarcastic applause. What if a student stood and booed the professor?

This example illustrates the importance of norms in our everyday lives. Norms are basic to every social situation, yet because they are so tightly woven into the fabric of social life, we often take them for granted. Typically, we conform to norms, and in most

NORMS

Expectations and rules for proper conduct that guide the behavior of group members.

FOLKWAYS

Informal rules and expectations that guide people’s everyday behavior.

social situations we expect others to do the same. Some norms tell us what we should *not* do: for example, that students should not cheat on exams; these are called *proscriptive norms*. Others spell out what we *should* do: for example, take and pass exams; these are *prescriptive norms*.

Mores **Mores** (pronounced more-ays) are *salient norms that people consider essential to the proper working of society*. Mores have considerable moral (and sometimes religious) significance and are closely tied to values. People believe that mores protect what is right and good. *Formal sanctions*, which are clearly defined rewards or punishments administered by specialized agents of society, are often employed to ensure conformity to mores. Medals and awards may be given in recognition of heroic acts and special contributions to society. Conversely, people who commit serious violations of mores may be imprisoned, tortured, and executed.

A large number of mores have their roots in ancient religious traditions, and these include many proscriptive norms that have near-universal application. The “Thou shalt nots”—steal, commit adultery, or commit murder—and other “sacred commandments” are serious mores, and their violation brings strong and immediate public response. The desecration of important public symbols, such as burning the American flag, elicits similar responses. Unethical conduct may sometimes be recognized as a breach of mores as well. If an auto body shop does a sloppy paint job, the owner of the vehicle may become upset, but it is unlikely others would feel offended. If a mechanic is careless while adjusting an automobile’s brakes, however, and a family is seriously injured or killed, most people would consider the lapse morally reprehensible and demand punishment.

Conformity is ensured partly by public understandings that mores are important to everyone and that detection and punishment for wrongdoers is almost a certainty. No society relies on coercion alone, however, to get people to conform to and uphold its most serious norms. During childhood, individuals are taught the rules of proper conduct. People internalize the rules and in effect become society’s police—society’s standards become “our” standards, and adherence to norms strongly influences how we view ourselves (see Chapter 4). When we conform to societal norms, we feel good knowing that we have done the “right thing”; when we violate norms, we feel bad, even if we are certain our offenses will never be known.

Laws Important mores typically become encoded into **laws**. Laws are *formal rules enacted and enforced by the power of the state, which apply to members of society*. Laws that codify mores are usually recognized as vital to society, and most people believe that without them public order would be impossible. The relationship between laws and mores is complex, however. Sometimes laws and mores correspond closely; for example, it is both immoral and illegal to steal another’s property. In other cases, laws may reflect the power of one group or segment of society relative to another, and their legitimacy may be challenged by opposition interests or groups. For example, prior to 1972 and *Roe v. Wade*, abortion was illegal in the United States. After the landmark Supreme Court decision that year, women gained the legal right to have an abortion. While this law is supported by a large segment of American society, another portion has challenged it because, according to their views of morality, it violates the societal norm that we do not take another’s life.

Sometimes laws may not correspond to a society’s mores, and these laws are the most difficult to enforce and the most subject to change. For example, in the United States, there is little public consensus regarding the morality of gambling. In some states gambling is illegal, but in others, state-sponsored lotteries and horse racing not only are legal but also contribute important revenues to the state. Thus, a police officer may make a gambling arrest in Utah on Friday, then cross the border into Nevada, go to Las Vegas, and gamble all weekend without seeing the slightest inconsistency in the two behaviors.

Taboos **Taboos** are *prohibitions against behaviors that most members of a group consider to be so repugnant they are unthinkable*. Eating human flesh, for example, is

MORES

Salient norms that people consider essential to the proper working of society.

LAWS

Formal rules enacted and enforced by the power of the state, which apply to members of society.

TABOOS

Prohibitions against behaviors that most members of a group consider to be so repugnant they are unthinkable.

considered to be such a heinous act that in most societies neither sanctions nor laws are needed for compliance with the taboo against this behavior. Another taboo is the incest taboo, especially parent–child and sibling sex, that is widely shared around the world; incest is also a serious breach of the law in most nations. Their definition as “unthinkable,” however, does not mean that people are not fascinated by taboos: the National Geographic channel airs a series by that title featuring various taboo practices around the world.

Sanctions

Norms are enforced by the use of **sanctions**, which are *penalties or rewards society uses to encourage conformity and punish deviance*. For example, parents are expected to feed, clothe, and care for their children. If they do not, parents may not only be punished for their neglect, they may also lose custody of the children. Some norms apply in certain situations but not in others. In the United States, for example, people should not spit on the floor of a home, nor should they spit on a crowded street. During baseball games, however, spitting is so common among the players that people who do not know the sport might think it was an essential part of the game.

We have divided beliefs, values, and norms in this discussion, but we want to emphasize that the three are vitally linked, and it is impossible to separate what people value from their interpretations of reality. This is evident in the abortion debate: Those who support the “pro-life” position believe that the fetus is a person, whereas many “pro-choice” advocates believe it is not. The values of both groups play a major role in how they interpret “reality.” We focus more specifically on the importance of norms and social control in Chapter 7.



It may seem as if a man is simply removing road kill in order to clean up the street. This, however, is an example of things not being what they seem.

WHAT is your reaction when you discover that he is going to take it home and cook it for dinner?

ETHNOCENTRISM AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Small children are acute observers of human behavior, and for a few years they are receptive to every cultural tradition on earth. Children learn languages—even ten or fifteen languages in some parts of the world—and are able to imitate hundreds of gestures with ease. Young children willingly sample foods, wear different clothing styles, and accept as fact an extraordinary variety of beliefs. As we discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4, during socialization, families and other groups narrow these possibilities. For example, children learn that only some plants and animals can be eaten and that some are better than others. Children also learn to distinguish and rank houses, clothing, automobiles, people, and virtually everything else.

Culture Shock

Once created, these cultural categories serve as lenses or filters of reality throughout our lives. From this point on, we rarely recognize culture’s powerful impact on our thoughts and behavior. The exception, of course, is when we encounter a culture that takes a radically different approach to reality. For some Americans, a visit to a developing country with teeming markets and strange sights and smells may encourage cultural comparisons and questions about our own customs. Of course, with globalization, people no longer have to travel abroad to discover surprising diversity in the food, dress, and other customs of one’s neighbors. In *Crossing the Blvd*, the authors mention that in Queens, New York, an estimated 138 languages are spoken and that the Queens area has become so ethnically diverse that whatever your ethnic background, you are

SANCTIONS

Penalties or rewards society uses to encourage conformity and punish deviance.



“Harry’s in his cultural center.”

a minority (Kilgannon, 2003; Lehrer and Sloan, 2003). New arrivals in the United States are often confused and dismayed by many aspects of American life—especially family life and parent–child relations. In extreme cases, such encounters may produce what sociologists call **culture shock**, or *feelings of confusion and disorientation that occur when a person encounters a very different culture*.

If we carefully observe another culture, however, we realize that the same things that cause us shock and confusion provide order, security, identity, and meaning to the people of that culture. Do visitors to the United States experience cultural shock? One of the authors discovered the answer when he served as a tour guide for a visitor from rural China, who was shocked by the many goods and affluent lifestyles that she witnessed in malls and suburban communities, which most Americans consider “ordinary.”

Although people today have a much greater understanding of cultural diversity than they did just a hundred years ago, many continue to believe that the customs and beliefs of others are backward, inferior, or even degenerate when compared with their own. Likewise, although Americans may be more tolerant of other cultures than they were in the past, no individual or group is value-free and open to *all* customs. For example, what do you think about the custom in some countries of eating dogs and cats, or the practice of eating dirt (actually clay) that is enjoyed by some people in the southern United States? If you are like most Americans, you probably find these practices either repulsive or ridiculous.

Ethnocentrism

Sociologists call this kind of thinking **ethnocentrism**—*the tendency to evaluate the customs of other groups according to one’s own cultural standards*. As Focus box 3.2 illustrates, ethnocentrism is such a strong tendency that when social scientists encounter particularly exotic cultures, even they are not always able to restrain their cultural biases.

Ethnocentrism has a positive side. It can enhance group stability by providing members with roots and a strong sense of meaning and purpose. The tendency to view one’s culture as “the best” also has provided humans with many different solutions to the problems of living. If groups had taken their cultures lightly or even pragmatically, cultural homogeneity rather than cultural diversity would now be the norm. But most people are attached to their religious beliefs, foods, clothing, and other customs and are unwilling to give them up, except under extreme conditions. Even social researchers may experience difficulty identifying their own cultural assumptions and biases—especially when there are strong emotional responses to people, groups, and places (Cylwik, 2001).

Throughout history, ethnocentrism’s negative side has been equally pronounced. Viewing one’s values and customs as natural and right, and those of others as inferior and wrong, often contributes to prejudice and discrimination, interethnic conflict, exploitation, and even ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Cultural Relativism

One important way in which we can guard against ethnocentric biases is by adopting **cultural relativism**, *a perspective that asks that we evaluate other cultures according to their standards, not ours*. For example, a highly unusual custom to most Americans is the extension of lips that once marked ideal beauty in Central Africa. Circular plugs were inserted into the lips and then gradually enlarged until the lips were stretched

CULTURE SHOCK

Feelings of confusion and disorientation that occur when a person encounters a very different culture.

ETHNOCENTRISM

The tendency to evaluate the customs of other groups according to one’s own cultural standards.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

A perspective that asks that we evaluate other cultures according to their standards, not ours.



SOCIOLOGICAL FOCUS 3.2

The Nacirema

In the following article excerpts, anthropologist Horace Miner (1956) reviews the ritual life of the Nacirema, a society he describes as so magic-ridden that it is a wonder they still survive.

They are a North American group living in the territory between Canada and Mexico, as well as the Atlantic and the Pacific. . . . Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy that has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people. . . . The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man's [people's] only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of powerful influences of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines in their houses. . . . Most houses are of wattle and daub construction, but the shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled in stone. Poorer families imitate the rich by applying pottery plaques to their shrine walls. . . .

While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. . . . The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In the chest are kept many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he [or she] could live. . . . Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters

the shrine room, bows his [or her] head before the shrine-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablation.

. . . The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them. . . .

In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these objects in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. . . . In the client's view, the purpose of these ministrations is to arrest decay and to draw friends. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy-mouth-men year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay.

It is to be hoped that, when a thorough study of the Nacirema is made, there will be a careful inquiry into the personality structure of these people. One has but to watch the gleam in the eye of a holy-mouth-man, as he jabs an awl into an exposed nerve, to suspect that a certain amount of sadism is involved. If this can be established a very interesting pattern emerges, for most of the population shows definite masochistic tendencies. It was to these that Professor Linton referred in discussing a distinctive part of the daily body ritual which is performed only by men.

This part of the rite involves scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument. . . . The theoretically interesting point is that what seems to be a predominantly masochistic people have developed sadistic specialists.

The medicine men have an imposing temple, or *latipsoh*, in every community of any size. The more elaborate ceremonies required to treat very sick patients can only be performed at this temple. . . . Few supplicants in the temple are well enough to do anything but lie on their hard beds. The daily ceremonies, like the rites of the holy-mouth-men, involve discomfort and torture. With ritual precision, the vestals awaken their miserable charges each dawn and roll them about on their beds of pain while performing ablutions, in the formal movements of which the maidens are highly trained. At other times they insert magic wands in the supplicant's mouth or force him [or her] to eat substances which are supposed to be healing. From time to time the medicine men come to their clients and jab magically treated needles into their flesh. The fact that these temple ceremonies may not cure, and may even kill, the neophyte, in no way decreases the people's faith in the medicine men.

. . . In conclusion, mention must be made of certain practices which have made their base in native esthetics but which depend upon the pervasive aversion to the natural body and its functions. There are ritual fasts to make fat people thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people fat. Still other rites are used to make women's breasts large if they are small, and smaller if they are large. General dissatisfaction with breast shape is symbolized in the fact that the ideal form is virtually outside the range of human variation. A few

Continued


**SOCIOLOGICAL
FOCUS 3.2**

The Nacirema *Continued*

women afflicted with almost inhuman hyper-mammary development are so idolized that they make a handsome living by simply going from village to village and permitting the natives to stare at them for a fee.

. . . Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has certainly shown them to be a magic-ridden people. It is hard to understand how they have managed to exist so long under the

burdens which they have imposed on themselves.

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

Who are these strange people? (Hint: spell Nacirema backwards). Has ethnocentrism influenced Miner's description of the Nacirema? Had Miner avoided such a strong focus

on the Nacirema's magical practice, would this group have appeared more human by your cultural standards? Might your own daily life and the lives of your friends be described in similar terms—as magic-ridden and filled with superstitions and rituals? Take a position and support it with empirical evidence. How would you rewrite Miner's article to make it more contemporary?

four inches or more. On the surface, this custom seems to make little sense, but let's examine it more carefully.

First, sociologists have found that most cultures modify the face and lips in some way to achieve beauty. For example, many American women use lipstick; some have enhanced their lips surgically. But why did so many villages in Central Africa take what may seem to Americans a more extreme approach to beauty? Some functionalist scholars attribute the custom of placing large circular objects in the lips to intense slave raiding a century ago. They contend that villages that practiced lip extension were often avoided by slave raiders, and this may have encouraged villagers to exaggerate lip extension as a symbol of beauty.

The Relativist Fallacy

Conflict theorists caution that we should be careful about associations between customs and the proper functioning or good of "society." In some cases, perhaps including lip extension, customs may be far more beneficial to one group than to another or may continue because they give advantages to men or the rich and powerful. We should also guard against viewing all cultural practices as being equally valid and worthy of respect. This is called the *relativist fallacy*, and in its most extreme form it would treat even the most severe social pathologies, such as genital mutilation, apartheid, and even genocide as legitimate cultural practices.

GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

During the past century, expanded global trade, advances in telecommunications, tourism, and large-scale emigration from one end of the earth to the other have introduced virtually everyone to the extraordinary array of customs, values, beliefs, and lifestyles worldwide. This process has greatly accelerated *cultural borrowing*, and as we mentioned in Chapter 1, a certain amount of cultural convergence has taken place over time. Across the globe, billions of people now share many elements of culture in common—especially elements of popular and consumer culture that are promoted by mass media and social media (see Table 3.2). But cultural diversity has dramatically increased as well.

Today, because of global emigration, in most large cities and even many small towns, people's values, beliefs, food, and clothing may have much more in common with people who live thousands of miles away than with their neighbors who live only a few blocks away. In this sense, contemporary culture is a complex mosaic, with members of different cultures and subcultures living side by side, sometimes in harmony, relishing each other's special contributions, but at other times in opposition and conflict with these value orientations. Sociologists have discovered numerous factors

TABLE 3.2 Global Values: A Roper Poll Compares American's Values with Global Values

Top 10 Values for Americans	Top 10 Values Globally
1. Honesty	1. Protecting the family
2. Protecting the family/freedom	2. Health and fitness
3. Health and fitness	3. Honesty
4. Friendship	4. Self-esteem
5. Justice	5. Justice
6. Stable peer relationships	6. Friendship
7. Knowledge	7. Freedom
8. Enjoying life	8. Knowledge
9. Self-esteem	9. Self-reliance
10. Learning	10. Wisdom

Source: Based on "Global Values," 2005 Roper Reports Worldwide, GfK Custom Research North America.

SUBCULTURES

Groups that share many elements of mainstream culture but maintain their own distinctive customs, values, norms, and lifestyles.

that make special contributions to the rich tapestry of culture today. In this section, we examine how subcultures, **countercultures**, the multicultural movement, postmodern culture, the media, and strains between ideal and **real culture** affect culture in the United States and globally.

Subcultures

Subcultures are groups that share many elements of mainstream culture but maintain their own distinctive customs, values, norms, and lifestyles. There are subcultures based on age, gender, wealth, sexual orientation, education, and occupation, to name only a few. Within organizations, management and workers maintain their own symbols, specialized languages, and material culture, as do subcultures in rural and urban areas. Even within a ten-block area in most cities there may be hundreds or thousands of subcultures, including jazz musicians, street people, inner-city gangs, investment bankers, garment workers, motorcyclists, and topless dancers.

Every region of the United States is a mosaic of ethnic and religious subcultures as well. For example, although Lowell, Massachusetts, is famous as the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, from its beginnings it has also been the crucible for an important and continuing multicultural experiment. Founded in 1826, the town was initially the home of Boston-based English gentry who financed and built textile mills that attracted immigrants from all over the world. Jewish, Greek, Polish, and Portuguese people arrived first, along with over 30,000 Irish Catholic immigrants who moved to Lowell during the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s (Kiang, 1994). French Canadians arrived next and created the Little Canada community. In the 1950s, large numbers of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans relocated to Lowell to work in the garment industry. The most dramatic and rapid growth in Lowell, however, occurred in the 1980s. At that time, more than 25,000 Cambodians and several thousand

Members of the Old Order Amish subculture combine limited modern technology with traditional farming methods to reflect their unique take on basic American values.

CAN you think of other subcultures that reflect traditional values in nontraditional ways?



Vietnamese and Laotians moved from other states to work as entry-level assemblers in new high-tech industries, bringing with them Buddhism, Confucianism, and many other forms of ethnic and religious diversity (Kiang, 1994).

You might attempt to chart the diversity in your town or city. You may be surprised at the degree of cultural diversity, expressed in such things as architectural designs, clothing, foods, family patterns, and religious beliefs.

Countercultures

Countercultures *reject the conventional wisdom and standards of behavior of the majority and provide alternatives to mainstream culture.* For these reasons, they are considered threats to society, their members are labeled “deviant,” and they are subjected to a variety of negative sanctions. Inequalities of class, race, age, gender, and other forms of social differentiation in contemporary postindustrial societies provide fertile ground for the development of countercultures. For example, political and social protests in the 1960s spawned dozens of countercultures, including the Black Panthers and the hippie movement. More recently, skinheads, the Aryan Brotherhood, the Christian Identity Movement, and the so-called alt-right have emerged to challenge multiculturalism, nonwhite immigration, and racial harmony with calls for a return to white domination and “racial purity.”

A number of sociologists suggest that the marginal status of adolescence has contributed to the proliferation of youth subcultures and even countercultures. This theory of *marginality* was first used to explain the predicament of second-generation immigrants (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1937) “who seek to emulate dominant patterns but retain some visibility as minorities” and consequently are not fully acculturated. Nor are they fully accepted members of either cultural system. This has encouraged the formation of adolescent subcultures and sometimes countercultures in the United States and worldwide (Thompson and Bynum, 2017). Throughout the twentieth century, numerous youth countercultural movements, from heavy metal in the 1970s and 1980s, to gangster rap and grunge in the 1990s, to rave subcultures with their drug use, all-night “rave” dance parties, and computer-generated music (Wilson, 2003) have attacked traditional adult norms and values. Some sociologists believe that traditional ways of distinguishing between subcultures and countercultures may be confusing and even ethnocentric where some “countercultures” are involved. According to James and Laura Dowd (2003:34), “Rather than continuing to think of countercultures as constituting an altogether different entity from the more common and less deviant subcultures, . . . we would emphasize the key distinction of a group’s likelihood of assimilating into the surrounding culture. That is, countercultures publically and actively resist assimilation, whereas other types of subcultures are far less likely to do so” (Dowd and Dowd, 2003:34).

COUNTERCULTURES

Groups that reject the conventional wisdom and standards of behavior of the majority and provide alternatives to mainstream culture.

MULTICULTURALISM

A movement that encourages respect and appreciation for cultural differences.

EUROCENTRISM

The belief that European cultures have contributed the most to human knowledge and are superior to all others. A focus on the contributions of Europeans to history, math, science, and literature.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism recognizes cultural diversity as a national asset rather than a liability. Further, it recognizes that in different regions of the country much of the population is considered “multicultural.” The movement emerged in the 1980s, on campuses and in other social arenas, during the second-largest wave of immigration in American history. **Multiculturalism** *encourages respect and appreciation for cultural difference.* In many ways, the multicultural movement seeks to reverse centuries of cultural intolerance and oppression of minority groups in the United States, Canada, and Europe. The majority historically has taken an *assimilationist approach* to immigrant groups, demanding that they abandon their cultural heritages and adopt the traditions of the host group. In the United States, this meant adopting the English language and the foods, dress, religion, and other cultural practices of the dominant European (Anglo-Saxon) groups, which established the early colonies and dominated American institutions (Gitlin, 1995).

Some call this one-sided approach to minority groups and their cultures **Eurocentrism**—*the belief that European cultures have contributed the most to human knowledge and are superior to all others.* This perspective is especially pronounced in the

U.S. educational system, where European accomplishments, interests, and perspectives have dominated history, literature, and all other subjects from grade school through college. In recent years, some minority groups have sought to balance these views with educational programs that emphasize their unique perspectives and accomplishments. **Afrocentrism**, for example, *emphasizes the preeminence of African and African American culture in human development*. Like Eurocentrism, however, it suffers from a unidimensional view of history, literature, and art by placing African culture above all others (Schlesinger, 1998).

Multiculturalism has brought fundamental changes to American education, and “developing the ability to adapt to different cultural contexts may be one of the key learning areas of the curriculum of the future” (Campbell, 2000:31). The shift toward the appreciation of cultural diversity is reflected in a new emphasis on global languages in most school curricula and in efforts to bring the literatures and perspectives of many ethnic groups to human understanding—especially those that have been ignored in history and education, such as Native American cultures. Multiculturalism also has raised people’s consciousness about the importance of gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other cultural differences that were previously neglected. The movement has led to ethnic revival in many cities and in the nation as a whole, as evidenced by celebrations of ethnic foods and folk customs and by holiday parades that celebrate ethnicity. Nowhere is this celebration more apparent than in popular culture and media celebrations of global diversity, from Disneyland to the Olympics, that are now beamed to billions of people worldwide.

The introduction of multiculturalism has not been without controversy, and there has been a strong backlash against the movement in politics and education. For some, *affirmative action*, *welfare*, and *multicultural* have become “code words” that license more subtle forms of racial and ethnic exclusion (Macedo and Bartolomé, 1999). Some conservative politicians have called multiculturalism misguided and even dangerous to the nation’s future. Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork (1996:120–23), for example, called challenges to Eurocentrism “ignorant and perverse,” noting that “European American culture is the best the world has to offer.” More tangible effects of the conservative backlash have been anti-immigrant legislation and efforts in many states to legislate “English only” in schools and government offices. At the national level, several bills have been introduced in Congress to make English the “official language” of the United States, and in 2006, Congress passed a law stating that English was the “common language” that unites the United States. President Trump’s oft-repeated phrase “America First” seemingly takes this even a step further, discounting diversity in favor of “Americentrism” ignoring even the European influence on American culture.

From Modern to Postmodern Culture

For much of the twentieth century, *modern values* were associated with industrial societies. Industrial societies essentially follow an assembly-line model. They are hierarchical and carefully ordered, with clear rules and a common vision that pervade major social institutions from politics to education and religion. Beginning in the 1970s in the most advanced postindustrial nations, new information technologies ushered in very different cultural trends that sociologists have labeled *postmodern values*.

Postmodern values are associated with prosperous high-tech societies that have a high degree of security. They emphasize quality of life and greater openness to change and diversity. They also place more stress on equality and creativity and promote more individualist orientations than any previous society. In postmodern culture, there is a shift from rugged individualism to *expressive individualism*, which emphasizes “style” rather than “taste.” Likewise, social life becomes highly fragmented, and the pace of social life accelerates (Bertman, 1998).

As journalist James Gleick remarked, technology has conditioned us to perform multiple tasks at the same time. Today people drive cars, eat, talk on cellular phones, and read newspapers and business reports at the same time—sometimes with disastrous results. According to Gleick (2000:18), “Technology has conditioned people to expect instant results. Internet purchases arrive by next-day delivery . . . the microwave

AFROCENTRISM

The perspective that emphasizes the preeminence of African and African American culture in human development.

delivers a hot meal in minutes, [and] faxes, e-mails and cell phones make it possible—and increasingly obligatory—for people to work faster.” In an era of high-speed change, many seek greater control of their lives (Bertman, 1998). For others, the desire for control and order is less important than is personal improvement. As Bartos (1996:32) remarked, in the new postmodern culture we are aware that everything that we do or possess sends a message—our clothes, homes, cars—and, like media messages, we change and reinvent ourselves continually.

Each year since the 1980s, a *World Values Survey* has been conducted among more than forty societies worldwide. Since the 1990s, a pattern has shown a worldwide shift toward postmodern values (WVS, 2015). A shift in this direction is neither uniform nor assured, however. As in previous periods, globalization and immigration have generated opposite tendencies, including cultural segmentation, a resurgence of local cultures, ethnic and religious revival, and, in some cases, militant nationalism. For example, in many parts of the former Soviet Union, and especially in the former Yugoslavia, radical political and economic restructuring have sparked the revival of nationalist, ethnic, and religious groups and values.

In advanced postindustrial societies, many groups at the edge of the mainstream—in economically depressed cities and many rural areas—have also responded to global change with calls for a return to traditional values and “universal morality” as the best approach to the present (and future). Another important challenge to postmodern culture has been the emergence of countercultures that reject the mainstream and offer their own visions of a better future.

Culture, Class, and the Media

During much of the twentieth century, and typically of *modern culture* as described earlier, cultural variation was reflected in the different aesthetic standards and tastes of social classes. According to Herbert Gans (1975), during this period there were three major kinds of “taste cultures” in all advanced industrial societies: high culture, folk culture, and popular culture.

High Culture *High culture* includes tastes and creations supported and used by the upper classes and intelligentsia to make fine distinctions within their ranks and to distinguish themselves from those beneath them in the social hierarchy. High culture demands elaborate training, technical proficiency, and considerable resources. Consequently, it has long been used by elites as a social indicator of refinement, education, and style. Examples in Western cultures include classical music, opera, ballet, novels by the “great authors,” and works by artists defined as possessing extraordinary skills and creative talents.

Conflict theorists argue that the belief that high culture is far superior to folk and popular culture reflects elite definitions of the situation. One English scholar, for example, wrote that “the differences between trash culture and high culture show only

HOW do the photos of these two dogs portray values, class, and culture?



that storytelling adapts to changing economic, social, and political conditions” (Simon, 1999:2). Those who play a key role in constraining artistic diversity and keeping highbrow genres distinct from folk and popular tastes are *aesthetic gatekeepers*, including critics, reviewers, tastemakers, and opinion makers, whose reviews, disseminated through the mass media, “may be more widely experienced than the artwork itself” (Shrum, 1991:373).

Folk Culture *Folk culture* is in most ways the opposite of high culture; it includes the art, dance, music, and other creations of working-class and minority group members in their home environments. Folk culture includes such things as doll and quilt making, subway art, customized low-rider automobiles, and dancing. Folk culture is spontaneous, familiar, and practical, and is produced for and by ordinary people (Real, 1977). It also includes various forms of graffiti that Susan Phillips (1999), in her book *Wallbangin'*, classified into gang graffiti, political graffiti, and hip-hop graffiti, calling the latter “subway art.”

Popular Culture *Popular culture* comprises tastes and creations that appeal to the masses. Because popular culture consists of products and creations designed for leisure, entertainment, and mass consumption, it includes a bewildering assortment of things that critics say favor “vulgarity,” “the commonplace,” and the “lowest common denominator” (Bogart, 1991:63). Examples of popular culture include prime-time television, Elvis statues, live concerts by popular artists, tractor-pulling contests, mud wrestling, baseball cards, NASCAR, and the mall Easter Bunny and Santa Claus.

Some sociologists contend that globalization and new information technologies have blurred “taste cultures.” Anthropologist Terry Eagleton (2000:125) believes that traditional high culture has been supplanted by new media combinations and that there is “almost no popular culture outside commercial forms.” At least one scholar argues that the Disney model has had such a profound effect on social structure and culture that it has created a *Disneyization* of global society (Bryman, 2004). Technology, from fax machines to interactive videos and the World Wide Web, has given anyone with a personal computer access to virtually all of the arts, from the great books to comic books and graffiti. A recent study suggests that members of the upper class (highbrows) no longer limit themselves to the fine arts to distinguish themselves from other classes (lowbrows), as they did in previous periods. Instead, upper- and upper-middle-class professionals have become “cultural omnivores,” who appreciate a great variety of art, music, and dance from around the world. Cultural eclecticism, of course, is highly functional in a global economy and can be used to express such things as a broad-based education, international experience, and cultural tolerance and understanding (Peterson and Kern, 1996).

This is not to say that every kind of cultural production has become equal, however. One researcher found that art, music, dance, and other leisure activities that are considered highbrow culture in nations such as the United States, Israel, and Sweden may be considered “popular culture” in nations such as Germany and Italy, where they receive considerable funding by the state, cities, and even towns. Further, in pluralistic societies today, class divisions and cultural consumption are differentiated by national context, but “there are significant linkages between race, religion, and gender” (Katz-Gerro, 2002:224). Moreover, “taste,” now in the guise of a broad knowledge of global music and fine arts, continues to be useful in class ranking. For example, corporate employers may use evidence of “cultural eclecticism” as one important measure of managerial competence. Cultural tolerance, however, has its limits, and this, too, may reinforce class and other social boundaries.

Ideal and Real Culture

Another important source of cultural variation in every contemporary society is contradictions and disagreements between **ideal culture**—*what people should do, according to group norms and values*—and **real culture**—*what people do in everyday social interaction*. Value conflicts create strains and tensions in society, social problems, and

IDEAL CULTURE

What people should do, according to group norms and values.

REAL CULTURE

What people do in everyday social interaction.

sometimes even wars. Ideally, the United States is a land of opportunity where everyone is given an equal chance to succeed. In fact, social barriers such as age, gender, class, and race inhibit the chances of some and enhance the chances of others. Parents are expected to love and care for their children, yet it is estimated that as many as a million children each year are victims of abuse and another million and a half suffer from neglect (Gelles, 1997; Straus et al., 2006; National Children's Alliance, 2015).

Contradictions between ideal and real culture can be an important source of social change. For example, for many years police tolerated drunk-driving violations. Conforming to the public view that occasional excessive drinking was not socially harmful, police may have ignored violations or subverted the law by taking drunk drivers to their homes. The efforts of some individuals and the social movement Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) led to changes in public opinion on this issue, resulting in much stricter enforcement of the law.

Almost a hundred years ago, well before television, computers, and cellular phones, William Ogburn (1922, 1964) noted that material culture tends to change more rapidly than nonmaterial culture and that this can cause cultural strains and even contradictions. This may result in **cultural lag**—*inconsistencies in a cultural system, especially in the relationship between technology and nonmaterial culture*. Recent advances in medical technology have had precisely the effects Ogburn proposed. We now have the ability to keep terminally ill patients alive indefinitely, using heart pumps, human and animal organ transplants, and artificial respirators. Cultural lag is obvious in such cases, for neither doctors nor family members are entirely sure of their responsibilities to the patient. Laws vary widely as well, for medical innovations have so redefined the fundamental nature of human existence that judges and juries regularly decide these issues. Recent experiments with genetic engineering and cloning have raised even more complicated questions that will provide new challenges in the future.

SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Sociologists view culture from several different perspectives. Functionalism and conflict approaches tend to be particularly useful in examining large-scale cultural patterns as well as cultural diversity in complex societies. Symbolic interactionism is better suited to understanding the powerful role of symbols and cultural interpretation in face-to-face interaction.

Society, Culture, and Functionalism

To understand why customs and traditions vary so widely around the world, it is important to know that all cultures are, in part, practical responses to environmental conditions. The **cultural ecological approach**, *an approach that examines the relationship between a culture and its total environment*, best exemplifies this perspective. At first glance, the Hindu custom that prohibits the slaughter of India's estimated 120 million cows because they are "sacred" may seem maladaptive and irrational. Functionalists contend, however, that we must examine the full context of the practice to understand it.

Although this practice may not seem rational in the context of advanced industrial and postindustrial societies, in India's preindustrial society, the benefits outweigh the liabilities. For one thing, in a country with few tractors, draft animals pull plows and transport people and goods to market. Cattle also provide manure, which is dried and used for fertilizer, fuel, and housing; and after they die, their hides are processed into sandals and leather goods. Most importantly, according to one anthropologist, "cow veneration" contributes to the adaptive resilience of Indian society by protecting a vital commodity that otherwise would have been consumed in any number of famines and droughts (Harris, 2011).

Such an approach to culture and society is clearly useful in tracing the origin of customs and provides important checks against ethnocentrism. Functionalism also shows

CULTURAL LAG

Inconsistencies in a cultural system, especially in the relationship between technology and nonmaterial culture.

CULTURAL ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

An approach that examines the relationship between a culture and its total environment.

how the cultural practices of groups tend to “fit together,” something sociologists call *cultural integration*. Changes in one element may have broad repercussions for the culture of any group. For example, the automobile, television, and computers clearly had a broad impact on almost every aspect of American culture and society, from family and work patterns to preferences for fast food and countless other elements of material and nonmaterial culture.

Society and Culture from the Conflict Perspective

According to the conflict perspective, the values, beliefs, and traditions of a nation or society are not necessarily a product of consensus and “social need,” as some functionalists claim. Instead, in all stratified societies, culture is highly complex, with many strains and contradictions that reflect conflicting group interests and needs. Because of their abundant resources, however, groups at the top of a society commonly have a disproportionate influence over national culture. As Marx and Engels ([1846] 1947:39) noted, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” In the slave era, for example, the dominant *ideology* promoted slavery and praised its virtues for both slaveholder and slave alike. Today, corporate capitalism extols the merits of individuality, consumerism, and free enterprise, which provide great benefits to corporate and governing elites.

Sociologists refer to more subtle, contemporary forms of elite cultural control—**cultural hegemony**, or *the domination of cultural industries by elite groups*. Cultural industries include the educational system, religion, the family, and, most important in contemporary society, the media. Today, the mainstream media, which reach most people, are disproportionately influenced by large corporations and government officials. Through *media framing* of the “news” and popular entertainment, elite groups around the world daily “help” the public recognize and interpret important issues and events.

For example, after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, one might think the last image the Chinese leadership would have shown on television would be the lone man confronting a line of tanks near the Beijing Hotel. Yet with proper framing it became one of their favorite images, and they showed this dramatic incident repeatedly on television—not to show the man’s bravery, courage, and support for freedom and democracy, as portrayed in the Western media, but to show the “extreme restraint” exercised by Chinese soldiers in restoring order (Snow and Benford, 1988; Lull, 1991). One scholar believes that corporations, advertisers, and mainstream media have even found a way to turn countercultures and social protest into commercial products and fantasies. “Hip consumerism” and anything with an edge that hints at rebellion have become highly marketable. For example, Ozzy Osbourne, the 1970s “shock rocker” and former symbol of anarchy, has, along with his family, become repackaged as “hip in an odd way” and perfectly suitable for mainstream television and even a White House visit (Frank, 1998; Hadnot, 2003:J1).

Social media seem to be more egalitarian, but this may again be an example that *things are not what they seem*. Political organizations, biased groups, and even foreign governments have the ability to hack websites, alter stories, and manipulate social media to their advantage.

Even in the most rigidly controlled media systems, however, audiences have considerable room for interpretation as well as many opportunities to challenge and protest establishment views. For example, the music industry pours forth a steady stream of records and music videos that promote system-supporting images and themes, but on any given day, a cacophony of dissent can also be heard or seen in heavy metal, grunge, rap, country, and many other forms of music and music videos.

Symbolic Interactionism, Society, and Culture

The *interactionist approach* focuses on how individuals and groups use symbols to define and interpret reality. This approach emphasizes that people everywhere live in “symbolic worlds” that are created and reproduced by diverse social groups, from Wall Street bankers to gangs and cab drivers. James Henslin (1993) provides an excellent

CULTURAL HEGEMONY
The domination of cultural industries by elite groups.



These iconic cultural symbols are recognized around the globe.

HOW many of them can you identify?

they truly exist, “they are real in their consequences.” For example, in 1997, thirty-nine members of a UFO religious group in San Diego committed mass suicide, believing that visitors from outer space had summoned them to a spaceship that was trailing the Hale–Bopp comet. In the twenty-first century there are still individuals and groups who believe that the earth is flat, global climate change is a hoax, science is less reliable than “gut level” opinions, and the earth is only six thousand years old (Dietrich, 2016).

example of the “cultural world” of cab drivers, where cabbies use time of day, dress, age, race, and “body language” to determine whether someone will be a trustworthy ride or a potential threat.

According to interactionists, our daily lives are structured by the symbols and meanings of many groups. These symbolic worlds shape reality and truths, whether or not they are real or scientifically valid. According to interactionism, if groups define things as real, whether or not

A Feminist View of Society and Culture

Not surprisingly, sociologists using the feminist perspective focus on the gender stratification and gender norms that exist in virtually every society. Even in hunting and gathering societies, it is almost always the men who do the hunting and the women who do the gathering. Although the day-to-day survival of those societies is dependent on the successful gathering done by the women, it is the less reliable bounties from hunting that are most celebrated, and the men tend to be held in high esteem for their courage and cunning, despite the fact that more often than not their hunting efforts may be unsuccessful, and it is usually the sick or weakest animals in a herd that they are able to slay. Nevertheless, after a successful hunt, great celebrations are held, as men reenact the hunt for the benefit of the women and children who stayed behind.

As societies become more complex, progressing through pastoral and herding to agrarian and industrial, cultural norms most often enhance the status of tasks performed by men as compared with those relegated to women. Friedrich Engels ([1884] 1902) pointed out that the inequality in men’s and women’s roles becomes more pronounced in industrial and capitalistic societies, where men are more closely associated with being the producers of valued goods, whereas women are primarily viewed as consumers. Feminists point out that although postindustrial societies may be more egalitarian than other societal forms, cultural norms continue to emphasize the value of men’s contributions to societal wellbeing, often minimizing or overlooking entirely those made by women (Smith, 2004).

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Today, there is no society on earth so remote that its inhabitants have not heard of radios, televisions, computers, automobiles, smartphones, tablets, and soft drinks; in fact, most people already possess them. Pygmies in the heart of the African rain forest wear Pepsi and Coca-Cola t-shirts; Inuit Eskimos drive snowmobiles, drink beer, talk on smartphones, and watch *Big Brother*. By no means are cultural contacts one-way. From the beginning, American and other Western cultures have borrowed from traditional cultures, and non-Western foods, clothing styles, architecture, art, and many other elements of material and nonmaterial culture have greatly enriched our lives. Some argue that with globalization and the spread of English as the language of business, science, and computers, English *and* American customs and ideas will become dominant as well. Such thinking may be misguided. For one thing, computer programs

feature more than two dozen languages, and their spell checkers offer not one but “four varieties of English” (Wallraff, 2000:66). Moreover, writer Barbara Wallraff (2000) contends that as English spreads around the world, English itself will be transformed, because ordinary people will coin new words and usages in their local languages and adapt English to suit their cultural and social environments.

Likewise, in the popular view, the media now bind together the diverse elements of American and global society into a seamless whole. People from different occupations, races, social classes, and even nations may have little else in common, but because of the media they share many values, beliefs, and norms. Few people in the world do not know about Coca-Cola and the “Golden Arches,” and almost anyone can express an opinion on a story about child abuse or capital punishment that was broadcast last night or last week on CNN or network television, not to mention daily blogs or other social media venues. Is this “Americanization” of the world a dangerous trend, as some European scholars have suggested, one that may lead to “cultural extinctions” all over the globe (Goldsmith, 1998:104)?

Many scholars take the opposite view, arguing that while media and popular culture provide entertainment and pleasure for audiences, they create neither identification with social authority nor shared values. Media expert David Demers (2007) argued that while global media will undoubtedly grow in the future, they may actually become less powerful. Instead of uniting audiences by exposing them to common values, mass media and postmodern culture fragment audiences with a smorgasbord of contradictory images and meanings that reinforce social divisions and make it difficult for ordinary people to see their common interests. Kai Hafez (2007) goes as far as to assert that media globalization may be more myth than reality. “All too often,” he contends, “the empirical data seem rather more anecdotal than representative. Many transborder media phenomena are overestimated and taken out of the context of locally and nationally oriented mainstream media processes all over the world” (Hafez, 2007:2). Edward Rothstein (2002:1) adds, “American popular culture is capitalist culture,” where commodities are produced to spur desire and profit. This, of course, makes it a highly disruptive standard-bearer of modernity and change. Global popular culture is no less fragmented. Even if elites wished to use the media to promote a homogeneous “global culture,” media texts can be read in a variety of ways. And while global audiences may sometimes interpret messages to agree with the interpretations of media producers, at other times they may disagree or even transform the intended messages to conform to traditional values and beliefs (Tetzlaff, 1992; Barker, 1999). This prompted sociologist George Ritzer (2007) to assert that the *globalization of everything* leads to the *globalization of nothing*. Aviad Raz, in his study of Tokyo Disneyland, contends that this process is a form of “glocalization.” According to Raz (1999:199), with global commodities—video, television, Hollywood, Coke, MTV, McDonald’s—these symbols spin webs of interaction that become “imbued with local meanings.”

What effect will transnational corporations and the mass media have on developing countries, and how will people in these countries respond to the flood of ideas and goods from the West? Of special interest to sociologists is the expansion of “consumer culture” and related ideas of freedom, individuality, and progress—especially among young people, who comprise the fastest-growing segment of the population in most developing countries. Will the world experience a globalization of everything? Or, as Ritzer (2007) asserts, will the globalization of everything translate into the globalization of nothing? Will the young in developing countries emulate the West and demand a greater share of material benefits? If their desires are not met, will this lead to a worldwide crisis of rising expectations or, conversely, a rejection of Western culture and a reemphasis on traditional values and beliefs? Further, a growing number of new immigrants wish to maintain dual identities and cultural practices that may clash with majority cultures in both Europe and America. For example, in Miami, some recent arrivals from Cuba and Haiti practice Santería, which involves animal sacrifice; not only is it prohibited by law, but it is also deemed “cruel to animals” by many in the population. Likewise, in Berlin, some Turkish parents have questioned “why Islamic classes cannot be made available as an elective in Germany,” with its tradition of religious instruction in public schools (Coles, 2003:14).

Some sociologists see considerable potential in grassroots movements that advocate a new global consciousness and “world culture.” Many seek to promote social structures and cultural values that stress “universalism, individualism, voluntaristic authority, and rational progress” (Boli and Thomas, 1997:171). To some, these cultural values are the essential ingredients of world citizenship, and they will become much more pronounced in this twenty-first century.

What about cultural change in advanced postindustrial societies where populations are growing older? At the turn of the last century, people aged sixty-five or older accounted for only 4 percent of the U.S. population. It is estimated that by 2030, this age cohort will increase to 20 percent, and in Japan and Germany, one in three persons will be older than sixty-four (Bosworth and Burtless, 1998; Novak, 2018). The mainstream media have already shifted their emphasis from youth culture toward middle-aged and elderly consumers. One journalist contends that “as the entire population of the developed world grows older, the attributes of personal aging may come to define the tone and pace of the culture at large” (Peterson, 2000b:21). Or perhaps the elderly will splinter into a variety of subcultures or countercultures that challenge dominant cultural values—perhaps including the ideas of progress and consumerism—much as youth countercultures did in the 1960s.

Finally, the impact of technological changes on culture and society will be closely monitored. How will improvements in computers, handheld data processors, robotics, lasers, and countless other high-tech industries influence postindustrial societies of the future? Will genetic and biomedical research bring fundamental changes to our ideas of life and death and what it means to be human? What new technological developments will radically alter our visions of the natural and supernatural worlds and our relations with one another? Will the rapid pace of technological change in this century reinforce traditional values and beliefs, or will cultural lag eventually lead to social and political chaos and perhaps even fundamental changes in American ideology? Do technology and technicians, in fact, hold the key to the future? Some in the popular media lend strong support to the idea that technological advances eventually will solve all social problems and ultimately produce utopian societies. Others believe dystopian societies are more likely and that unbridled technological change will eventually lead to environmental destruction and global terrorism and war. What do you think?

SUMMARY

1. All human societies can be grouped into six types based on their technologies and social lives: hunting-gathering, pastoral, horticultural, agrarian, industrial, and postindustrial.
2. Media and technology are fundamental to postindustrial society. They create the possibility of both a global village and a home-centered society as well as virtual communities with much greater individualism and social fragmentation than is characteristic of industrial society.
3. Culture consists of the learned set of practices, beliefs, values, rules for proper conduct, and material objects that are shared by group members. Sociologists divide culture into material and nonmaterial culture.
4. All contemporary people live in culturally constructed worlds that are largely their own creation. This includes group understandings of time, space, beauty, and virtually everything else.
5. All groups create worlds of meaning with the same basic elements: symbols, language, beliefs, values, norms, and material culture.
6. In today's global society, cultural diversity both shapes and is shaped by subcultures, countercultures, the multicultural movement, postmodernism, the media, and conflicts between ideal and real culture.
7. Sociologists take four major approaches in studying cultural diversity. Functionalists tend to emphasize the origin of customs and how culture contributes to social order. Conflict theorists emphasize cultural conflict and change, while interactionists stress how groups create and give meaning to symbols and how they affect face-to-face interaction. Feminists focus on the gender stratification and differential gender norms that exist in virtually all types of societies.
8. The globalization of the economy and demographic change will have an important impact on virtually all cultures in the future. Likewise, technological changes will continue to alter traditional beliefs, values, and norms around the world—perhaps at an unprecedented rate.

KEY TERMS

afrocentrism, 77
 agrarian society, 60
 beliefs, 67
 countercultures, 76
 cultural ecological approach, 80
 cultural hegemony, 81
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 cultural relativism, 72
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 taboos, 70
 values, 67
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OUTCOME ASSESSMENT

1. Define society and culture and give examples of different types of societies.
2. List and give examples of the major components of culture and discuss their importance.
3. Define, compare, and contrast ethnocentrism and cultural relativism.
4. Explain globalization and cultural diversity. Give some contemporary examples of each.
5. Discuss society and culture from each of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology.