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“Today, we must look to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a metaphor for our national character and aspiration. Its symbol a thirty-foot-high cardboard picture of a slot machine and a chorus girl. For Las Vegas is a city entirely devoted to the idea of entertainment, and as such proclaims the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment. Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education, and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.”

CULTURE

A Framework for the Individual

WHAT IS CULTURE?
WHAT DIFFERENTIATES ONE CULTURE FROM ANOTHER?
HOW DOES CULTURE INFLUENCE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND STUDY?

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Material Culture
One category of culture is material culture: items within a society that you can touch, touch, or feel. The jewelry art, music, clothing, architecture, and crafts a society creates are all examples of material culture. Of course, the natural resources available to a culture can influence that culture’s creations. For example, while seven countries (the United States, Japan, Russia, Canada, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom) use more than 46 percent of the world’s electricity and oil, these countries combined hold only about 12 percent of the world’s population. Do these statistics tell you about material culture? On a tour of these countries, you’d be likely to stumble across plenty of cars, air conditioners, blow dryers, and a host of other modern conveniences. If you took a trip to Nigeria, though, you’d notice a lack of access to energy also influences material culture. Nigeria is the ninth largest country in the world, yet it ranks 71st in the world’s electricity use and 42nd in the world’s use of oil. Few people own a car, and many live without regular access to electricity.

Nonmaterial Culture
Not all elements of culture are items you can touch, see, or buy at your local mall. Nonmaterial culture consists of the nonphysical products of society, including its symbols, values, rules, and sanctions.

Symbols
What do you think of when you see the U.S. flag? To most of us, it’s more than just a piece of cloth—it’s a symbol. Symbols represent, suggest, or stand for something else. They can be words, gestures, or even objects, and they often represent abstract or complex concepts. For example, wedding rings represent a legal bond of marriage and an emotional bond of love between two people. Each culture determines the meaning of its own symbols and uses these symbols to share thoughts and concepts with others. During the 2008 presidential campaign, a metal lapel pin in the shape of the U.S. flag took on a surprising amount of symbolism—or rather, its absence did.

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Two main factors determine the number of speakers of a language: population size and colonial history. China and India are the world’s largest countries by population, a fact that single-handedly explains the large percentage of people who speak Mandarin Chinese and Hindi. The English language is widely spoken throughout the world, but this has little to do with Great Britain’s population size. If you’ve ever heard the phrase, “The sun never sets on the British Empire,” you know that the British Empire once owned territory on every continent. As Great Britian colonized countries around the world from the 1700s to the 1900s, English was introduced to these places.

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CULTURE
Material Culture
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Symbols

Values

Norms

Roles

Symbols

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Universal Grammar

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Features

Values

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Role

Values...

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MATERIAL CULTURE: items within a society that you can touch, touch, or feel.

NONMATERIAL CULTURE: nonphysical products of society.

The Study of Culture

Ideal Culture—the values to which a culture aspires

Material Culture

Subcultures—subsets of the dominant culture that have distinct values, beliefs, and norms

Assimilation—process by which people as a group adapt to the dominant culture

Cultural Transmission

Ethnocentrism

Xenophobia

Cultural Relativism

Etno-...
Chapter 3

get the topic: WHAT IS CULTURE?

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If you want to think like a sociologist, you’ll need to understand not only the definition of culture but also how culture affects our lives. Because we see the world through the lens of our culture, it’s easy for us to take our cultural orientation for granted, accepting it without even being aware of the ways in which culture guides (or misguides) our thoughts and actions. The fact that you may only speak English, for example, is indicative of the culture in which you grew up. Had the Spanish or French run the English out of the United States in the 1600s, you might greet your friends, “¡Hola!” or “bonjour!”

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Chapter 3

Culture

MATERIAL CULTURE

• Items within a society that you can taste, touch, or feel

NONMATERIAL CULTURE

• Nonphysical products of society

Symbols

Language

• Universal Grammar

• Cultural Transmission

Features

Values

• Norms

• Morals

• Pi-bedays

• Taboos

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Language influences how we perceive things, which in turn influences our experiences of the world. Our experiences help us develop language, but our use of language also influences our experience.  

Universal Grammar

The famous linguist Noam Chomsky suggests that human beings’ ability to use language comes from common roots. All languages contain what Chomsky calls a “universal grammar.” This term refers not to particular language rules but to the way in which languages are constructed. Chomsky theorizes that, among other things, commonalities in sentence construction and word pronunciation connect languages throughout the world. Furthermore, he says, universal grammar begins in children at about the same age, regardless of culture. Chomsky’s observations suggest that humans have an innate need for language.

Research by Coppola and Newport supports much of Chomsky’s theory. In their study of deaf subjects who were isolated and knew no official sign language, Coppola and Newport found that these people’s “home sign language” (i.e., language that they developed themselves) follows a predictable grammatical style. For instance, the subject of a sentence generally appears at the beginning of the statement. Such findings point to an innate logic in the construction of language and support Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar.

Cultural Transmission

Language is a useful tool, but is it culturally crucial? There’s plenty of evidence to support the idea that a system of communication is, in fact, a critical aspect of culture. Culture often passes from one generation to the next through language. We call this phenomenon cultural transmission. Thanks to cultural transmission, we can use information others have learned to improve our own lives. Cultural transmission also helps spread technology; scientific studies of electricity and the development of microwave technology and the microchip made today’s cell phones and computers possible.

Language not only advances our knowledge; it also brings us together by helping us create social consensus, or agreement. If you and I were to meet, we could use language to exchange ideas, debate, or decide on a course of action. Language is inherently social. It serves as a tool for sharing past memories, making plans, and building relationships.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

It’s difficult to overstated the importance of language in our lives. Benjamin Whorf, a student of anthropologist Edward Sapir, suggested that language and thinking patterns are directly connected. Sapir and Whorf reached this conclusion, known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, after studying many different languages and the people who spoke them. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis proposes two key points:

1. The differences in the structure of language parallel differences in the thinking of the people who speak languages.
2. The structure of a language strongly influences the speaker’s worldview.

Have you ever considered how much language actually influences our thinking? Imagine that the English language had no words for right, left, front, or back. Would you still be able to understand these concepts? Probably not. An aboriginal group from Cape York Peninsula in Australia has no words for relative locations; instead, the group has words for absolute location, such as east, west, north, and south. Most members of the group do learn English, so they have an understanding of relative location. However, if they do not learn English at an early age, they struggle when asked to describe their location in relative terms. 1 Ongoing research into the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that because language influences thinking, it also influences culture.

Gestures

Although language is a primary component of nonmaterial culture, it’s not the only one. Another symbol system that differs by culture is gesture. Gestures are symbols we make using our bodies, such as facial expressions, hand movements, eye contact, and other types of body language. A gesture’s symbolic meaning can vary widely between cultures: When I worked as a counselor to a Native American man, I interpreted my client’s refusal to make eye contact with me as a sign of distrust until I learned that in his culture, looking someone in the eye is considered rude.

Values

Values, part of a society’s nonmaterial culture, represent cultural standards by which we determine what is good, bad, right, or wrong. Sometimes, these values are expressed as proverbs or sayings that teach us how to live. Do you recognize the phrase, “Life is like a box of chocolates—you never know what you’re going to get?” This modern-day saying is popular today among those who embrace life’s unpredictability. Cultures are capable of growth and change, so it’s possible for a culture’s values to change over time.

Value pairs help us define values, usually in terms of opposites. For every positive value, we have a negative one. We may also hold values that support or contradict our other values. Value clusters are two or more values that support each other. Let’s say you value both equality and tolerance. These values form a value cluster because they are similar concepts that strengthen each other. When two or more values are at odds, however, a value conflict occurs. For example, equality and racism are conflicting values.

International Gestures Quiz

Think you know what it means to give a high five in Honduras or a thumbs-up in Thailand? Test your body language IQ to find out if you’re culturally savvy.

1. How would you let a French person know that he’s boring you to tears?
   a. put your mouth and let out a giant yawn
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2. Your Puerto Rican friend wiggles her nose at you. What’s she saying?
   a. “What’s going on?”
   b. “I smell a rat—literally.”
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3. Which gesture is considered offensive in Egypt?
   a. using the right hand for eating
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The lyrics of rap music often prize material culture. Why do you think this is?
Achievement and Success. What do you want to accomplish with your life? Each of us has our own definition of success. For some it means having a high income, for others a college degree, still others simply want a better life than their parents had. Since success is an abstract concept, we often look at our achievements to determine whether or not we’ve been successful.

Activity and Work. It’s what you might call the American Dream: with enough hard work, anyone can pave a path to success. Thanks in part to this widely held belief, work has become a strong cultural value in the United States. We don’t like when others call us “lazy” or “idle,” and we fit time with hobbies and activities. In fact, we spend more time on the job than most people in the industrialized world.

Moral Orientation. U.S. citizens have a tendency toward absolute ethical judgments regarding what is good, bad, right, or wrong. For example, when President George W. Bush suggested in 2003 that North Korea, Iran, and Iraq formed an “axis of evil,” he was using an absolute moral orientation.

Humanitarianism. In the United States, many people are generous and value philanthropy. In times of crisis, we are willing to help. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, people all over the country assisted the residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast area. Organizations raised more than $32.7 billion, including about $1 billion in the first three weeks.

Efficiency and Practicality. People in the United States seek the most practical options for the least effort. We believe that efficiency helps us achieve goals quickly and easily.

Progress. People who value progress believe in “moving forward” by making changes and proposing ideas designed to improve society. For example, you (and most of the people you know) probably believe that, to some extent at least, new technology improves life. This belief is one motivator behind the One Laptop Per Child program, which sends kid-friendly, wireless-enabled laptops to developing countries in an attempt to increase children’s educational opportunities.

Material Comfort. If you’ve ever felt like you have too much “stuff”—and yet you still want more—you’re far from alone. The desire for material comfort drives many of us to buy bigger homes and fill them with things that make our lives easier, like wireless Internet. There are more Wi-Fi hotspots in the United States than in the United Kingdom, the Russian Federation, and Taiwan combined.

Equality. Since the Declaration of Independence was penned, people in the United States have embraced the notion that all people should be treated equally regardless of race, gender, social class, or religious background. However, we don’t always put our egalitarian values into practice. For example, female CEOs ran only 13 Fortune 500 companies in 2007. This gender disparity reflects women’s struggle to achieve equality in the workplace.

Freedom. Generally, U.S. citizens place high value on civil liberties and the rights of the individual. Civil liberties limit the power of the government in our daily lives. We value our freedom to speak our minds, hold independent beliefs, and follow the religious practices of our choice.

External Conformity. Don’t underestimate the power of a group to influence your choices. If you value external conformity, you’re probably eager to fit in with those around you. When you were in high school, for example, other students probably influenced your desire to have the latest and greatest clothes, shoes, or haircut.

Achievement and Success. What do you want to accomplish with your life? Each of us has our own definition of success. For some it means having a high income, for others a college degree, still others simply want a better life than their parents had. Since success is an abstract concept, we often look at our achievements to determine whether or not we’ve been successful.

Activity and Work. It’s what you might call the American Dream: with enough hard work, anyone can pave a path to success. Thanks in part to this widely held belief, work has become a strong cultural value in the United States. We don’t like when others call us “lazy” or “idle,” and we fit time with hobbies and activities. In fact, we spend more time on the job than most people in the industrialized world.

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Judging from the quantity of belongings strewn across the lawn, it’s safe to say that this family places a high value on material comfort.

Achievement and Success

Whether or not we’ve been successful.

Activity and Work

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Chapter 3

Sexuality and Romance

Physical Fitness and Youthfulness

Cultural Lag and Cultural Shock

Additional Values

Folkways are informal types of norms. They provide a framework for our behavior and are based on social expectations. Because they are less serious types of norms, the sanctions applied are less severe than for other types of norms. For example, if you violate a folkway by running late for a lunch, you get an informal, social sanction, such as a verbal reprimand. You are unlikely to receive a formal punishment for violating a folkway, such as a fine or a prison term.

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

When studying cultures from a sociological perspective, you must not allow your personal biases to complicate your understanding. Ethnocentrism occurs when a person uses his or her own culture to judge another culture. Nearly all people in the world are ethnocentric, but ethnocentrism is potentially dangerous to sociologists because it can lead to incorrect assumptions about different cultures.

Ethnocentrism refers to fear and hostility toward people who are from other countries or cultures. The United States has a long history of xenophobia. When the United States entered World War II after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, people in the United States began to fear Japanese Americans and locked many in internment camps.

Ethnocentrism Cultural relativism

Perspectives of a Central American Hotel Room

When traveling in Central America, I noticed that even in very nice hotels there was no air conditioning in the rooms. I viewed this observation through an ethnocentric lens based on my cultural expectations, but I was also able to view it through an objective, prejudice-free lens of cultural relativism.

Not all personal biases result in a negative view of foreign cultures. Sometimes, we engage in xenocentrism when we perceive other groups or societies as superior to our own. When living in Mexico, I noticed that my host family watched very little television. Instead, the family spent time discussing ideas. I remember wishing that people in my own culture would follow suit and interact with one another more.

Thinking like a sociologist means striving to practice cultural relativism when studying other cultures. Cultural relativism consists of a deliberate effort to approximate a way of life in its own context, without prejudice. Philosophers sometimes refer to this effort as normative relativism because it bases the evaluation of a society on that society's own norms. In some Islamic countries, for instance, women are not encouraged to seek education. Within the context of these countries, this practice could be interpreted as a normal function of that culture. However, if women in the United States were not allowed to get an education, the practice would seem unfair because it would violate U.S. cultural norms. When we engage in normative relativism, we evaluate acts within their cultural contexts.

Some people, however, argue that there are universal human values that are standards by which we should evaluate cultures. According to this argument, women in every culture should be educated, and any culture that does not allow this is inferior and exploitative of women.

CULTURAL LAG AND CULTURAL SHOCK

Cultural lag happens when social and cultural changes occur at a slower pace than technological changes. This is often the case when new technology enters and changes a culture. In the late 1970s, scientists were concerned with the deforestation of poorer regions of the world. People used most of the felled timber to heat stoves for cooking. To combat this problem, solar stoves were developed. However, initial tests in Africa and Haiti showed that people were reluctant to use these stoves. After learning of the stoves’ benefits, people’s reluctance waned, and today more than 120 million solar stoves are used around the world.

INVEST 10% IN WAR BONDS

KEEP THIS HORROR FROM YOUR HOME

BACK UP OUR BATTLESHIPS!

Propaganda posters popped up all over the nation after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Terrifying images of Japanese soldiers terrorizing women and children in the United States led to widespread xenophobia.

In 2007 Richard Gere caused a stir when he kissed actress Shilpa Shetty on the cheek at a public event in India. While this gesture is common in the United States, it’s considered a vulgar act in India.
NORMS are rules developed for appropriate behavior based on specific values that are conditional; they can vary from place to place.

SANCTION is a prize or punishment you receive when you either abide by a norm or violate it.

FOLKWAYS are informal types of norms.

MORES are norms that represent a community’s most important values.

TABOO is an act that is socially unacceptable.

ETHNOCENTRISM occurs when a person uses his or her own culture to judge another culture.

XENOPHOBIA refers to fear and hostility toward people who are from other countries or cultures.

XENOCENTRISM is perceiving other groups or societies as superior to your own.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM means making a deliberate effort to appreciate a group’s ways of life without prejudice.

NORMATIVE RELATIVISM is the evaluation of a society based on that society’s norms.

CULTURAL LAG occurs when social and cultural changes occur at a slower pace than technological changes.

Additional Values

Because Williams’ list of U.S. values is more than 30 years old, I believe that today’s society warrants the addition of two new values. Look at any magazine cover, and you will see images of youthful, physically fit bodies and people in sexy, intimate poses. That’s because today’s society’s values are focused on physical fitness and youthfulness.

Physical Fitness and Youthsfulness. People in the United States value a youthful appearance and a physically fit body. This is perhaps because our country has increasingly high rates of obesity.22 If you describe beauty, it’s likely to be in terms of being young and youthful. In the United States led to widespread xenophobia. When studying culture from a sociological perspective, you must not allow your personal biases to cloud your understanding. Ethnocentrism occurs when a person uses his or her own culture to judge another culture. Nearly all people in the world are ethnocentric, but ethnocentrism is potentially dangerous to sociologists because it can lead to incorrect assumptions about different cultures.23

Xenophobia refers to fear and hostility toward people who are from other countries or cultures. The United States has a long history of xenophobia. When the United States entered World War II after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, people in the United States began to fear Japanese Americans and locked many in internment camps.

FOLKWAYS are informal types of norms. They provide a framework for our behavior and are based on social expectations. Because they are less serious types of norms, the sanctions applied are less severe than for other types of norms. For example, if you see a person struggling with packages, you will hold the door for him or her. If you let the door slam on the person, you might be considered rude, but you won’t go to jail. Folkways are often social customs that, when violated, call for minor, informal negative sanctions.

MORES are norms that represent a community’s most important values. A taboo is an act that is socially unacceptable. For example, if you murder a person, you’ve violated one of society’s mores. People who violate mores are given a particularly serious type of formal negative sanction. Acts that lead us to feel revulsion, such as murder, are taboos.24

The Study of Culture

When you study culture, it’s a good idea to consider whether a particular behavior or event is a cultural universal, or common to all cultures. For example, funeral rites are a cultural universal because all cultures have methods of disposing of the dead. Many specific cultural norms surround funerals and death; however, these norms vary widely from culture to culture. In what is now known as Micronesia, anthropologist Brinnlaws Maliekovit observed a funeral ritual in which native islanders ate part of the dead person to maintain a connection.25 After eating, they would vomit in an attempt to create distance from the deceased. This Micronesian funeral norm probably differs greatly from your own cultural norm.

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PERSPECTIVES OF A CROWDED ROOM

Cultural lag happens when social and cultural changes occur at a slower pace than technological changes. This is often the case when new technology enters and changes a culture. In the late 1970s, scientists were concerned with the deterioration of poorer regions of the world. People used most of the felled lumber to heat stoves for cooking. To combat this problem, solar stoves were developed. However, initial tests in Africa and Haiti showed that people were reluctant to use these stoves. After learning of the stoves’ benefits, people’s reluctance waned, and today more than 120 million solar stoves are used around the world.27

When traveling in Central America, I noticed that even in very nice hotels there was wide variation in the rooms. I viewed this observation through an ethnocentric lens based on my cultural expectations, but I was also able to view it through an objective, prejudice-free lens of cultural relativism.

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In 2007 Richard Gere caused a stir when he kissed actress Shilpa Shetty on the cheek at a public event in India. While this gesture is common in the United States, it’s considered a vulgar act in India.
When a culture expresses values or beliefs that are in direct opposition to the dominant group's values, it becomes a counterculture.

Some countercultures have emerged because of cultural differences between the dominant culture and countercultures. These differences can be due to the culture's values, beliefs, and norms. Other countercultures have emerged because of the differences between the dominant culture and countercultures. These differences can be due to the culture's values, beliefs, and norms. For example, during my time in Mexico, I was stunned to discover that the electricity went out every afternoon. My host family planned their cooking schedule around the predictable power outages. It took some time for me to understand the reasons behind these power outages. Eventually, I accepted this cultural difference.

The Subcultures of Facebook

Are you a member of a Facebook subculture? Considering that Facebook has more than 600 million users worldwide, you are probably a member of a Facebook subculture. A Facebook subculture is a subset of the dominant culture that has distinct values, beliefs, and norms. For example, when you log into Facebook, you are connected to a subset of the dominant culture. This subset may include people who share similar values, beliefs, and norms. For example, you might connect with people who share your political views, religious beliefs, or other interests. These connections can lead to a sense of belonging and identity. In complex societies, subcultures allow people to connect with other people who have similar interests. Churches, civic organizations, clubs, and even online communities can become subcultures.

When you read the form counterculture, images of mafia organizations are likely to come to mind. These organizations are often associated with violence and crime. However, countercultures can take many forms. Some countercultures are formed by people who share similar interests or beliefs. For example, people who are interested in environmental issues might form a counterculture. Other countercultures are formed by people who are trying to change the dominant culture. For example, people who are trying to change the dominant culture to be more environmentally friendly might form a counterculture.

Global Village

The term “global village” refers to the shrinking of the world through immediate electronic communications. The Internet has made it possible for people to communicate with each other in real time. This has led to the concept of a global village. However, the concept of a global village is not as simple as it sounds. The Internet has made it possible for people to communicate with each other in real time. However, the Internet has also created new problems. For example, the Internet has made it possible for people to spread false information. This can lead to problems in real-time. Therefore, the concept of a global village is not as simple as it sounds.
CULTURE SHOCK occurs when a person encounters a culture foreign to his or her own and has an emotional response to the differences between the cultures. SUBCULTURE is a subset of the dominant culture that has distinct values, beliefs, and norms. COUNTERCULTURES are groups with value systems that are in opposition to the dominant group’s values. MULTICULTURALISM is a concept that supports the inherent value of different cultures within society. ASSIMILATION is the process by which minority groups adopt the patterns of the dominant culture. GLOBAL VILLAGE refers to the “shrinking” of the world through immediate electronic communications.

Have you ever been to a foreign country and marveled at how the culture differed from your own? If so, you were probably experiencing culture shock. Culture shock occurs when a person encounters a culture foreign to his or her own and has an emotional response to the differences between the cultures. During my time in Mexico, I was stunned to discover that the electricity went out every afternoon. My host family planned their cooking schedule around the predictable power outages. It took some time to adapt to this new way of life. However, Christianity later became the official religion of the empire.

IDEAL VERSUS REAL CULTURE

Is there a difference between culture as we’d like it to be and culture as it really is? Often, the answer is yes. Ideal culture represents the values to which a culture aspires, and real culture represents a culture’s actual behaviors. Democracy, for example, has always been part of the ideal culture of the United States, but voter turnouts for the 1996, 2000, and 2004 presidential elections indicate that many people don’t show democratic values and turn out to vote.

SUBCULTURES AND COUNTERCULTURES

Groups with a common interest may form a subculture. A subculture is a subset of the dominant culture that has distinct values, beliefs, and norms.

When a subculture expresses values or beliefs that are in direct opposition to the dominant group’s values, it becomes a counterculture.

MULTICULTURALISM AND ASSIMILATION

If you move to a new country, you’ll bring along not only material belongings but also concealed cultural baggage. It can be tricky to “unpack” that baggage, but you’ll need to find a way to adapt to your new culture. Multiculturalism is a concept that supports the inherent value of different cultures within society. Proponents of multiculturalism think that immigrants should maintain links to aspects of their original culture—such as language, cultural beliefs, and traditions, and religion—while also integrating into their new culture. However, opponents of multiculturalism worry that this practice keeps groups from adapting to the dominant culture.

Assimilation is the process by which minority groups adopt the patterns of the dominant culture. If a minority group completely abandons its previous culture in favor of a new one, that group is likely to experience rapid assimilation. One method by which the U.S. government tried to force rapid assimilation involved taking Native American children from their parents and placing them in boarding schools to “teach them white ways.” However, many Native American students left the boarding schools unprepared to live in either the dominant culture or their own culture.

Global Village

In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan popularized the term “global village,” which refers to the “shrinking” of the world through immediate electronic communications. McLuhan’s work suggests that time and space differences are rapidly becoming irrelevant as a result of technology. But is technology really bringing people closer together?

Before the advent of the Internet, Shirley Milgram conducted an experiment in an attempt to determine whether it really is a small world after all. Milgram found people from different areas of the United States and sent them on a hunt for strangers. He asked them to mail a letter to a target person, whom they did not know, using only their social networks. He provided only the subject’s name and town of residence but nothing else. After passing through the hands of between two and ten people, the letters eventually found their targets. Now that the Internet plays such a large role in our lives, could our separation be even shorter than it was in the 1960s? How many links would it take you to connect with a student in Japan?

Dodd et al. used the Internet to conduct a similar study. Through a social networking website, they sent more than 60,000 people on a target hunt to find 18 people in 13 different countries. Their results were astonishingly similar to Milgram’s results. Although these findings may support the notion of a small world, they do not suggest that the world is any smaller today than it was in Milgram’s time.

Technology and Cultural Change

In Amazing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, Neil Postman discusses television’s impact on U.S. culture. Television is the primary means of communication for news and information in the United States. Flavor papers read newspapers and magazines. Do the media affect the message?

Marshall Fishwick would say that they do. According to him, many aspects of life that make us human are not computable. Your laptop cannot feel, create beauty, or think. Your MP3 player talks to you, it does not listen. Like a fishwick, Postman argues that technology, such as television, provides a passive type of engagement for the user. Postman argues that this creates a nation of people who cannot think. This inability increases the odds that we will accept overly simple solutions to extremely complex problems, which will destroy our culture in the long run.

Of course, not everyone believes that technology will destroy our culture. In Culture and Technology, Andrew Murphy and John Potts argue that technology has improved society. For example, Murphy and Potts argue that the technology of writing “transformed human consciousness” because it brought about new ways of thinking. "Technological advancements, such as the Internet and television, inspire creativity and innovation, and open up a world of opportunity for the user. They claim that technology does not limit a society, as Fishwick and Postman suggest, but it gives people the tools and resources to improve their lives. In our culture, becoming a technopoly is not a goal. A technopoly is a society that values technological change for its own sake. In such a culture, having the latest upgrade is most important. Fishwick suggests that our culture is experiencing a new dynasty of technology, while Murphy and Potts argue that culture and technology are so tightly linked that we can’t really separate one from the other. What do you think? Has technology really invaded society?
think sociologically: **WHAT DIFFERENTIATES ONE CULTURE FROM ANOTHER?**

Now we will turn to the major theoretical perspectives on culture. The theoretical perspectives affect how sociologists view language, gestures, and values in a culture.

**Symbolic Interactionism—A Crisis of Values**

Symbolic interactionists explore how language, gestures, or values affect a culture. If a symbolic interactionist were to study values in U.S. society, he or she might ask: How are values defined in the United States? Are U.S. values weakening? Is the United States experiencing a moral decline?

**TRADITIONAL VALUES VS. SECULAR VALUES**

In America’s Crisis of Values, author Wayne Baker investigates whether a crisis of values really exists. Baker surmises that proponents of a decline in values usually support one of three arguments: the trend hypothesis, the comparative hypothesis, or the distribution hypothesis. He compares traditional and secular values over time.

Traditional values include the importance of religion and God, absolute standards of good and evil, importance of the family, deference to authority, male dominance in economic and political life, and intolerance of certain moral issues such as abortion, homosexuality, divorce, and suicide. Secular values emphasize reason and logic, ignoring religion and custom when determining government and social decisions, accepting low levels of religious beliefs and relative standards of good and evil, and questioning authority are all examples of secular values.

**THE THREE HYPOTHESES**

The comparative hypothesis suggests that the values in U.S. society are inferior to those found in other modern democracies. The argument proposes that our individualistic and traditional values result in higher rates of murder, poverty, and out-of-wedlock births. When Baker compared value statements from a variety of countries, he found more similarities than differences, which lends no support to the comparative hypothesis.

The distribution hypothesis or, as Baker also refers to it, “the culture war thesis” suggests that the United States is involved in a culture war. According to this theory, two morally opposed groups (one liberal, one conservative) must see themselves as individuals and as part of a community. Community members are communists, communitalists believe in free markets and private ownership of business. However, they stress that a sense of community must exist to check excesses of either the government or the market place.

**BAKER’S CONCLUSION**

Using data gathered from the U.S. public over a 30-year span, Baker concludes that U.S. citizens are becoming more traditional and less secular. Baker’s results may come as a surprise to pundits who love to chatter about culture wars. His findings suggest that U.S. citizens have more similar values today than they did 30 years ago. In fact, the country’s traditional values have become stronger over time. Yet, many who espouse these secular values suggest that secular moral values are “winning,” when in fact they are not. Baker suggests that the United States’ purported “crisis of values” is nothing more than an illusion fueled by rhetoric.

**Functionalist—Communitarianism**

When functionalists look at the importance of culture, they often consider how culture works to hold society together. Functionals suggest that culture binds society through shared values and norms and the interaction of social structures. Noted sociologist Amitai Etzioni has explored these systems in U.S. society.

Amitai Etzioni is one of the foundational creators of communitarianism—a functional approach to the understanding of culture in the United States.28 This theory suggests that for society to function properly, it must have a balanced relationship between the community, the market, and the government. Etzioni stresses that to build a society that works, its members must see themselves as individuals and as part of a community. Community members are communists, communitalists believe in free markets and private ownership of business. However, they stress that a sense of community must exist to check excesses of either the government or the market place.

**Conflict Theory—The McDonaldization of the United States**

Conflict theorists suggest that society is united in a struggle for scarce resources. Unequal distribution of wealth means that some people win and others lose. But how do you win? Are there predictable patterns of interaction that can bring about financial success? McDonald’s restaurant is successful because it prizes efficiency, practicality, and affordability. Sociologist George Ritzer suggests that U.S. society models itself after a McDonald’s restaurant through a process he calls “McDonaldization.”

Using a conflict theory rooted in the work of economist/sociologist/political scientist Max Weber, Ritzer notes that efficient bureaucracies succeed in business. In a capitalist system, those who follow the action that can bring about financial success? McDonald’s restaurant is successful because it prizes efficiency, practicality, and affordability.

**The McDonaldization process is likely to be financially successful.**

1. **Efficiency.** When a business practices efficiency, consumers benefit from the low prices that the business offers. The McDonaldization of efficiency means customers do the employees’ work. If you go to McDonald’s, you usually carry the food to the table yourself, and in some parts of the country, you might fill your own drink as well.

2. **Calculability.** McDonald’s counts every item, from the pickles on the hamburger to the number of chicken tenders in a box. Quantity is valued, and quality is less relevant. McDonaldized societies measure success by the number of tasks completed on time. If the quality of the task is mediocre, we often accept it as long as it is finished on schedule.

3. **Predictability.** Finding a product that is predictable decreases the risk of business failure. In this way, our culture has taken a page from the fast-food industry. Food from Taco Bell tastes the same whether you purchase it in San Antonio or Boston. Predictability increases reward and decreases risk to both the business owner and the consumer.

4. **Technology.** Businesses gain more control over their products when they use technology to limit human error. This trend helps increase profits because business owners are able to hire fewer people.

**NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF MCDONALDIZATION**

McDonaldization trades convenience for high quality and ensures high profits for business owners. Innovation and creativity suffer, but short-term profits rise. By replacing workers with technology, wages drop and inequality increases, leading to conflict between business owners and workers.

**The Three Trends: How Do They Measure Up?**

**The Comparative Hypothesis**

The comparative hypothesis is nothing more than an illusion fueled by rhetoric.

**The Distribution Hypothesis**

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**The Trend Hypothesis**

The trend hypothesis asserts that traditional values are losing ground to secular ones.
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The Three Trends: How Do They Measure Up?

>> The trend hypothesis asserts that traditional values are losing ground to secular ones.


WRAP YOUR MIND AROUND THE THEORY

The roots of mangroves grow in water, shown here in Papua New Guinea.

FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalists suggest society works as an interrelated system. Communicators understand that if society is to run smoothly, the government, the local community, and the business sector must all work together for the well-being of all. The cost of society is the local community. It anchors this social tree. The government carries the will of the people to the economic system, thereby functioning as the trunk of this tree. The leaves of a tree make the sugar that allows the entire plant to live. Of course, leaves without roots blow over, and roots without leaves die.

CONFLICT THEORY

Conflict theorists point out that members of society struggle for what is scarce. In our society, that is money, health, and power. Because of the McDonaldization process, short-term rewards increase power and wealth of the few. The costs to society are irrelevant. Las Vegas casinos frequently make money off of people who are not wealthy. These consumers gamble for the entertainment value and because they believe gambling will make them wealthy. In reality, it's the casino owners who become wealthy.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Interactionists suggest that culture is rooted in the values expressed by the people who live within it. Politicians use symbols to articulate that which they believe is important. Successful candidates are able to attract votes from a wide variety of people. In general, they do not have extreme values. Many people in today's society get their information about politicians from television news. Neil Postman argues that news programs use sound bites from politicians to sum up their complex views in single phrases. Can people truly understand politicians' values from a single sentence?

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Social Policy — Multiculturalism and Assimilation

In recent years, more than 15 states in the United States have passed laws that require immigrants to understand English in order to use public services. Some “English-only” laws simply state that English is the official state language, while others prohibit giving state applications, forms, and driver’s license exams in any language other than English. When discussing the social policies related to the English-only movement, sociologists often use the terms “multiculturalism” and “assimilation.” Supporters of multiculturalism believe that people should be allowed to adapt to a new culture. People who favor assimilation often criticize multiculturalism because they believe that immigrants should adapt to society. Society does not need to adapt to immigrants.

Is one theory better than the other? Sociologist Ruben Rumbaut explores immigrant assimilation by reviewing a variety of studies. Traditionally, experts believed that assimilation occurred in a linear process. Immigrants began to assimilate by learning the language and then incorporated other parts of the culture into their lives. Rumbaut finds that this linear idea is not valid. Assimilation varies based on the immigrant’s time of entry into the country and country of origin. Many of today’s immigrants come from countries with little understanding of industrialization and democracy, which limits the process by which they assimilate. Under these conditions, coerced rapid assimilation has a negative impact on successful immigrant adaptation. Recent research shows that immigrants improve their chances of successful adaptation if they remain tied to their own culture and remain bilingual.

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Those who support aggressive assimilation policies view the policies as a way to functionally support the country’s unity and ease the fear that a bilingual society would negatively affect the country. Interestingly, as an individual’s education level increases, the likelihood of supporting “English-only” laws decreases. Therefore, college graduates are more likely to realize that successful immigrant adaptation occurs slowly and cannot be forced.

Slot machines are a popular form of casino entertainment because of the lights, sounds, and interactive nature of the game.

New York senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and Illinois senator Barack Obama were in a close race throughout most of the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primaries because they both appealed to a wide variety of people.

“I didn’t know what I was getting into.”

Sonya, a 22-year-old, bilingual, United States-born Latino student, uttered these words when reflecting on an experience she had while working on a civic engagement project. When Sonya began volunteering at a local Latino development organization that offered legal, medical, and psychological help to Spanish-speaking immigrants, she could not imagine the life lessons she would learn.

“As the first week, I was given an assignment to help many immigrants in the United States.”

Sonya recalled. The woman spoke very little English, and her husband had left her and her children about a year earlier. As a legal citizen of the United States, the woman was entitled to public assistance. However, she did not know how to get it. The process was long and arduous, but Sonya did not fluster. She followed the woman through the system and appealed each rejection along the way. Eventually, Sonya was able to help the woman find day-care assistance and food stamps, and she helped the woman to collect child support from her ex-husband. The experience taught Sonya how not speaking English very well, you cannot really negotiate the system. Even legal immigrants suffer in such an environment. Fortunately, the Latino society is closely knit and more collective. This helped her to survive.

“Without her community’s support, she would have had no hope to make a new and better life for herself and her children.”
The roots of mangroves grow in water, shown here in Papua New Guinea.

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**TRADITIONAL VALUES VS. SECULAR ONES?**

**WRAP YOUR MIND AROUND THE THEORY**

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**ACTIVITIES**
1. Research the laws in your state. In what languages other than English can a person take a driver’s license test?
2. Imagine that you moved to another country and were banned from speaking English. How might you feel? What would you do to adapt?
3. Visit an English as a second language classroom in a school in your community. Ask the teacher about the importance of language in cultural transmission.

**From Classroom to Community: Assisting Immigrants**

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“After the first week, I was given a case of an immigrant woman who needed help getting medical care for her children.”

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**DISCOVER SOCIOLOGY IN ACTION:** HOW DOES CULTURE INFLUENCE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND STUDY?

“Can you speak English very well, you cannot really negotiate the system. Even legal immigrants suffer in such an environment. Fortunately, the Latino society is closely knit and more collective. This helped her to survive. Without her community’s support she would have had no hope to make a new and better life for herself and her children.”

**Discover sociology in action:** how does culture influence sociological theory and study?
Chapter 3

What Is Culture? 48

- the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, and material objects that are important enough to pass on to future generations of a society.

What Differentiates One Culture From Another? 58

- language, gestures, values, perception and categorization of experiences, actions, norms, interaction of social structures, and struggle for scarce resources.

How Does Culture Influence Sociological Theory and Study? 61

- culture: affects how we perceive things; guides our thoughts and actions; must be studied while keeping these differences in mind.

Key Terms

- objects that are passed on to future generations of society. 48
- material culture consists of items within a culture that you can taste, touch, and feel. 49
- nonmaterial culture consists of the nonphysical products of society, including our symbols, values, rules, and sanctions. 49
- symbols represent, suggest, or stand for something else. 49
- language is a system of speech and/or written symbols used to convey meaning. 49
- cultural transmission is culture passing from one generation to the next through language. 50
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is a hypothesis, first advanced by Edward Sapir in 1939 and subsequently developed by Benjamin Whorf, that the structure of a language determines a native speaker's perception and categorization of experiences. 50
- gestures are symbols we make using our bodies, such as facial expressions, hand movements, eye contact, and other types of body language. 50
- values are a part of a society's nonmaterial culture that represent cultural standards by which we determine what is good, bad, right, or wrong. 51
- value pairs help us define values, usually in terms of opposites. 51
- value clusters are two or more values that support each other. 54
- value conflict occurs when two or more values are at odds. 57
- norms are rules developed for appropriate behavior based on specific values that are conditional. 57
- sanction is a crisis or punishment you receive when you either abide by a norm or violate it. 54
- folkways are informal norms. 54
- mores are rules that represent a community's most important values. 54
- taboos is an act that is socially unacceptable. 54
- ethnocentrism occurs when a person uses his or her own culture to judge another culture. 55
- xenophobia refers to fear and hostility toward people who are from other countries or cultures. 55
- xenocentrism is perceiving other groupers societies as superior to your own. 55
- cultural relativism means making a deliberate effort to appreciate a group's ways of life without prejudice. 55
- normative relativism is the evaluation of a society based on that society's norms. 55
- cultural lag happens when social and cultural changes occur at a slower pace than technological changes. 55
- culture shock occurs when a person encounters a foreign culture and has an emotional response to the differences between the cultures. 56
- subculture is a subset of the dominant culture that has distinct values, beliefs, and norms. 56
- countercultures are groups with value systems that are in opposition to the dominant group's values. 56
- multiculturalism is a concept supporting the inherent value of different cultures within society. 56
- assimilation is the process by which minority groups adopt the patterns of the dominant culture. 56
- global village refers to the “shrinking” of the world through immediate electronic communications. 57

Theory

Functionalism 58

- culture (shared values and norms) holds society together through written symbols used to convey meaning. 52
- symbols
- products of society, including our symbols, values, beliefs, and norms. 52
- nonmaterial culture
- material culture
- society. 52
- brought together to form culture
- messages are passed through generations of a society. 52
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Symbolic Interaction—A Crisis of Values 58

- Symbolic Interactionism 59
- three hypotheses: trend, comparison, and distribution
- individualist and traditional values result in higher rates if murder, poverty, and out-of-wedlock births
- U.S. citizens becoming more traditional, not secular
- culture is the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, and material

Conflict Theory 59

- society struggles for resources
- societies win resources by using McDonaldization process (efficiency, calculability, predictability, and technology)
- convenience over quality
- only the wealthy benefit: wages drop, inequality increases, short-term profits rise
- tradition vs. secular values
- three hypotheses: trend, comparison, and distribution
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Get the Topic: What Is Culture?

- Material Culture 49
- Nonmaterial Culture 49
- Additional Values 54
- Norms and Sanctions 54
- The Study of Culture 64
- Symbolic Interaction—A Crisis of Values 58
- Functionalism—Countermobilization 59
- Conflict Theory—The McDonaldization of the United States 59
- Social Policy: Multiculturalism and Assimilation 61

Cultural Changes and Assimilation

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Sample Test Questions

These multiple-choice questions are similar to those found in the text bank that accompanies this textbook.

1. What aspects of Las Vegas culture may lead to the city’s cultural death? A. Forays, b. mores, c. rules for behavior, d. definitions of beauty.
2. Which of the following statements is false? A. Values may cluster, but they cannot contradict. B. Values remain the same over time. C. Values are often defined by their opposite. D. Values exist in all societies.
4. How does a counterculture form? A. When a subculture's values differ from the dominant group's values. B. When a group maintains its values over time. C. When the dominant culture does not accept part of the group. D. When the subculture adopts the values of the dominant culture.

Essay

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Where to Start Your Research Paper

To learn more about the McDonaldization of America, go to http://www.mcdonaldization.com. To find more information about attending college while traveling the world, go to http://www.sponsoredschools.com. To learn more about the Small World project (the online experiment to test the idea that any two people in the world can be connected through only six others), go to http://smallworld.columbia.edu. To learn more about the communitarian movement, go to http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/index.html. To find urban legends and myths as well as their origins and why they are not true, see http://www.uron.com. For more information on international study options, go to http://www.studyabroad.com, http://www.studentroadlinks.com. To find vital information to consider before studying abroad, go to http://travel.state.gov/travel/king/study/king_1238.html. For more information on international volunteering, go to http://www.toptenworldtravel.com. To learn more about the Peace Corp, go to http://www.peacecorps.gov.
get the topic: WHAT IS CULTURE?

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Nonmaterial Culture 49
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The Study of Culture 64
Symbolic Interaction—A Crisis of Values 58
Functionalism—Communitarianism 59
Conflict Theory—The McDonaldization of the United States 59

Social Policy: Multiculturalism and Asimilation 61

Theory

FUNCTIONALISM 58
- culture (shared values and norms) holds society together through shared values and norms
- interaction of social structures
- society must have a balanced relationship between the community, the market, and the government
- communitarians (free markets and private ownership of businesses)

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM 59
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- U.S. citizens becoming more traditional, not secular

CONFICT THEORY 59
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- societies win resources by using McDonaldization process (efficiency, calculability, predictability, and technology)
- convenience over quality
- only the wealthy benefit: wages drop, inequality increases, short-term profits rise

Key Terms

objects that are passed on to future generations of society. 48
material culture consists of items within a culture that you can see, touch, and feel. 49
nonmaterial culture consists of the nonphysical products of society, including our symbols, values, rules, and sanctions. 49
symbols represent, suggest, or stand for something else. 49
language is a system of speech and/or written symbols used to convey meaning and communicate. 49
cultural transmission is culture passing from one generation to the next through language. 50
Sapi-Whoft hypothesis is a hypothesis, first advanced by Edward Sapir in 1939 and subsequently developed by Benjamin Whorf, that the structure of a language determines a native speaker's perception and categorization of experience. 50
gestures are symbols we make using our bodies, such as facial expressions, hand movements, eye contact, and other types of body language. 51
values are a part of a society's nonmaterial culture that represent cultural standards by which we determine what is good, bad, right, or wrong. 51
value pairs help us define values, usually in terms of opposites. 51
value conflict occurs when two or more values are at odds. 51
norms are rules developed for appropriate behavior based on specific values that are conditional. 54
sanctions is a prise or punishment you receive when you either abide by a norm or violate it. 54
folkways are informal types of norms. 54
mores are norms that represent a community's most important values. 54
taboos is an act that is socially unacceptable. 54
ethnocentrism occurs when a person uses his or her own culture to judge another culture. 54
xenophobia refers to fear and hostility toward people who are from other countries or cultures. 54
xenocentrism is perceiving other groupers soci-