

Chapter 2: Culture

Chapter Summary

The concept of culture is sometimes easier to grasp by description than by definition. All human groups possess culture, which consists of the language, beliefs, values, norms, and material objects that are passed from one generation to the next. Although the particulars of culture may differ from one group to another, culture itself is universal—all societies develop shared, learned ways of perceiving and participating in the world around them.

Culture can be subdivided into material culture and nonmaterial culture. Material culture consists of tools and the technology required to use them that members of society create and utilize. This includes art, buildings, weapons, jewelry, and all other man-made objects. Nonmaterial culture includes a group's ways of thinking (beliefs, values, and other assumptions about the world) and patterns of behavior (language, gestures, and other forms of social interaction).

The effects of culture are profound and pervasive, touching almost every aspect of people's lives. However, most people are generally unaware of their own culture; culture is so engrained it is often taken for granted. People often become more aware of their own culture when their cultural assumptions are challenged by exposure to other cultures, particularly those with fundamentally different beliefs and customs.

When people come into contact with cultures that significantly differ from their own, they often experience culture shock, a condition of disorientation that requires them to question their cultural assumptions. Culture shock is influenced by ethnocentrism, the practice of viewing one's own culture as preferable and using it as a yardstick for judging other cultures.

Although all groups practice some forms of ethnocentrism, people can also employ cultural relativism, the practice of understanding a culture on its own terms without assessing its elements as any better or worse than one's own culture. Cultural relativism presents a challenge to ordinary thinking because we tend to use our own culture to judge others.

Sociologists sometimes refer to nonmaterial culture as symbolic culture, because the central component of nonmaterial culture is symbols. Symbols include gestures, language, values, norms, sanctions, folkways, and mores. Gestures involve the ways in which people use their bodies to communicate with one another. Although people in every culture use gestures, the gestures people use and the meanings they associate with those gestures vary greatly from one culture to another.

The primary way people communicate with each other is through language: a system of symbols that can be strung together in an infinite number of ways. Like gestures, all human groups have language. And like gestures, the meanings that people associate with different sounds and symbols can vary greatly from one culture to another.

Language is the basis of culture. It is critical to human life and essential for cultural development. Among other things, language allows human experience to be cumulative; gives people the capacity to share understandings about the past and develop common perceptions about the future; and provides for complex, shared, goal-directed behavior. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language not only expresses our thinking and perceptions but also shapes them. The "descriptive terms" that we use can—and do—influence how we see other objects, other people, and ourselves.

All groups have values (beliefs regarding what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad, beautiful or ugly), which they channel into norms (expectations, or rules of behavior, that develop from values). Norms include folkways (norms that are not strictly enforced), mores (norms that are strictly enforced), and taboos (norms so strong that the thought of violating them is universally revolting). Norms can be enforced through both positive sanctions (rewards ranging from approving looks and gestures to material compensation) and negative sanctions (punishment ranging from disapproving looks and gestures to imprisonment and execution).

Cultures may contain numerous subcultures and countercultures. A subculture is a group whose values and related behaviors set it apart from the larger culture; a counterculture is a group whose values and related behaviors stand in opposition to the dominant culture.

Because the United States is a pluralistic society made up of many different groups, competing value systems are common. Some sociologists, however, have tried to identify some underlying core values in the United States. These core values (values shared by many groups that make up American society) include value clusters (a series of interrelated values that together form a larger whole) and value contradictions (values that contradict one another). Social change often occurs when a society is forced to face, and work through, its value contradictions.

Cultural universals are values, norms, or other cultural traits that are found in all cultures. Although anthropologists and sociologists have identified some universal human activities, they have also found that the ways of carrying out these activities differ from one group to another.

Technology is central to a group's material culture, while also setting the framework for its nonmaterial culture. The term "new technology" refers to any emerging technologies of an era that have a significant impact on social life. The current "new technology" includes computers, satellites, and various other forms of the electronic media. Cultural lag refers to a condition in which a group's nonmaterial culture lags behind its material culture.

With the emergence of new technologies in mass transportation and mass communication, the world is becoming more interconnected. This has resulted in more cultural diffusion (the spread of characteristics from one culture to another) and culture leveling (the process by which cultures become similar to one another). Cultural leveling is occurring rapidly around the world. Mickey Mouse, Fred Flintstone, and the golden arches of McDonald's can be found in Miami, Mexico City, Moscow, and in most other major cities of the world.

Chapter Outline

I. What is Culture?

- A. Culture is defined as the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, and even material objects passed from one generation to the next.
 - 1. Material culture is things such as jewelry, art, buildings, weapons, machines, clothing, hairstyles, etc.
 - 2. Nonmaterial culture is a group's ways of thinking (beliefs, values, and assumptions) and common patterns of behavior (language, gestures, and other forms of interaction).
- B. Culture provides a taken-for-granted orientation to life.
 - 1. We assume that our own culture is normal or natural; in fact, it is not natural, but rather is learned. It penetrates our lives so deeply that it is taken for granted and provides the lens through which we perceive and evaluate things.
 - 2. It provides implicit instructions that tell us what we ought to do and a moral imperative that defines what we think is right and wrong.

3. Coming into contact with a radically different culture produces “culture shock,” challenging our basic assumptions.
 4. A consequence of internalizing culture is ethnocentrism, using our own culture (and assuming it to be good, right, and superior) to judge other cultures. It is functional when it creates in-group solidarity, but can be dysfunctional if it leads to discrimination against those who are different.
- C. Cultural relativism consists of trying to appreciate other groups’ ways of life in the context in which they exist, without judging them as superior or inferior to our own.
1. Because we tend to use our own culture as the standard, cultural relativism presents a challenge to ordinary thinking.
 2. At the same time, this view helps us appreciate other ways of life.
 3. Robert Edgerton suggests developing a scale for evaluating cultures on their “quality of life”. He argues that those cultural practices that result in exploitation *should* be judged as morally inferior to those that enhance people’s lives.

II. Components of Symbolic Culture

- A. Sociologists sometimes refer to nonmaterial culture as symbolic culture.
1. A central component of culture is the symbol—something to which people attach meaning and use in communications.
 2. Symbols include gestures, language, values, norms, sanctions, folkways, and mores.
- B. Gestures, or using one’s body to communicate with others, are shorthand means of communication.
1. People in every culture use gestures, although the gestures and the meanings differ; confusion or offense can result because of misunderstandings over the meaning of a gesture or misuse of a gesture.
 2. There is disagreement over whether there are any universal gestures. They tend to vary considerably around the world.
 3. Because some gestures are so closely associated with emotional messages, the gestures themselves can often elicit emotions.
- C. Language consists of a system of symbols that can be put together in an infinite number of ways in order to communicate abstract thought. Each word is a symbol to which a culture attaches a particular meaning. It is important because it is the primary means of communication between people.
1. It allows human experiences to be cumulative; each generation builds on the body of significant experiences that is passed on to it by the previous generation, thus freeing people to move beyond immediate experiences.
 2. It allows for a social or shared past. We are able to discuss past events with others or understandings
 3. It allows for a social or shared future. Language allows us to plan future activities with one another.
 4. It allows the exchange of perspectives (i.e., ideas about events and experiences).
 5. It allows people to engage in complex, shared, goal-directed behavior.
 6. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that our thinking and perception not only are expressed by language but actually are shaped by language because we are taught not only words but also a particular way of thinking and perceiving. Rather than objects and events forcing themselves onto our consciousness, our very language determines our consciousness.
- D. Culture includes values, norms, and sanctions.
1. Values are the standards by which people define good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Every group develops both values and expectations regarding the right way to reflect them.
 2. Norms are the expectations, or rules of behavior, that develop out of a group’s values.
 3. Sanctions are the positive or negative reactions to the way in which people follow norms. Positive sanctions (a money reward, a prize, a smile, or even a handshake) are expressions

of approval; negative sanctions (a fine, a frown, or harsh words) denote disapproval for breaking a norm.

4. To relieve the pressure of having to strictly follow the norms, some cultures have moral holidays—specified times when people are allowed to break the norms and not worry about being sanctioned. Mardi Gras is an example of a moral holiday in our society.
 5. Some societies have moral holiday places, locations where norms are expected to be broken. An example would be red light districts where prostitutes are allowed to work the street.
- E. Norms vary in terms of their importance to a culture.
1. Folkways are norms that are not strictly enforced, such as passing on the left side of the sidewalk. They may result in a person getting a dirty look.
 2. Mores are norms that are believed to be essential to core values and we insist on conformity. A person who steals, rapes, and kills has violated some of society's most important mores.
 3. Norms that one group considers to be folkways another group may view as mores. A male walking down the street with the upper half of his body uncovered may be violating a folkway; a female doing the same thing may be violating mores.
 4. Taboos are norms so strongly ingrained that even the thought of them is greeted with revulsion. Eating human flesh and having sex with one's parents are examples of such behavior.

III. Many Cultural Worlds: Subcultures and Countercultures

- A. Subcultures are groups whose values and related behaviors are so distinct that they set their members off from the dominant culture.
1. Each subculture is a world within the larger world of the dominant culture, and has a distinctive way of looking at life, but remains compatible with the dominant culture.
 2. U.S. society contains tens of thousands of subcultures. Some are quite broad (teenagers), while others are narrow (body builders). Some ethnic groups form subcultures, as do certain occupational groups.
- B. Countercultures are groups whose values set their members in opposition to the dominant culture.
1. While usually associated with negative behavior, some countercultures are not.
 2. Countercultures are often perceived as a threat by the dominant culture because they challenge the culture's values; for this reason the dominant culture will move against a particular counterculture in order to affirm its own core values. For example, the Mormons in the 1800's challenged the dominant culture's core value of monogamy.

IV. Values in U.S. Society

- A. Identifying core values in U.S. society is difficult because it is a pluralistic society with many different religious, racial, ethnic, and special interest groups.
1. Sociologist Robin Williams identified twelve core values: achievement and success (especially, doing better than others); individualism (success due to individual effort); activity and work; efficiency and practicality; science and technology (using science to control nature); progress; material comfort; humanitarianism (helpfulness, personal kindness, philanthropy); freedom; democracy; equality (especially of opportunity); and racism and group superiority.
 2. Henslin updated Williams's list by adding education; religiosity (belief in a Supreme Being and following some set of matching precepts); and romantic love.
- B. Values are not independent units; value clusters are made up of related core values that come together to form a larger whole. In the value cluster surrounding success, for example, we find hard work, education, efficiency, material comfort, and individualism all bound together.

- C. Some values conflict with each other. There cannot be full expressions of democracy, equality, racism, and sexism at the same time. These are value contradictions and as society changes some values are challenged and undergo modification.
- D. A cluster that is emerging in response to fundamental changes in U.S. society is made up of the values of leisure, self-fulfillment, physical fitness, and youthfulness. Another emerging value is concern for the environment.
 - 1. Valuing leisure is reflected in the huge recreation industry that exists today.
 - 2. Self-fulfillment is expressed through the human potential movement and on the popularity of self-help books and talk shows.
 - 3. While physical fitness is not a new value, it is emphasized more today, as evidenced by the interest in health foods, weight and diet, and the growth in the number of health club/physical fitness centers.
 - 4. There is today a new sense of urgency in being young, perhaps because of the presence of aging baby boomers who are trying to deny their biological fate.
 - 5. Our history suggests a lack of concern for the environment; it was generally viewed as a challenge to be overcome. However, there is today a genuine concern for protecting the environment.
- E. Core values do not change without meeting strong resistance.
 - 1. Change is seen as a threat to the established way of life, something that will undermine people's present and their future.
 - 2. Today's clash in values is often so severe that the term "culture wars" has been coined to refer to it.
- F. Values and their supporting beliefs may blind people to other social circumstances. Success stories blind many people in the United States to the dire consequences of family poverty, lack of education, and dead-end jobs.
- G. Ideal culture refers to the ideal values and norms of a people. What people actually do usually falls short of this ideal, and sociologists refer to the norms and values that people actually follow as real culture.

V. Cultural Universals

- A. Although there are universal human activities, there is no universally accepted way of doing any of them.
 - 1. Anthropologist George Murdock concluded that all human groups have certain cultural universals: customs about courtship, cooking, marriage, funerals, games, laws, music, myths, incest taboos, and toilet training are present in all cultures.
 - 2. Even so, the specific customs differ from one group to another: by way of example, there is no universal form of the family, no universal way of disposing of the dead, and even the methods of toilet training differ from one culture to another. Even incest is defined differently from group to group.
- B. Sociobiologists argue that, as a result of natural selection, the basic cause of human behavior is biology.
 - 1. Just as physical characteristics and instinctual behavior of animals is the result of natural selection (i.e., those genetic traits that aid in survival tend to become common to a species while those that do not tend to disappear), so is human behavior.
 - 2. Edward Wilson has argued that religion, competition and cooperation, slavery and genocide, war and peace, envy and altruism can all be explained in terms of genetic programming.
 - 3. Most sociologists reject this claim. Unlike other species, humans are capable of reasoning and abstract thought; they can consider alternatives, reflect on outcomes, and make choices.

VI. Technology in the Global Village

- A. Central to a group's material culture is its technology. In its simplest sense, technology can be equated with tools. In its broadest sense, technology also includes the skills or procedures necessary to make and use those tools.
 - 1. The emerging technologies of an era that make a major impact on human life are referred to as new technologies. The printing press and the computer are both examples of new technologies.
 - 2. The sociological significance of technology is that it sets the framework for the nonmaterial culture, influencing the way people think and how they relate to one another.
- B. Not all parts of culture change at the same pace; cultural lag was William Ogburn's term for situations where the material culture changes first and the nonmaterial culture lags behind.
- C. Although for most of human history cultures had little contact with one another, there has always been some contact with other groups, resulting in groups learning from one another.
 - 1. This transmission of cultural characteristics is cultural diffusion; it is more likely to produce changes in material culture than the nonmaterial culture.
 - 2. Cultural diffusion occurs more rapidly today, given the technology.
 - 3. *Travel and communication unite the world to such an extent that there almost is no "other side of the world." For example, Japan, no longer a purely Eastern culture, has adapted Western economic production, forms of dress, music, and so on. This leads to cultural leveling where cultures become similar to one another.*

Key Terms

After studying the chapter, review the definition for each of the following terms.

counterculture: a group whose values, beliefs, and related behaviors place its members in opposition to the values of the broader culture (52)

cultural diffusion: the spread of cultural characteristics from one group to another (61)

cultural lag: William Ogburn's term for human behavior lagging behind technological innovations (61)

cultural leveling: the process by which cultures become similar to one another, and especially by which Western industrial culture is imported and diffused into industrializing nations (62)

cultural relativism: not judging a culture, but trying to understand it on its own terms (41)

cultural universal: a value, norm, or other cultural trait that is found in every group (56)

culture: the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, and even material objects that are passed from one generation to the next (38)

culture shock: the disorientation that people experience when they come in contact with a fundamentally different culture and can no longer depend on their taken-for-granted assumptions about life (39)

ethnocentrism: the use of one's own culture as a yardstick for judging the ways of other individuals or societies, generally leading to a negative evaluation of their values, norms, and behaviors (39)

folkways: norms that are not strictly enforced (50)

gestures: the ways in which people use their bodies to communicate with one another (44)

ideal culture: the ideal values and norms of a people, the goals held out for them (58)

language: a system of symbols that can be combined in an infinite number of ways and can represent not only objects but also abstract thought (45)

material culture: the material objects that distinguish a group of people, such as their art, buildings, weapons, utensils, machines, hairstyles, clothing, and jewelry (38)

mores: norms that are strictly enforced because they are thought essential to core values (50)

negative sanction: an expression of disapproval for breaking a norm, ranging from a mild, informal reaction such as a frown to a formal prison sentence or an execution (48)

new technology: the emerging technologies of an era that have a significant impact on social life (60)

nonmaterial culture: a group's ways of thinking (including its beliefs, values, and other assumptions about the world) and doing (its common patterns of behavior, including language and other forms of interaction) (38)

norms: the expectations, or rules of behavior, that reflect and enforce values (48)

pluralistic society: a society made up of many different groups (52)
positive sanction: a reward given for following norms, ranging from a smile to a prize (48)
real culture: the norms and values that people actually follow (59)
sanctions: expressions of approval or disapproval given to people for upholding or violating norms (48)
Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf's hypothesis that language creates ways of thinking and perceiving (48)
sociobiology: a framework of thought that views human behavior as the result of natural selection and considers biological characteristics to be the fundamental cause of human behavior (59)
subculture: the values and related behaviors of a group that distinguish its members from the larger culture; a world within a world (51)
symbol: something to which people attach meaning and then use to communicate with others (44)
symbolic culture: another term for nonmaterial culture (44)
taboo: a norm so strong that it brings revulsion if it is violated (50)
technology: in its narrow sense, tools; its broader sense includes the skills or procedures necessary to make and use those tools (60)
value clusters: a series of interrelated values that together form a larger whole (56)
value contradictions: values that conflict with one another; to follow the one means to come into conflict with the other (56)
values: the standards by which people define what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad, beautiful or ugly (48)

Key People

Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.

Peter Conrad: He notes that not all homosexuals have the Xq28, "gay gene", and some people who have this gene are not homosexual. This gene does not determine behavior and social causes should be examined. (60)

Charles Darwin: Darwin studied the principles on which natural selection occurred. (59)

Robert Edgerton: Edgerton attacks the concept of cultural relativism, suggesting that because some cultures endanger their people's health, happiness, or survival, there should be a scale to evaluate cultures on their "quality of life." (42)

Douglas Massey: This sociologist has studied the impact that immigration is having on Miami, predicting that the city will become the first "truly bilingual" city. (47)

George Murdock: Murdock was an anthropologist who sought to determine which cultural values, norms, or traits, if any, were found universally across the globe. (59)

William Ogburn: Ogburn coined the term "cultural lag." (61)

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf: These two anthropologists argued that language not only reflects thoughts and perceptions but that it actually shapes the way people think and perceive the world. (48)

JoEllen Shively: This sociologist's research demonstrated that Native Americans' identification with cowboys in Westerns was based on the symbolism of the West as a free, natural way of life. She discovered that they think of themselves as the real cowboys. (56)

William Sumner: Sumner developed the concept of ethnocentrism. (39)

Robin Williams: He identified twelve core U.S. values. (53)

Edward Wilson: Wilson is an insect specialist who claims that human behavior is also the result of natural selection. (59)

Eviatar Zerubavel: This sociologist offers an example of how language shapes our perceptions of the world (the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*). He notes that in his native Hebrew, there is no distinction made between the two forms of fruit spread—jams and jellies. It was only when he learned English that he was able to "see" the differences that were so obvious to English speakers. (48)