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Culture

Giving Meaning to Human Lives

In 2005, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the body that governs intercollegiate sports in the United States, banned teams with American Indian names and mascots from competing in its postseason tournaments. Clarifying the ruling, an official stated, “Colleges and universities may adopt any mascot that they wish. . . . But as a national association, we believe that mascots, nicknames, or images deemed hostile or abusive in terms of race, ethnicity or national origin should not be visible at the championship events that we control” (NCAA 2005). The ruling affected a number of schools with competitive sports programs, including Florida State (“Seminoles”), University of North Dakota (“Fighting Sioux”), and University of Illinois (“Fighting Illini”).

The ruling concluded decades of pressure from American Indians, students, and others who have argued that these mascots stereotype and denigrate Indian

Mascot Chief Illiniwek. Chief Illiniwek performs during a University of Illinois football game. In 2007, after a long controversy, the university retired the mascot.

traditions. As one Oneida woman expressed, “We experience it as no less than a mockery of our cultures. We see objects sacred to us—such as the drum, eagle feathers, face painting, and traditional dress—being used, not in sacred ceremony, or in any cultural setting, but in another culture’s game” (Munson 1999:14). To Indians, the mascots seem to be just another attack on Indian cultures by non-Indians—attacks they have endured for several centuries.

Outraged students, alumni, and political commentators have countered that these mascots honor Indian traditions, pointing to the strength and bravery of Native Americans, which they hope to emulate in their teams. They also point out that the mascots are part of venerable traditions, part of the living cultures of their universities. Abandoning their mascots is like turning their backs on a part of their own cultural heritage.

This battle of words over college mascots has brewed for decades, with participants on both sides making claims, sometimes exaggerated, about the other side’s motivations or intentions. Yet each side in the controversy calls into play an issue of deep concern to them that divides the participants into two opposed groups, each with a radically different interpretation of the issue that often views the opposing point of view as irrational or wrong. In that respect, it is a cultural conflict.

The concept of culture is at the heart of anthropology. *Culture*, as anthropologists use the term, refers to the perspectives and actions that a group of people consider natural, self-evident, and appropriate. These perspectives and actions are rooted in shared meanings and the ways people act in social groups. Culture is a uniquely human capacity that helps us confront the common problems that face all humans, such as communicating with each other, organizing ourselves to get things done, making life predictable and meaningful, and dealing with conflict and change.

The culture concept provides a powerful lens for making sense of what people do, why they do it, and the differences and similarities across and within societies, a point that leads to a key question: *How does the culture concept help explain the differences and similarities in people’s ways of life?* Embedded in this broader question are the following problems, around which this chapter is organized:

What is culture?

If culture is always changing, why does it feel so stable?

How do social institutions express culture?

Can anybody own culture?

In this chapter, we present an overview of how anthropologists approach culture and explain why it is so relevant to understanding human beliefs and actions. We also offer a definition of culture that informs and shapes the rest of this textbook. We start with the key elements that all anthropologists accept as central to any definition of culture.

What Is Culture?

Culture has been defined in many ways by anthropologists, and there are nearly as many approaches to studying it as there are anthropologists. This lack of agreement does not frustrate or paralyze anthropologists. In fact, most anthropologists see this diversity of perspective as the sign of a vibrant discipline. A striking fact about this diversity is that most of these definitions emphasize a number of common features.

Elements of Culture

English scholar Sir Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) was a founding figure of cultural anthropology. He offered the first justification for using the word *culture* to understand differences and similarities among groups of people. He defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871:1). Two aspects of Tylor’s definition, especially that culture is *acquired* (today we say *learned*) and that culture is a “complex whole,” have been especially influential.

Since Tylor’s time, anthropologists have developed many theories of culture, the most prominent of which are summarized in Table 2.1. We discuss many of these theories in later chapters, exploring in more detail how they have changed over time. One of the most important changes in cultural theory is that early anthropologists tended to see cultures in societies with simple technologies as more fixed and stable than anyone does today. Nevertheless, across all these theories, there are seven basic elements that anthropologists agree are critical to any theory of culture.

TABLE 2.1 PROMINENT ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORIES OF CULTURE

Theory	Period	Major Figures	Definition
Social evolutionism	1870s–1910s	Edward B. Tylor (1871), Herbert Spencer (1874), Lewis Henry Morgan (1877)	All societies pass through stages, from primitive state to complex civilization. Cultural differences are the result of different evolutionary stages.
Historical particularism	1910s–1930s	Franz Boas (1940), Alfred Kroeber (1923), Edward Sapir (1921)	Individual societies develop particular cultural traits and undergo unique processes of change. Culture traits diffuse from one culture to another.
Functionalism	1920s–1960s	Bronislaw Malinowski (1922)	Cultural practices, beliefs, and institutions fulfill psychological and social needs.
Structural-functionalism	1920s–1960s	A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952)	Culture is systematic, its pieces working together in a balanced fashion to keep the whole society functioning smoothly.
Neo-evolutionism	1940s–1970s	Leslie White (1949), Julian Steward (1955)	Cultures evolve from simple to complex by harnessing nature’s energy through technology and the influence of particular culture-specific processes.

Cultural materialism	1960s–1970s	Marvin Harris (1979)	The material world, especially economic and ecological conditions, shapes people’s customs and beliefs.
Cognitive anthropology	1950s–1970s	Ward Goodenough (1965), Roy D’Andrade (1995)	Culture operates through mental models and logical systems.
Structuralism	1960s–1970s	Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949/1969, 1961)	People make sense of their worlds through binary oppositions like hot–cold, culture–nature, male–female, and raw–cooked. These binaries are expressed in social institutions and cultural practices like kinship, myth, and language.
Interpretive anthropology	1970s–present	Clifford Geertz (1973), Victor Turner (1967), Mary Douglas (1966), Roy Wagner (1975)	Culture is a shared system of meaning. People make sense of their worlds through the use of symbols and symbolic activities like myth and ritual.
Post-structuralism	1980s–present	Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Renato Rosaldo (1989), James Clifford, George Marcus, and Michael M. J. Fischer (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Marcus and Fischer 1986)	Not a single school of thought, but a set of theoretical positions that rejects the idea that there are underlying structures that explain culture. It embraces the idea that cultural processes are dynamic, and that the observer of cultural processes can never see culture completely objectively.

CULTURE IS LEARNED

Although all human beings are born with the ability to learn culture, nobody is born as a fully formed cultural being. The process of learning a culture begins at birth, and that is partly why our beliefs and conduct seem so natural: we have been doing and thinking in certain ways since we were young. For example, the Onge [ahn-gay], an indigenous group who live in the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean, learn from a very early age that ancestors cause periodic earthquakes and tidal waves. When these natural events occur, Onge have a ready-made explanation for how the world works, guiding their responses so that they do not have to learn how to deal with these things anew every time they occur. Anthropologists call this process of learning the cultural rules and logic of a society **enculturation**.

Enculturation happens both explicitly and implicitly. Your student experience illustrates how both processes have shaped you. Throughout your schooling, your teachers have explicitly taught you many things you need to know to be a productive member of society: to write, to analyze a text, to do mathematics, and so on (Figure 2.1). But you have also learned many other things that are more implicit, or not clearly expressed. These lessons include obedience to authority and respect for social hierarchy, learned for example from sitting in class facing forward in rows so the teacher can control your attention and movement. Bells and announcements over the loudspeakers also regulate your activities and the flow

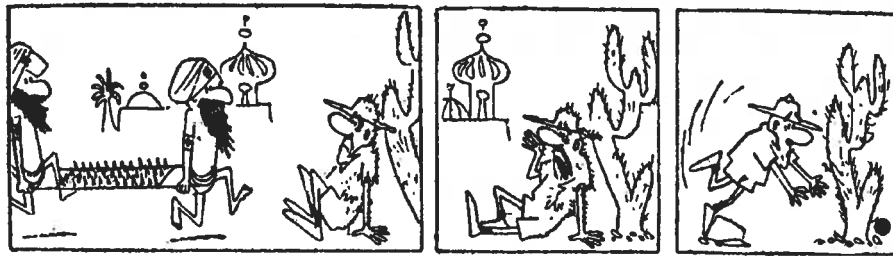


Figure 2.1 Do You Get It? You were enculturated to read from left to right. But when speakers of Hebrew language are taught to read, such as those who might read this cartoon from a Hebrew language newspaper, they begin on the right and move left.

of your day. By the time you reach college, these patterns are so ingrained that you know more or less exactly what to do when you walk into the classroom without thinking about it. Enculturation hasn't stopped, though: it continues throughout your life. You might notice that you are also involved in enculturation, explicit and implicit, as a student at your college, as you learn its specific traditions and develop loyalty to certain mascots and other school symbols.

CULTURE USES SYMBOLS

Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) was one of the best-known American anthropologists in recent times. He proposed that culture is a system of symbols—a **symbol** being something that conventionally stands for something else—through which people make sense of the world. Symbols may be verbal or non-verbal. Symbols are things that people in a given culture associate with something else, often something intangible, such as motherhood, family, God, or country. To illustrate this point, Geertz posed an interesting question: How do we know the difference between a wink and a twitch (1973:6–7)?

As movements of the eye, winks and twitches are identical. But the difference between them is enormous, as anyone who has experienced the embarrassment of taking one for the other can attest. A twitch is an involuntary blink, and generally speaking carries no symbolic significance. A wink, however, communicates a particular message to a particular someone. Telling the difference and understanding what, if anything, the action is meant to communicate takes a lot of implicit knowledge. In an instant, we must consider a number of questions: Is there intent? What is the intent—conspiracy, flirtation, parody, ridicule, or something else? Would it be socially appropriate for this person to wink at me, and under what conditions? Underlying our considerations is a shared system of meaning in which we (and the winker) participate that helps us communicate with and understand each other. What sounds like a complex computational process actually comes quite naturally to the human mind. This is because of the human capacity for learning with symbols and signs that otherwise have little meaning outside a given culture.

Geertz's concept of culture, often called the **interpretive theory of culture**, is the idea that culture is embodied and transmitted through symbols. This fundamental concept helped anthropologists clarify the symbolic basis of culture, something virtually all anthropologists take for granted today. Because culture is implicit in how people think and act, they express culture in *everything* they do—playing games, speaking a language, building houses, growing food, making love, raising children, and so on (Figure 2.2). The meanings of these things—and the symbols that underlie those meanings—differ from group to group, and, as a result, people do things and organize themselves differently around the world. These differing meanings are what make the Balinese Balinese, Zapotecs Zapotecs, and Americans Americans.



Figure 2.2 It's Like Getting a Joke. When a popular comedian like Trevor Noah tells a funny joke, most of us barely think about what makes it so funny. Like other examples of culture Geertz discussed, we just "get it."

CULTURES ARE DYNAMIC, ALWAYS ADAPTING AND CHANGING

In a globalized world with high levels of migration across cultural borders, communication flowing in all directions, and social and ethnic mixing, it is often impossible to say with any certainty where one culture or social group ends and another begins. As a result, many anthropologists today talk less about culture as a totally coherent and static *system* of meaning and more about the *processes* through which social meanings are constructed and shared.

Culture is a *dynamic* process. It is adaptive, helping people adjust to the changing worlds in which they live. At the same time, social groups are not uniform or homogeneous, because not everybody interprets the events of everyday life in the same way, nor do they blindly act out scripts already laid out for them to perform. So cultural processes are emergent, fluid, and marked by creativity, uncertainty, differing individual meaning, and social conflict. Relations of power and inequality routinely permeate these cultural processes.

CULTURE IS INTEGRATED WITH DAILY EXPERIENCE

As cultural beings, how we relate to the world seems natural to us, transparent, obvious, inevitable, and necessary. Our sense of passing time, for example, might

contrast sharply with that of people in other cultures. In Western cultures, we think of time as an entity that moves from past to present to future. This concept—an element of culture—organizes and regulates our activities every day. It also motivates us to make plans, since this concept of time leads us to believe that time must be used or it will be lost.

Understanding that culture comprises a dynamic and interrelated set of social, economic, and belief structures is a key to understanding how the whole of culture operates. The integration of culture across these domains leads to expectations that are specific to a given social group. For example, most white middle-class American parents think it is “natural” for their babies to sleep in single beds, often in their own rooms (Small 1998:116–18). They believe that sleeping with their babies creates emotional dependence. In our society, which prizes personal independence and self-reliance, such dependence seems damaging to the child. Other societies find these ideas strange and exotic. The Gusii of Kenya, for example, think it is “natural” to sleep with their babies, not to mention holding them constantly during waking hours, precisely because they *want* them to grow up to be dependent on others. For them, proper human behavior means constantly relying on other people.

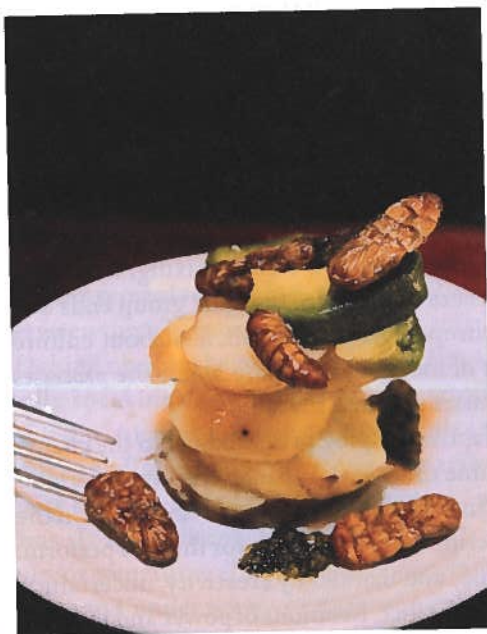


Figure 2.3 Yummy... Or Not. A meal of insect larvae might make some Americans vomit or retch, which shows how powerful cultural beliefs are: they actually provoke a biological response to something that is perfectly digestible, if not healthy and delicious.

How we sleep also demonstrates that activities you might think of as “natural”—that is, biologically based, as sleeping is, and therefore universally the same for all humans—are actually culturally patterned. Culture helps shape the basic things all humans must do for biological survival, like eating, sleeping, drinking, defecating, and having sex. There is no better illustration of this fact than food preferences. As omnivores, humans can eat an enormous range of foods. But many Americans’ stomachs churn at the thought of eating delicacies like rotten shark flesh (Iceland), buffalo penis stew (Thailand), or dogs (East Asia) (Figure 2.3).

No other animal so thoroughly dwells in artificial worlds of its own creation. Anthropologists stress that a **cross-cultural perspective** (analyzing a human

social phenomenon by comparing that phenomenon in different cultures) is necessary to appreciate just how “artificial” are our beliefs and actions.

CULTURE SHAPES EVERYBODY’S LIFE

White middle-class North Americans tend to believe they have no culture, in the same way that most people feel they have no accent. But the other side of the coin is the tendency to view minorities, immigrants, and others who differ from white middle-class norms as “people with culture,” as compared to people who have what they understand as a fairly general American culture. In the United States, these ideas are tied to social and institutional power: the more “culture,” in this sense of the term, one appears to have, the less power one wields; the more power one has, the less one appears to have culture (Rosaldo 1989). This power of mainstream culture over ethnic cultures is about the relationships of power and inequality mentioned earlier. In fact, by differing from mainstream patterns, a group’s culture becomes more visible to everyone. It is in this sense that groups with the most obvious cultures tend to be the least powerful. Nevertheless, *all* people’s lives are embedded in and shaped by culture.

CULTURE IS SHARED

The notion that culture is shared refers to the idea that people make sense of their worlds and order their lives through their participation in social groups. Culture does not emerge from, and is not reducible to, individual psychology or biology. Anthropologists generally accept that purely psychological and biological explanations of human experience are inadequate.

An individual’s comprehension of anything is always based on what his or her group deems collectively as proper and improper. Anthropologists commonly refer to such definitions as **cultural constructions**, which refers to the fact that people collectively “build” meanings through common experience and negotiation. In the debate over college mascots, for example, both sides collectively “constructed” the significance of these images and symbols for both Indians and colleges through their debates, protests, and discussions. A “construction” derives from past collective experiences in a community, as well as people talking about, thinking about, and acting in response to a common set of goals and problems.

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING INVOLVES OVERCOMING ETHNOCENTRISM

One of the key aspects of culture is that it makes us feel that we are “right” and everybody else thinks and does things wrongly. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, this phenomenon is called *ethnocentrism*. For anthropologists, overcoming ethnocentrism is the first step to understanding other cultures. If we are constantly judging another society and how it does things by our own goals, morals, and understandings, we cannot ever understand that society in its own terms. From the beginning of cultural anthropology in America, anthropologists have argued that the only way to understand other cultures is in terms of that other

culture's own goals, ideas, assumptions, values, and beliefs, which is the concept of *cultural relativism*. A relativistic perspective is a central tool for overcoming ethnocentrism, and it is a major feature of the anthropological perspective on culture.

Importantly, understanding another culture in its own terms does not mean that anthropologists necessarily accept and defend all the things people do. Even though the job of an anthropologist is not to judge other cultures but to learn to understand how and why other peoples do things as they do, anthropologists still carry basic values as individuals and as members of a particular society.

A number of anthropologists, in fact, advocate “critical relativism,” or taking a stance on a practice or belief only after trying to understand it in its cultural and historical context. Critical relativism also holds that no group of people is homogeneous, so it is impossible to judge an entire culture based on the actions or beliefs of a few (Merry 2003). For example, many North Americans practice male circumcision, which other societies consider abhorrent, including people in the German city of Cologne, who banned circumcision in 2012 as a human rights abuse. There is even a small but growing social movement in the United States that condemns the practice along similar lines. But to criticize this practice is not to condemn the entire culture.

Another reason for advocating critical relativism is that, in an extreme form, cultural relativism can be a difficult position to uphold. It can lead to **cultural determinism**, the idea that *all* human actions are the product of culture, which denies the influence of other factors like physical environment and human biology on human action. Some critics also argue that extreme relativism can justify atrocities like genocide, human rights abuses, and other horrific things humans do to one another.

Defining Culture in This Book

Although all anthropologists agree that these seven elements of culture are critical to any definition, in their research different anthropologists emphasize or interpret these elements differently, which contributes to the diversity of culture theories expressed in Table 2.1. So while we, too, accept the importance of these key elements to any definition, we do approach culture throughout this book in a particular way. Building on the more general definition provided in Chapter 1, we define culture as *those collective processes through which people in social groups construct and naturalize certain meanings and actions as normal and even necessary*. In whatever manner any group of people does something, their way seems like the only sensible and obvious way to people in that community—it seems natural, obvious, and appropriate—even though other people might only scratch their heads, perplexed. No matter how much our culture changes during our lifetimes, our reactions to the people and things around us always seem normal or natural.

This definition emphasizes that culture is not a static set of rules, or a totally coherent system of symbolic beliefs that people “have” or “carry” like a toolbox that gets passed down from generation to generation, which have been rather common

views of culture among anthropologists. Culture is more dynamic than these ideas allow, as cultures intermingle due to cross-border interconnections such as migration, global media, and economic globalization. Moreover, culture is emergent and even unstable, responding to innovation, creativity, and struggles over meaning. The power of this definition is that by presenting culture as a dynamic and emergent process based on social relationships, it leads anthropologists to study the ways cultures are created and re-created constantly in people's lives.

Throughout this chapter and in subsequent chapters we illustrate how our definition of culture works. But this definition does raise an immediate question: If culture is a dynamic process, why doesn't it always feel that way to people? We deal with this question in the next section.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT CULTURE

How can an understanding of the complexities of culture help us make sense of the day-to-day world in which we live? Give an example from your life to illustrate your answer.

✚ If Culture Is Always Changing, Why Does It Feel So Stable?

Imagine how chaotic life would be if you could not expect the same rules and processes for interacting with others from one week to the next. If we always had to stop and think about changes in the rules of social interaction, we could not function in our society. The very power of culture is that its processes feel totally natural and simultaneously predictable. Yet the previous section defined culture in a way that emphasizes its processes as dynamic and emergent. So how does something feel stable if it is so dynamic?

The concept of enculturation—the idea that people have been doing or believing things for much of their lives—only partly explains why culture feels so stable. There are a number of other features of culture—symbols, values, norms, and traditions—that help explain the sense of stability that people feel about it.

Symbols

One way of approaching the issue of cultural stability and change is by examining symbols (Sahlins 1999). A symbol, as we have already noted, is something that conventionally stands for something else. The relationship between the symbol and what it refers to is arbitrary, based on no particular rhyme or reason (Figure 2.4). Symbols can be more than just images or concepts, however; people also use their bodies as symbols. In Japan, for example, bowing is a form of greeting, but depending on how low one bows, it may also symbolize respect, apology, gratitude, sincerity, remorse, superiority, or humility.

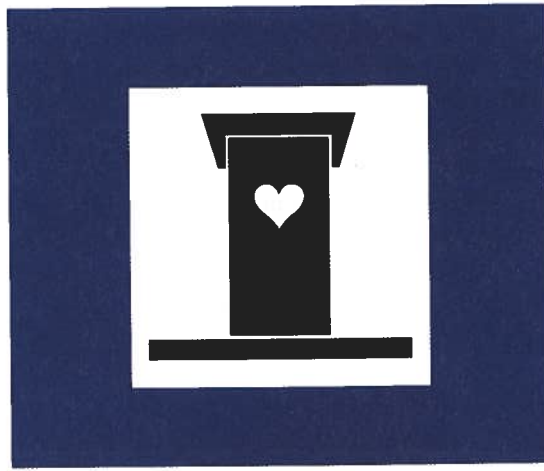


Figure 2.4 Love, Affection . . . and Toilets. Symbols are arbitrary. In the United States and several other countries, the heart conventionally symbolizes love and affection. But in rural Sweden and other parts of Scandinavia, people also associate the heart with outhouses, or rustic toilets (Lonely Planet 2014).

ning, Illapa, who they believed changes forms. To the Indians, Santiago symbolized the power of their own mountain gods and later encouraged resistance against the Spaniards (Silverblatt 1988).

Values

Studying values also helps us to understand how change and stability are so closely related. **Values** are symbolic expressions of intrinsically desirable principles or qualities. They refer to that which is moral and true for a particular group of people. For example, “Mom and apple pie” symbolize American core values (values that express the most basic qualities central to a culture), such as patriotism or loyalty to country. In the United States, “Mom” expresses the purity of selfless sacrifice for the greater good. “Apple pie,” a common food since colonial times, expresses Americans’ shared heritage. Of course, not everybody eats apple pie and not every mother is loyal to her family, much less sacrifices herself for the greater good. The point is not that these ideals reflect what actually happens in the real world. Rather, they orient thinking about one’s obligations as a citizen, like putting aside differences with other Americans and being willing to sacrifice oneself for love of family and country.

Values are conservative in that they conserve prevailing ideas about social relations and morality. Yet, this does not mean that a community’s values do not change. Nor does it mean that within a society or community, people will not have opposing values. It is not even uncommon for people to hold conflicting values simultaneously.

Norms

While values provide a general orientation for social relations, norms are more closely related to actual behavior. **Norms** are typical patterns of behavior, often

A society will store its conventional meanings in symbols because their meanings tend to be stable. But symbols and their meanings can and do change, sometimes dramatically. For example, during the Spanish conquest of the Peruvian Andes in the sixteenth century, the Spaniards carried banners of their patron saint, Santiago Matamoros, to ensure victory over the Indians. The Indians quickly absorbed Santiago into their native religion. They identified Santiago as their own god of thunder and light-

viewed by participants as the rules of how things should be done. In our society, for example, it would be unimaginable to try to haggle over the price of toothpaste at the grocery store because everyone expects you to pay the listed price. But in many other societies, especially in the Arab world and in Indonesia, the norm is just the opposite: no matter how small the item, it is considered rude to *not* haggle. In such places, taking the first asking price disrespects the seller. For more expensive items, such as a digital camera, buyers and sellers may expect to haggle over the price for an hour.

Norms are stable because people learn them from an early age and because of the social pressure to conform. Norms also tend to be invisible (we’re usually not conscious of them) until they are broken, as visitors to a different society or even city often find when they do things the “wrong” way. The scowls or expressions of disapproval you might get provide a **social sanction**, a reaction or measure intended to enforce norms and punish their violation. Long-established norms may eventually become **customs**, which have a codified and lawlike aspect.

Traditions

Tradition usually refers to the most enduring and ritualized aspects of a culture. People often feel their traditions are very old, which justifies actions that make no logical sense in contemporary times. With such justifications, individuals and groups go to great lengths to protect their traditions. The controversy between Indians and NCAA schools over mascots illustrates how powerful such traditions can be.

But anthropologists are aware that where traditions are concerned, appearances can be deceiving (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). For example, Scottish people often celebrate their identity with bagpipes and kilts made from tartans, plaid textiles that comprise stripes of different widths and colors that identify the wearers’ clans. But these traditions, while indeed venerable, are not actually ancient. As a matter of fact, these objects, and the sense of a distinctive tradition they symbolize, emerged only during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Trevor-Roper 1983). An English iron industrialist designed the kilt as we know it for his workers in the late 1700s. As the kilt caught on in the Scottish highlands, textile manufacturers began producing distinctive plaids to expand sales and found willing buyers among clan chiefs. The chiefs wanted to distinguish themselves and their ancestry as unique, so they adopted particular designs. When England’s King George IV made a state visit to Scotland in 1822, the organizers heavily promoted the use of kilts and tartans to enhance the pageantry of the visit. This occasion legitimized highlands culture and established the look as a national institution. The power of tartans comes not from their antiquity, but from their association with the clans that have long been central to Scottish highlander social life. Of course, knowing that a particular tradition may be a recent invention does not mean people are any less protective of it (Figure 2.5).



Figure 2.5 Sumo Wrestling in Japan. Like the use of tartans in Scotland, Sumo wrestling in Japan feels ancient, although key features of it—such as the practice of awarding one person the championship—are less than 100 years old.

Historically, anthropologists have emphasized that culture is “shared” among a group of people, implying a kind of uniformity and stability in culture. Clearly, people need a relatively stable and common base of information and knowledge in order to live together. But these different aspects of culture—symbols, values, norms, and traditions—are features that seem stable and common, even though they may not be shared by everybody in a society. There is another reason culture feels stable. It is that culture is expressed through social institutions, a theme we turn to next.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT CULTURE

Most students think it is easy to identify the symbols, values, norms, and traditions that support other people’s practices. But they find it more difficult to think about their own daily practices in the same terms. Use any of your own daily practices to illustrate how these four features of culture reinforce your own behavior.

How Do Social Institutions Express Culture?

The **social institutions** of any society are the organized sets of social relationships that link individuals to each other in a structured way in that society. These institutions include patterns of kinship and marriage (domestic arrangements, the organization of sex and reproduction, raising children, etc.), economic activities (farming, herding,

manufacturing, and trade), religious institutions (rituals, religious organizations, etc.), and political forms for controlling power. Each culture has its norms, values, and traditions for how each of these activities should be organized, and in each case they can vary greatly from one society to another due to cultural differences. Here we consider how mid-twentieth-century anthropologists approached culture’s relationship to social institutions; we then turn to examine how changes in these institutions can shape cultural patterns, which ultimately transform the social institutions themselves.

Culture and Social Institutions

From the 1920s to the 1960s, many anthropologists understood culture as the glue that holds people together in ordered social relationships. Associated with British anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, this theory, known as **functionalism**, holds that cultural practices and beliefs serve important purposes for society, such as explaining how the world works and organizing people into roles so they can get things done. Functionalists emphasize that social institutions function together in an integrated and balanced fashion to keep the whole society functioning smoothly and to minimize social change.

As an illustration of functional analysis, think back to the case of the Onge, the people who believe their ancestors make earthquakes and tidal waves. A functionalist would focus on how Onge beliefs about their ancestors explain how the natural world works, and on how these beliefs in turn help shape and are shaped by their migratory hunting-and-gathering existence. Working together with other structures of Onge society, such as political organization, economics, and kinship, these beliefs contribute to the maintenance of an ordered society.

For functionalists, cultures were closed, autonomous systems. But even at the height of its influence, critics insisted that functionalism’s vision of culture was *too* stable. Not all societies function smoothly, and functionalism’s static view of culture could not explain history and social change. One of Britain’s most prominent anthropologists, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, famously broke with functionalists in 1961 when he said that anthropology should not model itself on the natural sciences but on humanistic disciplines, especially history with its processual focus.

In spite of its shortcomings, functionalism has left us an important legacy: the **holistic perspective**, a perspective that aims to identify and understand the whole—that is, the systematic connections between individual cultural beliefs, practices, and social institutions—rather than the individual parts. This does not mean that contemporary anthropologists still see a society as wholly integrated and balanced. Rather, the holistic perspective is a methodological tool that helps show the interrelationships among different domains of a society—domains that include environmental context, history, social and political organization, economics, values, and spiritual life. Thus, the life of a community becomes expressed through the social relationships among its members, organized as they are through their social institutions. To understand how changes in cultural values can lead to changes in social institutions, consider the relationship between diet, industrialization, and sexual deviance in America.

American Culture Expressed Through Breakfast Cereals and Sexuality

Let us begin by posing a simple question: Why do so many Americans prefer cereal for breakfast? Most of us do because it is part of a “healthy and nutritious diet” (the standard industry line) or because of its convenience. In any event, eating cereal for breakfast has become a social norm for a majority of Americans. It builds on positive cultural values attributed to health and on the symbolism of “healthy food = a healthy body.” But corn flakes began in the nineteenth century as a cure for sexual deviance, masturbation being the most worrisome.

Nineteenth-century religious leaders considered masturbation an abomination, and the emerging scientific disciplines of psychiatry and surgery claimed that masturbation caused shyness, hairy palms, jaundice, insanity, cancer, and murderous behaviors (Figure 2.6). From 1861 to 1932, the U.S. Patent Office issued some two dozen patents on antimasturbation devices to prevent boys from masturbating, among them a safety pin to close the foreskin of the penis, various kinds of male chastity belts, and an electric bell attached to the penis that would notify parents if their son got an erection during the night. As recently as 1918, a U.S. government brochure advised new parents to prevent their

babies from masturbating by tying their hands and legs to the sides of their cribs. Circumcision became the most commonly performed surgery in the United States based on the view that it prevented masturbation.

John Harvey Kellogg (1852–1943), the inventor of corn flakes, was a physician from Battle Creek, Michigan. He was a follower of the health food movement of vegetarian and dietary reformer Sylvester Graham (1794–1851), who had developed graham flour used in graham crackers. When Kellogg became director of a Seventh-day Adventist sanitarium in Battle Creek, he built on Graham’s ideas, inventing corn flakes and various granolas as food for his patients. Both men were concerned with health



Figure 2.6 The Effects of Masturbation, Circa 1853. This image comes from a book called *The Silent Friend* about the “horrors of masturbation.” At the time, common wisdom held that masturbation would lead to insanity.

and sexuality—they especially abhorred masturbation, which they attributed to animalistic passions that were enhanced by a rich, meaty, or spicy diet. Both believed that bland but healthy foods were the way to soothe these volatile and unhealthy sexual urges (Money 1985).

Eating cereal has never prevented masturbation, of course, and no one today would argue that it does. Over time, the meaning of both cereal and masturbation have shifted. In fact, these days, an increasing number of medical professionals embrace masturbation as good for mental health. But the initial assumptions that masturbation was abhorrent and that bland food could curb sexual impulses were enough to create corn flakes.

During the nineteenth century, the American breakfast, like the rest of the diet, was a hearty meal of meat, eggs, fish, biscuits, gravy, jams, and butter. Although farmers worked off the calories in their fields, as America became more urban such rich meals became a sign of prosperity, just as the ideal body type was full-bodied for both men and women. But as American culture began to value healthy eating early in the twentieth century, industrial cereal makers, like C. W. Post and Kellogg’s brother William, took advantage of this connection between cereals and good health to market their creations as nutritious foods. By the 1920s the American diet had shifted dramatically, and the ideal body type became much thinner. The result was an increased demand from consumers for convenient and tasty breakfast cereals, spawning a giant breakfast cereal industry associated with good taste and health rather than with preventing sexual deviance.

In answering our initial question about why many Americans prefer cereal for breakfast, we see interrelationships between separate domains like beliefs (about sexual morality, good health), social institutions and power (expert knowledge, medical practices), and daily life (changes in labor organization and economic life, dietary preferences). This is the holistic perspective.

This example also shows the integration of specific domains. For instance, beliefs about sexual morality are intertwined with institutions of social authority, such as sanitariums, and medical disciplines like psychiatry and surgery, and those institutions in turn regulate people’s sexual relationships. Similarly, changes in people’s economic relationships and work habits help shape and are shaped by their ideas about what is good to eat. At any historical moment, these domains feel stable because they are reflected in the other domains, even though some may be highly transitory and dynamic. The values, norms, and traditions in one domain are buttressed and supported by values, norms, and traditions in many other domains.

And herein lies the power of a cultural analysis: it shows how doing something that feels totally “natural” (eating cereal in the morning) is really the product of intertwined cultural processes and meanings. In “Thinking Like an Anthropologist: Understanding Holism” we present a scenario to illustrate how simple innovations can lead to changes in social institutions.

Thinking Like an Anthropologist

Understanding Holism

Anthropologists begin their research by asking questions. In this box, we want you to learn how to ask questions as an anthropological researcher. Part One describes a situation and follows up with questions we would ask. Part Two asks you to formulate your own questions based on a different situation.

PART ONE: INTRODUCING CASH CROPS TO HIGHLAND NEW GUINEANS

When anthropologist Ben Finney (1973) studied coffee as a cash crop in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, he observed that some younger men planted large fields in coffee and some had become coffee buyers. Many of these men eventually became very successful coffee planters and buyers, acquiring whole fleets of trucks, which they used to bring coffee beans to local warehouses and to coastal cities (Westermarck 1998).



Women process coffee in a local factory in Highland Papua New Guinea. Although men initially planted coffee as a cash crop, as the economy has begun to modernize, some farmers have built factories for roasting and bagging the roasted coffee as we see here.

On the face of it, this program was dramatically successful in introducing a valuable cash crop to a region that had known only subsistence horticulture. But a holistic approach illustrates that coffee also brought important social consequences for Highland communities.

In the 1950s an Australian colonial ban on tribal warfare opened up large tracts of no-man's-land between formerly hostile groups. Colonial officers brought coffee seedlings for villagers to plant in this formerly useless land. Some highlanders planted coffee; others rejected the whole idea, saying "what good is coffee, you can't eat it and pigs can't eat it either," pigs being an especially important form of wealth in Highlanders' political and economic lives. Most of the village leaders and prominent elders continued planting sweet potatoes and tending pigs as they always had. The pigs ate surplus sweet potatoes and were used in feasts and ceremonial exchanges with friends and rivals in other villages. Men with extensive exchange networks became village leaders called "big men." Big men achieved prominence and influence over others from their own hard work, assisted by the hard work of their wives and female relatives in the gardens. Traditional subsistence farmers made fun of their coffee-planting neighbors.

But after seven years, the coffee trees began to bear fruit, and the officers showed the coffee planters how to pick, process, and sell the beans. The young coffee planters now had larger sums of cash than people had ever seen. Coffee profits

increased as the trees matured. Unexpectedly, younger men found themselves with money that they would have had to work for months or years on a coastal plantation to earn.

These young coffee growers used this money to achieve social status because they, unlike the older men, had access to all sorts of imported goods in the stores. In some cases, the prestige of these new big men was even greater than that of the older big men. Suddenly, everyone wanted to become a coffee planter, but after seven or eight years nearly all of the open land was already planted in coffee.

Elimination of tribal warfare and the introduction of coffee did not eliminate the big man political system or the cultural logic upon which it is based. But a holistic perspective shows that it did have important ramifications throughout the society.

What questions does this situation raise for anthropological researchers?

1. How did Highland society change as a result of coffee?

2. What were the unexpected effects of introducing coffee on this small-scale egalitarian society?
3. Which effects were positive? For whom were they positive? Who experienced negative consequences from the introduction of coffee?

PART TWO: INTRODUCING SMARTPHONES TO AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

Consider the relatively recent rise in the use of smartphones by high school and college students. As little as fifteen years ago, most students were forced to use a telephone land line if they wanted to talk to their friends, which usually meant that they were calling from home. With their mobility, texting ability, and access to the Internet, smartphones have brought lifestyle changes for young people that nobody anticipated. Using a holistic approach, what questions would you ask about this situation as an anthropological researcher? (Sample questions can be found at the end of this chapter.)

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT CULTURE

Anthropologists feel that holism is important because it links together lots of things that people in other disciplines do not routinely think about. Use an example of an object in daily life (e.g., a book or laptop you use in class) to show how it is holistically linked to other aspects of American life.

Can Anybody Own Culture?

As we have defined culture, the question of owning culture may appear to make little sense. How can somebody own the collective processes through which people construct and naturalize certain meanings and actions as appropriate and necessary? For the most part, owning culture is about power relations between people who control resources and (typically) minority communities who have been kept outside the mainstream. Nobody can really own culture, but many will claim the exclusive right to the symbols that give it power and meaning.

The debate over sports teams' Indian mascots is only one example of a conflict over who has the right to use, control, even "own" symbols, objects, and cultural processes. This conflict is related to the phenomenon of **cultural appropriation**, the unilateral decision of one social group to take control over the symbols, practices, or objects of another. Cultural appropriation is as old as humanity itself. The fact that people adopt ideas, practices, and technologies from other societies demonstrates the fluidity of social boundaries and partly explains why societies and cultures are changing all the time.

Yet cultural appropriation also often involves relationships of domination and subordination between social groups. For American Indians, for example, the pressure to assimilate into dominant white Euro-American society has coincided with the dominant society's appropriation of Indian cultural symbols. That appropriation goes beyond the use of Indian images as sports mascots and includes, among others, kids "playing Indian," New Age religion's imitation of Indian spirituality and rituals, Hollywood movies about Indians, and even the use of the Zia Pueblo sun symbol on the New Mexico state flag (Strong 1996; Brown 2003). While some Indians do not mind, others find these uses of Indian symbolism degrading and simplistic, because they ignore the realities of Indian communities and traditions, or because nobody asked permission to use their culturally meaningful objects and symbols. For example, Zia Pueblo brought a lawsuit against the state of New Mexico in 1994, formally demanding reparations for the use of the Zia sun symbol in the state flag (Figure 2.7).



Figure 2.7 The Cause of Indigenous Rights. Indigenous groups forced the United Nations to establish the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2000. The Forum's goal is to address the human, cultural, and territorial rights of indigenous peoples around the world.

Anthropologists have not escaped indigenous scrutiny and criticism for claiming expertise about native cultures. Anthropologist Kay Warren (1998), for example, studied the rise of the Pan-Maya ethnic movement in Guatemala. When she gave an academic presentation on Maya political activism, Maya intellectuals and political leaders in attendance responded by challenging the right of foreign anthropologists even to study Maya culture. As Warren points out, indigenous movements like Pan-Mayanism reject the idea that anthropological knowledge is neutral or objective. They insist that doing anthropology raises important political and ethical questions: Who should benefit from anthropological research? Why do the people studied by anthropologists not get an opportunity to help define and evaluate research projects?

Responding to such questions, a number of anthropologists like Warren have modified how they do cultural research, including inviting the subjects of their research to be collaborators in all stages of the research, from the definition of the study all the way through to publication.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT CULTURE

Discuss whether people from one culture could "own" a dance—like the samba from Brazil—that originated with people from another ethnic group. Could anyone own a style of pop music?

Conclusion

At the heart of all anthropological discussions of culture is the idea that culture helps people understand and respond to a constantly changing world. As we have defined it, culture consists of the collective processes through which people construct and naturalize certain meanings and actions as appropriate and even necessary. Based on symbols and expressed through values, norms, and traditions, culture offers a relatively stable and common base of information and knowledge so that people can live together in groups. A holistic perspective on culture illustrates how different domains of a society interrelate. But culture is also dynamic, responding to innovation, creativity, and struggles over meaning.

In spite of the many difficulties involved in studying culture, it is more important than ever to understand culture, what it is, and how cultural processes work. The big and urgent matters of our time have cultural causes and consequences. These matters range from the problems posed by development and change for indigenous groups and heated conflicts about social identity over mascots and traditions on college campuses, to others like terrorism, environmental degradation and sustainability, ethnic diversity and racial conflict, religious intolerance, globalization, and healthcare. As you read this book, you will learn how anthropologists use cultural perspectives to understand, explain, and even contribute to resolving problems related to these matters.

Key Terms

Cross-cultural perspective p. 32	Enculturation p. 29	Social institutions p. 38
Cultural appropriation p. 44	Functionalism p. 39	Social sanction p. 38
Cultural construction p. 33	Holistic perspective p. 39	Symbol p. 30
Cultural determinism p. 34	Interpretive theory of culture p. 31	Tradition p. 37
Customs p. 37	Norms p. 36	Values p. 36

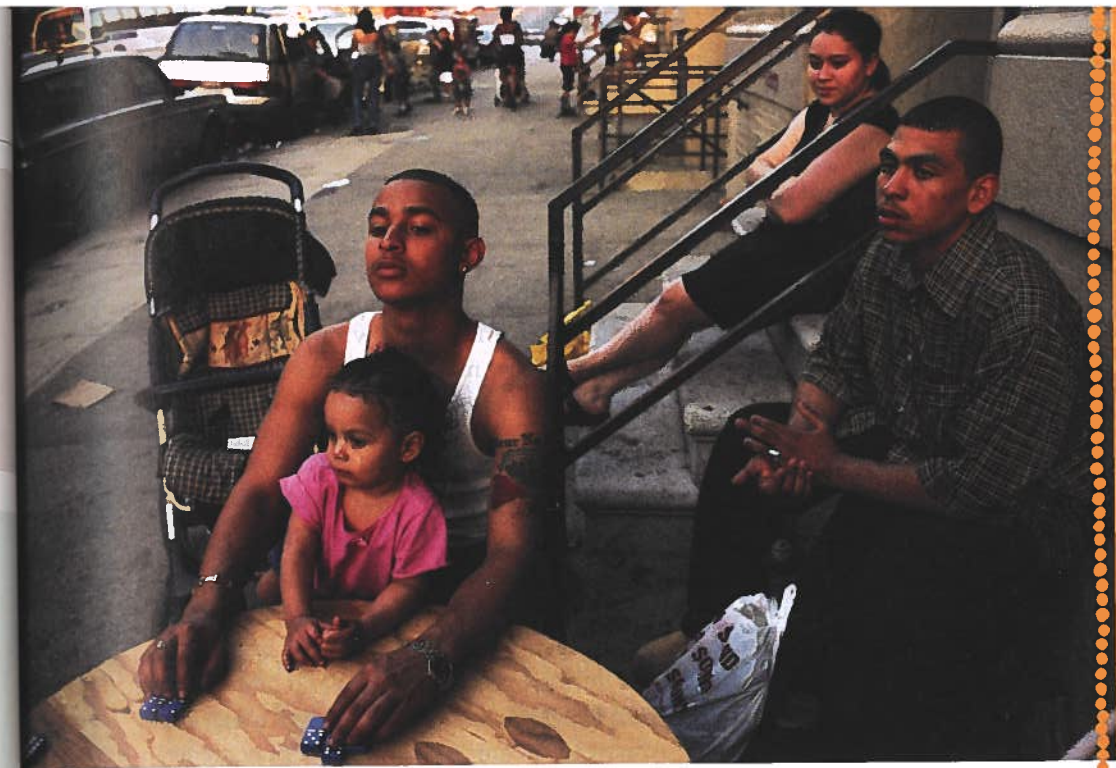
Reviewing the Chapter

CHAPTER SECTION	WHAT WE KNOW	TO BE RESOLVED
What is culture?	Culture is a central component of what it means to be human. Culture involves the processes through which people comprehend, shape, and act in the world around them.	Although most definitions of culture emphasize common themes, anthropologists have never agreed on a single definition of culture.
If culture is always changing, why does it feel so stable?	Cultural processes are emergent, fluid, and marked by creativity, uncertainty, differing individual meaning, and social conflict. Yet culture is also remarkably stable.	Anthropologists continue to debate which is more important—dynamism or stability—in explaining how culture works in people's lives.
How do social institutions express culture?	A holistic perspective enables anthropologists to understand how different social institutions and domains of a society are interrelated.	Anthropologists continue to debate how and why social institutions in any society change.
Can anybody own culture?	The phenomenon of cultural appropriation illustrates the tensions between cultural change and stability, and raises important ethical and political questions about anthropological knowledge itself.	Anthropologists continue to debate over which research and collaborative strategies are most effective to respond to the ethical and political issues raised by the creation of anthropological knowledge about culture.

Suggested Answers To “Thinking Like An Anthropologist”

Use these examples as a guide to answering questions for other “Thinking Like an Anthropologist” boxes in the book.

1. How has cultural life on campus changed because of smartphones?
2. Are there unexpected effects of introducing smartphones into college life?
3. How has the proliferation of smartphones changed college students' patterns of communication with their parents and friends?
4. Are people more connected socially than they were before?
5. Are there ways that people are less connected socially?
6. Does smartphone use have any impact on how college classrooms operate?



3

Ethnography

Studying Culture

You don't have to travel far and wide to study culture, and anthropologists have long studied the social lives of people in their home countries and communities. One such study was conducted during the 1980s and 1990s in East Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City, by American anthropologist Philippe Bourgois. East Harlem was and continues to be largely cut off from mainstream America, if not from the very city in which it exists. Its residents, who are still largely Puerto Rican, were isolated because of language and educational barriers, unemployment, poverty, and ethnic segregation. Bourgois lived in East Harlem to study how people experience this marginalization and how they make a living in an economy that does not seem to want them.

Life in Spanish Harlem. Ethnographic methods have been used to study the lives of many distinct societies and communities, including communities within the United States. For example, ethnographers have studied the lives of residents of East Harlem, New York City, such as those pictured here playing dominoes on the sidewalk.