

# Culture

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## **Culture in the Future**



When I first encountered the reality of being different, I felt like a banana in Norway. . . . I got quite a rude welcome when I [an executive] was assigned to a factory in Michigan. If I were in a court of law, I'm not sure I could prove it was because I am Latino, but being a foreigner, speaking with an accent, being different, with a Ph.D., I was a very atypical guy, and I was welcomed to that place like somebody welcomes cancer of the pancreas. . . .

I had been in the United States for probably ten years. I had never heard anybody call me a name that was derogatory in an ethnic sense. This was my first real-life situation. I was differ-

ent. I was maybe even perceived as a threat. I heard all kinds of ethnic innuendos. It was a way of life there.

“What the hell are you doing here taking jobs from somebody else? Why don't you go back to your . . . country where they need you?” Those were some of the remarks I heard. And it was one hell of an experience. Because then it really motivated me to excel, because I knew that the rules would not be the same for me. So, I worked twice as hard and was, in retrospect, very successful. (qtd. in Failde and Doyle, 1996: 106–107)

—a forty-seven-year-old executive vice president of a Fortune 500 company

Is intolerance toward “outsiders”—people who are viewed as being different from one's own group or way of life—accepted by some people as a way of life in the United States? Is there a relationship between dominant cultural beliefs and values in this country and verbal or physical attacks on people because of their race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, or religion? Intolerance and racial/ethnic hatred, like compassion and love, may be embedded in the cultural fabric of a society. **Culture is the knowledge, language, values, customs, and material objects that are passed from person to person and from one generation to the next in a human group or society.** As previously defined, a *society* is a large social grouping that occupies the same geographic territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations. Whereas a society is composed of people, a culture is composed of ideas, behavior, and material possessions. Society and culture are interdependent; neither could exist without the other.

Culture can be an enormously stabilizing force for a society, and it can provide a sense of continuity. However, culture can also be a force that generates discord, conflict, and even violence. How people view culture is intricately related to their location in society with regard to their race/ethnicity, class, sex, and age. From one perspective, U.S. culture does not condone intolerance or *hate crimes*—attacks against people because of their race, religion, color, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, or ancestry (Levin and McDevitt, 1993). Most states have laws against such

behavior; persons apprehended and convicted of hate crimes may be punished. From another perspective, however, intolerance and hatred may be the downside of some “positive” cultural values—such as individualism, competition, and consumerism—found in U.S. society. Just as attitudes of love and tolerance may be embedded in societal values and teachings, beliefs that reinforce acts of intolerance and hatred may also be embedded in culture.

In this chapter, we examine society and culture, with special attention to the components of culture and the relationship between cultural change and diversity. We also analyze culture from functionalist, conflict, interactionist, and postmodern perspectives. Before reading on, test your knowledge of the relationship between culture and intolerance toward others by answering the questions in Box 3.1.

## Questions and Issues

**Chapter Focus Question: What part does culture play in intolerance toward others and hate crimes?**

What part does culture play in shaping people?

What are the essential components of culture?

To what degree are we shaped by popular culture?

How do subcultures and countercultures reflect diversity within a society?

How do the various sociological perspectives view culture?



### Box 3.1 Sociology in Everyday Life

#### *How Much Do You Know About Culture and Intolerance Toward Others?*

##### TRUE FALSE

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| T | F | 1. Core values in the United States are opposed to racism and a belief in the superiority of one's own group.  |
| T | F | 2. As a form of popular culture, some rap music has anti-violence and antidrug themes.   |
| T | F | 3. Some individuals view the Confederate flag as a racist symbol associated with slavery.  |
| T | F | 4. Individuals can do very little to reduce or eliminate intolerance in society.   |
| T | F | 5. As the rate of immigration into the United States has increased rapidly in recent years, anti-immigrant feelings have also risen.   |
| T | F | 6. The U.S. Constitution designates English as the official language of this country.  |
| T | F | 7. Individuals have been physically attacked for speaking Spanish or languages other than English in public places in the United States.   |
| T | F | 8. As the United States is increasing in diversity, most dominant-group members (middle- and high-income white Anglo-Saxon Protestants) are becoming more tolerant of social and cultural diversity. |

*Answers on page 68.*

## Culture and Society

Understanding how culture affects our lives helps us develop a sociological imagination. When we meet someone from a culture vastly different from our own, or when we travel in another country, it may be easier to perceive the enormous influence of culture in people's lives. However, as our society has become more diverse, and communication among members of international cultures more frequent, the need to appreciate diversity and to understand how people in other cultures view their world has also increased (Samovar and Porter, 1991b). Many international travelers and businesspeople, for example, have learned the importance of knowing what gestures mean in various nations (see Figure 3.1). Although the “hook ’em Horns” sign—two outside fingers with the pinky and index finger raised up and the middle two fingers folded down—is used by fans to express their support for University of Texas at Austin sports teams, for millions of Italians the same gesture means “your spouse is being unfaithful.” In Argentina, rotating one's index finger around the front of the ear means “you have a telephone call,” but in the United States it usually suggests that a person is “crazy” (Axtell, 1991). Similarly, making

a circle with the thumb and index finger indicates “OK” in the United States, but in Tunisia it means “I’ll kill you!” (Samovar and Porter, 1991a).

### *The Importance of Culture in a Changing World*

How important is culture in determining how people think and act on a daily basis? Simply stated, culture is essential for our individual survival and our communication with other people. We rely on culture because we are not born with the information we need to survive. We do not know how to take care of ourselves, how to behave, how to dress, what to eat, which gods to worship, or how to make or spend money. We must learn about culture through interaction, observation, and imitation in order to participate as members of the group (Samovar and Porter, 1991a). Sharing a common culture with others simplifies day-to-day interactions. However, we must also understand other cultures and the world views therein.

Just as culture is essential for individuals, it is also fundamental for the survival of societies. Culture has been described as “the common denominator that makes the actions of individuals intelligible



## Box 3.1

*Answers to the Sociology Quiz on Culture and Intolerance Toward Others*

1. **False.** Among the core American values identified by sociologists is the belief that one's own racial or ethnic group should be valued above all others. Inherent in this belief may be the assumption of racism—that members of racial-ethnic categories other than one's own are somehow inferior.
2. **True.** Although some people associate all rap music with “gangsta rap,” which glorifies violence, drug use, and hostility toward women, other forms of rap music discourage such behavior and draw attention to the severe economic barriers that increasingly divide poor African Americans in central cities from middle- and upper-middle-class African Americans.
3. **True.** The Confederate flag has become an emotional symbol that continues to divide whites and African Americans in the South.
4. **False.** Sociologists agree that hatred and violence are “learned” attitudes and behaviors, not a genetic by-product. Factors such as the availability of guns, economic inequality, and a violence-saturated culture are not rooted in human biology.
5. **True.** Polls show that high rates of immigration are related to an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment.
6. **False.** Although the desire to protect the supremacy of the English language in the United States dates back to colonial times, the framers of the Constitution chose in 1780 *not* to establish a national language. They thought that a national language was inconsistent with the cultural composition of the new nation.
7. **True.** Individuals speaking languages other than English have been the victims of verbal and physical abuse by individual bigots and members of hate groups, who view such persons as “outsiders who should go back home.”
8. **False.** Recent polls have shown that as the United States has increased in diversity, most dominant group members are *not* becoming more tolerant. Three examples demonstrate this point: recent demands in this country that immigration laws be more strictly enforced, renewed interest in establishing English as the “official” language of the United States, and pressure to eliminate affirmative action programs that might otherwise benefit minority-group members.

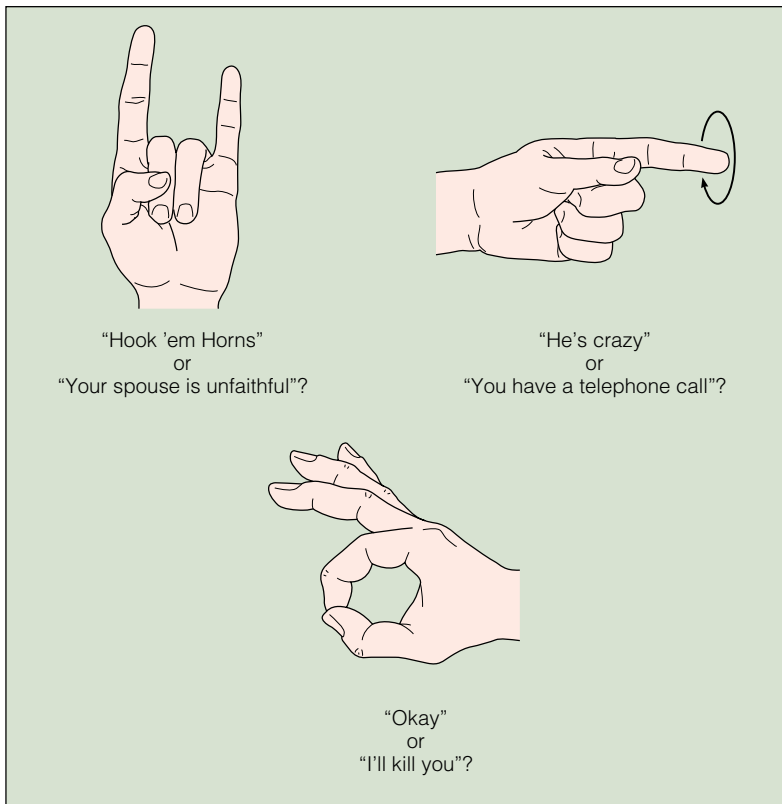
Sources: Based on *Harvard Law Review*, 1987; Herek and Berrill, 1992; Dyson, 1993; and Levin and McDevitt, 1993.

to the group” (Haviland, 1993: 30). Some system of rule making and enforcing necessarily exists in all societies. What would happen, for example, if *all* rules and laws in the United States suddenly disappeared? At a basic level, we need rules in order to navigate our bicycles and cars through traffic. At a more abstract level, we need laws to establish and protect our rights.

In order to survive, societies need rules about civility and tolerance toward others. We are not born knowing how to express kindness or hatred toward others, although some people may say “Well, that’s just human nature” when explaining

someone’s behavior. Such a statement is built on the assumption that what we do as human beings is determined by *nature* (our biological and genetic makeup) rather than *nurture* (our social environment)—in other words, that our behavior is instinctive. An *instinct* is an unlearned, biologically determined behavior pattern common to all members of a species that predictably occurs whenever certain environmental conditions exist. For example, spiders do not learn to build webs. They build webs because of instincts that are triggered by basic biological needs such as protection and reproduction.

**Figure 3.1 Hand Gestures with Different Meanings in Other Societies**



As international travelers and businesspeople have learned, hand gestures may have very different meanings in different cultures.

Humans do not have instincts. What we most often think of as instinctive behavior can actually be attributed to reflexes and drives. A *reflex* is an unlearned, biologically determined involuntary response to some physical stimuli (such as a sneeze after breathing some pepper in through the nose or the blinking of an eye when a speck of dust gets in it). *Drives* are unlearned, biologically determined impulses common to all members of a species that satisfy needs such as sleep, food, water, or sexual gratification. Reflexes and drives do not determine how people will behave in human societies; even the expression of these biological characteristics is channeled by culture. For example, we may be taught that the “appropriate” way to sneeze (an involuntary response) is to use a tissue or turn our head away from others (a learned response). Similarly, we may learn to sleep on mats or in beds. Most contemporary sociologists agree that culture and social learning, not nature, account for virtually all of our behavior patterns.

Since humans cannot rely on instincts in order to survive, culture is a “tool kit” for survival. According to the sociologist Ann Swidler (1986: 273),

culture is a “tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and world views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.” The tools we choose will vary according to our own personality and the situations we face. We are not puppets on a string; we make choices from among the items in our own “tool box.”

### **Material Culture and Nonmaterial Culture**

Our cultural tool box is divided into two major parts: material culture and nonmaterial culture (Ogburn, 1966/1922). **Material culture consists of the physical or tangible creations that members of a society make, use, and share.** Initially, items of material culture begin as raw materials or resources such as ore, trees, and oil. Through technology, these raw materials are transformed into usable items (ranging from books and computers to guns and tanks). Sociologists define *technology* as the knowledge, techniques, and tools that make it possible for people to transform resources into usable



The customs and rituals associated with weddings are one example of nonmaterial culture. What can you infer about beliefs and attitudes concerning marriage in the societies represented by these photographs?

forms, and the knowledge and skills required to use them after they are developed. From this standpoint, technology is both concrete and abstract. For example, technology includes a pair of scissors and the knowledge and skill necessary to make them from iron, carbon, and chromium (Westrum, 1991). At the most basic level, material culture is important because it is our buffer against the environment. For example, we create shelter to protect ourselves from the weather and to provide ourselves with privacy. Beyond the survival level, we make, use, and share objects that are interesting and important to us. Why are you wearing the particular clothes you have on today? Perhaps you're communicating something about yourself, such as where you attend school, what kind of music you like, or where you went on vacation.

**Nonmaterial culture** consists of the abstract or intangible human creations of society that influence people's behavior. Language, beliefs, values, rules of behavior, family patterns, and political systems are examples of nonmaterial culture. A central component of nonmaterial culture is *be-*

*liefs*—the mental acceptance or conviction that certain things are true or real. Beliefs may be based on tradition, faith, experience, scientific research, or some combination of these. Faith in a supreme being and trust in another person are examples of beliefs. We may also have a belief in items of material culture. When we travel by airplane, for instance, we believe that it is possible to fly at 33,000 feet and to arrive at our destination even though we know that we could not do this without the airplane itself.

### **Cultural Universals**

Because all humans face the same basic needs (such as for food, clothing, and shelter), we engage in similar activities that contribute to our survival. Anthropologist George Murdock (1945: 124) compiled a list of over seventy **cultural universals**—**customs and practices that occur across all societies**. His categories included appearance (such as bodily adornment and hairstyles), activities (such as sports,



Shelter is a universal type of material culture, but it comes in a wide variety of shapes and forms. What might some of the reasons be for the similarities and differences you see in these cross-cultural examples?



dancing, games, joking, and visiting), social institutions (such as family, law, and religion), and customary practices (such as cooking, folklore, gift giving, and hospitality). While these general customs and practices may be present in all cultures, their specific forms vary from one group to another and from one time to another within the same group. For example, although telling jokes may be a universal practice, what is considered to be a joke in one society may be an insult in another.

How do sociologists view cultural universals? In terms of their functions, cultural universals are useful because they ensure the smooth and continual operation of society (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). A society must meet basic human needs by providing food, shelter, and some degree of safety for its members so that they will survive. Children

and other new members (such as immigrants) must be taught the ways of the group. A society must also settle disputes and deal with people's emotions. All the while, the self-interest of individuals must be balanced with the needs of society as a whole. Cultural universals help fulfill these important functions of society.

From another perspective, however, cultural universals are not the result of functional necessity; these practices may have been *imposed* by members of one society on members of another. Similar customs and practices do not necessarily constitute cultural universals. They may be an indication that a conquering nation used its power to enforce certain types of behavior on those who were defeated (Sargent, 1987). Sociologists might ask questions such as "Who determines the dominant cultural

patterns?” For example, although religion is a cultural universal, traditional religious practices of indigenous peoples (those who first live in an area) have often been repressed and even stamped out by subsequent settlers or conquerors who hold political and economic power over them. However, many people believe there is cause for optimism in the United States because the democratic ideas of this nation provide more guarantees of religious freedom here than in some other nations. For example, Josif Shrayman, aged sixty-two, who recently became a U.S. citizen, believes that he has found freedom here that he never previously had as a Jew in Ukraine: “For Jews it’s very good here. God has helped me. America is a free country. I celebrate the Jewish holidays. I go to synagogue every day. I eat kosher” (qtd. in Dugger, 1997: 27).

## Components of Culture

Even though the specifics of individual cultures vary widely, all cultures have four common non-material cultural components: symbols, language, values, and norms. These components contribute to both harmony and strife in a society.

### Symbols

A *symbol* is anything that meaningfully represents something else. Culture could not exist without symbols because there would be no shared meanings among people. Symbols can simultaneously produce loyalty and animosity, and love and hate. They help us communicate ideas such as love or patriotism because they express abstract concepts with visible objects.

For example, flags can stand for patriotism, nationalism, school spirit, or religious beliefs held by members of a group or society. They also can be a source of discord and strife among people, as evidenced by recent controversies over the Confederate flag, the banner of the southern states during the Civil War. To some people, this flag symbolizes the “Old South” or “American history.” To others, such as members of the Ku Klux Klan, it symbolizes “white supremacy.” To still others, it symbolizes slavery. In 1993, when the United Daughters of the Confederacy asked Congress to renew the design patent on their logo (which is a laurel wreath encircling the Confederate flag), they asserted that the flag was part of their cultural heritage, not a racist symbol. Former U.S. Senator Carol Moseley-Braun, an African American, delivered the following argument against renewing the patent:



At the beginning of the twenty-first century, controversy continues over the use of certain symbols. The Confederate flag flying over the state capitol in Columbia, South Carolina, has been a topic of controversy for many years. How would sociologists explain the divergent meanings of such a symbol?

On this issue there can be no consensus. It is an outrage. It is an insult.

It is absolutely unacceptable to me and to millions of Americans, black or white, that we would put the imprimatur of the United States Senate on a symbol of this kind of idea. . . .

This is no small matter. This is not a matter of little old ladies walking around doing good deeds. There is no reason why these little old ladies cannot do good deeds anyway. If they choose to wave the Confederate flag, that certainly is their right. . . .

[But] a flag that symbolized slavery should not be underwritten, underscored, adopted, approved by the United States Senate. (qtd. in Clymer, 1993: A10)

Other conflicts over use of the Confederate flag have occurred in Columbia, South Carolina, where it has flown atop the state capitol for the past four decades (Tanner, 1994), and at the University of Mississippi, where one supporter described the symbolic nature of the flag as follows:

. . . let us freely admit that all symbols can be (and usually are) many things to many people. To adopt



the notion that any and all displays of the Confederate flag are symbols of racism and slavery is not only ridiculous, it also displays an abysmal ignorance of U.S. history and a lack of understanding of human behavior. . . .

What then is the Confederate flag? It is many things to many people. It has been used (and shall continue to be used) by those who espouse evil endeavors. It has been used by racists, South and North, but it is also recognized by thousands of others as a symbol of the American South, a short-lived government, an era now “Gone With the Wind,” and a cause for which thousands of their ancestors died. With our 20th-century eye-glasses, we may look back upon this time, with its scourge of human slavery, rhetoric about state sovereignty, federalism, etc., and easily judge a few of the issues. But we dishonor the memories and sacrifices (on both sides) of this time if we allow simplistic flapdoodle to obscure the real issues of that great conflict that divided but also forged us together as a great nation. (Ezell, 1993: B2)

To both of these people, the Confederate flag is a meaningful symbol for some value, belief, or institution. Symbols can stand for love (a heart on a valentine), peace (a dove), or hate (a Nazi swastika), just as words can be used to convey these meanings.

Symbols can also transmit other types of ideas. A siren is a symbol that denotes an emergency situation and sends the message to clear the way immediately. Gestures are also a symbolic form of communication—a movement of the head, body, or hands can express our ideas or feelings to others. For example, in the United States, pointing toward your chest with your thumb or finger is a symbol for “me.”

Symbols affect our thoughts about gender. The color of clothing, for example, has different symbolic meaning for females and males. In a study of baby clothing, the sociologist Madeline Shakin and her associates (1985) found that 90 percent of the infants they observed were dressed in colors indicating their sex. Most boys were dressed in blue or red while most girls were dressed in pink or yellow. The color of the clothing sends implicit messages about how the child should be treated. If a female infant is wearing a pink dress, the message is “I’m a girl. Say that I’m pretty, not that I’m handsome.” Such messages about gender have long-term effects on individual and societal perceptions about how women and men should think and act.

Symbols may also affect our beliefs about race and ethnicity. Although black and white are not truly colors at all, the symbolic meanings associated with these labels permeate society and affect everyone. English-language scholar Alison Lurie (1981: 184) suggests that it is incorrect to speak of

“whites” and “blacks.” She notes that “pinkish-tan persons . . . have designated themselves the ‘White race’ while affixing the term ‘Black’ [to people] whose skin is some shade of brown or gold.” The result of this “semantic sleight of hand” has been the association of pinkish-tan skin with virtue and cleanliness, and “brown or golden skin with evil, dirt and danger” (Lurie, 1981: 184).

## Language

**Language is a set of symbols that expresses ideas and enables people to think and communicate with one another.** Verbal (spoken) language and nonverbal (written or gestured) language help us describe reality. One of our most important human attributes is the ability to use language to share our experiences, feelings, and knowledge with others. Language can create visual images in our head, such as “the kittens look like little cotton balls” (Samovar and Porter, 1991a). Language also allows people to distinguish themselves from outsiders and maintain group boundaries and solidarity (Farb, 1973).

Language is not solely a human characteristic. Other animals use sounds, gestures, touch, and smell to communicate with one another, but they use signals with fixed meanings that are limited to the immediate situation (the present) and cannot encompass past or future situations. For example, chimpanzees can use elements of Standard American Sign Language and manipulate physical objects to make “sentences,” but they are not physically endowed with the vocal apparatus needed to form the consonants required for verbal language. As a result, nonhuman animals cannot transmit the more complex aspects of culture to their offspring. Humans have a unique ability to manipulate symbols to express abstract concepts and rules and thus to create and transmit culture from one generation to the next.

**LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL REALITY** Does language *create* or simply *communicate* reality? Anthropological linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf have suggested that language not only expresses our thoughts and perceptions but also influences our perception of reality. According to the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*, **language shapes the view of reality of its speakers** (Whorf, 1956; Sapir, 1961). If people are able to think only through language, then language must precede thought.

If language actually shapes the reality we perceive and experience, then some aspects of the world are viewed as important and others are virtually neglected because people know the world only in terms of the vocabulary and grammar of



Does the language people use influence their perception of reality? According to social scientists, the words we use strongly influence our relationships with other people. What kind of interaction is taking place in this photo?

their own language. For example, the Eskimo language has over twenty words associated with snow, making it possible for people to make subtle distinctions regarding different types of snowfalls. In the United States, people perceive time as something that can be kept, saved, lost, or wasted; therefore, “being on time” or “not wasting time” is important. Many English words divide time into units (years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds, and milliseconds) and into the past, present, and future (yesterday, today, and tomorrow) (Samovar and Porter, 1991a). By contrast, according to Sapir and Whorf, the Hopi language does not contain past, present, and future tenses of verbs or nouns for times, days, or years (Carroll, 1956); however, scholars have recently argued that this assertion is incorrect (see Edgerton, 1992).

If language does create reality, are we trapped by our language? Many social scientists agree that the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis overstates the relationship between language and our thoughts and behavior patterns. Although they acknowledge that language has many subtle meanings and that words used by people reflect their central concerns, most sociologists contend that language may *influence* our behavior and interpretation of social reality but does not *determine* it.

**LANGUAGE AND GENDER** What is the relationship between language and gender? What cultural assumptions about women and men does language reflect? Scholars have suggested several ways in which language and gender are intertwined:

- The English language ignores women by using the masculine form to refer to human beings in general (Basow, 1992). For example, the word *man* is used generically in words like

*chairman* and *mankind*, which allegedly include both men and women. However, *man* can mean either “all human beings” or “a male human being” (Miller and Swift, 1991: 71).

- Use of the pronouns *he* and *she* affects our thinking about gender. Pronouns show the gender of the person we *expect* to be in a particular occupation. For instance, nurses, secretaries, and schoolteachers are usually referred to as *she*, but doctors, engineers, electricians, and presidents are referred to as *he* (Baron, 1986).
- Words have positive connotations when relating to male power, prestige, and leadership; when related to women, they carry negative overtones of weakness, inferiority, and immaturity (Epstein, 1988: 224). Table 3.1 shows how gender-based language reflects the traditional acceptance of men and women in certain positions, implying that the jobs are different when filled by women rather than men.
- A language-based predisposition to think about women in sexual terms reinforces the notion that women are sexual objects. Women are often described by terms such as *fox*, *broad*, *bitch*, *babe*, and *doll*, which ascribe childlike or even petlike characteristics to them. By contrast, men have performance pressures placed on them by being defined in terms of their sexual prowess, such as *dude*, *stud*, and *hunk* (Baker, 1993).

Gender in language has been debated and studied extensively in recent years, and some changes have occurred. The preference of many women to be called *Ms.* (rather than *Miss* or *Mrs.* in reference to their marital status) has received a degree of acceptance in public life and the media (Maggio, 1988). Many organizations and publica-

**Table 3.1 Language and Gender**

| MALE TERM               | FEMALE TERM            | NEUTRAL TERM        |
|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| teacher                 | teacher                | teacher             |
| chairman                | chairwoman             | chair, chairperson  |
| Congressman             | Congresswoman          | Representative      |
| policeman               | policewoman            | police officer      |
| fireman                 | lady fireman           | firefighter         |
| airline steward         | airline stewardess     | flight attendant    |
| race car driver         | woman race car driver  | race car driver     |
| wrestler                | lady/woman wrestler    | wrestler            |
| professor               | female/woman professor | professor           |
| doctor                  | lady/woman doctor      | doctor              |
| bachelor                | spinster/old maid      | single person       |
| male prostitute         | prostitute             | prostitute          |
| male nurse              | nurse                  | nurse               |
| welfare recipient       | welfare mother         | welfare recipient   |
| worker/employee         | working mother         | worker/employee     |
| janitor/maintenance man | maid/cleaning lady     | custodial attendant |

Sources: Adapted from Korsmeyer, 1981: 122, and Miller and Swift, 1991.

tions have established guidelines for the use of nonsexist language and have changed titles such as *chairman* to *chair* or *chairperson*. “Men Working” signs in many areas have been replaced with “People Working” (Epstein, 1988). Some occupations have been given “genderless” titles, such as *firefighter* or *flight attendant* (Maggio, 1988). Yet many people resist change, arguing that the English language is being ruined (Epstein, 1988). To develop a more inclusive and equitable society, many scholars suggest that a more inclusive language is needed (see Basow, 1992).

**LANGUAGE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY** Language may create and reinforce our perceptions about race and ethnicity by transmitting preconceived ideas about the superiority of one category of people over another. Let’s look at a few images conveyed by words in the English language in regard to race/ethnicity:

- Words may have more than one meaning and create and reinforce negative images. Terms such as *blackhearted* (malevolent) and expressions such as *a black mark* (a detrimental fact) and *Chinaman’s chance of success* (unlikely to succeed) associate the words *black* or *Chinaman* with negative associations and derogatory imagery. By contrast, expressions such as *that’s white of you* and *the good guys wear white hats* reinforce positive associations with the color white.
- Overtly derogatory terms such as *nigger*, *kike*, *gook*, *honkey*, *chink*, *spic*, and other racial–ethnic slurs have been “popularized” in movies, music, comic routines, and so on. Such derogatory terms are often used in conjunction with physical threats against persons.
- Words are frequently used to create or reinforce perceptions about a group. For example, Native Americans have been referred to as “savages” and “primitive,” and African Americans have been described as “uncivilized,” “cannibalistic,” and “pagan.”
- The “voice” of verbs may minimize or incorrectly identify the activities or achievements of people of color. For example, use of the passive voice in the statement “African Americans *were given* the right to vote” ignores how African Americans *fought* for that right. Active-voice verbs may also inaccurately attribute achievements to people or groups. Some historians argue that cultural bias is shown by the very notion that “Columbus discovered America”—given that America was already inhabited by people who later became known as Native Americans (see Stannard, 1992; Takaki, 1993).
- Adjectives that typically have positive connotations can have entirely different meanings when used in certain contexts. Regarding employment, someone may say that a person of color is “qualified” for a position when it is taken for granted that whites in the same position *are* qualified (see Moore, 1992).



Rapid changes in language and culture in the United States are reflected in this street scene. How do functionalist and conflict theorists' views regarding language differ?

In addition to these concerns about the English language, problems also arise when more than one language is involved. Consider an incident in Florida described by journalist Carlos Alberto Montaner, a native of Cuba:

I was walking quietly with my wife on a sidewalk in Miami Beach. We were speaking Spanish, of course, because that is our language. Suddenly, we were accosted by a spry little old lady, wearing a baseball cap and sneakers, who told us: "Talk English. You are in the United States." She continued on her way at once, without stopping to see our reaction. The expression on her face, curiously, was not that of somebody performing a rude action, but of someone performing a sacred patriotic duty. (Montaner, 1992: 163)

Why was this woman upset about a conversation between two people she did not even know? Montaner explains why he believes she reacted as she did:

. . . the truth is that the lady in question was not an eccentric madwoman. Thousands, millions of people are mortified that in their country there is a vast minority that constantly speaks a language that they do not understand. It disturbs them to hear Spanish prattle in shops, at work, in restaurants. They are irritated when conversations that they do not understand are held in their presence. . . .

[One] of the key elements in the configuration of a nation is its language. A monolingual American who suddenly finds himself on Miami's Calle Ocho [in Little Havana] or in San Francisco's Chinatown has the feeling that he is not in his own country. And when one is not in one's own country, one feels endangered. (Montaner, 1992: 163)

In recent decades, the United States has experienced rapid changes in language and culture. The

number of speakers of Asian languages has increased sharply (Barringer, 1993). In the 1990s, more than 14 percent of all U.S. residents age five and older spoke a language other than English at home, an increase of 38 percent from 1980. (Table 3.2 lists the primary languages other than English spoken in the United States.) At the same time, sociologist Alejandro Portes' recent study of eighth- and ninth-graders in Miami and San Diego found that children of immigrants from Cuba, Haiti, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Mexico are bilingual but prefer English to their parents' native language and speak it more fluently than their parents' language (Sontag, 1993). Figure 3.2 summarizes Portes' findings.

From the functionalist perspective, a shared language is essential to a common culture; language is a stabilizing force in society. This view was expressed by Mauro E. Mujica (1993: 101), chairman of the organization called U.S. English:

I am proud of my heritage. Yet when I emigrated to the United States from Chile in 1965 to study architecture at Columbia University, I knew that to succeed I would have to adopt the language of my new home.

As in the past, it is critical today for new immigrants to learn English as quickly as possible. And that's so they can benefit from the many economic opportunities that this land has to offer. I believe so much in this concept that when elected to head an organization that promotes the use of English, I eagerly accepted.

Language is an important means of cultural transmission. Through language, children learn about their cultural heritage and develop a sense of personal identity in relationship to their group. For

**Table 3.2 The Top 25 Languages Other Than English in the United States**

| LANGUAGE USED<br>AT HOME | TOTAL SPEAKERS OVER<br>5 YEARS OLD |            | PERCENT<br>CHANGE |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|------------|-------------------|
|                          | 1990                               | 1980       |                   |
| Spanish                  | 17,339,000                         | 11,549,000 | 50.1              |
| French                   | 1,703,000                          | 1,572,000  | 8.3               |
| German                   | 1,547,000                          | 1,607,000  | -3.7              |
| Italian                  | 1,309,000                          | 1,633,000  | -19.9             |
| Chinese                  | 1,249,000                          | 632,000    | 97.7              |
| Tagalog                  | 843,000                            | 452,000    | 86.6              |
| Polish                   | 723,000                            | 826,000    | -12.4             |
| Korean                   | 626,000                            | 276,000    | 127.2             |
| Vietnamese               | 507,000                            | 203,000    | 149.5             |
| Portuguese               | 430,000                            | 361,000    | 19.0              |
| Japanese                 | 428,000                            | 342,000    | 25.0              |
| Greek                    | 388,000                            | 410,000    | -5.4              |
| Arabic                   | 355,000                            | 227,000    | 57.4              |
| Hindi, Urdu, and related | 331,000                            | 130,000    | 155.1             |
| Russian                  | 242,000                            | 175,000    | 38.5              |
| Yiddish                  | 213,000                            | 320,000    | -33.5             |
| Thai                     | 206,000                            | 89,000     | 131.6             |
| Persian                  | 202,000                            | 109,000    | 84.7              |
| French Creole            | 188,000                            | 25,000     | 654.1             |
| Armenian                 | 150,000                            | 102,000    | 46.3              |
| Navajo                   | 149,000                            | 123,000    | 20.6              |
| Hungarian                | 148,000                            | 180,000    | -17.9             |
| Hebrew                   | 144,000                            | 99,000     | 45.5              |
| Dutch                    | 143,000                            | 146,000    | -2.6              |
| Mon-Khmer                | 127,000                            | 16,000     | 676.3             |

Source: *New York Times*, 1993b.

example, Latinos/as in New Mexico and south Texas use *dichos*—proverbs or sayings that are unique to the Spanish language—as a means of expressing themselves and as a reflection of their cultural heritage. Examples of *dichos* include *Anda tu camino sin ayuda de vecino* (“Walk your own road without the help of a neighbor”) and *Amor de lejos es para pendejos* (“A long-distance romance is for fools”). *Dichos* are passed from generation to generation as a priceless verbal tradition whereby people can give advice or teach a lesson (Gandara, 1995).

Conflict theorists view language as a source of power and social control; it perpetuates inequalities between people and between groups because words are used (whether or not intentionally) to “keep people in their place.” As the linguist Deborah Tannen (1993: B5) has suggested, “The devastating group hatreds that result in so much suffering in our own country and around the world are related in origin to the small intolerances in our everyday conversations—our readiness to attribute good intentions to

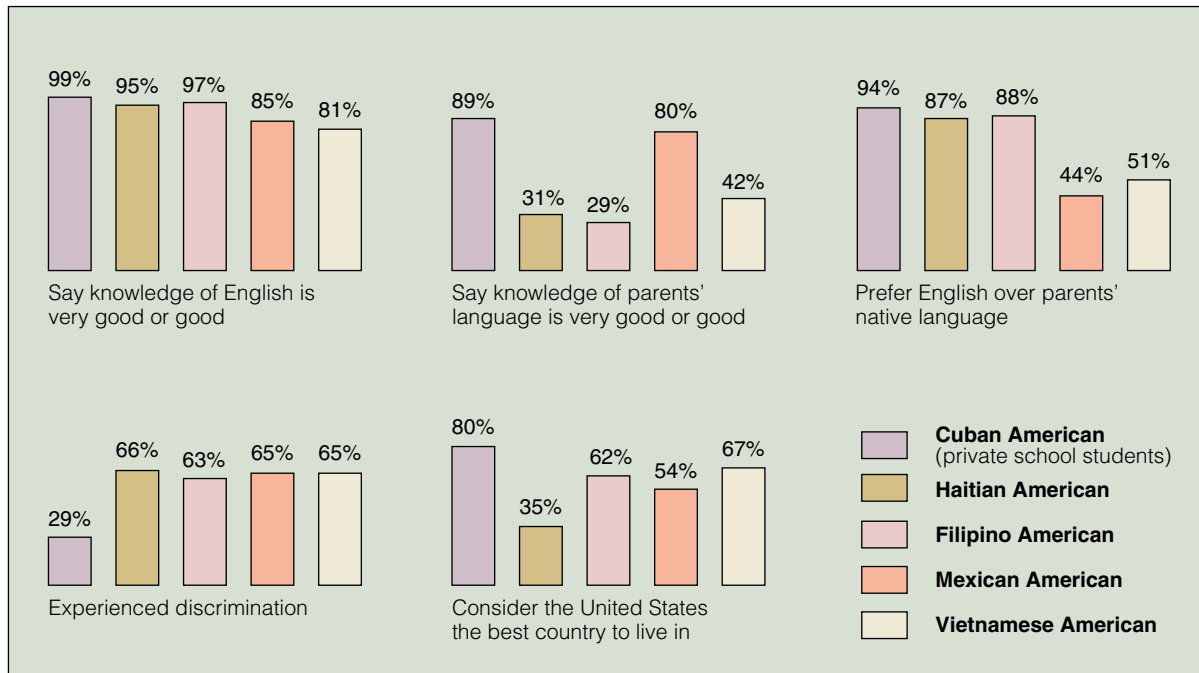
ourselves and bad intentions to others.” Language, then, is a reflection of our feelings and values.

## Values

**Values** are collective ideas about what is right or wrong, good or bad, and desirable or undesirable in a particular culture (Williams, 1970). Values do not dictate which behaviors are appropriate and which ones are not, but they provide us with the criteria by which we evaluate people, objects, and events. Values typically come in pairs of positive and negative values, such as being brave or cowardly, hardworking or lazy. Since we use values to justify our behavior, we tend to defend them staunchly (Kluckhohn, 1961).

**CORE AMERICAN VALUES** Do we have shared values in the United States? Sociologists disagree about the extent to which all people in this country

**Figure 3.2 The Language of Children of Immigrants**



Note: Based on interviews with 5,000 eighth- and ninth-graders whose parents are immigrants. Cuban Americans and Haitian Americans were interviewed mainly in Miami. Children of immigrants from Mexico, the Philippines, and Vietnam were interviewed mainly in San Diego.

Source: Adapted from Santag, 1993.

share a core set of values. Functionalists tend to believe that shared values are essential for societies and have conducted most of the research on core values. Sociologist Robin M. Williams, Jr. (1970) has identified ten core values as being important to people in the United States:

1. *Individualism.* People are responsible for their own success or failure. Individual ability and hard work are the keys to success. Those who do not succeed have only themselves to blame because of their lack of ability, laziness, immorality, or other character defects.
2. *Achievement and success.* Personal achievement results from successful competition with others. Individuals are encouraged to do better than others in school and to work in order to gain wealth, power, and prestige. Material possessions are seen as a sign of personal achievement.
3. *Activity and work.* People who are industrious are praised for their achievement; those perceived as lazy are ridiculed. From the time of the early Puritans, work has been viewed as important. Even during their leisure time, many people “work” in their play. Think, for example, of all the individuals who take exercise classes, run in marathons, garden, repair or restore cars, and so on in their spare time.
4. *Science and technology.* People in the United States have a great deal of faith in science and technology. They expect scientific and technological advances ultimately to control nature, the aging process, and even death.
5. *Progress and material comfort.* The material comforts of life include not only basic necessities (such as adequate shelter, nutrition, and medical care) but also the goods and services that make life easier and more pleasant.
6. *Efficiency and practicality.* People want things to be bigger, better, and faster. As a result, great value is placed on efficiency (“How well does it work?”) and practicality (“Is this a realistic thing to do?”).
7. *Equality.* Since colonial times, overt class distinctions have been rejected in the United States. However, “equality” has been defined as “equality of *opportunity*”—an assumed equal chance to achieve success—not as “equality of *outcome*.”



Baseball hero Mark McGwire waves to the fans following the game in which he became the all-time leader for home runs in a single season. Which core American values are reflected in sports such as baseball?

8. *Morality and humanitarianism.* Aiding others, especially following natural disasters (such as floods or hurricanes), is seen as a value. The notion of helping others was originally a part of religious teachings and tied to the idea of morality. Today, people engage in humanitarian acts without necessarily perceiving that it is the “moral” thing to do.
9. *Freedom and liberty.* Individual freedom is highly valued in the United States. The idea of freedom includes the right to private ownership of property, the ability to engage in private enterprise, freedom of the press, and other freedoms that are considered to be “basic” rights.
10. *Racism and group superiority.* People value their own racial or ethnic group above all others. Such feelings of superiority may lead to discrimination; slavery and segregation laws are classic examples. Many people also believe in the superiority of their country and that “the American way of life” is best.

As you can see from this list, some core values may contradict others.

**VALUE CONTRADICTIONS** All societies, including the United States, have value contradictions. *Value contradictions* are values that conflict with one another or are mutually exclusive (achieving one makes it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve another). Core values of morality and humanitarianism may conflict with values of individual achievement and success. In the 1990s, for example, humanitarian values reflected in welfare and other government aid programs came into conflict with values emphasizing hard work and personal achievement. Many people are more ambivalent about helping the poor or homeless than about helping victims of natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, or earthquakes in this or other countries. In the aftermath of the earthquake in Kobe, Japan, in January 1995, for instance, some people in the United States viewed economic aid to Japan more favorably than welfare benefits for unwed mothers under the age of eighteen (Pear, 1995).

**IDEAL VERSUS REAL CULTURE** What is the relationship between values and human behavior? Sociologists stress that a gap always exists between

ideal culture and real culture in a society. *Ideal culture* refers to the values and standards of behavior that people in a society profess to hold. *Real culture* refers to the values and standards of behavior that people actually follow. For example, we may claim to be law-abiding (ideal cultural value) but smoke marijuana (real cultural behavior), or we may regularly drive over the speed limit but think of ourselves as “good citizens.”

Most of us are not completely honest about how well we adhere to societal values. In a University of Arizona study known as the “Garbage Project,” household waste was analyzed to determine the rate of alcohol consumption in Tucson, Arizona. People were asked about their level of alcohol consumption, and in some areas of the city, they reported very low levels of alcohol use. However, when their garbage was analyzed, researchers found that over 80 percent of those households consumed some beer, and more than half discarded eight or more empty beer cans a week (Haviland, 1993). Obviously, this study shows a discrepancy between ideal cultural values and people’s actual behavior.

The degree of discrepancy between ideal and real culture is relevant to sociologists investigating social change. Large discrepancies provide a foothold for demonstrating hypocrisy (pretending to be what one is not or to feel what one does not feel). These discrepancies are often a source of social problems; if the discrepancy is perceived, leaders of social movements may use them to point out people’s contradictory behavior. For example, preserving our natural environment may be a core value, but our behavior (such as littering highways and lakes) contributes to its degradation, as discussed in Chapter 20 (“Collective Behavior, Social Movements, and Social Change”).

## Norms

Values provide ideals or beliefs about behavior but do not state explicitly how we should behave. Norms, on the other hand, do have specific behavioral expectations. **Norms are established rules of behavior or standards of conduct.** *Prescriptive norms* state what behavior is appropriate or acceptable. For example, persons making a certain amount of money are expected to file a tax return and pay any taxes they owe. Norms based on custom direct us to open a door for a person carrying a heavy load. By contrast, *proscriptive norms* state what behavior is inappropriate or unacceptable. Laws that prohibit us from driving over the speed limit and “good manners” that preclude you from reading a newspaper during class are examples. Prescriptive and proscriptive

norms operate at all levels of society, from our everyday actions to the formulation of laws.

**FORMAL AND INFORMAL NORMS** Not all norms are of equal importance; those that are most crucial are formalized. *Formal norms* are written down and involve specific punishments for violators. Laws are the most common type of formal norms; they have been codified and may be enforced by sanctions. **Sanctions are rewards for appropriate behavior or penalties for inappropriate behavior.** Examples of *positive sanctions* include praise, honors, or medals for conformity to specific norms. *Negative sanctions* range from mild disapproval to the death penalty. In the case of law, formal sanctions are clearly defined and can be administered only by persons in certain official positions (such as police officers and judges) who are given the authority to impose the sanctions.

Norms considered to be less important are referred to as *informal norms*—unwritten standards of behavior understood by people who share a common identity. When individuals violate informal norms, other people may apply informal sanctions. *Informal sanctions* are not clearly defined and can be applied by any member of a group (such as frowning at someone or making a negative comment or gesture).

**FOLKWAYS** Norms are also classified according to their relative social importance. **Folkways are informal norms or everyday customs that may be violated without serious consequences within a particular culture** (Sumner, 1959/1906). They provide rules for conduct but are not considered to be essential to society’s survival. In the United States, folkways include using underarm deodorant, brushing our teeth, and wearing appropriate clothing for a specific occasion. Often, folkways are not enforced; when they are enforced, the resulting sanctions tend to be informal and relatively mild.

Folkways are culture specific; they are learned patterns of behavior that can vary markedly from one society to another. In Japan, for example, where the walls of rest room stalls reach to the floor, folkways dictate that a person should knock on the door before entering a stall (you cannot tell if anyone is there without knocking). However, people in the United States find it disconcerting when someone knocks on the door of the stall (A. Collins, 1991).

**MORES** Other norms are considered to be highly essential to the stability of society. **Mores are strongly held norms with moral and ethical connotations that may not be violated without serious consequences in a particular culture.** Since



mores (pronounced MOR-ays) are based on cultural values and considered to be crucial for the well-being of the group, violators are subject to more severe negative sanctions (such as ridicule, loss of employment, or imprisonment) than are those who fail to adhere to folkways. The strongest mores are referred to as taboos. **Taboos are mores so strong that their violation is considered to be extremely offensive and even unmentionable.** Violation of taboos is punishable by the group or even, according to certain belief systems, by a supernatural force. The incest taboo, which prohibits sexual or marital relations between certain categories of kin, is an example of a nearly universal taboo.

Folkways and mores provide structure and security in a society. They make everyday life more predictable and provide people with some guidelines for appearance and behavior. As individuals travel in countries other than their own, they become aware of cross-cultural differences in folkways and mores. For example, women from the United States traveling in Muslim nations quickly become aware of mores, based on the Sharia (the edicts of the Koran), that prescribe the dominance of men over women. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, women are not allowed to mix with men in public. Banks have branches with only women tellers—and only women customers. In hospitals, female doctors are supposed to tend only to children and other women (Alireza, 1990; Ibrahim, 1990).

**LAWS** *Laws are formal, standardized norms that have been enacted by legislatures and are enforced by formal sanctions.* Laws may be either civil or criminal. *Civil law* deals with disputes among persons or groups. Persons who lose civil suits may encounter negative sanctions such as having to pay compensation to the other party or being ordered to stop certain conduct. *Criminal law*, on the other hand, deals with public safety and well-being. When criminal laws are violated, fines and prison sentences are the most likely negative sanctions, although in some states the death penalty is handed down for certain major offenses.

In addition to material objects, all of the non-material components of culture—symbols, language, values, and norms—are reflected in the popular culture of contemporary society.

## Popular Culture

Before taking this course, what was the first thing you thought about when you heard the term *culture*? In everyday life, culture is often used to describe the fine arts, literature, and classical music. When peo-



With the widespread accessibility of television and the Internet, popular culture is increasingly accessible for both children and adults in their own homes. Studies show that many children spend more time watching television than they spend attending school.

ple say that a person is “cultured,” they may mean that the individual has a highly developed sense of style or aesthetic appreciation of the “finer” things.

## High Culture and Popular Culture

Some sociologists use the concepts of high culture and popular culture to distinguish between different cultural forms. These ideal types are differentiated by their content, style, expressed values, and respective audiences (Gans, 1974; DiMaggio and Unseem, 1978; Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987). *High culture* consists of classical music, opera, ballet, live theater, and other activities usually patronized by elite audiences, composed primarily of members of the upper-middle and upper classes, who have the time, money, and knowledge assumed to be necessary for its appreciation. *Popular culture* consists of activities, products, and services that are assumed to appeal primarily to members of the middle and working classes. These include rock concerts, spectator sports, movies, and television soap operas and situation comedies. Although we will distinguish between “high” and “popular” culture in our discussion, it is important to note that some social analysts believe that the rise of a consumer society in which luxury items have become more widely accessible to the masses has greatly reduced the great divide between activities and possessions associated with wealthy people or a social elite (see Huyssen, 1984; Lash and Urry, 1994).

However, most sociological examinations of high culture and popular culture focus primarily on the link between culture and social class. French



Activity fads such as moshing are particularly popular with young people. Why are such fads often short-lived?

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) *cultural capital theory* views high culture as a device used by the dominant class to exclude the subordinate classes. According to Bourdieu, people must be trained to appreciate and understand high culture. Individuals learn about high culture in upper-middle- and upper-class families and in elite education systems, especially higher education. Once they acquire this trained capacity, they possess a form of cultural capital. Persons from poor and working-class backgrounds typically do not acquire this cultural capital. Since knowledge and appreciation of high culture are considered a prerequisite for access to the dominant class, its members can use their cultural capital to deny access to subordinate group members and thus preserve and reproduce the existing class structure (but see Halle, 1993).

Unlike high culture, popular culture is assumed to be far more widespread and accessible to everyone; for this reason, it sometimes is referred to as "mass culture." The primary purpose of popular culture is entertainment, but it also provides an avenue for people to express their hopes, fears, and anger. However, popular culture may also include racism, sexism, and nativism (hostility toward immigrants by native-born citizens) (Mukerji and Schudson, 1991). For sociologists, popular culture provides a window into the public consciousness.

### *Popular Culture and Leisure*

Studying popular culture helps us understand fads, fashions, and leisure activities. It also gives us insights into how the commercialization of popu-

lar culture may provide wealth to those who produce and market it.

**FADS** A *fad* is a temporary but widely copied activity followed enthusiastically by large numbers of people. Most fads are short-lived novelties (Garreau, 1993). According to the sociologist John Lofland (1993), fads can be divided into four major categories. First, *object fads* are items that people purchase despite the fact that they have little use-value. In other words, the consumer object itself is less important than its value as a consumer *sign*, which, like the Nike "swoosh," takes on a personal value ("I am one of the in-crowd") and a social meaning ("You should look up to me because I own this product") apart from the object's actual use-value (for example, the actual function of a T-shirt or a pair of athletic shoes). Recent examples of object fads include Beanie Babies, characters from *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*, and Pokémon (called "Pocket Monsters" in Japan) games, toys, trading cards, clothing, cartoons, and snack foods. Second, *activity fads* include pursuits such as body piercing, "surfing" the Internet, and "blade nights" in New York City, where thousands of in-line skaters swarm down the city's streets in processions that are several blocks long (Weber, 1997). Third are *idea fads*, such as New Age ideologies and the simplicity movement (see Chapter 1). Fourth are *personality fads*, such as those surrounding celebrities like Calista Flockhart ("Ally McBeal"), Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, and Leonardo DiCaprio. Personality fads include a variety of deceased icons, such as Princess Diana and the singer Elvis Presley, who continue to receive

media coverage and have fan clubs on the Internet (see Box 3.2 on pages 84–85).

**FASHION** A *fashion* is a currently valued style of behavior, thinking, or appearance that is longer lasting and more widespread than a fad. Examples of fashion are found in many areas, including child rearing, education, sports, clothing, music, and art. For example, the sociologist David Halle studied artwork in U.S. homes and found that landscape depictions were a fashion that crossed all class and racial lines:

Landscape depictions pursue . . . [a] pervasive modern *ideal*. In their portrayal of a contemporary nature as both calm and devoid of other people, they signify . . . the *imaginary achievement* of a private leisure on a scale far grander than the backyard, for they are unfettered by the requirement of legally owning the leisure space depicted. Landscape depictions . . . *compensate* for . . . a long, noisy commute to work, for the bustle and pressure of the world of work and so on. (Halle, 1993: 201)

Sociologists have also examined fashions in sports. Soccer is an example of a fashion in sports. Until recently, only schoolchildren played soccer in the United States. Now it has become a popular sport, perhaps in part because of immigration from Latin America and other areas of the world where soccer is widely played. Its current popularity is reflected in the fact that the United States hosted soccer's World Cup tournament for the first time in 1994.

Like soccer, other forms of popular culture move across cultures. In fact, popular culture is this country's second largest export (after aircraft) to other nations (Rockwell, 1994). Of the world's 100 most-attended films in the 1990s, for example, 88 were produced by U.S.-based film companies. Likewise, music, television shows, novels, and street fashions from the United States have become a part of many other cultures. In turn, people in this country continue to be strongly influenced by popular culture from other nations. For example, contemporary music and clothing in the United States reflect African, Caribbean, and Asian cultural influences, among others.

## Cultural Change and Diversity

We have examined the nature of culture within society, the defining components of culture, and the forcefulness of popular culture. Cultures do not

generally remain static, however. There are many forces working toward change and diversity. Some societies and individuals adapt to this change, whereas others suffer culture shock and succumb to ethnocentrism.

### Cultural Change

Societies continually experience cultural change, at both material and nonmaterial levels. Moreover, a change in one area frequently triggers a change in other areas. For example, the personal computer has changed how we work and how we think about work; today, many people work at home—away from the immediate gaze of a supervisor. Ultimately, computer technology may change the nature of boss–worker relations. Such changes are often set in motion by discovery, invention, and diffusion.

**Discovery is the process of learning about something previously unknown or unrecognized.** Historically, discovery involved unearthing natural elements or existing realities, such as “discovering” fire or the true shape of the earth. Today, discovery most often results from scientific research. For example, the discovery of a polio vaccine virtually eliminated one of the major childhood diseases. A future discovery of a cure for cancer or the common cold could result in longer and more productive lives for many people.

As more discoveries have occurred, people have been able to reconfigure existing material and non-material cultural items through invention. **Invention is the process of reshaping existing cultural items into a new form.** Guns, video games, airplanes, and First Amendment rights are examples of inventions that positively or negatively affect our lives today.

When diverse groups of people come into contact, they begin to adapt one another's discoveries, inventions, and ideas for their own use. **Diffusion is the transmission of cultural items or social practices from one group or society to another** through such means as exploration, military endeavors, the media, tourism, and immigration. To illustrate, piñatas can be traced back to the twelfth century when Marco Polo brought them back from China, where they were used to celebrate the springtime harvest, to Italy, where they were filled with costly gifts in a game played by the nobility. When the piñata traveled to Spain, it became part of Lenten traditions. In Mexico, it was used to celebrate the birth of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli (Burciaga, 1993). Today, children in many countries squeal with excitement at parties as they swing a stick at a piñata. In today's “shrinking globe,” cultural diffusion moves at a



### Box 3.2 Changing Times: Media and Technology

#### *Elvis and Princess Diana as Media Icons*

I always believed the press would kill [Princess Diana] in the end. Not even I could imagine that they would take such a direct hand in her death, as seems to be the case. It would appear that every proprietor and editor of every publication that has paid for intrusive and exploitative photographs of her, encouraging greedy and ruthless individuals to risk everything in pursuit of Diana's image, has blood on his hands today.

—Charles, the current Earl Spencer and the only brother of the late Princess Diana, describing his feelings about the media's pursuit of his sister, which ultimately

may have been a contributing factor in her untimely death (qtd. in *Time*, 1997a: 33)

What do Princess Diana and Elvis Presley—the rock star and movie actor of the fifties, sixties and seventies—have in common? According to some social analysts, both have become not only internationally known celebrities—for very different reasons—but they are also icons of popular culture and relatively permanent personality fads (Carlson, 1997; Phillips, 1997).

How are popular culture and global celebrity status related? Electronic technology makes it possible for bil-



Why are popular culture icons such as the late Princess Diana and rock star Elvis Presley more difficult to forget than people and events that do not receive intense media coverage?

very rapid pace as countries continually seek new markets for their products. However, critics believe that some contemporary forms of cultural diffusion actually amount to **cultural imperialism**—the extensive infusion of one nation's culture into other nations (see Box 3.3 on page 86). Some view the widespread infusion of the English language into countries that speak other languages as a form of cultural imperialism. For example, when the directors of the Spanish Royal Academy met recently in Madrid to prepare new editions of the Academy's authoritative dictionary of Spanish, they found that hundreds of "Anglicisms" had shifted into the Spanish dialect, including words such as

*mitin* (meeting), *fútbol*, and *guisqui* (whiskey) (Simons, 1999). A number of countries or states within them have sought to prevent English from overtaking their native language. In Canada, for example, there is an ongoing conflict over the use of English in French-speaking Quebec.

When a change occurs in the material culture of a society, nonmaterial culture must adapt to that change. Frequently, this rate of change is uneven, resulting in a gap between the two. Sociologist William F. Ogburn (1966/1922) referred to this disparity as **cultural lag**—a gap between the technical development of a society and its moral and legal institutions. The failure of nonmaterial cul-

lions of celebrity images to be transmitted throughout the world each year. From the paparazzi (photographers) who take pictures that are published in weekly tabloids and daily newspapers to journalists for worldwide television news networks such as CNN, many people and technological innovations contribute to the making of people such as Elvis and Princess Diana into icons of popular culture. Everyday people also contribute to this phenomenon: Princess Diana and Elvis Presley chat groups and web pages, ranging from the reverential to the absurd and vulgar, abound on the Internet.

What is an icon? Regardless of time or place, icons condense complex cultural ideas—such as wealth, physical attractiveness, happiness, and success—into tangible, visible forms (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1997). Historical icons represent gods, goddesses, and other holy figures. Contemporary icons and personality fads often come in the form of celebrities, professional athletes, top singers and entertainers, movie stars, and individuals designated as “royalty.”

Why do celebrity icons receive such widespread attention and adulation? Some analysts believe that celebrity icons such as Elvis Presley and Princess Diana are so widely known and remembered because ordinary people remember most vividly that which they first experience through the images and sounds of the media (Pevere, 1997).

Sociologist Joshua Gamson (1994: 186) suggests that people are drawn to celebrities at least partially through the media attention they receive:

... celebrity is a primary contemporary means to power, privilege, and mobility. Audiences recognize this when they seek brushes with it and when they fantasize about the freedom of fame and its riches and about the distinction of popularity and attention. . . . They recognize it when they seek to watch and be part of the media spectacle. They recognize it when they speak admiringly of the celebrity's capacity to achieve, maintain, and manage a public image: if fame is power, the capacity to achieve it is an even greater one.

When we think of historical events, most often we are remembering how the media covered the event—not the event itself. Millions of people “remember” the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in the 1960s, the death of Elvis Presley in the 1970s, the “fairy tale” wedding of Princess Diana and Prince Charles in the 1980s, and the tragic automobile crash in which Diana and several other people died in the late 1990s.

In other words, we who live in the electronic era have “event memory” because of the indelible nature of information that is delivered electronically (Pevere, 1997). It is far more difficult for us to forget those things we have seen on television, in films, on CD-ROMS, or on the Internet. In fact, we may view people and events that do not receive intense media coverage as being uninteresting, unimportant, or insignificant (Pevere, 1997).

From this perspective, popular culture icons are partially made by the media, and, in turn, celebrities serve as personality fads at specific times and places, sometimes resurfacing—as Elvis Presley's image did upon the twentieth anniversary of his death—and receiving renewed attention and coverage for a period of time. No doubt, when anniversaries of Princess Diana's birth, marriage, and death occur, the media will be there with full electronic capabilities to resurrect another icon of global popular culture. For example, when Prince Edward married Sophie Rhys-Jones in 1999, the prince was critical of the media for constantly comparing his bride's appearance and activities to those of the late Princess Diana (Yahoo! News, 1999).

What can we learn about our own lives by examining contemporary cultural icons in the media? How might sociologists conduct a study to determine the social consequences of being a global celebrity and cultural icon like Elvis or Princess Diana?

ture to keep pace with material culture is linked to social conflict and problems in society. For example, the United States has some of the most advanced medical technology in the world, but there is a lack of consensus regarding to whom it should be available. The debate centers on whether medical care is a privilege for which people must pay or a right of U.S. citizenship (or noncitizen residency).

### Cultural Diversity

*Cultural diversity* refers to the wide range of cultural differences found between and within nations. Cultural diversity between countries may

be the result of natural circumstances (such as climate and geography) or social circumstances (such as level of technology and composition of the population). Some nations—such as Sweden—are referred to as *homogeneous societies*, meaning that they include people who share a common culture and are typically from similar social, religious, political, and economic backgrounds. By contrast, other nations—including the United States—are referred to as *heterogeneous societies*, meaning that they include people who are dissimilar in regard to social characteristics such as religion, income, or race/ethnicity (see Figure 3.3 on page 87).



### Box 3.3 Sociology in Global Perspective

#### *Popular Culture, the Internet, and Cultural Imperialism*

- In Hanoi, a photographer in Lenin Park charges the equivalent of 50 cents (U.S. currency) for taking a person's picture standing beside a human-size Mickey Mouse doll. ("Mouse Makes the Man," 1995)
- Euro Disney, outside Paris, is the single largest tourist attraction in France, far surpassing the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre. (Kraft, 1994)
- During Moscow's December holiday season, parents can buy their children nonalcoholic champagne in bottles decorated with Disney's Pocahontas and the Lion King. (Hilsenrath, 1996)
- Ninety percent of worldwide traffic on the Internet is in English; the Internet is anchored in the United States, and the vast majority of web sites are based in this country. (Harvard Law School Seminar, 1996)

Are these examples of cultural imperialism and the "Americanization" of the world's cultures? According to Richard Kuisel (1993), *Americanization* is not the central issue when people around the globe go to U.S.-inspired amusement parks or surf the Internet. As Kuisel (1993: 4) states, "Although the phenomenon is still described as Americanization, it has become increasingly disconnected from America. Perhaps it would be better described as the coming of the consumer society." However, other global analysts disagree with Kuisel's assertion and suggest that we should think about how we would feel if we were in this situation:

What if one day you woke up, turned on the radio and could not find an American song? What if you went to the movies and the only films were foreign? What if you wanted to buy a book and you found that the only American works were located in a small "Americana"

section of the store? Furthermore, what if you came home to find your kids glued to the television for back-to-back reruns of a French soap opera and two German police dramas? It sounds foreign, even silly to an American. Ask a Canadian, a German, or a Greek the same question, however, and you will get a different reaction. (Harvard Law School Seminar, 1996: 1)

In nations such as France, which is extremely proud of its cultural identity, many people believe that the effects of cultural imperialism are evident in the types of entertainment and other cultural products available to them in everyday life. According to this view, a nation's *cultural products*, including its books, films, television programs, and other modes of communication, define its *identity*. As a result, some believe that "the Internet will have a huge impetus in the Anglification of the world and that English, currently the unofficial language of world commerce, will become that of world culture" (Harvard Law School Seminar, 1996: 5). Leaders in some nations have become concerned that the Internet constitutes a new tool of U.S. cultural imperialism and have formed groups such as France's "La Francophonie," an organization created to preserve the use of French in cyberspace.

Although the ideas and products of many nations have also permeated U.S. culture and influenced our consumption patterns, many social analysts believe that U.S. culture has had a greater influence on other nations' cultures than other nations' cultures have had on ours. Some social analysts believe that American culture is likely to become the "second culture" of people around the globe (Kuisel, 1993). Is the commercialized diffusion of popular culture beneficial to people in other nations? Or is it a form of cultural imperialism? What do you think?

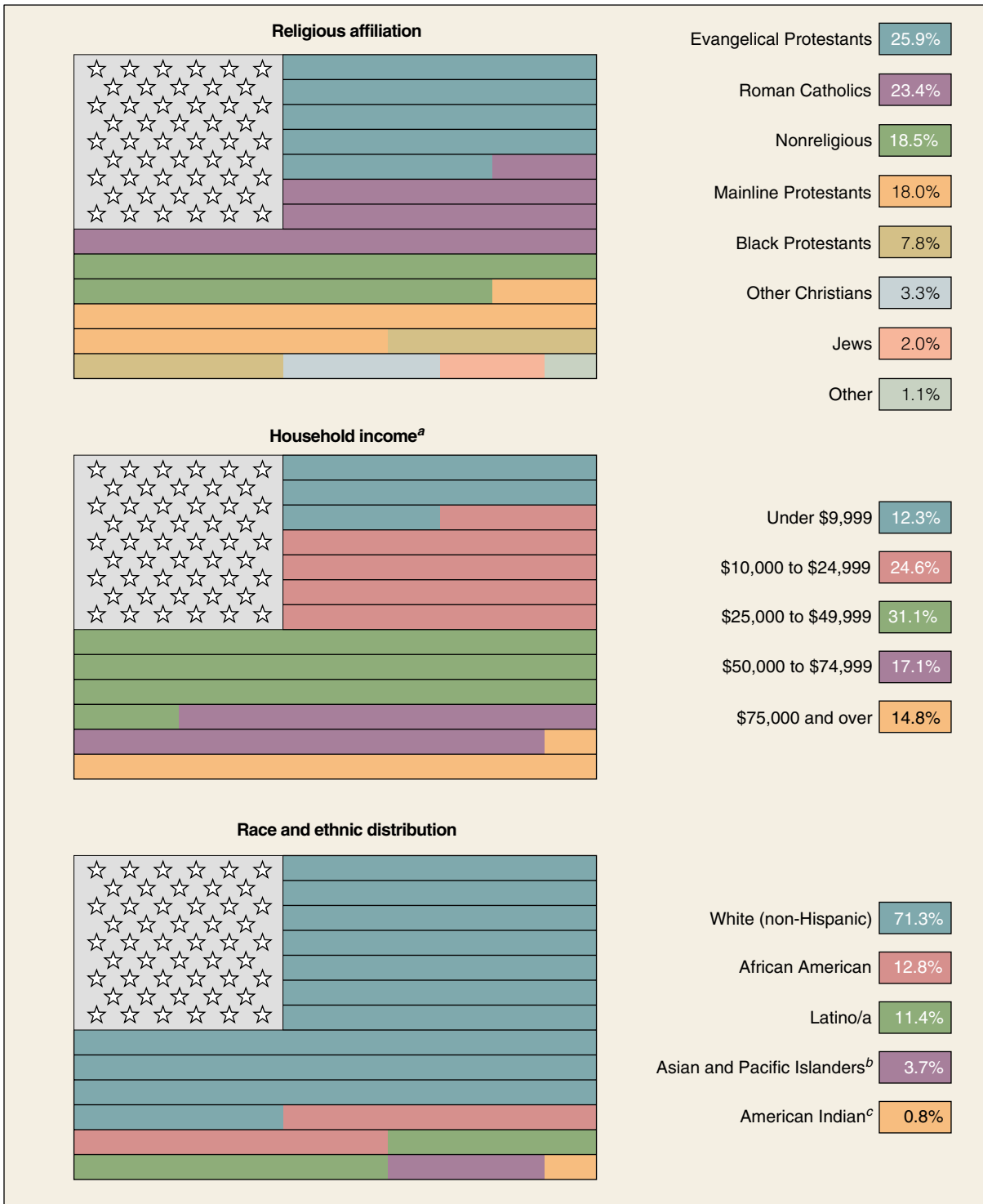
Immigration contributes to cultural diversity in a society. Throughout its history, the United States has been a nation of immigrants. Over the past 175 years, more than 55 million "documented" (legal) immigrants have arrived here; innumerable people have also entered the country as undocumented immigrants. Immigration can cause feelings of frustration and hostility, especially in people who feel threatened by the changes that large numbers of immigrants may produce (Mydans, 1993). Often, people are intolerant of those who are different from themselves. When societal tensions rise, people may look for others on whom they can place blame—or single out persons because they are the "other," the "outsider," the one who does not "belong." Ronald Takaki, an ethnic studies scholar, described his experience of being singled out as an "other":

I had flown from San Francisco to Norfolk and was riding in a taxi to my hotel to attend a conference on multiculturalism. . . . My driver and I chatted about the weather and the tourists. . . . The rearview mirror reflected a white man in his forties. "How long have you been in this country?" he asked. "All my life," I replied, wincing. "I was born in the United States." With a strong southern drawl, he remarked: "I was wondering because your English is excellent!" Then, as I had many times before, I explained: "My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880s. My family has been here, in America, for over a hundred years." He glanced at me in the mirror. Somehow I did not look "American" to him; my eyes and complexion looked foreign. (Takaki, 1993: 1)

Have you ever been made to feel like an "outsider"? Each of us receives cultural messages that may make us feel good or bad about ourselves or

### Figure 3.3 Heterogeneity of U.S. Society

Throughout history, the United States has been heterogenous. Today, we represent a wide diversity of social categories, including our religious affiliations, income levels, and racial-ethnic categories.



<sup>a</sup>In Census terminology a household consists of people who occupy a housing unit.

<sup>b</sup>Includes Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Asian Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, Hawaiian, Samoan, Guamanian, and other Asian or Pacific Islanders.

<sup>c</sup>Includes American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998b.



In heterogeneous societies such as the United States, people from very diverse cultures encourage their children to learn about their heritage. At Camp Robin Hood, a Sikh camp in Pennsylvania, children learn turban-tying and other practices of their religious tradition.

may give us the perception that we “belong” or “do not belong.” Can people overcome such feelings in a culturally diverse society such as the United States? Some analysts believe it is possible to communicate with others despite differences in race, ethnicity, national origin, age, sexual orientation, religion, social class, occupation, leisure pursuits, regionalism, and so on. People who differ from the dominant group may also find reassurance and social support in a subculture or a counterculture.

**SUBCULTURES** A *subculture* is a category of people who share distinguishing attributes, beliefs, values, and/or norms that set them apart in some significant manner from the dominant culture. Emerging from the functionalist tradition, this concept has been applied to categories ranging from ethnic, religious, regional, and age-based categories to those categories presumed to be “deviant” or marginalized from the larger society. In the broadest use of the concept, thousands of categories of people residing in the United States might be classified as participants in one or more subcultures, including Native Americans, Muslims, Generation Xers, and motorcycle enthusiasts. However, many sociological studies of subcultures have limited the scope of inquiry to more visible, distinct subcultures

such as the Old Order Amish and ethnic enclaves in large urban areas—to see how subcultural participants interact with the dominant U.S. culture.

*The Old Order Amish* Having arrived in the United States in the early 1700s, members of the Old Order Amish have fought to maintain their distinct identity. Today, over 75 percent of the more than 100,000 Amish live in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, where they practice their religious beliefs and remain a relatively closed social network. According to sociologists, this religious community is a subculture because its members share values and norms that differ significantly from those of people who primarily identify with the dominant culture. The Amish have a strong faith in God and reject worldly concerns. Their core values include the joy of work, the primacy of the home, faithfulness, thriftiness, tradition, and humility. The Amish hold a conservative view of the family, believing that women are subordinate to men, birth control is unacceptable, and wives should remain at home. Children (about seven per family) are cherished and seen as an economic asset: They help with the farming and other work. Many of the Old Order Amish speak Pennsylvania Dutch (a dialect of German) as well as English. They dress in traditional clothing, live on farms, and rely on the horse and buggy for transportation.

The Amish are aware that they share distinctive values and look different from other people; these differences provide them with a collective identity and make them feel close to one another (Kephart and Zellner, 1994). The Amish have also experienced special sets of collective problems for which they have attempted to find solutions. For example, the Amish want their children to attend Amish schools, but only through the eighth grade. They do not want their children to attend public high schools for fear that they will rebel against an agrarian, conservative way of life. After a series of legal battles, the Supreme Court ruled that Amish youth do not have to attend public high schools (Terry, 1993). The Amish have also been the victims of intolerance and hate crimes. However, when arsonists burned down some of their barns, killed livestock, and destroyed farm equipment, the group joined together to rebuild buildings and replace animals and equipment. Finally, the Amish have been threatened by modernization and high levels of tourism. Although many Amish families do not have modern technology, more have acquired electricity, modern plumbing, and power tools in recent years. Some now own Rollerblades, computers, and cellu-





Take a close look at the boy's feet as he follows the horse-drawn carriage of his Old Order Amish family. Are modernization and consumerism a threat to the way of life of subcultures such as the Amish? Why or why not?

lar telephones. Moreover, some adults are abandoning the farms to start small businesses or to take jobs with the large corporations that have moved into their areas (Janofsky, 1997). Overall, the Old Order Amish belief system and group cohesiveness remain strong despite the intrusion of corporations and tourists, the vanishing farmlands, and increasing levels of government regulation in their daily lives (Kephart and Zellner, 1994).

*Ethnic Subcultures* Some people who have unique shared behaviors linked to a common racial, language, or nationality background identify themselves as members of a specific subculture whereas others do not. Examples of ethnic subcultures include African Americans, Latinos/Latinas (Hispanic Americans), Asian Americans, and Native Americans. Some analysts include “white ethnics” such as Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and Polish Americans. Others also include Anglo Americans.

Although people in ethnic subcultures are dispersed throughout the United States, a concentration of members of some ethnic subcultures is visible in many larger communities and cities. For example, Chinatowns, located in cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York, are one of the more visi-

ble ethnic subcultures in the United States. In San Francisco, over 100,000 Chinese Americans live in a twenty-four-block “city” within a city, which is the largest Chinese community outside of Asia. Traditionally, the core values of this subculture have included loyalty to others and respect for one's family. Obedience to parental authority, especially the father's, is expected, and sexual restraint and control over one's emotions in public are also highly valued.

By living close to one another and clinging to their original customs and language, first-generation immigrants can survive the abrupt changes they experience in material and nonmaterial cultural patterns. In New York City, for example, Korean Americans and Puerto Rican Americans constitute distinctive subcultures, each with its own food, music, and personal style. In San Antonio, Mexican Americans enjoy different food and music than Puerto Rican Americans or other groups. Subcultures provide opportunities for expression of distinctive lifestyles, as well as sometimes helping people adapt to abrupt cultural change. Subcultures can also serve as a buffer against the discrimination experienced by many ethnic or religious groups in the United States. However, some people may be forced by economic or social disadvantage to remain in such ethnic enclaves.

Applying the concept of subculture to our study of social life helps us to understand how cultural differences may influence people. However, subcultural theory and research have been criticized for overstating the within-category similarities and making the assumption that most people primarily identify with others who are similar to themselves in ethnicity, religion, age, or other categories. Until recently, most studies of subcultures did not acknowledge that the experiences of women might be quite different from those of men in the same subcultural setting. Finally, some contemporary theorists argue that information technologies and the plurality and fragmentation of life in the twenty-first century have contributed to the creation of new subcultures in cyberspace and the larger global community that are no longer geographically specific or limited by time and space.

**COUNTERCULTURES** Some subcultures actively oppose the larger society. A *counterculture* is a group that strongly rejects dominant societal values and norms and seeks alternative lifestyles (Yinger, 1960, 1982). Young people are most likely to join countercultural groups, perhaps because younger persons generally have less invested in the existing culture. Examples of countercultures include the beatniks of the 1950s, the flower children



Even as global travel and the media make us more aware of people around the world, the distinctiveness of the Yanomamö in South America remains apparent. Are people today more or less likely than those in the past to experience culture shock upon encountering diverse groups of people such as these Yanomamö?

of the 1960s, the drug enthusiasts of the 1970s, and members of nonmainstream religious sects, or cults. Some countercultures (such as the Ku Klux Klan, militias, neo-Nazi skinheads, and the Nation of Islam) engage in revolutionary political activities.

One of the countercultures closely associated with racial intolerance is the skinheads, sometimes referred to as “neo-Nazi skinheads,” who have been present in the United States since the early 1980s. Skinheads are primarily young, white, working-class males who express group identity by wearing boots, jeans, suspenders, green flight jackets, and chains and by shaving their heads or sporting “burr” haircuts. Core values of “hard-core” skinheads include racial group superiority, patriotism, a belief in the traditional roles of women and men, and justification of physical violence as a means of expressing anger toward immigrants, gay men and lesbians, people of color, and Jews (Wooden, 1995). Some skinhead groups tend to engage in relatively spontaneous outbursts of violence; others are highly organized and motivated. These groups select leaders, hold regular meetings, distribute racist propaganda, and attend rallies sponsored by groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the White Aryan Resistance (Levin and McDevitt, 1993).

### **Culture Shock**

**Culture shock** is the disorientation that people feel when they encounter cultures radically dif-

**ferent from their own** and believe they cannot depend on their own taken-for-granted assumptions about life. When people travel to another society, they may not know how to respond to that setting. For example, Napoleon Chagnon (1992) described his initial shock at seeing the Yanomamö (pronounced yah-noh-MAH-mah) tribe of South America on his first trip in 1964.

The Yanomamö (also referred to as the “Yanomami”) are a tribe of about 20,000 South American Indians who live in the rain forest. Although Chagnon traveled in a small aluminum motorboat for three days to reach these people, he was not prepared for the sight that met his eyes when he arrived:

I looked up and gasped to see a dozen burly, naked, sweaty, hideous men staring at us down the shafts of their drawn arrows. Immense wads of green tobacco were stuck between their lower teeth and lips, making them look even more hideous, and strands of dark-green slime dripped from their nostrils—strands so long that they reached down to their pectoral muscles or drizzled down their chins and stuck to their chests and bellies. We arrived as the men were blowing *ebene*, a hallucinogenic drug, up their noses. . . . I was horrified. What kind of welcome was this for someone who had come to live with these people and learn their way of life—to become friends with them? But when they recognized Barker [a guide], they put their weapons down and returned to their chanting, while keeping a nervous eye on the village entrances. (Chagnon, 1992: 12–14)

The Yanomamö have no written language, system of numbers, or calendar. They lead a nomadic lifestyle, carrying everything they own on their backs. They wear no clothes and paint their bodies; the women insert slender sticks through holes in the lower lip and through the pierced nasal septum.

When Chagnon returned to the Yanomamö almost two decades later (in 1992), he found that they were threatened by diseases (such as malaria, venereal disease, and tuberculosis) and by environmental degradation. Seventy percent of the tribe's land in Brazil had been taken away from them, and their supplies of fish were poisoned by mercury contamination of rivers. Although the governments of Brazil and Venezuela enacted policies to save them from extinction by setting aside huge areas to be their homeland (see Chagnon, 1992: 248–255), in 1993 about seventy of the Yanomamö were attacked and brutally killed by Brazilian gold miners in a massacre that produced a widespread outcry (Brooke, 1993a: Y3). Recently, activist groups seeking to protect the way of life of the Yanomamö have sent out pleas for assistance on various academic and commercial web sites.

### ***Ethnocentrism***

Many of us tend to make judgments about other cultures in terms of our own culture. ***Ethnocentrism is the assumption that one's own culture and way of life are superior to all others*** (Sumner, 1959/1906). From a functionalist viewpoint, ethnocentrism can serve a positive function in societies by promoting group solidarity and loyalty and by encouraging people to conform to societal norms and values. For example, nationalism and patriotism encourage people to think of their own nation as “the best.” International sports competition, such as the Olympic Games, helps to foster this idea.

On the other hand, ethnocentrism can be problematic for societies. Historically, people have regarded outsiders as “barbarians” or “primitive” because they were different. Until recently, for example, few people in the more-developed nations have been interested in what indigenous peoples such as the Yanomamö might know; after all, what could nations with high levels of technology possibly learn from tribal cultures? Yet people in such cultures have devised ways to survive and flourish that constitute an important source of knowledge. Some have created methods of farming without irrigation; others hunt, fish, and gather food in the rain forest without destroying the delicate balance

that maintains the ecosystem. Ethnocentrism is counterproductive when it blinds us to what other groups have to offer or when it leads to conflict, hostility, and war.

Ethnocentrism can be a problem within societies as well as between them when it leads to social isolation, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression of one group by another. People who have recently arrived in a country where their customs, dress, eating habits, or religious beliefs differ markedly from those of existing residents often find themselves the object of ridicule. Indigenous groups, such as Native Americans, have also been the target of ethnocentrism by other groups.

Recently, some sociologists have begun to study xenocentrism, or “reverse ethnocentrism.” *Xenocentrism* is the belief that the products, styles, or ideas of another society are better than those of one's own culture. Examples include the desire for German-made cars by U.S. citizens, some of whom assert that American manufacturers cannot make a decent car anymore, and the embracing of Buddhism by many in the United States.

### ***Cultural Relativism***

An alternative to ethnocentrism and xenocentrism is ***cultural relativism—the belief that the behaviors and customs of a society must be viewed and analyzed within the context of its own culture.*** Cultural relativism is a part of the sociological imagination; researchers must be aware of the customs and norms of the society they are studying and then spell out their background assumptions so that others can spot possible biases in their studies.

Anthropologist Marvin Harris (1974, 1985) uses cultural relativism to explain why cattle, which are viewed as sacred, are not killed and eaten in India, where widespread hunger and malnutrition exist. From an ethnocentric viewpoint, we might conclude that cow worship is the cause of the hunger and poverty in India. However, Harris demonstrates that the Hindu taboo against killing cattle is very important to their economic system. Live cows are more valuable than dead ones because they have more important uses than as a direct source of food. As part of the ecological system, cows consume grasses of little value to humans. Then they produce two valuable resources—oxen (the neutered offspring of cows) to pull the plows and manure (for fuel and fertilizer)—as well as milk, floor covering, and leather. As Harris's study reveals, culture must be viewed from the standpoint of those who live in a particular society. For

this reason, ethnographic research provides social scientists with the opportunity to uncover the meanings by which other people construct realities and translate them into action (see Chapter 2).

Cultural relativism also has a downside. It may be used to excuse customs and behavior (such as violence against women and cannibalism) that violate basic human rights.

## Sociological Analysis of Culture

Sociologists regard culture as a central ingredient in human behavior. Although all sociologists share a similar purpose, they typically see culture through somewhat different lenses as they are guided by different theoretical perspectives in their research. What do these perspectives tell us about culture?

### Functionalist Perspectives

As previously discussed, functionalist perspectives are based on the assumption that society is a stable, orderly system with interrelated parts that serve specific functions. Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) suggested that culture helps people meet their *biological needs* (including food and procreation), *instrumental needs* (including law and education), and *integrative needs* (including religion and art). Societies in which people share a common language and core values are more likely to have consensus and harmony.

How might functionalist analysts view popular culture? According to many functionalist theorists, popular culture serves a significant function in society in that it may be the “glue” that holds society together. Regardless of race, class, sex, age, or other characteristics, many people are brought together (at least in spirit) to cheer teams competing in major sporting events such as the Super Bowl or the Olympic Games. Television and the Internet help integrate recent immigrants into the mainstream culture, whereas longer-term residents may become more homogenized as a result of seeing the same images and being exposed to the same beliefs and values (Gerbner et al., 1987).

However, functionalists acknowledge that all societies have dysfunctions that produce a variety of societal problems. When a society contains numerous subcultures, discord results from a lack of consensus about core values. In fact, popular culture may undermine core cultural values rather than reinforce them (Christians, Rotzoll, and Fackler, 1987). For example, movies may glorify crime, rather than hard

work, as the quickest way to get ahead. According to some analysts, excessive violence in music videos, movies, and television programs may be harmful to children and young people (Medved, 1992). From this perspective, popular culture may be a factor in antisocial behavior as seemingly diverse as hate crimes and fatal shootings in public schools.

A strength of the functionalist perspective on culture is its focus on the needs of society and the fact that stability is essential for society’s continued survival. A shortcoming is its overemphasis on harmony and cooperation. This approach also fails to fully account for factors embedded in the structure of society—such as class-based inequalities, racism, and sexism—which may contribute to conflict among people in the United States or to global strife.

### Conflict Perspectives

Conflict perspectives are based on the assumption that social life is a continuous struggle in which members of powerful groups seek to control scarce resources. According to this approach, values and norms help create and sustain the privileged position of the powerful in society while excluding others. As early conflict theorist Karl Marx stressed, ideas are *cultural creations* of a society’s most powerful members. Thus, it is possible for political, economic, and social leaders to use *ideology*—an integrated system of ideas that is external to, and coercive of, people—to maintain their positions of dominance in a society. As Marx stated,

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force in society, is at the same time, its ruling intellectual force. The class, which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production. . . . The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas. (Marx and Engels, 1970/1845–46: 64)

Many contemporary conflict theorists agree with Marx’s assertion that ideas, a nonmaterial component of culture, are used by agents of the ruling class to affect the thoughts and actions of members of other classes.

How might conflict theorists view popular culture? Some conflict theorists believe that popular culture, which originated with everyday people, has been largely removed from their domain and has become nothing more than a part of the capitalist economy in the United States (Gans, 1974; Cantor, 1980, 1987). From this approach, media conglomerates



In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of immigrants who have become U.S. citizens. However, an upsurge in anti-immigrant sentiment has put pressure on the Border Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which are charged with enforcing immigration laws.

erates such as Time-Warner, Disney, and Viacom create popular culture, such as films, television shows, and amusement parks, in the same way that they would produce any other product or service. Creating new popular culture also promotes consumption of *commodities*—objects outside ourselves that we purchase to satisfy our human needs or wants (Fjellman, 1992). Recent studies have shown that moviegoers spend more money for popcorn, drinks, candy, and other concession-stand food than they do for tickets to get into the theater. Similarly, park-goers at Disneyland and Walt Disney World spend as much money on merchandise—such as Magic Kingdom pencils, Mickey Mouse hats, kitchen accessories, and clothing—as they do on admission tickets and rides (Fjellman, 1992).

From this perspective, people come to believe that they *need* things they ordinarily would not purchase. Their desire is intensified by marketing techniques that promote public trust in products and services provided by a corporation such as the Walt Disney Company. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 291) referred to this public trust as *symbolic capital*: “the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability.” Symbolic capital consists of culturally approved intangibles—such as honor, integrity, esteem, trust, and goodwill—that may be accumulated and used for tangible (economic) gain. Thus, people buy products at Walt Disney World (and Disney stores throughout the country) because they believe in the trustworthiness of the item (“These children’s pajamas are bound to be

flame retardant; they came from the Disney Store”) and the integrity of the company (“I can trust Disney; it has been around for a long time”).

Other conflict theorists examine the intertwining relationship among race, gender, and popular culture. According to the sociologist K. Sue Jewell (1993), popular cultural images are often linked to negative stereotypes of people of color, particularly African American women. Jewell believes that cultural images depicting African American women as mammies or domestics—such as those previously used in Aunt Jemima Pancake ads and current resurrections of films like *Gone with the Wind*—affect contemporary black women’s economic prospects in profound ways (Jewell, 1993).

A strength of the conflict perspective is that it stresses how cultural values and norms may perpetuate social inequalities. It also highlights the inevitability of change and the constant tension between those who want to maintain the status quo and those who desire change. A limitation is its focus on societal discord and the divisiveness of culture.

### *Symbolic Interactionist Perspectives*

Unlike functionalists and conflict theorists, who focus primarily on macrolevel concerns, symbolic interactionists engage in a microlevel analysis that views society as the sum of all people’s interactions. From this perspective, people create, maintain, and modify culture as they go about their everyday activi-

ties. Symbols make communication with others possible because they provide us with shared meanings.

According to some symbolic interactionists, people continually negotiate their social realities. Values and norms are not independent realities that automatically determine our behavior. Instead, we reinterpret them in each social situation we encounter. However, the classical sociologist Georg Simmel warned that the larger cultural world—including both material culture and nonmaterial culture—eventually takes on a life of its own apart from the actors who daily re-create social life. As a result, individuals may be more controlled by culture than they realize. As discussed in Chapter 1, Simmel (1990/1907) suggested that money is an example of how people may be controlled by their culture. According to Simmel, people initially create money as a means of exchange, but then money acquires a social meaning that extends beyond its purely economic function. Money becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Today, we are aware of the relative “worth” not only of objects but also of individuals. Many people revere wealthy entrepreneurs and highly paid celebrities, entertainers, and sports figures for the amount of money they make, not for their intrinsic qualities. According to Simmel (1990/1907), money makes it possible for us to *relativize* everything, including our relationships with other people. When social life can be reduced to money, people become cynical, believing that anything—including people, objects, beauty, and truth—can be bought if we can pay the price. Although Simmel acknowledged the positive functions of money, he believed that the social interpretations people give to money often produce individual feelings of cynicism and isolation.

A symbolic interactionist approach highlights how people maintain and change culture through their interactions with others. However, interactionism does not provide a systematic framework for analyzing how we shape culture and how it, in turn, shapes us. It also does not provide insight into how shared meanings are developed among people, and it does not take into account the many situations in which there is disagreement on meanings. Whereas the functional and conflict approaches tend to overemphasize the macrolevel workings of society, the interactionist viewpoint often fails to take these larger social structures into account.

### **Postmodernist Perspectives**

Postmodernist theorists believe that much of what has been written about culture in the Western world is Eurocentric—that it is based on the un-

critical assumption that European culture (including its dispersed versions in countries such as the United States, Australia, and South Africa) is the true, universal culture in which all the world’s people ought to believe (Lemert, 1997). By contrast, postmodernists believe that we should speak of *cultures*, rather than *culture*.

However, Jean Baudrillard, one of the best-known French social theorists, believes that the world of culture today is based on *simulation*, not reality. According to Baudrillard, social life is much more a spectacle that simulates reality than reality itself. Many people gain “reality” from the media or cyberspace. Consider, for example, the many U.S. children who, upon entering school for the first time, have already watched more hours of television than the total number of hours of classroom instruction they will encounter in their entire school careers (Lemert, 1997). Add to this the number of hours that some will have spent playing computer games or surfing the Internet. Baudrillard refers to this social creation as *hyperreality*—a situation in which the *simulation* of reality is more real than the thing itself. For Baudrillard, everyday life has been captured by the signs and symbols generated to represent it, and we ultimately relate to simulations and models as if they were reality. Baudrillard (1983) uses Disneyland as an example of a simulation that conceals the reality that exists outside rather than inside the boundaries of the artificial perimeter. According to Baudrillard, Disney-like theme parks constitute a form of seduction that substitutes symbolic (seductive) power for real power, particularly the ability to bring about social change. From this perspective, amusement park “guests” may feel like “survivors” after enduring the rapid speed and gravity-defying movements of the roller coaster rides or see themselves as “winners” after surviving fights with hideous cartoon villains on the “dark rides” when they have actually experienced the substitution of an *appearance* of power over their lives for the *absence* of real power. Similarly, the anthropologist Stephen M. Fjellman (1992) studied Disney World in Orlando, Florida, and noted that people may forget, at least briefly, that the outside world can be threatening while they stroll Disney World’s streets without fear of crime or automobiles. Although this freedom may be temporarily empowering, it also may lull people into accepting a “worldview that presents an idealized United States as heaven. . . . How nice if they could all be like us—with kids, a dog, and General Electric appliances—in a world whose only problems are avoiding Captain Hook, the witch’s apple, and Toad Hall weasels” (Fjellman, 1992: 317).

In their examination of culture, postmodernist social theorists make us aware of the fact that no

single perspective can grasp the complexity and diversity of the social world. They also make us aware that reality may not be what it seems. According to the postmodernist view, no one authority can claim to know social reality, and we should deconstruct—take apart and subject to intense critical scrutiny—existing beliefs and theories about culture in hopes of gaining new insights (Ritzer, 1997).

Although postmodern theories of culture have been criticized on a number of grounds, we will examine only three. One criticism is postmodernism's lack of a clear conceptualization of ideas. Another is the tendency to critique other perspectives as being “grand narratives,” whereas postmodernists offer their own varieties of such narratives. Finally, some analysts believe that postmodern analyses of culture lead to profound pessimism about the future.

## Culture in the Future

As we have discussed in this chapter, many changes are occurring in the United States. Increasing cultural diversity can either cause long-simmering racial and ethnic antagonisms to come closer to a boiling point or result in the creation of a truly “rainbow culture” in which diversity is respected and encouraged.

In the future, the issue of cultural diversity will increase in importance, especially in schools. Multicultural education that focuses on the contributions of a wide variety of people from different backgrounds will continue to be an issue of controversy from kindergarten through college. In the Los Angeles school district, for example, students speak more than 114 different languages and dialects. Schools will face the challenge of embracing widespread cultural diversity while conveying a sense of community and national identity to students.

Technology will continue to have a profound effect on culture. Television and radio, films and videos, and electronic communications will continue to accelerate the flow of information and expand cultural diffusion throughout the world. Global communication devices will move images of people's lives, behavior, and fashions instantaneously among almost all nations (Petersen, 1994). Increasingly, computers and cyberspace will become people's window on the world and, in the process, promote greater integration or fragmentation among nations. Integration occurs when there is a widespread acceptance of ideas and items—such as democracy, rock music, blue jeans, and McDonald's hamburgers—among cultures. By contrast, fragmentation occurs when people in



New technologies have made educational opportunities available to a wider diversity of students, including persons with a disability. How will global communications technologies continue to change culture and social life in the future?

one culture disdain the beliefs and actions of other cultures. As a force for both cultural integration and fragmentation, technology will continue to revolutionize communications, but most of the world's population will not participate in this revolution (Petersen, 1994).

From a sociological perspective, the study of culture helps us not only understand our own “tool kit” of symbols, stories, rituals, and world views but also expand our insights to include those of other people of the world, who also seek strategies for enhancing their own lives (see Box 3.4 on page 96). If we understand how culture is used by people, how cultural elements constrain or further certain patterns of action, what aspects of our cultural heritage have enduring effects on our action, and what specific historical changes undermine the validity of some cultural patterns and give rise to others, we can apply our sociological imagination not only to our own society but to the entire world as well (see Swidler, 1986).



### Box 3.4 You Can Make a Difference

#### Understanding People from Other Cultures

Why study chemistry if one cannot effectively tell an audience how to use various chemicals responsibly? Or why study geography and history if one cannot link the environment and the past to people's current ways of life? . . . [W]hy learn about culture and fail to appreciate differences among people and communicate the same message to others? (Kabagarama, 1993: vi–vii)

Daisy Kabagarama, a U.S. college professor who was born in Uganda, poses these questions in her provocative book *Breaking the Ice* (1993), in which she explains how to further the cross-cultural understanding needed with rapid population changes and globalization. We can help others communicate across cultures by passing Kabagarama's techniques on to them:

- *Get acquainted.* Show genuine interest, have a sense of curiosity and appreciation, feel empathy for others, be nonjudgmental, and demonstrate flexibility.
- *Ask the right questions.* Ask general questions first and specific ones later, making sure that questions are clear and simple and are asked in a relaxed, non-threatening manner.
- *Consider visual images.* Use compliments carefully; it is easy to misjudge other people based on their physical appearance alone, and appearance norms differ widely across cultures.
- *Deal with stereotypes.* Overcome stereotyping and myths about people from other cultures through sincere self-examination, searching for knowledge, and practicing objectivity.

Electronic systems now link people around the world, making it possible for us to communicate with people from diverse racial–ethnic backgrounds and cultures without even leaving home or school. Try these web sites on the Internet for interesting information on multicultural issues and cultural diversity:

• Multicultural Pavilion/University of Virginia provides resources on racism, sexism, and ageism in the United States, as well as access to multicultural newsgroups, essays, and a large list of multicultural links on the Web:

<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/curry/centers/multicultural.html>

• *Multiworld* is a bilingual (Chinese and English) e-zine (online magazine) that includes information on culture, people, art, and nature, plus sites about nations such as the United States, Canada, Ireland, China, Belgium, and Brazil:

<http://www.jnw.com/mw/index.html>

## Chapter Review

### What is culture?

Culture is the knowledge, language, values, and customs passed from one generation to the next in a human group or society. Culture may be either material or non-material. Material culture consists of the physical creations of society. Nonmaterial culture is more abstract and reflects the ideas, values, and beliefs of a society.

### What are cultural universals?

Cultural universals are customs and practices that exist in all societies and include activities and institutions such as storytelling, families, and laws. Specific forms of these universals vary from one cultural group to another, however.

### What are the four nonmaterial components of culture that are common to all societies?

These components are symbols, language, values, and norms. Symbols express shared meanings; through them, groups communicate cultural ideas and abstract concepts. Language is a set of symbols through which groups communicate. Values are a culture's collective ideas about what is acceptable or not acceptable. Norms are the specific behavioral expectations within a culture.

### What are the main types of norms?

Folkways are norms that express the everyday customs of a group, whereas mores are norms with strong moral and ethical connotations and are essential to the stability of a culture. Laws are formal, standardized norms that are enforced by formal sanctions.

### What are high culture and popular culture?

High culture consists of classical music, opera, ballet, and other activities usually patronized by elite audiences. Popular culture consists of the activities, products, and services of a culture that appeal primarily to members of the middle and working classes.

### What causes cultural change in societies?

Cultural change takes place in all societies. Change occurs through discovery and invention, and through diffusion, which is the transmission of culture from one society or group to another.

### How is cultural diversity reflected in society?

Cultural diversity is reflected through race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion, occupation, and so forth. A diverse culture also includes subcultures and countercultures. A subculture has distinctive ideas and behaviors that differ from the larger society to which it belongs. A counterculture rejects the dominant societal values and norms.



### What are culture shock, ethnocentrism, and cultural relativism?

Culture shock refers to the anxiety people experience when they encounter cultures radically different from their own. Ethnocentrism is the assumption that one's own culture is superior to others. Cultural relativism views and analyzes another culture in terms of that culture's own values and standards.

### How do the major sociological perspectives view culture?

A functionalist analysis of culture assumes that a common language and shared values help produce consensus and harmony. According to some conflict theorists, culture may be used by certain groups to maintain their privilege and exclude others from society's benefits. Symbolic interactionists suggest that people create, maintain, and modify culture as they go about their everyday activities. Postmodern thinkers believe that there are many cultures within the United States alone. In order to grasp a better understanding of how popular culture may simulate reality rather than being reality, postmodernists believe that we need a new way of conceptualizing culture and society.

## Key Terms

counterculture 89  
 cultural imperialism 84  
 cultural lag 84  
 cultural relativism 91  
 cultural universals 71  
 culture 66  
 culture shock 90  
 diffusion 83  
 discovery 83  
 ethnocentrism 91  
 folkways 80  
 invention 83  
 language 73  
 laws 81  
 material culture 69  
 mores 80  
 nonmaterial culture 70  
 norms 80  
 popular culture 81  
 sanctions 80  
 Sapir-Whorf hypothesis 73  
 subculture 88  
 symbol 72  
 taboos 81  
 values 77

## Questions for Critical Thinking

1. Would it be possible today to live in a totally separate culture in the United States? Could you avoid all influences from the mainstream popular culture

or from the values and norms of other cultures? How would you be able to avoid any change in your culture?

2. Do fads and fashions reflect and reinforce or challenge and change the values and norms of a society? Consider a wide variety of fads and fashions: musical styles; computer and video games and other technologies; literature; and political, social, and religious ideas.
3. You are doing a survey analysis of neo-Nazi skinheads to determine the effects of popular culture on their views and behavior. What are some of the questions you would use in your survey?

## Media Resources

### Internet Exercises



1. The Progressive Sociologists Network is a large mailing list set up for sociologists. Join this list by going to <http://csf.colorado.edu/listproc.html> in your web browser. Choose "PSN Progressive Sociologists Network," and select Subscribe at the bottom of your screen. Monitor the list for a week, and compare it to [alt.sci.sociology](http://alt.sci.sociology). In terms of the four elements of culture, which of these forums most resembles a culture? Why?
2. Go to the AltaVista search engine (<http://www.altavista.digital.com/>), and run a search on the terms *hacker* and *warez*. Some people would consider hackers to be a counterculture. Compare what you have read in this chapter about countercultures to what you find in the hacker and warez pages. What criteria of a counterculture do hackers fit? In what ways don't they fit?
3. This chapter looks at postmodern perspectives as a critique of functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives. Visit the Postmodern Culture Journal home page (<http://jefferson.village.Virginia.edu/pmc/>), and identify the key differences among these perspectives. Which approach do you believe most accurately describes contemporary urban life?

### Wadsworth Sociology Resource Center, Virtual Society, Virtual Society



(<http://sociology.wadsworth.com>), the companion web site for *Sociology in Our Times*, provides numerous helpful hints and useful features created specifically for this book in order to enrich your learning experience in your introductory sociology course. At the *Virtual Society* site you will find hints on how to use the Internet. The site also maintains a list of highly relevant, updated sociological links called hypercontents, which parallel each chapter of the text. To help you study for exams, you can take online quizzes for each chapter. There is even a

link to sites that will help you prepare your résumé and offer you information on possible careers in sociology. If you have not already bookmarked *Virtual Society*, you should do so now to help you study throughout the course.

### InfoTrac College Edition

The following central sociological topics are all discussed in this chapter. You can find relevant articles for these as well as other topics in this chapter by using InfoTrac College Edition, the online library.

Hate crimes

Cultural change

Subculture

To aid in your search and to gain useful tips, see the “Student Guide to InfoTrac College Edition” on the *Virtual Society* web site.

### *Interactions: A Sociology CD-ROM*

Review and test your knowledge on what you have learned from this chapter by using the interactive CD-ROM, *Interactions*. *Interactions* includes an in-depth review of the chapter, enriching images, and links to relevant web sites you can access through your computer's Internet browser. After you have reviewed each chapter, test your understanding by taking the chapter quiz. If some of your answers are incorrect, *Interactions* will direct you to the pages in the chapter that cover the concepts you should review.

## Suggested Readings

An interesting functionalist analysis of culture is provided by this anthropologist:

Marvin Harris. *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures*. New York: Random House, 1977.

Marvin Harris. *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986.

These authors analyze aspects of culture from diverse perspectives:

Robin Andersen. *Consumer Culture and TV Programming*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995.

Michael Eric Dyson. *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

David Halle. *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

bell hooks. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

These books provide interesting insights on culture and demonstrate how fieldwork can be carried out in a wide variety of settings:

Napoleon A. Chagnon. *Yanomamö: The Last Days of Eden*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1992.

Stephen M. Fjellman. *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992.

These journals regularly carry articles on popular culture:

*Cultural Studies*

*Journal of Popular Culture*

*Media, Culture and Society*

*Theory, Culture & Society*

*Women: A Cultural Review*

*Women's Studies*