

CULTURE

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Summary and Review

I had never felt heat like this before. This was *northern* Africa, and I wondered what it must be like closer to the equator. Sweat poured off me as the temperature climbed, soaring past 110° Fahrenheit.



R. C. Gorman, *Night Stories*, 1994

As we were herded into the checkpoint—which had no air-conditioning—hundreds of people lunged toward the counter at the rear of the structure. With body crushed against body, we waited as the uniformed officials behind the windows leisurely examined each passport. At times like this, I wondered what I was doing in Africa.

When I first arrived in Morocco, I found the sights that greeted me exotic—not far removed from my memories of *Casablanca*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and other movies that over the years had become part of my collective memory. The men, the women, and even the children really did wear those white robes that reached down to their feet. What was especially striking was that the women were almost totally covered. Despite the heat, they wore not only full-length gowns, but also head coverings that reached down over their foreheads and veils that covered their faces from the nose down.

All you could see were their eyes—all the same shade of brown. And how short everyone was! The Arab women looked to be, on average, 5 feet, and the men only three or four inches taller. As the only blue-eyed, blond, 6-foot-plus person around, and the only one wearing jeans and a pullover shirt, in a world of white-robed short people I stood out like a creature from another planet. Everyone stared. No matter where I went, they stared. Wherever I looked, I found brown eyes watching me intently. Even staring back at those many dark

The people fell silent. But just as soon as the man left, the shoving and shouting began again amidst the clamor to get passports stamped.

The situation had become unbearable. His body pressed against mine, the man behind me decided that this was a good time to take a nap. Determining that I made a good support, he placed his arm against my back and leaned his head against his arm. Sweat streamed down my back at the point where his arm and head touched me.

Finally, I realized that I had to abandon U.S. customs. I pushed my way forward, forcing my frame into every square inch of vacant space that I could create. At the counter, I shouted in English. The official looked up at the sound of this strange tongue, and I thrust my long arms over the heads of three people, shoving my passport into his hand.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

What is culture? The concept is sometimes easier to grasp by description than by definition. For example, suppose you meet a young woman from India who has just arrived in the United States. That her culture is different from yours is immediately evident. You first see it in her clothing, jewelry, makeup, and hairstyle. Next you hear it in her speech. It then becomes apparent by her gestures. Later, you might hear her express unfamiliar beliefs about the world or about what is valuable in life. All of these characteristics are indicative of **culture**—the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, and even material objects that are passed from one generation to the next.

In northern Africa, I was surrounded by a culture quite alien to my own. It was evident in everything I saw and heard. The **material culture**—such things as jewelry, art, buildings, weapons, machines, and even eating utensils, hairstyles, and clothing—provided a sharp contrast to what I was used to seeing. There is nothing inherently “natural” about material culture. That is, it is no more natural (or unnatural) to wear gowns on the street than it is to wear jeans.

I also found myself immersed in a contrasting **non-material culture**, that is, a group’s ways of thinking (its beliefs, values, and other assumptions about the world) and doing (its common patterns of behavior, including language, gestures, and other forms of interaction). North African assumptions about pushing others aside to buy a ticket and staring in public are examples of nonmaterial culture. So are U.S. assumptions about not doing either of these things. Like material culture, neither custom is “right.” People simply become comfortable with the customs they learn during childhood and—as in the case of my visit to northern Africa—uncomfortable when their basic assumptions about life are challenged.

Culture and Taken-for-Granted Orientations to Life

To develop a sociological perspective, it is essential to understand how culture affects people’s lives. If we meet someone from a different culture, the

encounter may make us aware of culture's pervasive influence. Attaining the same level of awareness regarding our own culture, however, is quite another matter. *Our* speech, *our* gestures, *our* beliefs, and *our* customs are usually taken for granted. We assume that they are "normal" or "natural," and we almost always accept them without question. As anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936) remarked, "The last thing a fish would ever notice would be water." So also with people: Except in unusual circumstances, the effects of our own culture remain imperceptible to us.

Yet culture's significance is profound; it touches almost every aspect of who and what we are. We came into this life without a language; without values and morality; with no ideas about religion, war, money, love, use of public space, personal boundaries, and so on. We possessed none of these fundamental orientations that we take for granted and that are so essential in determining the type of people we become. Yet by this point in our lives, we all have acquired them. Sociologists call this *culture within us*. These learned and shared ways of believing and of doing (another definition of culture) penetrate our being at an early age and quickly become part of our taken-for-granted assumptions about what normal behavior is. *Culture becomes the lens through which we perceive and evaluate what is going on around us*. Seldom do we question these assumptions, for, like water to a fish, the lens through which we view life remains largely beyond our perception.

The rare instances in which these assumptions are challenged, however, can be upsetting. Although as a sociologist I should be able to look at my own culture from the outside, my trip to Africa quickly revealed how fully I had internalized my culture. My upbringing in Western society had given me strong assumptions about aspects of social life that had become deeply rooted in my being—eye contact with strangers, hygiene, and the use of space. But in this part of Africa these assumptions were useless in helping me navigate everyday life. No longer could I count on people to stare only surreptitiously, to take precautions against invisible microbes, or to stand in line in an orderly fashion, one behind the other.

As you can tell from the opening vignette, I personally found these different assumptions upsetting, for they violated my basic expectations of "the way people *ought* to be"—although I did not even realize how firmly I held these expectations until they were so abruptly challenged. When my nonmaterial culture failed me—when it no longer enabled me to make sense out of the world—I experienced a disorientation known as **culture shock**. In the case of buying tickets, the fact that I was several inches taller than most Moroccans and thus able to outreach almost everyone helped me adjust partially to their different ways of doing things. But I never did get used to the idea that pushing ahead of others was "right," and I always felt guilty when I used my size to receive preferential treatment.

An important consequence of culture within us is **ethnocentrism**, a tendency to use our own group's ways of doing things as the yardstick for judging others. All of us learn that the ways of our own group are good, right, proper, and even superior to other ways of life. As sociologist William Sumner (1906),

who developed this concept, said, “One’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.”

Ethnocentrism has both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, it creates in-group loyalties. On the negative side, ethnocentrism can lead to discrimination against people whose ways differ from ours.

The many ways in which culture affects our lives fascinate sociologists. In this chapter, we’ll examine how profoundly culture affects everything we are. This will serve as a basis from which you can start to analyze your own assumptions of reality. I should give you a warning at this point: This can result in your gaining a different perspective on social life and your role in it. If so, life will never look the same.

In Sum. To avoid losing track of the ideas under discussion, let’s pause for a moment to summarize, and in some instances clarify, the principles we have covered:

1. There is nothing “natural” about material culture. Arabs wear gowns on the street and feel that it is natural to do so; Americans do the same with jeans.
2. There is nothing “natural” about nonmaterial culture; it is just as arbitrary to stand in line as to push and shove.
3. Culture becomes a lens through which we see the world and obtain our perception of reality.
4. Culture provides implicit instructions that tell us what we ought to do and how we ought to think; it provides a fundamental basis for our decision making.
5. Culture also provides a “moral imperative”; that is, the culture that we internalize becomes the “right” way of doing things. (I, for example, believed deeply that it was wrong to push and shove to get ahead of others.)
6. Coming into contact with a radically different culture challenges our basic assumptions about life. (I experienced culture shock when I discovered that my deeply ingrained cultural ideas about hygiene and the use of personal space no longer applied.)
7. Although the particulars of culture differ from one group of people to another, culture itself is universal. That is, all people have culture, for a society cannot exist without developing shared, learned ways of dealing with the challenges of life.
8. All people are ethnocentric, which has both positive and negative consequences.

Practicing Cultural Relativism

To counter our tendency to use our own culture as the standard by which we judge other cultures, we can practice **cultural relativism**; that is, we can try to understand a culture on its own terms. Cultural relativism involves looking at how the elements of a culture fit together without judging those elements as superior or inferior to one’s own way of life.

Because we tend to use our own culture as a standard for judging others, cultural relativism presents a challenge to ordinary thinking. For example, most U.S. citizens appear to have strong feelings against raising bulls for the



Many Americans perceive bullfighting, which is illegal in the United States, as a cruel activity that should be abolished everywhere. To Spaniards and those who have inherited Spanish culture, however, bullfighting is a beautiful, artistic sport in which matador and bull blend into a unifying image of power, courage, and glory. *Cultural relativism* requires that we suspend our own perspectives in order to grasp the perspectives of others, something that is much easier described than attained.

purpose of stabbing them to death in front of crowds that shout “Olé!” According to cultural relativism, however, bullfighting must be viewed from the perspective of the culture in which it takes place—its history, its folklore, its ideas of bravery, and its ideas of sex roles.

You still may regard bullfighting as wrong, of course, because U.S. culture, so deeply ingrained in us, has no history of bullfighting. We all possess culturally specific ideas about cruelty to animals, convictions that have evolved slowly and match other elements of our culture. Consequently, practices that once were common—cock fighting, dog fighting, bear-dog fighting, and so on—have been gradually eliminated.

None of us can be entirely successful at practicing cultural relativism. Look at the Cultural Diversity section on the next page. My best guess is that you will evaluate these “strange” foods through the lens of your own culture. Practicing cultural relativism, however, is an attempt to refocus that lens so we can appreciate other ways of life rather than simply asserting, “Our way is right.” As you view the photos on page 285, try to appreciate the cultural differences in standards of beauty.

Although cultural relativism helps us to avoid cultural smugness, this view has come under attack. In a provocative book, *Sick Societies* (1992), anthropologist Robert Edgerton suggests that we develop a scale for evaluating cultures based on their “quality of life,” much as we do for U.S. cities. He also asks why we should consider cultures that practice female circumcision, gang rape, or

wife beating or cultures that sell little girls into prostitution as morally equivalent to those that do not. Cultural values that result in exploitation, he says, are inferior to those that enhance people's lives.

Edgerton's sharp questions and incisive examples bring us to a topic that comes up repeatedly in this text: the disagreements that arise among scholars as they confront contrasting views of reality. It is such questioning of assumptions that keeps sociology interesting.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AROUND THE WORLD

Here is a chance to test your ethnocentrism and ability to practice cultural relativity. You probably know that the French like to eat snails and that in some Asian cultures, chubby dogs and cats are considered a delicacy ("Ah, lightly browned with a little doggy sauce!"). But did you know about this?

Marston Bates (1967), a zoologist, reports:

I remember once, in the llanos of Colombia, sharing a dish of toasted ants at a remote farmhouse. . . . My host and I fell into conversation about the general question of what people eat or do not eat, and I remarked that in my country people eat the legs of frogs.

The very thought of this filled my ant-eating friends with horror; it was as though I had mentioned some repulsive sex habit.

And then there is the experience of the production coordinator of this text, Dusty Friedman, who told me:

When traveling in Sudan, I ate some interesting things that I wouldn't likely eat now that I'm back in our society. Raw baby camel's liver with chopped herbs

You Are What You Eat?
An Exploration in Cultural
Relativity



"Nothing like a little snake blood to get you started in the morning." Food preferences, an essential part of culture, vary around the world, as this photo from Taipei, Taiwan, illustrates.

was a delicacy. So was camel's milk cheese patties that had been cured in dry camel's dung.

You might be able to see yourself eating frog legs, toasted ants, perhaps raw camel's liver, or even dogs and cats, but this custom may provide a better test of your ethnocentrism and cultural relativity ("Monkey Rescued" 2004). Maxine Kingston (1975), an English professor whose parents grew up in China, wrote:

"Do you know what people in [the Nantou region of] China eat when they have the money?" my mother began. "They buy into a monkey feast. The eaters sit around a thick wood table with a hole in the middle. Boys bring in the monkey at the end of a pole. Its neck is in a collar at the end of the pole, and it is screaming. Its hands are tied behind it. They clamp the monkey into the table; the whole table fits like another collar around its neck. Using a surgeon's saw, the cooks cut a clean line in a circle at the top of its head. To loosen the bone, they tap with a tiny hammer and wedge here and there with a silver pick. Then an old woman reaches out her hand to the monkey's face and up to its scalp, where she tufts some hairs and lifts off the lid of the skull. The eaters spoon out the brains."

For Your Consideration

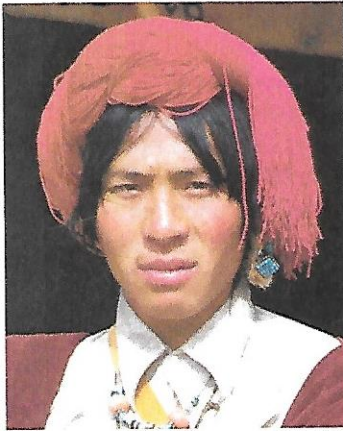
1. What is your opinion about eating toasted ants? About eating fried frog legs? About eating puppies and kittens? About eating raw monkey brains?
2. If you were reared in U.S. society, more than likely you think that eating frog legs is okay, eating ants is disgusting, and eating dogs, cats, and monkey brains is downright repugnant. How would you apply the concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism to your perception of these customs?

COMPONENTS OF SYMBOLIC CULTURE

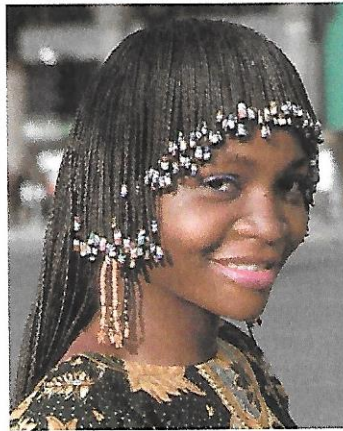
Sociologists sometimes refer to nonmaterial culture as **symbolic culture** because its central component is the symbols that people use. A **symbol** is something to which people attach meaning and that they then use to communicate with one another. Symbols include gestures, language, values, norms, sanctions, folkways, and mores. Let's look at each of these components of symbolic culture.

Gestures

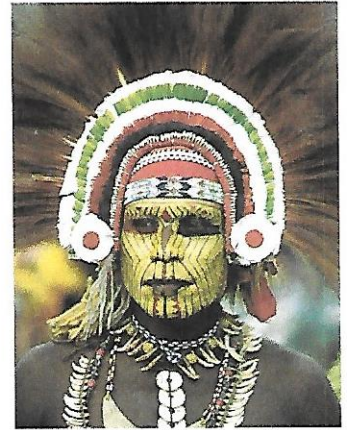
Gestures, using one's body to communicate with others, are shorthand ways to convey messages without using words. Although people in every culture of the world use gestures, a gesture's meaning may change from one culture to



Tibet



Cameroon



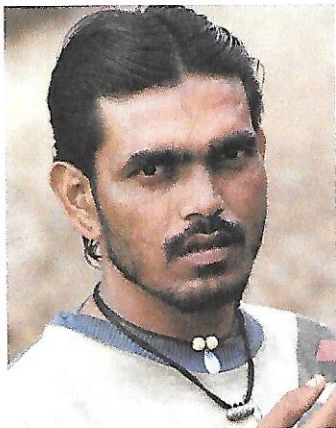
New Guinea



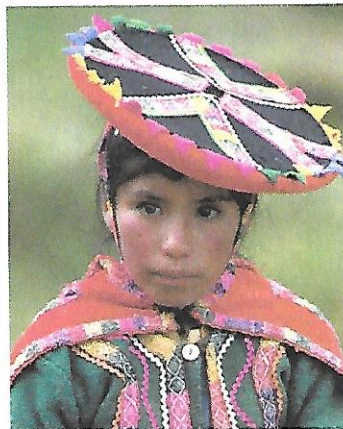
Thailand



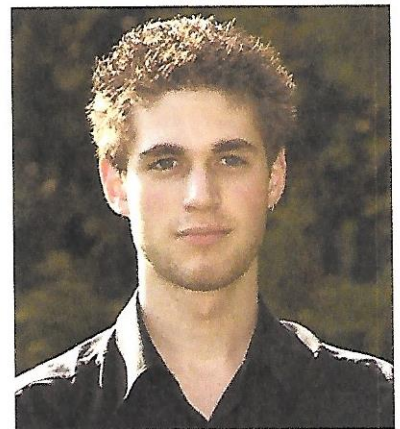
Japan



India (Gypsy)



Peru



United States

Standards of Beauty. Standards of beauty vary so greatly from one culture to another that what one group finds attractive, another may not. Yet, in its *ethnocentrism*, each group thinks that its standards are the best—that their appearance reflects what beauty “really” is.

As indicated by these photos, around the world men and women aspire to their group’s norms of physical attractiveness. To make themselves appealing to others, they make certain that their appearance reflects those standards.

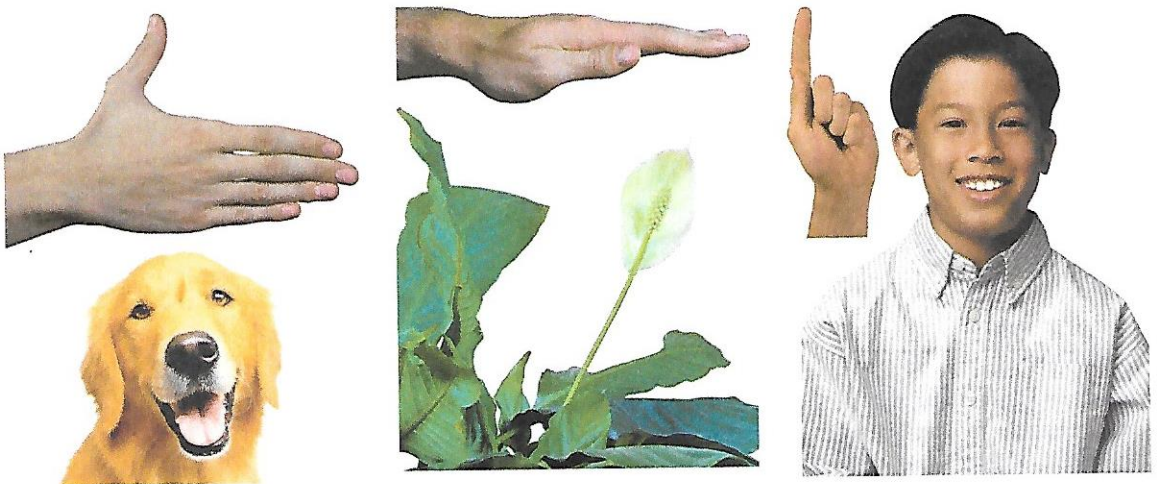
another. North Americans, for example, communicate a succinct message by raising the middle finger in a short, upward-stabbing motion. I stress “North Americans,” for that gesture does not convey the same message in most parts of the world.

I once was surprised to find that this particular gesture was not universal, having internalized it to such an extent that I thought everyone knew what it meant. When I was comparing gestures with friends in Mexico, however, this gesture drew a blank look from them. After I explained its intended meaning, they laughed and showed me their rudest gesture—placing the hand under the armpit and moving the upper arm up and down. To me, they simply looked as if they were imitating monkeys, but to them the gesture meant “Your mother is a whore,” the worst possible insult in that culture.

With the current political, military, and cultural dominance of the United States, “giving the finger” is becoming well known in other cultures. Following 9/11, the United States began to photograph and fingerprint foreign travelers. Feeling insulted, Brazil retaliated by doing the same to U.S. visitors. Angry at this, a U.S. pilot raised his middle finger while being photographed. Having become aware of the meaning of this gesture, Brazilian police arrested him. To gain his release, the pilot had to pay a fine of \$13,000 (“Brazil Arrests” . . . 2004).

Gestures not only facilitate communication but also, because their meanings differ around the world, they can lead to misunderstanding, embarrassment, or worse. One time in Mexico, for example, I raised my hand to a certain height to indicate how tall a child was. My hosts began to laugh. It turns out that Mexicans use three hand gestures to indicate height: one for people, a second for animals, and yet another for plants. They were amused because I had ignorantly used the plant gesture to indicate the child’s height. (See Figure 7-1.)

FIGURE 7-1 GESTURES TO INDICATE HEIGHT, SOUTHERN MEXICO



To get along in another culture, then, it is important to learn the gestures used by people of that culture. If you don't, not only will you fail to achieve the simplicity of communication that gestures allow but also you may overlook or misunderstand much of what is happening, run the risk of appearing foolish, and possibly offend people. In some cultures, for example, you would provoke deep offense if you were to offer food or a gift with your left hand, because the left hand is reserved for dirty tasks, such as wiping after going to the toilet. Left-handed Americans visiting Arabs, please note!

Suppose for a moment that you are visiting southern Italy. After eating one of the best meals of your life, you are so pleased that when you catch the waiter's eye, you smile broadly and use the standard U.S. "A-OK" gesture of putting your thumb and forefinger together and making a large "O." The waiter looks horrified, and you are struck speechless when the manager asks you to leave. What have you done? Nothing on purpose, of course, but in that culture this gesture refers to a part of the human body that is not mentioned in polite company (Ekman et al. 1984).

Some gestures are so associated with emotional messages that the gesture itself, even when demonstrated out of context, summons up emotions. For example, my introduction to Mexican gestures took place at a dinner table. It was evident that my husband-and-wife hosts were trying to hide their embarrassment at using their culture's obscene gesture at their dinner table. And I felt the same way—not about *their* gesture, of course, which meant nothing to me, but about the one I was teaching them.



Although most gestures are learned, and therefore vary from culture to culture, some gestures that represent fundamental emotions such as sadness, anger, and fear appear to be inborn. This crying child whom I photographed in India differs little from a crying child in China—or the United States or anywhere else on the globe. In a few years, however, this child will demonstrate a variety of gestures highly specific to his Hindu culture.

Language

Gestures and words go hand in hand, as is evident when you watch people talking. We use gestures to supplement our words, to provide emphasis and a deeper understanding of what we are communicating. Written language lacks the subtle cues that gestures provide, and with online communications so common, we miss these cues. To help supply them, people use “written gestures” that help to convey the feelings that go with their words. These emoticons are the topic of the Down-to-Earth Sociology section on the next page.

The primary way in which people communicate with one another is through **language**—symbols that can be strung together in an infinite number of ways for the purpose of communicating abstract thought. Each word is actually a symbol, a sound to which we have attached a particular meaning. This allows us to use it to communicate with one another. Language itself is universal in the sense that all human groups have language, but there is nothing universal about the meanings given to particular sounds. Thus, like gestures, in different cultures the same sound may mean something entirely different—or it may have no meaning at all. In German, for example, *gift* means poison, and if you give chocolate to a non-English speaking German and say, “Gift” . . .

Because language allows culture to exist, its significance for human life is difficult to overstate. Consider the following:

Language Allows Human Experience to Be Cumulative. By means of language, we pass on ideas, knowledge, and even attitudes to the next generation. This allows others to build on experiences in which they might never directly participate. Because of this, humans are able to modify their behavior in light of what previous generations have learned. Hence the central sociological significance of language: *Language allows culture to develop by freeing people to move beyond their immediate experiences.*

Without language, human culture would be little more advanced than that of the lower primates. If we communicated by grunts and gestures, we would be limited to a short time span: to events now taking place, those that have just taken place, or those that will take place immediately—a sort of slightly extended present. You can grunt and gesture, for example, that you want a drink of water, but in the absence of language, how could you share ideas concerning past or future events? There would be little or no way to communicate to others what event you had in mind, much less the greater complexities that humans communicate: ideas and feelings about events.

Language Provides a Social or Shared Past. Without language, our memories would be extremely limited, for we associate experiences with words and then use words to recall the experience and words to reflect on that experience. Such memories as would exist in the absence of language would be highly individualized, for only rarely and incompletely could we communicate them to others, much less discuss them and agree on something. By attaching words to an event, however, and then using those words to recall it, we are able to discuss

the event. As we talk about past events, we develop shared understandings about what those events mean. In short, through talk, people develop a shared past.

Language Provides a Social or Shared Future. Language also extends our time horizons forward. Because language enables us to agree on times, dates, and places, it allows us to plan activities with one another. Think about it for a moment. Without language, how could you ever plan future events? How could you possibly communicate goals, times, and plans? Whatever planning could exist would be limited to rudimentary communications, perhaps to an agreement to meet at a certain place when the sun is in a certain position. But think of the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of conveying just a slight change in this simple arrangement, such as “I can’t make it tomorrow, but my neighbor can take my place, if that’s all right with you.”

DOWN-TO-EARTH SOCIOLOGY

Emoticons: “Written Gestures” for Expressing Yourself Online

Talking online has become a favorite activity of millions of people. Teenagers rehash the day’s events with friends; grandparents keep in touch with grandchildren; businesspeople seal their deals with the click of a “send” button. All of them love the speed of online communications. They send an e-mail or an instant message, or post a note in a chat room, and in an instant people across the country or in distant lands can read or respond to it.

There is something nagging about online talk, though. It leaves a dissatisfying taste because it is so one-dimensional. People miss the nuances of emotion and overlays of meaning that we transmit during face-to-face conversations. Lacking are the gestures and tones of voice that give color and life to our communications, the subtleties by which we monitor and communicate submessages.

To help fill this gap, computer users have developed symbols to convey their humor, disappointment, sarcasm, and other moods and attitudes. Although these symbols are not as varied or spontaneous as the nonverbal cues of face-to-face interaction, they are useful. Here are some of them. If you tilt your head to the left as you view them, the symbols will be clearer.

:)	Smile
:))	Laugh
:(	Frowning, or Sad
:((	Very sad
;(	Crying
>:-(	Angry, annoyed
:X	My lips are sealed (or a Kiss)
;-)	Wink, wink—know what I mean?
:~)	Tongue in cheek
:-P	Sticking out your tongue
:-\$	Put your money where your mouth is

(:- D Has a big mouth
 :-0 WOW! (Shocked)
 #-) Oh, what a night!

Some correspondents prefer more aesthetically pleasing emoticons. They use the profile version: :^):^)) :^(\

Correspondents also use abbreviations to indicate their emotions:

IAB	I Am Bored
ILY	I Love You
JK	Just Kidding
LOL	Laughing Out Loud
OTF	On The Floor (laughing)
ROTF	Rolling On The Floor
ROFLWTIME	Rolling On Floor Laughing With Tears In My Eyes

Another form of emoticons are the many smilies. Each of the symbols below is meant to indicate a particular emotion—from happiness and greed to shock and embarrassment.

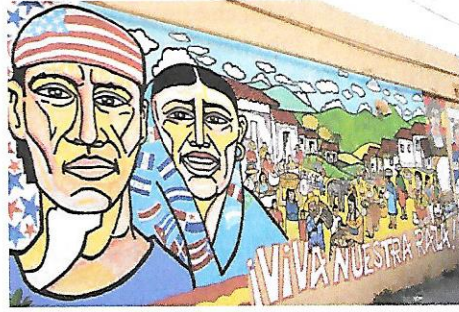


With advancing technology, such shorthand might become unnecessary. Now that we can include video in our e-mail, recipients can see our image and hear our voice. Eventually, messages that include verbal and facial cues may replace much written e-mail. As long as written e-mail exists, however, some system of symbols to substitute for gestures will remain.

Language Allows Shared Perspectives. Our ability to speak, then, provides a social past and future. These two vital aspects of our humanity represent a watershed that distinguishes us from animals. But speech does much more than this. When humans talk with one another, they are exchanging ideas about events; that is, they are sharing perspectives. Their words are the embodiment of their experiences, distilled into a readily exchangeable form, one that is mutually intelligible for people who have learned that language. Talking about events allows people to arrive at the shared understandings that form the basis of social life. Not sharing a language while residing alongside one another, however, invites miscommunication and suspicion. This risk, which comes with living in a diverse society, is discussed in the Cultural Diversity section below.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Since Castro seized power in Cuba in 1959, the city of Miami has been transformed from a quiet southern city to a Latin American mecca. Nothing reflects Miami's essential character today as much as its long-simmering feud over



Mural from Miami.

language: English versus Spanish. Half of the city's 360,000 residents have trouble speaking English. Only *one-fourth* of Miami residents speak English at home.

As this chapter stresses, language is a primary means by which people learn—and communicate—their social worlds. Consequently, language differences in Miami reflect not only cultural diversity but also the separate social worlds of the city's inhabitants.

Miami—Language in a Changing City

Although its ethnic stew makes Miami culturally one of the richest cities in the United States, the language gap sometimes creates misunderstanding and anger. The aggravation felt by Anglos—which often seems tinged with hostility—is seen in the bumper stickers that used to read, “Will the Last American Out Please Bring the Flag?”

Latinos, now a majority in Miami, are similarly frustrated. Many think that Anglos should be able to speak at least some Spanish. Nicaraguan immigrant Pedro Falcon, for example, is studying English and wonders why more people don't try to learn his language. “Miami is the capital of Latin America,” he says. “The population speaks Spanish.”

Language and cultural flare-ups sometimes make headlines in the city. Latinos were outraged when an employee at the Coral Gables Board of Realtors lost her job for speaking Spanish at the office. And protesters swarmed a Publix supermarket after a cashier was fired for chatting with a friend in Spanish.

What's happening in Miami, says University of Chicago sociologist Douglas Massey, is what happened in cities such as Chicago a hundred years ago. Then, as now, the rate of immigration exceeded the speed with which new residents learned English, creating a pile-up effect in the proportion of non-English speakers. “Becoming comfortable with English is a slow process,” he points out, “whereas immigration is fast.”

Massey expects Miami's percentage of non-English speakers to grow. But he says that this “doesn't mean that Miami is going to end up being a Spanish-speaking city.” Instead, Massey believes that bilingualism will prevail. He says, “The people who get ahead are not monolingual English speakers or monolingual Spanish speakers. They're people who speak both languages.”

In the meantime, Miami officials have tried to resolve the controversy over language by declaring English to be the official language of Miami. In at least one small way, they have succeeded. When we tried to get a photograph of “Bienvenidos a Miami” for this box, we discovered that such a sign would be illegal!

Source: Based on Sharp 1992; Usdansky 1992.

Language Allows Complex, Shared, Goal-Directed Behavior. Common understandings also enable people to establish a purpose for getting together. Let’s suppose you want to go on a picnic. You use speech not only to plan the picnic but also to decide on reasons for the picnic—which may be anything from “because it’s a nice day and it shouldn’t be wasted studying” to “because it’s my birthday.” Language permits you to blend individual activities into an integrated sequence. In other words, through discussion you decide where you will go; who will drive; who will bring the hamburgers, chips, and soda; where you will meet; and so on. Only because of language can you participate in such a picnic—or build bridges and roads, or attend college classes.

In Sum. The sociological significance of language is that it takes us beyond the world of apes and allows culture to develop. Language frees us from the present, actually giving us a social past and a social future. That is, language gives us the capacity to share understandings about the past and to develop shared perceptions about the future. Language also allows us to establish underlying purposes for our activities. In short, *language is the basis of culture*.

Language and Perception: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

In the 1930s, two anthropologists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, became intrigued when they noted that the Hopi Indians of the southwestern United States had no words to distinguish among the past, the present, and the future. English, in contrast—as well as French, Spanish, Swahili, and other languages—distinguishes carefully among these three time frames. From this observation, Sapir and Whorf concluded that the commonsense idea that words are merely labels that people attach to things is wrong. *Language, they concluded, has embedded within it ways of looking at the world.* Language, they said, not only expresses our thoughts but also shapes the way we think. Words not only express what we perceive but also help to determine what we perceive. When we learn a language, we learn not only words but also ways of thinking and perceiving (Sapir 1949; Whorf 1956).

The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** reverses common sense: It indicates that rather than objects and events forcing themselves onto our consciousness, it is our language that determines our consciousness, and hence our perception of objects and events. The racial-ethnic terms provided by our culture, for

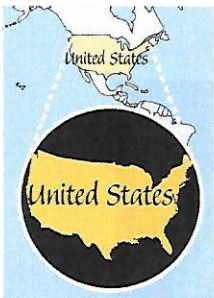
example, influence how we see both ourselves and others, a point that is discussed in the Cultural Diversity section below.

Sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1991) gives a good example: Hebrew, his native language, does not have separate words for jam and jelly. Both go by the same term, and only when Zerubavel learned English could he “see” this difference, which is “obvious” to native English speakers. Similarly, if you learn to classify students as Jocks, Goths, Stoners, Skaters, and Preps, you will perceive students in an entirely different way from someone who does not know these classifications.

Although Sapir and Whorf’s observation that the Hopi do not have tenses was wrong (Edgerton 1992:27), they stumbled onto a major truth about social life. Learning a language means not only learning words but also acquiring the perceptions embedded in that language. In other words, language both reflects and shapes cultural experiences.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Race and Language: Searching for Self-Labels



The groups that dominate society often determine the names that are used to refer to racial-ethnic groups. If those names become associated with oppression, they take on negative meanings. For example, the terms *Negro* and *colored people* came to be associated with submissiveness and low status. To overcome these

meanings, those referred to by these terms began to identify themselves as *black* or *African American*. They infused these new terms with respect—a basic source of self-esteem that they felt the old terms denied them.

In a twist, African Americans—and to a lesser extent Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans—have changed the rejected term *colored people* to *people of color*. Those who embrace this modified term are imbuing it with meanings that offer an identity of respect. The term also has political meanings. It indicates bonds that cross racial-ethnic lines, a growing sense of mutual ties and identity rooted in historical oppression.

There is *always* disagreement about racial-ethnic terms, and this one is no exception. Although most rejected the term *colored people*, some found in it a sense of respect and claimed it for themselves. The acronym NAACP, for example, stands for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The new term, *people of color*, arouses similar feelings. Some individuals whom this term would include claim that it is inappropriate. They point out that this new label still makes color the primary identifier of people. They stress that humans transcend race-ethnicity, that what we have in common as human beings goes much deeper than what you see on the surface. They stress that we should avoid terms that focus on differences in the pigmentation of our skin.

The language of self-reference in a society that is so conscious of skin color is an ongoing issue. As long as our society continues to emphasize such

superficial differences, the search for adequate terms is not likely to ever be “finished.” In this quest for terms that strike the right chord, the term *people of color* may become a historical footnote. If it does, it will be replaced by another term that indicates a changing self-identification in a changing historical context.

Values, Norms, and Sanctions

To learn a culture is to learn people’s **values**, their ideas of what is desirable in life. When we uncover people’s values, we learn a great deal about them, for values are the standards by which people define what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Values underlie our preferences, guide our choices, and indicate what we hold worthwhile in life.

Every group develops expectations concerning the right ways to reflect its values. Sociologists use the term **norms** to describe those expectations (or rules of behavior) that develop out of a group’s values. They use the term **sanctions** to refer to the reactions people get for following or breaking norms. A **positive sanction** expresses approval for following a norm, while a **negative sanction** reflects disapproval for breaking a norm. Positive sanctions can be material, such as a prize, a trophy, or money, but in everyday life they usually consist of hugs, smiles, a pat on the back, encouraging words, or even handshakes



The violation of *mores* is a serious matter. In this case, it is serious enough that the police at this rugby match in Dublin, Ireland, have swung into action to protect the public from seeing a “disgraceful” sight, at least one so designated by this group.

or “high-fives.” Negative sanctions can also be material—being given a fine in court is one example—but they, too, are more likely to be symbolic: harsh words or gestures such as frowns, stares, clenched jaws, or raised fists. Getting a raise at work is a positive sanction, indicating that you have followed the norms clustering around work values. Getting fired, however, is a negative sanction, indicating that you have violated those norms. The North American finger gesture discussed earlier is, of course, a negative sanction.

Because people can find norms stifling, some cultures relieve the pressure through *moral holidays*, specified times when people are allowed to break norms. Moral holidays, such as Mardi Gras, often center on getting drunk and being rowdy. Some activities for which people would otherwise be arrested are permitted—and expected—including public drunkenness and some nudity. The norms are never completely dropped, however, just loosened a bit. Go too far, and the police step in.

Folkways and Mores

Norms that are not strictly enforced are called **folkways**. We expect people to comply with folkways, but we are likely to shrug our shoulders and not make a big deal about it if they don’t. If someone insists on passing you on the right side of the sidewalk, for example, you are unlikely to take corrective action—although if the sidewalk is crowded and you must move out of the way, you might give the person a dirty look.

Other norms, however, are taken much more seriously. We think of them as essential to our core values, and we insist on conformity. These are called **mores** (“MORE-rays”). A person who steals, rapes, or kills has violated some of society’s most important mores. As sociologist Ian Robertson (1987:62) put it,

A man who walks down a street wearing nothing on the upper half of his body is violating a folkway; a man who walks down the street wearing nothing on the lower half of his body is violating one of our most important mores, the requirement that people cover their genitals and buttocks in public.

It should also be noted that one group’s folkways may be another group’s mores. Although a man walking down the street with the upper half of his body uncovered is deviating from a folkway, a woman doing the same thing is violating the culture’s mores. In addition, the folkways and mores of a subculture (discussed in the next section) may be the opposite of those of mainstream culture. For example, to walk down the sidewalk in a nudist camp with the entire body uncovered would conform to that subculture’s folkways.

A **taboo** refers to a norm so strongly ingrained that even the thought of its violation is greeted with revulsion. Eating human flesh and having sex with one’s parents are examples of such behaviors. When someone breaks a taboo, the individual is usually judged unfit to live in the same society as others. The sanctions are severe and may include prison, banishment, or death.

MANY CULTURAL WORLDS

Subcultures

What common condition do you think this doctor is describing? Here is what he said:

[It accompanies] diaphragmatic pleurisy, pneumonia, uremia, or alcoholism . . . Abdominal causes include disorders of the stomach, and esophagus, bowel diseases, pancreatitis, pregnancy, bladder irritation, hepatic metastases, or hepatitis. Thoracic and mediastinal lesions or surgery may be responsible. Posterior fossa tumors or infarcts may stimulate centers in the medulla oblongata. (Chambliss 2003:443)

My best guess is that you don't have the slightest idea what this doctor is talking about. For most of us, he might as well be speaking Greek. Physicians who are lecturing students in medical school, however, talk like this. This doctor is describing hiccups!

Physicians form a **subculture**, *a world within the larger world of the dominant culture*. Subcultures consist of people whose experiences have led them to have distinctive ways of looking at life or some aspect of it. Even if we cannot understand the preceding quote, it makes us aware that the physician's view of life is not quite the same as ours.

U.S. society contains tens of thousands of subcultures. Some are as broad as the way of life we associate with teenagers, others as narrow as those we associate with body builders—or with physicians. Some U.S. ethnic groups also form subcultures; their values, norms, and foods set them apart. So might their religion, language, and clothing. Occupational groups also form subcultures, as anyone who has hung out with artists (McCall 1980), construction workers (Haas 1972), or undertakers (Thompson 2005) can attest. Even sociologists form a subculture. As you are learning, they use a unique language to make sense of the world.

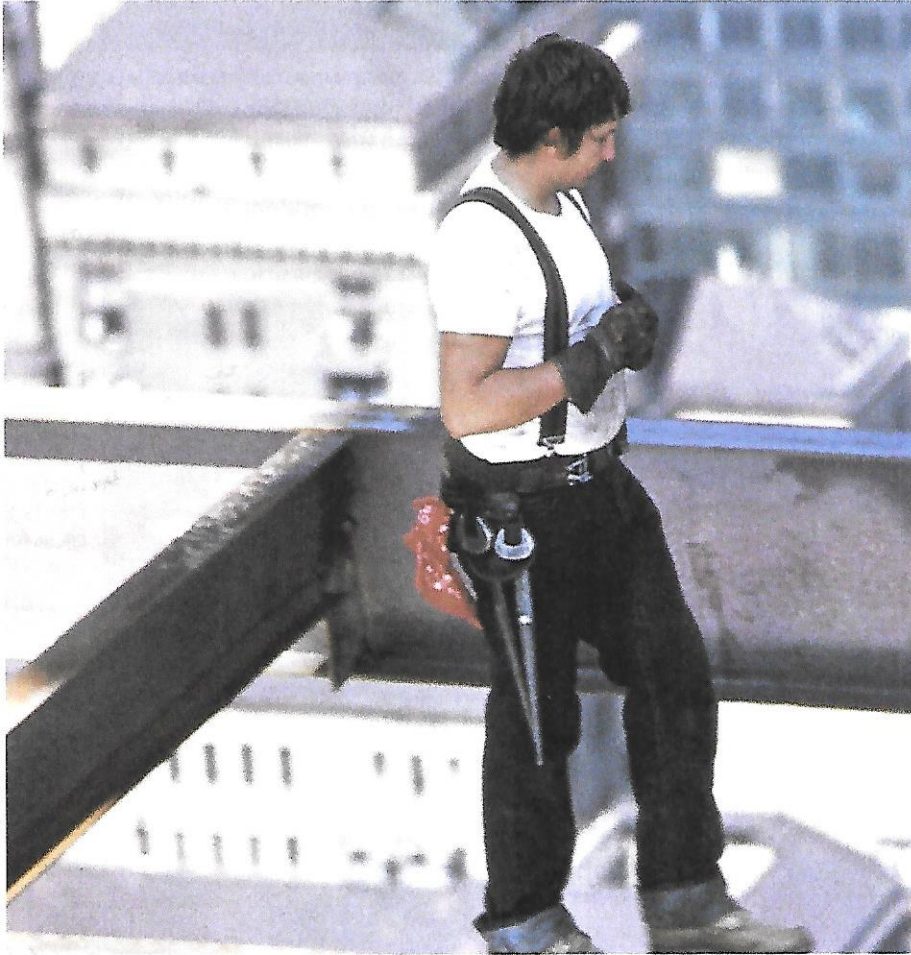
For a visual depiction of subcultures, see the photo montage on the next two pages.

LOOKING AT SUBCULTURES

Subcultures can form around any interest or activity. Each subculture has its own values and norms that its members share, giving them a common identity. Each also has special terms that pinpoint the group's corner of life and that its members use to communicate with one another. Some of us belong to several subcultures simultaneously.

As you can see from these photos, most subcultures are compatible with the values of the dominant or mainstream culture. They represent specialized

interests around which its members have chosen to build tiny worlds. Some subcultures, however, conflict with the mainstream culture. Sociologists give the name counterculture to subcultures whose values (such as those of outlaw motorcyclists) or activities and goals (such as those of terrorists) are opposed to the mainstream culture. Countercultures, however, are exceptional, and few of us belong to them.



Membership in this subculture is not easily awarded. Not only must **high-steel ironworkers** prove that they are able to work at great heights but also that they fit into the group socially. Newcomers are tested by members of the group, and they must demonstrate that they can take joking without offense.

This Native American also represents a subculture within this subculture, for many Mohawk Native Americans specialize in this occupation.



The **cabbies'** subculture, centering on their occupational activities and interest, is also broken into smaller subcultures that reflect their experiences of race-ethnicity.

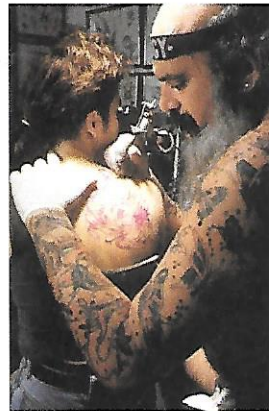


Participants in the **rodeo** subculture "advertise" their membership by wearing special clothing. The clothing symbolizes a set of values that unites its members. Among those values is the awarding of hyper-masculine status through the conquest of animals—or in this instance, the attempted conquest.

Values and interests are perhaps the two main characteristics of subcultures. What values and interests distinguish the **modeling** subculture?



This subculture, with its fierce traditions, used to consist of white men. The subculture's painful adjustment to changed times is evident in its participants, name being changed from firemen to **firefighters**.



The subculture that centers around **tattooing** previously existed on the fringes of society, with seamen and circus folk its main participants. It now has entered the mainstream of society.



Each subculture provides its members with values and distinctive ways of viewing the world. What values and perceptions do you think are common among **body builders**?



The subculture of **future farmers**, in decline for over 100 years, remains vibrant in some rural areas.

Why would someone decorate themselves like this? Among the many reasons, one is to show their solidarity with the **football** subculture.



Countercultures

Consider this quote from another subculture:

If everyone applying for welfare had to supply a doctor's certificate of sterilization, if everyone who had committed a felony were sterilized, if anyone who had mental illness to any degree were sterilized—then our economy could easily take care of these people for the rest of their lives, giving them a decent living standard—but getting them out of the way. That way there would be no children abused, no surplus population, and, after a while, no pollution. . . .

Now let's talk about stupidity. The level of intellect in this country is going down, generation after generation. The average IQ is always 100 because that is the accepted average. However, the kid with a 100 IQ today would have tested out at 70 when I was a lad. You get the concept . . . marching morons. . . .

When the world system collapses, it'll be good people like you who will be shooting people in the streets to feed their families. (Zellner 1995:58, 65)

Welcome to the world of the survivalists, where the message is much clearer than that of the physicians—and much more disturbing.

The values and norms of most subcultures blend in with mainstream society. In some cases, however, such as these survivalists, some of the group's values and norms place it at odds with the dominant culture. Sociologists use the term **counterculture** to refer to such groups. Another example would be Satanists. To better see this distinction, consider motorcycle enthusiasts and motorcycle gangs. Motorcycle enthusiasts—who emphasize personal freedom and speed *and* affirm cultural values of success—are members of a subculture. In contrast, the Hell's Angels not only stress freedom and speed but also value dirtiness and contempt toward women and work. This makes them a counterculture (Watson 1988).

An assault on core values is always met with resistance. To affirm their own values, members of the mainstream culture may ridicule, isolate, or even attack members of the counterculture. The Mormons, for example, were driven out of several states before they finally settled in Utah, which was then a wilderness. Even there, the federal government would not let them practice *polygyny* (one man having more than one wife); Utah's statehood was made conditional on its acceptance of monogamy (Anderson 1942/1966).

VALUES IN U.S. SOCIETY

An Overview of U.S. Values

As you know, the United States is a **pluralistic society**, made up of many different groups. The United States has numerous religious and racial-ethnic groups, as well as countless interest groups that focus on such divergent activities as collecting Barbie dolls and hunting deer. This state of affairs makes

the job of specifying U.S. values difficult. Nonetheless, sociologists have tried to identify the underlying core values that are shared by the many groups that make up U.S. society. Sociologist Robin Williams (1965) identified the following:

1. *Achievement and success.* Americans place a high value on personal achievement, especially outdoing others. This value includes getting ahead at work and school and attaining wealth, power, and prestige.
2. *Individualism.* Americans prize success that comes from individual efforts and initiative. They cherish the ideal that an individual can rise from the bottom of society to its very top. If someone fails to “get ahead,” Americans generally find fault with that individual rather than with the social system for placing roadblocks in his or her path.
3. *Activity and work.* Americans expect people to work hard and to be busy doing some activity even when not at work. This value is becoming less important.
4. *Efficiency and practicality.* Americans award high marks for getting things done efficiently. Even in everyday life, Americans consider it important to do things fast, and they seek ways to increase efficiency.
5. *Science and technology.* Americans have a passion for applied science, for using science to control nature—to tame rivers and harness winds—and to develop new technology, from video iPods to Segways.
6. *Progress.* Americans expect rapid technological change. They believe that they should constantly build “more and better” gadgets that will help them move toward some vague goal called “progress.”
7. *Material comfort.* Americans expect a high level of material comfort. This comfort includes not only good nutrition, medical care, and housing but also late-model cars and recreational playthings—from Land Rovers to X-boxes.
8. *Humanitarianism.* Americans emphasize helpfulness, personal kindness, aid in mass disasters, and organized philanthropy.
9. *Freedom.* This core value pervades U.S. life. It underscored the American Revolution, and Americans pride themselves on their personal freedom. The Mass Media in Social Life section on the next page highlights an interesting study on how this core value applies to Native Americans.
10. *Democracy.* By this term, Americans refer to majority rule, to the right of everyone to express an opinion, and to representative government.
11. *Equality.* It is impossible to understand Americans without being aware of the central role that the value of equality plays in their lives.
12. *Racism and group superiority.* Although it contradicts freedom, democracy, and equality, Americans value some groups more than others and have done so throughout their history. The slaughter of Native Americans and the enslaving of Africans are the most notorious examples.

In an earlier publication, I updated Williams’ analysis by adding these three values:

13. *Education.* Americans are expected to go as far in school as their abilities and finances allow. Over the years, the definition of an “adequate” education has

changed, and today a college education is considered an appropriate goal for most Americans.

14. *Religiosity.* There is a feeling that every true American ought to be religious. This does not mean that everyone is expected to join a church, synagogue, or mosque, but that everyone ought to acknowledge a belief in a Supreme Being and follow some set of matching precepts. This value is so pervasive that Americans stamp "In God We Trust" on their money and declare in their national pledge of allegiance that they are "one nation under God."
15. *Romantic love.* Americans feel that the only proper basis for marriage is romantic love. Songs, literature, mass media, and folk beliefs all stress this value. They especially delight in the theme that "love conquers all."

MASS MEDIA IN SOCIAL LIFE

Why Do Native Americans Like Westerns?

U.S. audiences (and even German, French, and Japanese ones) devour Western movies. In the United States, it is easy to see why Anglos might like Westerns. It is they who are portrayed as heroes who tame the wilderness and defend themselves from the attacks of cruel, savage Indians who are intent on their destruction. But why would Indians like Westerns?

Sociologist JoEllen Shively, a Chippewa who grew up on Indian reservations in Montana and North Dakota, observed that Westerns are so popular that Native Americans bring bags of paperbacks into taverns to trade with one another. They even call each other "cowboy."

Intrigued, Shively decided to investigate the matter by showing a Western to adult Native Americans and Anglos in a reservation town. She matched the groups in education, age, income, and percentage of unemployment. To select the movie, Shively (1991, 1992) previewed more than seventy Westerns. She chose a John Wayne movie, *The Searchers*, because it not only focuses on conflict between



Although he was often portrayed as an Anglo who kills Indians, John Wayne is popular among Indian men. These men tend to identify with the cowboys, who reflect their values of bravery, autonomy, and toughness.

Indians and cowboys but also shows the cowboys defeating the Indians. After the movie the viewers filled out questionnaires, and Shively interviewed them.

She found something surprising: *All* Native Americans and Anglos identified with the cowboys; *none* identified with the Indians. Anglos and Native Americans, however, identified with the cowboys in different ways. Each projected a different fantasy onto the story. While Anglos saw the movie as an accurate portrayal of the Old West and a justification of their own status in society, Native Americans saw it as embodying a free, natural way of life. In fact, Native Americans said that they were the “real cowboys.” They said, “Westerns relate to the way I wish I could live”; “He’s not tied down to an eight-to-five job, day after day”; “He’s his own man.”

Shively adds,

What appears to make Westerns meaningful to Indians is the fantasy of being free and independent like the cowboy. . . . Indians . . . find a fantasy in the cowboy story in which the important parts of their ways of life triumph and are morally good, validating their own cultural group in the context of a dramatically satisfying story.

To express their real identity—a combination of marginality on the one hand, with a set of values which are about the land, autonomy, and being free—they (use) a cultural vehicle written for Anglos about Anglos, but it is one in which Indians invest a distinctive set of meanings that speak to their own experience, which they can read in a manner that affirms a way of life they value, or a fantasy they hold to.

In other words, values, not ethnicity, are the central issue. If a Native American film industry were to portray Native Americans with the same values that the Anglo movie industry projects onto cowboys, then Native Americans would identify with their own group. Thus, says Shively, Native Americans make cowboys “honorary Indians,” for the cowboys express their values of bravery, autonomy, and toughness.

Value Clusters

As you can see, values are not independent units; some cluster together to form a larger whole. In the **value cluster** surrounding success, for example, we find hard work, education, efficiency, material comfort, and individualism bound up together. Americans are expected to go far in school, to work hard afterward, to be efficient, and then to attain a high level of material comfort, which, in turn, demonstrates success. Success is attributed to the individual’s efforts; lack of success is blamed on his or her faults.

Value Contradictions and Social Change

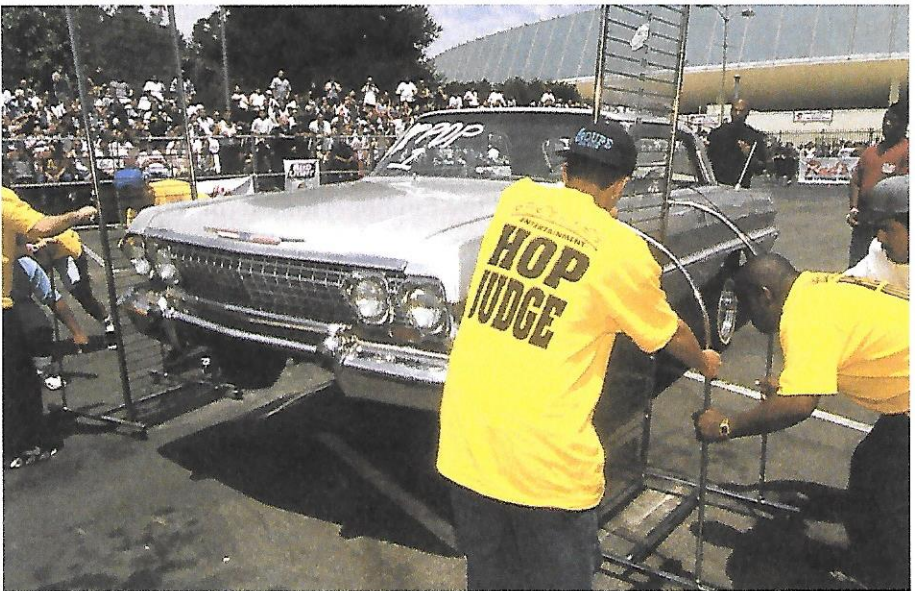
Not all values fall into neat, integrated packages. Some even contradict one another. The value of group superiority contradicts freedom, democracy, and

equality, producing a **value contradiction**. There simply cannot be full expression of freedom, democracy, and equality along with racism and sexism. Something has to give. One way in which Americans sidestepped this contradiction in the past was to say that freedom, democracy, and equality applied only to some groups. The contradiction was bound to surface over time, however, and so it did with the Civil War and the women's liberation movement. *It is precisely at the point of value contradictions, then, that one can see a major force for social change in a society.*

Emerging Values

A value cluster of four interrelated core values—leisure, self-fulfillment, physical fitness, and youthfulness—is emerging in the United States. A fifth core value—concern for the environment—is also emerging.

1. *Leisure.* The emergence of leisure as a value is reflected in a huge recreation industry—from computer games, boats, and spa retreats to sports arenas, home entertainment systems, and luxury cruises.
2. *Self-fulfillment.* This value is reflected in the “human potential” movement, which emphasizes becoming “all one can be,” and in books and talk shows that focus on “self-help,” “relating,” and “personal development.”



The many groups that comprise the United States contribute to its culture. As the number of Latinos in the United States increases, Latinos are making a greater impact on music, art, and literature. This is also true of other areas of everyday life, such as this car-hopping contest in California. Cars are outfitted with bionic hydraulic systems, and contestants compete to see whose vehicles can hop the highest or shimmy the most erratically from tire to tire.

3. *Physical fitness.* Physical fitness is not a new U.S. value, but its increased emphasis is moving it into this emerging cluster. This trend is evident in the emphasis on organic foods; concerns about weight and diet; the many joggers, cyclists, and backpackers; and countless health clubs and physical fitness centers.
4. *Youthfulness.* While valuing youth and disparaging old age are not new, some note a new sense of urgency. They attribute this to the huge number of aging baby boomers, who, aghast at the physical changes that accompany their advancing years, attempt to deny or at least postpone their biological fate. An extreme view is represented by a physician who claims that “aging is not a normal life event, but a disease” (Cowley 1996). It is not surprising, then, that techniques for enhancing and maintaining a youthful appearance—from cosmetic surgery to Botox injections—have become popular.

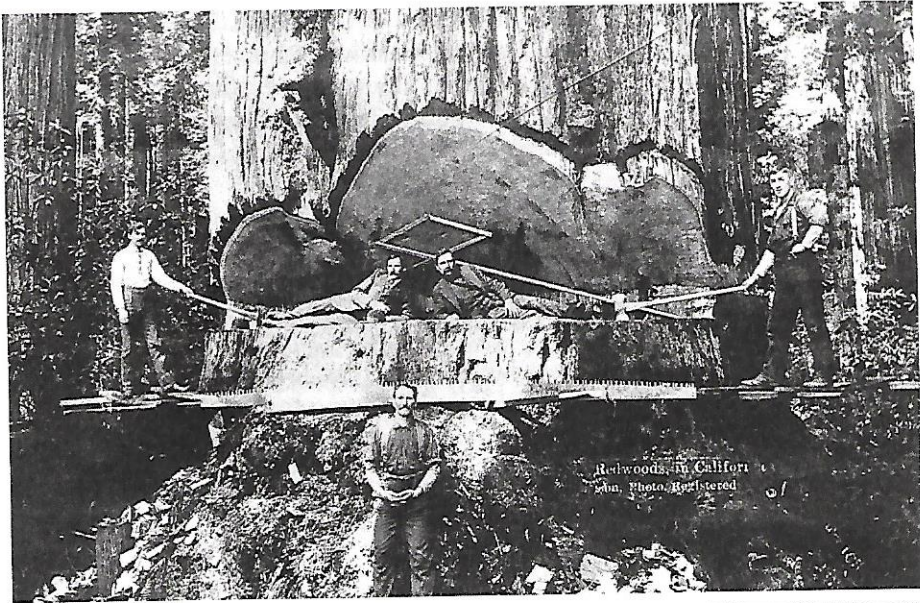
This emerging value cluster is a response to fundamental changes in U.S. society. Americans used to be preoccupied with forging a nation and fighting for economic survival. They now have come to a point in their economic development at which millions of people are freed from long hours of work and millions more are able to retire from work at an age when they anticipate decades of life ahead of them. This value cluster centers on helping people to maintain their health and vigor during their younger years and enabling them to enjoy their years of retirement.

5. *Concern for the environment.* During most of U.S. history, the environment was viewed as something to be exploited—a wilderness to be settled, forests to be chopped down, rivers and lakes to be fished, and animals to be hunted. One result was the near extinction of the bison and the extinction in 1915 of the passenger pigeon, a bird previously so abundant that its annual migration would darken the skies for days. Today, Americans have developed a genuine and (we can hope) long-term concern for the environment.

This emerging value of environmental concern is related to the current stage of U.S. economic development: People act on environmental concerns only after they meet basic needs. At this point in their development, for example, the world’s poor nations have a difficult time “affording” this value.

Culture Wars: When Values Clash

Changes in core values are met with strong resistance by the people who hold them dear. They see the change as a threat to their way of life, an undermining of their present and a hazard to their future. Efforts to change gender roles, for example, arouse intense controversy, as does support for the marriage of homosexuals. Alarmed at such onslaughts to their values, traditionalists fiercely defend historical family relationships and the gender roles they grew up with. Today’s clash in values is so severe that the term “culture wars” has been coined to refer to it. Compared with the violence directed against the Mormons, however, today’s reactions to such controversies are mild.



Values, both those held by individuals and those that represent a nation or people, can undergo deep shifts. It is difficult for many of us to grasp the pride with which earlier Americans destroyed trees that took thousands of years to grow, are located only on one tiny speck of the globe, and that we today consider part of the nation's and world's heritage. But this is a value statement, representing current views. The pride expressed on these woodcutters' faces represents another set of values entirely.

Values as Blinders

Just as values and their supporting beliefs paint a unique picture of reality, so they also form a view of what life *ought* to be like. Americans value individualism so highly, for example, that they tend to see everyone as equally free to pursue the goal of success. This value blinds them to the many circumstances that keep people from reaching this goal. The dire consequences of family poverty, parents' low education, and dead-end jobs tend to drop from sight. Instead, Americans cling to the notion that anyone can make it—if they put forth enough effort. And they “know” they are right, for every day, dangling before their eyes are enticing stories of individuals who have succeeded despite huge handicaps.

“Ideal” Versus “Real” Culture

Many of the norms that surround cultural values are followed only partially. Differences always exist between a group's ideals and what its members actually do. Consequently, sociologists use the term **ideal culture** to refer to the values, norms, and goals that a group considers ideal, worth aspiring to. Success, for example, is part of ideal culture. Americans glorify academic progress,

hard work, and the display of material goods as signs of individual achievement. What people actually do, however, usually falls short of the cultural ideal. Compared with their abilities, for example, most people don't work as hard as they could or go as far as they could in school. To refer to the norms and values that people actually follow, sociologists use the term **real culture**.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

The New Technology

The gestures, language, values, folkways, and mores that we have discussed—all are part of symbolic or nonmaterial culture. Culture, as you recall, also has a material aspect—a group's *things*, from its houses to its toys. Central to a group's material culture is its technology. In its simplest sense, **technology** can be equated with tools. In a broader sense, technology also includes the skills or procedures necessary to make and use those tools.

We can use the term **new technology** to refer to an emerging technology that has a significant impact on social life. People develop minor technologies all the time. Most are slight modifications of existing technologies. Occasionally, however, they develop a technology that makes a major impact on human life. It is primarily to these that the term *new technology* refers. For people 500 years ago, the new technology was the printing press. For us, the new technology consists of computers, satellites, and the electronic media.



The adoption of new forms of communication by people who not long ago were cut off from events in the rest of the world is bound to change their *nonmaterial culture*. How do you think that this man's thinking and views of the world are changing?

The sociological significance of technology goes far beyond the tool itself. *Technology sets a framework for a group's nonmaterial culture.* If a group's technology changes, so do the ways people think and how they relate to one another. An example is gender relations. Through the centuries and throughout the world, it has been the custom (the nonmaterial culture of a group) for men to dominate women. Today, with instantaneous communications (the material culture), this custom has become much more difficult to maintain. For example, when women from many nations gathered in Beijing for a U.N. conference in 1995, satellites instantly transmitted their grievances around the globe. Such communications both convey and create discontent, as well as a feeling of sisterhood, motivating women to agitate for social change.

In today's world, the long-accepted idea that it is proper to withhold rights on the basis of someone's sex can no longer hold. What is usually invisible in this revolutionary change is the role of the new technology, which joins the world's nations into a global communications network.

Cultural Lag and Cultural Change

About three generations ago, sociologist William Ogburn (1922/1938), a functional analyst, coined the term **cultural lag**. By this Ogburn meant that not all parts of a culture change at the same pace. When some part of a culture changes, other parts lag behind.

Ogburn pointed out that *a group's material culture usually changes first, with the nonmaterial culture lagging behind*, playing a game of catch-up. For example, when we get sick, we could type our symptoms into a computer and get a printout of our diagnosis and a recommended course of treatment. In fact, in some tests, computers outperform physicians. Yet our customs have not caught up with our technology, and we continue to visit the doctor's office.

Sometimes nonmaterial culture never catches up. Instead, we rigorously hold on to some outmoded form, one that once was needed but long ago was bypassed by new technology. A striking example is our nine-month school year. Have you ever wondered why it is nine months long and why we take summers off? For most of us this is "just the way it's always been," and we have never questioned it. But there is more to this custom than meets the eye, for it is an example of cultural lag.

In the late 1800s, when universal schooling came about, the school year matched the technology of the time, which was labor-intensive. Most parents were farmers, and for survival they needed their children's help at the crucial times of planting and harvesting. Today, generations later, when few people farm and there is no need for the school year to be so short, we still live with this cultural lag.

Technology and Cultural Leveling

For most of human history, communication was limited and travel slow. Consequently, in their relative isolation, human groups developed highly

distinctive ways of life as they responded to the particular situations they faced. The unique characteristics they developed that distinguished one culture from another tended to change little over time. The Tasmanians, who lived on a remote island off the coast of Australia, provide an extreme example. For thousands of years they had no contact with other people. They were so isolated that they did not even know how to make clothing or fire (Edgerton 1992).

Except in such rare instances humans have always had *some* contact with other groups. During these contacts, people learn from one another, adapting some part of the other's way of life. In this process, called **cultural diffusion**, groups are most open to a change in their technology or material culture. They usually are eager, for example, to adopt superior weapons and tools. In remote jungles in South America one can find metal cooking pots, steel axes, and even bits of clothing spun in mills in South Carolina. Although the direction of cultural diffusion today is primarily from the West to other parts of the world, cultural diffusion is not a one-way street—as bagels, woks, hammocks, and sushi bars in the United States attest.

With today's travel and communications, cultural diffusion is occurring rapidly. Air travel has made it possible to journey around the globe in a matter of hours. In the not-so-distant past, a trip from the United States to Africa was so unusual that only a few adventurous people made it, and newspapers would herald their feat. Today, hundreds of thousands make the trip each year.

The changes in communication are no less vast. Communication used to be limited to face-to-face speech, written messages that were passed from hand to hand, and visual signals, such as smoke, or light that was reflected from mirrors. Despite newspapers, people in some parts of the United States did not hear that the Civil War had ended until weeks and even months after it was over. Today's electronic communications transmit messages across the globe in a matter of seconds, and we learn almost instantaneously what is happening on the other side of the world. During Gulf War II, reporters traveled with U.S. soldiers, and for the first time in history the public was able to view live video reports of battles and deaths as they occurred.

Travel and communication now unite us to such an extent that there is almost no "other side of the world" anymore. One result is **cultural leveling**, a process in which cultures become similar to one another. The globalization of capitalism is bringing both technology and Western culture to the rest of the world. Japan, for example, has adopted not only capitalism but also Western forms of dress and music. These changes, which have been "super-imposed" on traditional Japanese culture, have transformed Japan into a blend of Western and Eastern cultures.

Cultural leveling is occurring rapidly around the world, as is apparent to any traveler. The Golden Arches of McDonald's welcome today's visitors to Tokyo, Paris, London, Madrid, Moscow, Hong Kong, and Beijing. In Mexico, the most popular piñatas are no longer donkeys but, instead, Mickey Mouse and Fred Flintstone (Beckett 1996). When I visited a jungle village in India—no electricity, no running water, and so remote that the only entrance was by a footpath—I saw a young man sporting a cap with the Nike emblem.

Although the bridging of geography and culture by electronic signals and the exportation of Western icons do not in and of themselves mark the end of traditional cultures, the inevitable result is some degree of *cultural leveling*, some blander, less distinctive way of life—U.S. culture with French, Japanese, and Brazilian accents, so to speak. Although the “cultural accent” remains, something vital is lost forever.

SUMMARY AND REVIEW

What Is Culture?

All human groups possess **culture**—language, beliefs, values, norms, and material objects that are passed from one generation to the next. **Material culture** consists of objects (art, buildings, clothing, tools). **Nonmaterial** (or **symbolic**) **culture** is a group’s ways of thinking and their patterns of behavior. **Ideal culture** is a group’s ideal values, norms, and goals. **Real culture** is their actual behavior, which often falls short of their cultural ideals. pp. 279–281.

What are cultural relativism and ethnocentrism?

People are naturally **ethnocentric**; that is, they use their own culture as a yardstick for judging the ways of others. In contrast, those who embrace **cultural relativism** try to understand other cultures on those cultures’ own terms. pp. 281–283.

Components of Symbolic Culture

What are the components of nonmaterial culture?

The central component is **symbols**, anything to which people attach meaning and use to communicate with others. Universally, the symbols of nonmaterial culture are **gestures**, **language**, **values**, **norms**, **sanctions**, **folkways**, and **mores**. pp. 284–287.

Why is language so significant to culture?

Language allows human experience to be goal-directed, cooperative, and cumulative. It also lets humans move beyond the present and share past, future, and other common perspectives. According to the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, language even shapes our thoughts and perceptions. pp. 288–293.

How do values, norms, sanctions, folkways, and mores reflect culture?

All groups have **values**, standards by which they define what is desirable or undesirable, and **norms**, rules or expectations about behavior. Groups use **positive sanctions** to show approval of those who follow their norms, and **negative sanctions** to show disapproval of those who do not. Norms that are not strictly enforced are called **folkways**, while **mores** are norms to which groups demand conformity because they reflect core values. pp. 294–295.

Many Cultural Worlds

How do subcultures and countercultures differ?

A **subculture** is a group whose values and related behaviors distinguish its members from the general culture. A **counterculture** holds values that stand in opposition to those of the dominant culture. pp. 296–299.

Values in U.S. Society

What are the core U.S. values?

Although the United States is a **pluralistic society**, made up of many groups, each with its own set of values, certain values dominate: achievement and success, individualism, activity and work, efficiency and practicality, science and technology, progress, material comfort, equality, freedom, democracy, humanitarianism, racism and group superiority, education, religiosity, and romantic love. Some values cluster together (**value clusters**) to form a larger whole. **Value contradictions** (such as equality and racism) indicate areas of tension, which are likely points of social change. Leisure, self-fulfillment, physical fitness, youthfulness, and concern for the environment are emerging core values. Changes in a society's values do not come without opposition. pp. 299–306.

Technology in the Global Village

How is technology changing culture?

William Ogburn coined the term **cultural lag** to refer to how a group's nonmaterial culture lags behind its changing technology. With today's technological advances in travel and communication, **cultural diffusion** is occurring rapidly. This leads to **cultural leveling**, whereby many groups are adopting Western culture in place of their own customs. Much of the richness of the world's diverse cultures is being lost in the process. pp. 306–309.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT CHAPTER 7A

1. Do you favor ethnocentrism or cultural relativism? Explain your position.
2. Do you think that the language change in Miami, Florida (discussed on pages 290–292), is an indicator of the future of the United States? Why or why not?
3. Are you a member of any subcultures? Which one(s)? Why do you think that your group is a subculture? What is your group's relationship to the mainstream culture?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Companion Website www.ablongman.com/henslin

- Content Select Research Database for Sociology, with suggested key terms and annotated references
- Link to 2000 Census, with activities
- Flashcards of key terms and concepts
- Practice Tests
- Weblinks
- Interactive Maps