Chapter Two: Culture

Learning Objectives

- Define culture and determine how it provides our basic orientations to life.
- Analyze how ethnocentrism is different from cultural relativism.
- Explore the impact that different components of symbolic culture have on us.
- Compare and contrast values, norms, and sanctions. Understand how they are related to moral holidays.
- Discuss the differences between folkways, mores, and taboos.
- Understand how subcultures and countercultures are different from one another.
- Identify the core values of the U.S. and its emerging value cluster.
- Differentiate between ideal and real culture.
- Show how technology has led to change in cultures.

What’s New in Henslin’s 10th Edition?

- Down-to-Earth Sociology box: 2-D: A New Subculture and a Different Kind of Love (p. 53)

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, behaviors and even 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 the tools and 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 that 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 symbols are the central component of nonmaterial culture. 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 that range from approving looks and gestures to material compensation) and negative sanctions (punishment that ranges 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). An emerging value cluster in the United States is a set of four interrelated core values: leisure, self-fulfillment, physical fitness, and youthfulness; a fifth core value is the concern for the environment.
Social change often occurs when a society is forced to face, and work through, its value contradictions. The term “culture wars” refers to the clash in values between traditionalists and those advocating change. A distinction is made between the “ideal” culture (the values, norms, and goals that a group considers ideal and worth aiming for) and the “real” culture (the norms and values people actually follow).

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 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 cultural 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—things such as jewelry, art, buildings, weapons, machines, clothing, hairstyles, etc.
      2. Nonmaterial culture—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. Coming into contact with a radically different culture produces “culture shock,” challenging our basic assumptions.
      3. 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.
      4. Culture provides implicit instructions that tell us what we ought to do and a moral imperative that defines what we think is right and wrong.
   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.
   3. It allows for a social or shared future. Language allows us to plan future activities with one another.
   4. It allows for the exchange of perspectives (i.e., ideas about events and experiences).
   5. It allows people to engage in complex, shared, goal-directed behavior. It allows us to have common understandings that enable us to establish a purpose for getting together with each other.
D. In the 1930s two anthropologists, Sapir and Whorf, were intrigued by Hopi Indians, who had no words in their language to distinguish between past, present, and future.
   1. 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.
   2. Rather than objects and events forcing themselves onto our consciousness, our very language determines our consciousness.
E. 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 the hometown of the team that wins the Super Bowl. For one night, the city becomes a location for a moral holiday.

F. 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

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 1800s 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 ten core values: achievement and success (especially doing better than others), individualism (success due to individual effort), hard work, efficiency and practicality, science and technology (using science to control nature), material comfort, freedom, democracy, equality (especially of opportunity), 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, offering leisure activities such as computer games, boats, vacation homes, and spa retreats.
2. Self-fulfillment is expressed through the human potential movement and by 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. Today, there is 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, today there is 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, norms, and goals of 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. 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 have 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 is almost no “other side of the world” anymore. 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.

core values: the values that are central to a group, those around which it builds a common identity (p. 53)

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

cultural diffusion: the spread of cultural characteristics from one group to another (p. 60)

cultural lag: William Ogburn’s term for one part of a culture changing, and other parts lagging behind (p. 60)

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 (p. 61)

cultural relativism: not judging a culture, but trying to understand it on its own terms (p. 42)
culture: the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, and even material objects that are passed from one generation to the next (p. 40)
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 (p. 41)
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 (p. 41)
folkways: norms that are not strictly enforced (p. 51)
gestures: the ways in which people use their bodies to communicate with one another (p. 43)
ideal culture: the ideal values and norms of a people, the goals held out for them (p. 58)
language: a system of symbols that can represent not only objects, but can be combined in an infinite number of ways for the purpose of communicating abstract thought (p. 45)
material culture: the material objects that distinguish a group of people, such as their art, buildings, weapons, utensils, machines, hairstyles, clothing, and jewelry (p. 40)
mores: norms that are strictly enforced because they are thought essential to core values (p. 51)
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 (p. 49)
new technology: the emerging technologies of an era that have a significant impact on social life (p. 59)
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, gestures and other forms of interaction) (p. 40)
norms: the expectations, or rules of behavior, that reflect and enforce behavior (p. 49)
pluralistic society: a society made up of many different groups (p. 53)
positive sanction: a reward given for following norms, ranging from a smile to a prize (p. 49)
real culture: the norms and values that people actually follow (p. 59)
sanctions: expressions of approval or disapproval given to people for upholding or violating norms (p. 49)
Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf’s hypothesis that language creates ways of thinking and perceiving (p. 49)
subculture: the values and related behaviors of a group that distinguish its members from the larger culture; a world within a world (p. 52)
symbol: something to which people attach meaning and then use to communicate with others (p. 43)
symbolic culture: another term for nonmaterial culture (p. 43)
taboo: a norm so strong that it brings revulsion if it is violated (p. 51)
technology: in its narrow sense, tools; its broader sense includes the skills or procedures necessary to make and use those tools (p. 59)

value cluster: a series of interrelated values that together form a larger whole (p. 56)

value contradictions: values that contradict with one another; to follow the one means to come into conflict with the other (p. 57)

values: the standards by which people define what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad, beautiful or ugly (p. 49)

**KEY PEOPLE**

Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.

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.” (p. 43)

William Ogburn: Ogburn coined the term “cultural lag.” (p. 60)

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. (p. 49)

William Sumner: Sumner developed the concept of ethnocentrism. (p. 41)

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

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. (p. 49)

**Discussion Topics to Encourage Student Participation**

- Ask your students to provide specific examples of how the material culture in China, Iran, and Ethiopia may differ from the material culture in the United States. Where do they obtain the information they have about the material culture in China, Iran, and Ethiopia? Then ask them how much confidence they have in their sources of information, and why. In considering this last point, have your students think about and discuss the ways a “source” country’s own material and nonmaterial culture might consciously and/or unconsciously distort the information it provides about another country’s culture.

- Ask your students to discuss how material and nonmaterial culture may vary in different regions of the United States. For example, how might the material and nonmaterial culture in the Northeast differ from the material and nonmaterial culture in the South? Along these lines, ask your students to discuss how the material and nonmaterial culture in American
cities may differ from the material and nonmaterial culture in American suburbs and rural areas.

- Ask students who moved from another part of the state or country in order to attend college to list some of the specific cultural differences between school and home that they have encountered. Then have them discuss which aspects they most like and dislike about the cultural differences between their old and new hometowns.

- Considering the concept of cultural shock, ask your students to share an instance(s) when their cultural assumptions were challenged by an encounter with a significantly different culture. In which ways did the cultural shock force them to reevaluate or change their own ways of thinking? Did the effects of the cultural shock lead to any long-lasting and/or profound changes in their own cultural attitudes and, if so, do they now view those changes as a positive or negative experience?

- Have students list the norms, folkways, and mores from American society. Then discuss the importance of these in American culture. Do any of them seem silly, irrelevant, etc.? If their parents/grandparents were to make this list would it look the same/different? What do these differences imply about the social changes that have taken place in our society? Has cultural leveling influenced any of these changes?

**Classroom Activities and Student Projects**

- Ask your students to log on to the Internet and connect to three major newspapers available online from countries other than the United States. Have them spend at least fifteen minutes per paper examining as many features, stories, and advertisements as they can. From their examination, ask them if they can deduce any core values of the countries that publish the newspapers. Furthermore, ask them to consider how those core values may or may not differ from some of the “American” core values identified by Robin Williams and James Henslin. Then have your students report their findings to the class while discussing to what extent newspapers, as examples of material culture, may or may not be indicative of their producing society’s nonmaterial culture.

- Examining the concept of ethnocentrism, ask your students to list some of the groups to which they currently belong. Then have them identify the ethnocentric tendencies of these groups, and discuss in what ways these ethnocentric tendencies may be functional and/or dysfunctional to the group as a whole and its members in particular.

- Ask your students to identify three specific instances when the United States and/or its people practiced ethnocentrism. In which ways were these instances positive or negative? Then have your students consider whether Americans, in general, are more ethnocentric or less ethnocentric than people of other nationalities. If so, how so, and in which ways is this a good thing or a bad thing?

- Ask students to come up with multiple examples of situations in which ethnocentrism often
occurs. In groups, have students develop skits to enact in front of the class that role-play ethnocentrism in such situations.

- Send students on a scavenger hunt throughout campus to search for elements of culture. When they return, have them connect what they found with the material from the chapter. They can then synthesize this information into a general statement about the culture of their campus. Have students share and compare their discoveries.

Service Learning Projects and Field Trips

- If your college or university has an international relations office, ask the director of the office to make a presentation to your classes to discuss the adjustment foreign students must make to American culture when they arrive in this country. Include the most difficult adjustments as well as the ones that appear to be most easily mastered.

- Require students to attend a cultural activity of a different ethnic or racial group apart from their own and write a short paper on their impression of the experience.

- Suggest that students take a trip to the inner city and record all the observations of material and nonmaterial culture they can observe. For safety reasons, suggest they make the trip with at least one other student and do so during the daylight hours.

- Have students participate in, or lead, a multicultural event. They could prepare different foods, generate lists of diverse music, provide examples of artwork from many cultures, etc.

Suggested Films


This program examines issues in cross-cultural communication. It discusses public behavior and taboos, power, stereotyping and prejudice, miscommunication, time conceptualization, socialization, direct and indirect communication, and high context versus low context cultures. The program features vignettes and offers practical applications for cross-cultural communication.

*Culture.* Allyn and Bacon Interactive Video for Introductory Sociology. Allyn and Bacon. 1998, 3 minutes (Video).

This short segment introduces the student to culture. It is a useful aide to begin the lecture on culture.

*The Blending of Culture: Latino Influence on America.* Films for the Humanities & Sciences. 2002, 30 minutes (Video).
This program looks at the “Three Houses of Latino culture”—Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Mexican-American—and their widespread influence from entertainment to politics and to economics.

_The Merchants of Cool._ Frontline and 10/20 Productions. 2003, 60 minutes (Video).
This film journeys into the world of the marketers of popular culture to teenagers.