What is culture, and how can you use the sociological perspective to understand its impact on your life?

How can culture both promote consensus and create conflict?

Why is cultural diversity increasing today?
When writer John Wray visited his cousin, an aid worker among the Amazonian Shuar community in a part of Ecuador accessible only by canoe or small plane, he was greeted as an honored guest. His hosts in the village of Pampansa invited Wray to the home of a local community leader, where they would share a bowl of chicha, an alcoholic beverage traditionally offered as a friendly greeting to visitors (Wray 2010).

While Wray was honored by the warm welcome and knew that his hosts were offering him a traditional drink as a gesture of friendship, he reports that he would “have given almost anything to escape.” That’s because in Pampansa, women prepare chicha by chewing on fermented yucca root and spitting into a large barrel, where the beverage accumulates before being transferred into a ceramic bowl for drinking.

After Wray’s cousin Martin downed his bowlful of chicha, which their hosts described proudly as the best in the region, a newly refilled bowl was placed in front of Wray, who paused, wondering how he had ended up in this situation. After all, a year earlier he had visited Martin in a neighboring village and had managed to take only a sip of ceremonial chicha. This time, Wray found the chicha’s odor overpowering, likening the smell to “an old man’s false teeth.” Now, out of respect for his hosts, he was faced with guzzling the entire bowl.
n search of a way forward in this unfamiliar—and, for Wray, very unappetizing—situation, Wray recalled something that made the idea of drinking chicha more familiar and eased his sense of anxiety. He thought of all the times he had tasted someone else’s saliva: “hadn’t I tasted spit countless times before? What was chicha drinking, after all, but French kissing once removed?” With the inspiration of this familiar activity in mind, Wray quietly gulped down his portion of chicha, paying respect to his host’s generosity.

What we drink and eat, and how we prepare our food, is a familiar—and often vivid—illustration of how culture works. When we are part of a culture, our way of life seems natural, and we take it as a given; we are like fish in water. However, a cultural practice taken for granted by insiders (such as Shuar) may appear to outside observers (such as Wray) as interesting, odd, curious, disturbing, or even threatening.

This chapter explores the central role of culture in social life and its pervasive influence on who we are as human beings. It considers some of the opportunities and challenges posed by our contemporary world, as people of many different cultures interact with increasing frequency and cultural diversity becomes a fact of daily life. As we gain a better understanding of the meaning of culture, we are able not only to analyze its impact on our own lives but also to prepare for a lifetime of interactions with people from cultures other than our own.

Defining Culture

Culture is one of sociology’s core concepts. Indeed it is an essential part of the very definition of society—a group of people who live together in a specific territory and share a culture. Many people associate the word culture with museums and symphonies, a connection that is understandable because one definition of the term does involve the “cultivation” of the mind by studying the “best” a society has to offer. In the West, culture in this sense generally refers to such attributes as education and refinement in the arts and such artifacts as great works of literature and classical music. For sociologists and anthropologists, however, culture has a much broader, more inclusive meaning.

Culture is the collection of values, beliefs, knowledge, norms, language, behaviors, and material objects shared by a people and socially transmitted from generation to generation. Sometimes culture is simply referred to as a way of life.

Culture must be learned; it is not biologically based. In fact, we can think of culture as all aspects of society that are transmitted socially, rather than biologically. That you may be tall is a biological reality. That you use your height to advantage when you play basketball is a result of cultural influences.

Culture operates at multiple levels, from everyday actions by individuals (micro level), to the norms that operate within an organization such as a school or business (meso level), to the beliefs and practices associated with very large groups of people, including entire societies (macro level). At each level, the elements of culture influence how people live.

At any level, culture can serve as a source of both consensus and conflict in society. Regardless of the size of a particular group, its culture serves as a common ground connecting group members to one another. As we see later in this chapter, however, cultural differences can also contribute to tension and cause clashes among groups within a society and between different societies.

The Elements of Culture

Cultures consist of both material and nonmaterial elements. Material culture refers to the physical objects produced by people in a particular culture, including tools, clothing, toys, works of art, shopping malls, and housing. Nonmaterial culture refers to the ideas of a culture, including values and beliefs, accumulated knowledge about how to understand and navigate the world, and standards or “norms” about appropriate behavior. Nonmaterial culture exists in the world of thoughts and ideas; by contrast, material culture is physically real—it can be observed or touched. Collectively, the ideas and practices of a culture make up an entire way of life, affecting how people eat, work, love, think, worship, dress, learn, play, and live.

Because material objects can have symbolic (nonmaterial) meaning, the material and nonmaterial aspects of culture are often interconnected. For example, at the heart of many religions are sacred texts, such as Judaism’s Torah, Christianity’s Bible, and Islam’s Qur’an (or Koran). These writings relate the central beliefs of each faith, thus comprising an essential part of the faith’s nonmaterial culture. At the same time, the books themselves are often considered sacred as physical objects, to be treated with great respect as a part of the material culture. The books (Bibles, Qur’ans) are physical objects (material culture), but they also have symbolic (nonmaterial) significance. Thus Islamic detainees at the infamous Guantánamo Bay detention facility have alleged that U.S. interrogators exerted psychological pressure on them by desecrating the Qur’an, stepping on it and even putting it in a toilet, actions that are a grave violation of Islamic cultural norms (Lewis 2005).

Let’s consider how the various aspects of culture work together by looking at a much less serious topic: the everyday activity of grooming hair. Most people put at least some thought into what their hair looks like. Whether unkempt or coolly styled, our hair often expresses who we are. Hairstyles also reflect cultural values; we learn what is considered attractive and what meaning different hairstyles convey. We may think we are making purely individual statements when we style our hair, but in fact, as the photographs on page 60 show, we are likely to be influenced heavily by the ideas and practices of our culture.

Often, we are so familiar with our own culture that we have a hard time recognizing its various elements or their significance. If we take a sociological perspective, however, we can
see the often hidden ways that cultural ideas and practices help to define our identities and our relationship to various communities. The elements of culture—to which we now turn—are summarized in Table 3.1.

**Culture in Our Heads: Values, Beliefs, Knowledge, and Norms**

Let’s look more closely at the ideas of culture—the particular values, beliefs, knowledge, and norms that lend a culture its unique character. Together, they shape how people think, behave, and view their world.

**VALUES: WHAT IS DESIRABLE?** A value is a deeply held principle or standard that people use to make judgments about the world, especially in deciding what is desirable or worthwhile. For example, U.S. culture is highly individualistic. That is, people in the United States generally value individual freedom and autonomy above collective responsibility and commitment to community (Bellah et al. 2007). In contrast, some cultures place much more value on family well-being or some broader collective good than on individual achievement. The Japanese, for instance, emphasize group solidarity and loyalty, and this kind of collective orientation shapes ideas about what it means to be successful (Hofstede 1980; Silver 2002). China, too, has had a strong collective tradition, but recent

**BELIEFS:** Convictions or opinions that people accept as true (for example, my country is good, God exists, the gods exist)

**KNOWLEDGE:** Information, awareness, and understanding that helps people navigate the world (for example, language, mathematics, sociological insight)

**NORMS:** Rules and expectations for “appropriate” behavior (for example, how to dress, what standards of hygiene to maintain)

**BEHAVIORS:** The actions associated with a group that help to reproduce a distinct way of life (for example, “appropriate” sexual practices, the pursuit of formal education)

**OBJECTS AND ARTIFACTS:** The physical items that are created and associated with a culture (for example, food, clothing, music)

**SYMBOLS:** Anything—a sound, a gesture, an image, an object—that represents something else (for example, a handshake, a corporate logo)

**LANGUAGE:** An elaborate system of symbols that allows people to communicate with one another in complex ways (for example, English, Spanish, Chinese, American Sign Language)
research shows its values in the twenty-first century to be shifting. The Chinese now have a more favorable view of competition than do the Japanese and even, according to the World Values Survey, than do people in the United States (Marsh 2009; World Values Survey 2005–2008).

Values can translate into public policy. For example, the relatively low rate of taxation in the United States reflects more than an aversion to taxes; it reflects popular support for the principle of small government (though major social programs such as Medicare and Social Security have widespread support). However, the relatively low tax rates in the United States also correlate with a relatively high rate of poverty. In contrast, in most other industrialized nations, individualism is less valued, tax rates are much higher, and the poverty rate is far lower. Figure 3.1 shows the relationship between tax rates and poverty rates for thirty industrialized countries.

The link between cultural values and public policy can sometimes have dramatic—even deadly—consequences, as illustrated by the recent experience of Niger, a poor African country beset by periodic food shortages. Niger has long relied on a culture of generosity based on Muslim traditions of charity and communal support to provide for the poor during these shortages (Timberg 2005). Building on this tradition, the government had made a policy of keeping the price of basic food items affordable to help ensure their widespread availability.

In recent years, however, Niger, like many other developing nations, has absorbed Western cultural values emphasizing individualism and deregulated free markets. This cultural change was partly a response to requirements by international institutions, such as the World Bank, that governments eliminate price controls and other market interventions in order to qualify for loans. In Niger, the government abandoned its commitment to price controls. At the same time, the traditional commitment to charity weakened. As Malan Hassane, a local religious leader, commented at the time, “There is nothing like generosity now. Selfishness is gaining ground” (Timberg 2005). When the country suffered a food shortage in 2005, this shift in values from an emphasis on collective responsibility and mutual aid to an emphasis on individual economic success in competitive markets proved disastrous for Niger's...
Sociologists are often reluctant to label the major values of a given society because they do not want to imply that values are unchanging or universal. The most widely cited sociological description of American values appears in the classic book *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation* by Robin Williams (1970). Williams identified fifteen basic value orientations as central to post–World War II society in the United States:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievements and success</th>
<th>Freedom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity and work</td>
<td>Conformity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral orientation</td>
<td>Science and secular rationality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian mores</td>
<td>Nationalism-patriotism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency and practicality</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress</td>
<td>Individual personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material comfort</td>
<td>Racism and related group-superiority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Williams described these value orientations as tendencies and suggested a series of questions to help understand their depth and meaning. For each value on his list—and, we would add, for each value you would include in an updated, twenty-first century list of American values—Williams (1970, 453) would ask a series of questions: “Is it actually an important value in American society? How do we know whether it is or not? Where does it stand in relation to other values? [W]hat groups or subcultures are the main bearers of the value, and what groups or subcultures are indifferent or opposed?” Finally, Williams asks how do the various value systems “work towards or against the integration of the culture as a whole?”

In contrast to Williams, contemporary American sociologists have rarely sought to articulate a list of major American values, but they continue to ask versions of Williams’s probing questions about the sociological significance of values. Summarizing recent research on values, sociologist Robert Wuthnow (2008) recognizes that they explain only partially individuals’ choices, but he notes that “the influence of values on behavior remained evident in study after study; people with conservative values voted Republican, people with religious values attended religious services, people with altruistic values did volunteer work, and so on” (p. 337). In addition, values change over time, especially during times of broad social change. For example, we may ask how, if at all, changes in contemporary society, including globalization and the development of new technologies, are influencing our basic values (Gecas 2008).

Although values vary a great deal from culture to culture, research shows that certain values are common across cultures. A series of studies in dozens of countries over two decades by Shalom Schwartz and his colleagues (Davidov et al. 2008; Schwartz 1992, 1994) has identified ten distinct values that are widely shared and generally understood to have a similar meaning across cultures (Schwartz et al. 2001):

- **Power**
- **Achievement**
- **Hedonism** (the seeking of personal pleasure)
- **Stimulation** (the seeking of excitement and personal challenge)
- **Self-direction**
- **Universalism** (appreciation of and concern for all humanity)
- **Benevolence** (generosity and compassion)
- **Tradition**
- **Conformity** (the desire to blend in)
- **Security**

Of course, the relative importance of each value on this list differs from culture to culture, and the values do not always coexist easily. It may be difficult, for example, to value power and benevolence or security and stimulation equally. Thus different cultures prioritize values differently, and these differences can be a major source of conflict between cultures. For example, theocratic societies such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, which are ruled or dominated by religious authorities, value tradition and conformity. They often dislike what they perceive to be the values of secular Western democracies, such as self-direction, stimulation, and relative hedonism as exemplified by popular notions of “rugged individualism” and the widespread marketing of “extreme” products and experiences.

That some people place a higher priority on one set of values over another can also be a source of conflict within a particular society. Sociologist James Davison Hunter (1991, 1994) has argued that the United States is in the midst of an ongoing culture war, an intense disagreement about core values and moral positions. According to Hunter, the fault lines of this conflict are readily apparent in venues such as the family, schools, and the arts. For example, debates about same-sex marriage are fundamentally conflicts over the definition of marriage and family. In schools, debates about how to teach American history and sex education are part of broader conflicts about patriotism and sexuality. The arts have long been an arena in which the values of free expression and respect for tradition clash. In 2010, for example, the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., removed a video from

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**Chapter 3: Thinking about Culture**

What are the value priorities of the community in which you were raised? In Chapter 16 we explore political culture in the United States, paying attention to the culturally specific norms and practices in the realm of politics.
an exhibit of work on sexual differences after a Catholic organization complained that the video’s depiction of a crucifix covered with ants was “hate speech” (Trescott 2010). In all such cases, debates can become extraordinarily heated because they are rooted in profound differences in values, and these differences often arouse intense reactions. This culture war is waged primarily at the level of ideas, but occasionally it erupts into acts of violence. For example, gays and lesbians have been targeted for harassment and assault and, in a few cases, extremist antiabortion activists have killed doctors who perform abortions.

Are the differences in how various groups prioritize values in the United States so profound, however, that they truly warrant the label culture war? This question has been the subject of much debate among sociologists and other scholars (see, for example, Fiorina 2011; Hunter and Wolfe 2006; McConkey 2001; Thomson 2010). Certainly you will find people with different positions on just about any current social or political issue—from gay marriage and immigration policy to health care reform and the war on terrorism—depending on the values they think are most important. Though people differ in the values they consider most essential, however, they are not necessarily intolerant of other views. Some scholars argue that it is the political elites—politicians seeking to mobilize voters and raise money and political commentators trying to attract audiences and sell books—who highlight differences in values and encourage polarization and extremism. Ordinary citizens are actually far more ambivalent about their own views and more tolerant of others (Baker 2005; Fiorina 2011; Koch and Steelman 2009).

Journalists who use the familiar shorthand “red state” and “blue state” to describe differences between conservative and liberal regions of the United States encourage the notion of a culture war. Identifying each state as simply red or blue implies that each state is fundamentally conservative or liberal and that the two types of states have little in common with each other. In reality, however, each state includes communities with differing views and values that reflect varying degrees of conservatism and liberalism. A map reflecting the complexity of value preferences in the United States would consist of various shades of purple, rather than stark reds and blues (see Map 3.1).

**Beliefs: What Is True?** Whereas a culture’s values are usually a set of broad principles, its beliefs are the specific convictions or opinions that its people generally accept as being true. Our cultural beliefs encourage us to understand fundamental issues in the world in a particular way. Is democracy the best form of government? Should marriage be based on love, or is it primarily an economic arrangement? What constitutes “success” in life? Is violence justifiable in pursuing an important goal? Are all people created equal? Does God...
Beliefs about God and the importance of religion are central to the culture of these societies.

KNOWLEDGE: HOW DO I GET THINGS DONE?
In the context of culture, **knowledge** is the range of information, awareness, and understanding that helps us navigate our world. Sociologists sometimes refer to such knowledge as cultural capital, an idea we explore in more detail in Chapter 9, where we consider class-based cultures. People often take for granted the knowledge they have internalized about their own culture. They learn how to speak, read, and write the language; how to dress appropriately for work; and how to behave properly in different situations. To navigate U.S. culture, for example, you have very likely learned how to read a map, how to use a credit card, how to apply to college, how to select items and pay for them in a supermarket, how to practice safe sex, and how to drive a car. In short, you have learned about the sorts of behavior that are rewarded and necessary for success in this culture.

**Culture shock** is the experience of being disoriented because of a lack of knowledge about an unfamiliar social situation. You are most likely to experience culture shock when you are traveling outside of your own country, as John Wray did in the Shuar.

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**FIGURE 3.2 | THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A NATION’S WEALTH AND THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION TO ITS PEOPLE**

Poorer countries tend to be more religious, whereas wealthier countries tend to be less so. The United States is an exception to this trend, however. Although it is a very wealthy nation, it is far more religious than its comparative wealth would suggest. More than 80 percent of respondents to this survey said religion was important to them, far higher than in the other wealthy countries in the survey. Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project (2008).

Exist? The way people answer these questions depends, in part, on their cultural beliefs. What people believe is, in turn, deeply influenced by the culture of which they are a part.

Belief in a god and concern for religion are widespread but more so in some societies than in others. In general, the importance of religion in a culture declines as people become more educated and affluent. As Figure 3.2 shows, however, there is one major exception to this trend: the United States. In a survey of people in twenty-three countries, 55 percent of people in the United States said religion was “very important” in their lives, more than double the figure for Germany (22 percent) and Australia (21 percent), and more than triple the figure for Britain (18 percent) and France (10 percent) (Pew Global Attitudes Project 2008). Such a relatively high level of religiosity helps to explain why debates about abortion, stem cell research, teaching evolution, and gay rights are often more vocal and intense in the United States than in many other industrialized societies. A higher percentage of people in the United States tend to believe in God than in other developed countries, and these religious beliefs influence political debates.

In poor countries, though, religion plays an even more important role in people’s lives than it does in the United States. An overwhelming percentage of respondents said religion was “very important” in their lives in countries such as Indonesia (95 percent), Pakistan (95 percent), Tanzania (94 percent), and Nigeria (94 percent). Beliefs about God and the importance of religion are central to the culture of these societies.
community in our opening example. In describing a research trip to Kenya, Rachael Irwin (2007) told of her anxiety about riding in a matatu—a minibus typically filled well beyond capacity with people and sometimes goats, driving at “breakneck speeds” on poorly maintained roads. Culture shock can also occur within your own country. When someone raised in a small town visits a big city for the first time, or when a person who is not religious spends time in the home of a devoutly religious family, the visitor may suddenly feel out of place.

Cultural knowledge is essential for survival. People from the United States who are traveling in Australia had better know that motorists in that society drive on the left side of the road—otherwise, they are in for an abrupt case of culture shock! Of course, most cultural knowledge is subtler, involving how to act in order to get something done. When you entered college, you probably had to learn about what makes the culture of higher education different from that of high school.

**NORMS: WHAT IS APPROPRIATE?** Norms are a culture’s rules and expectations for “appropriate” behavior. (Behavior that violates the norms of a culture is often labeled as deviant, a topic we explore in Chapter 8.) In a sense, norms serve as a bridge between a culture’s ideas and its practices since they suggest which practices are appropriate. Norms can tell people what they should do as well as what they should not do. However, norms are not fixed or rigid. For example, smoking in public places—once a practice taken for granted in our culture—now increasingly violates informal norms and local laws. People are now expected (or required) to buckle their seat belts when they are driving or riding in an automobile. As recently as the 1960s, however, many automobiles did not even have seat belts.

As society changes, culture evolves to address new situations. Nowhere is this process more apparent today than in cyberspace. Norms for those who participate in its various venues—sometimes referred to as “netiquette”—developed rapidly, contributing to an emergent culture among Internet users. Different parts of the Internet each have their own norms. E-mail users learn to use “bcc” (blind carbon copy) when they send out a group email so that they do not reveal the email addresses of their friends or colleagues. At online discussion groups, new users learn to read the FAQ (“frequently asked questions”) page before asking questions. Social networking sites such as Facebook strongly discourage “flaming”—posts that attack, insult, or ridicule other users. If you are a regular Internet user, such norms may seem obvious to you now, but they had to be created over time. Like all new users, you had to learn them at some point.

Social norms do not always keep up with technological change, however. In the 1920s, sociologist William Ogburn (1922) coined the term cultural lag to describe the ways that new technological developments often outpace the norms that govern our collective experiences with these new technologies. For instance, recent developments in digital photography and the proliferation of high-speed Internet access have made it extremely easy for many people to post photos and videos online for wide public viewing. However, the norms that define what is appropriate to make public, how to distribute such images, and what privacy means in this context are still catching up to the technology. Perhaps this concept helps to explain the posting of photos of alcohol-fueled high school parties on Facebook or the “sexting” of nude photos among teenagers. As these examples suggest, cultural definitions of what is—or should be—public and private information are lagging behind the development of the Internet. New norms and behaviors will undoubtedly emerge and solidify as we advance further into the digital age.
Cultural norms for social interaction vary depending on whether the interaction is face-to-face, over the telephone, via e-mail, on social networking sites such as Facebook, through text messaging, or on Twitter. When we interact face-to-face, we use more than words to communicate; we use our tone of voice, hand gestures, and facial expressions, as well. When we send e-mail and text messages, we do not have these additional means of expression, which is why emoticons—symbols such as ;o) or :o( created by text characters—or abbreviations like LOL are so useful in online communication. Also, some topics are not appropriate for certain types of communication. Would e-mailing a friend to ask him to go out for pizza be appropriate, or not? How about breaking off a romantic relationship via text message?

Society enforces most norms informally. If your cell phone rings during a movie, for example, be prepared for dirty looks from those sitting near you. However, more formal regulations—like a university’s code of ethics or the legal system—serve to reinforce particularly significant norms. The study of deviance and crime is linked closely to the study of culture since both are largely about violations of a culture’s norms.

**Norms that are strictly enforced, with potentially severe penalties for violating them, are called mores (pronounced MORE-ays).** Contemporary mores in the United States forbid physical or psychological abuse of one’s children, for example. Those who violate such mores face public shame, potential loss of their children, and the possibility of a prison sentence. In contrast, the term *folkways* describes *group habits or customs that are common in a given culture.* Those who violate folkways are not likely to be subject to punishment (Sumner 1906). It may be customary to wear a bathing suit to swim, for example, but those who go swimming in jeans are likely to face only some surprised glances.

Taken together, values, knowledge, beliefs, and norms—the ideas of a culture—help to shape people’s orientation toward the world, providing an unwritten guidebook on what to think and how to behave. By studying the ideas of a culture, we focus our attention on how people make sense of their experiences. Understanding what people value, believe, and know and what people define as appropriate and deviant reveals a great deal about the complex workings of society—your own, as well as those of other societies. To communicate the ideas of our culture to one another, however, we need symbols and, in particular, language.

**Communicating Culture: Symbols and Language**

A symbol is anything—a sound, a gesture, an image, an object—that represents something else. An image of five interlocking rings represents the Olympic Games. A red light means “stop.”

An upraised forefinger placed on the lips means “quiet.” The letters d-o-g together represent the sound “dog,” which in English represents a domesticated four-legged creature (which, in turn, represents faithful companionship to many Americans).

The association between a symbol and the thing it represents is arbitrary and culturally defined. The people of Indonesia recognize a banner with a band of red over a band of white as their national flag; turn that banner upside down, however, and you have instead the Polish national flag. In most languages other than English, “dog” is a meaningless sound (and in some cultures the animal itself might more likely represent dinner than companionship). Similarly the same symbol can have different meanings in different cultures. In Mexico, raising your hand with a circle formed by the thumb and forefinger is an obscene gesture; in the United States it represents “OK.” A “thumbs-up” gesture has a positive connotation in some societies but is an insult (“Up yours!”) in Australia, Russia, Greece, Iraq, and much of Western Africa. In many societies, nodding your head up and down means yes, whereas turning it from left to right means no, but in Bulgaria the opposite is true.

Culture is fundamentally symbolic, and it is through symbols that we communicate and reinforce the elements of our culture to one another and pass them on to our children. As the Through a Sociological Lens box makes clear, cultural symbols in many forms can evoke emotionally powerful associations. However, one form of symbolic communication, language, is our primary vehicle for cultural transmission.

**LANGUAGE** A language is an elaborate system of symbols that allows people to communicate with one another in complex ways. Other animals have call systems that allow them to alert each other about their immediate environment—the presence of predators, for example. Human language, in contrast, is unique in its ability to convey information about objects and situations that are not immediately present. With language we can converse about events that happened in the past and plans we are making for the future, and we can even relate stories
Symbols can be a powerful means of representing cultural beliefs, especially in the areas of religion and politics. The meaning we give a particular symbol can vary by culture, however. When the symbol is a potent one, the various meanings can be a source of confusion and sometimes conflict.

One of the most controversial symbols in recent American history has been the “Southern Cross.” This flag was never the official flag of the Confederacy, but rather was one of a number of battle flags used by Confederate forces during the Civil War. In the 1940s the Ku Klux Klan adopted the flag, and in the 1950s supporters of racial segregation used the flag as a prominent symbol of their cause. Today, various white supremacist groups still use the flag as their emblem. As a result, for many in the United States the flag symbolizes the fight to maintain slavery as well as recent and contemporary racist movements. For some Southerners, however, the contemporary use of the flag is not racist. To them it represents “heritage not hate.”

Sociologist Lori Holyfield and her colleagues (2009) sought to untangle the complex meanings of the confederate flag, noting that previous research indicates that “Confederate symbols accommodate extremely disparate meanings of southern pride and heritage versus white supremacy and racial conflict” (p. 518). They conducted focus group discussions with white college students at a large southern university. After reading aloud a news article about a controversy involving the Confederate flag in Leesburg, Virginia, groups discussed their views of the controversy and opinions of the flag.

The authors heard only rare instances of overt racism in these focus groups. Instead, they found that white students typically sought to downplay the racial meanings associated with the Confederate flag or became defensive and diverted the discussion away from racial issues. In fact, faced with a highly charged symbol, most of these white students had difficulty explaining their own understanding of southern heritage or the meaning of the flag, even as they refused the implication that the flag is a racist symbol.

In analyzing the ways these focus groups largely ignored history and disregarded persistent differences in power and privilege, Holyfield and her colleagues (2009) suggest that, even if unintended, the use of such symbols can convey racist messages. They write, “participants need not approve of uses of the Confederate Flag or racism in order to participate in and perpetuate racist discourses” (p. 525).

The controversy over the Confederate flag is part of a long history of symbols carrying multiple—and sometimes conflicting—meanings. For example, many Christians use the cross, symbolizing the crucifixion of Jesus, as a sign of their faith. But the cross has been used by other, non-Christian cultures, as well. In ancient Egypt the cross was a sign of life. The ancient Greek cross—with vertical and horizontal arms of equal length—represented the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

Perhaps the most reviled symbol of the past century is the swastika, now forever linked with Nazism. But the swastika is an ancient symbol used in many different cultures. For example, it was a variation on the Christian cross; a Hindu symbol associated with the ferocious goddess, Kali; and a Navajo symbol related to healing rituals.

**think about it**

1. What symbols do you encounter in daily life? Are they used in other contexts as well?

2. There has been a great deal of debate in recent years about whether statehouses in the South should fly the flag associated with the Confederacy. Where do you stand on this issue? Do you think the flag is simply a symbol of the South’s heritage or a symbol of hate?
Sharing a language, however, does not necessarily mean sharing a culture. English, for example, is spoken in many countries worldwide, in some as a first language and in many others as a nearly universal second language, but the people of these countries do not all share a common culture. They usually do, however, speak a particular dialect of English. A dialect is a variant of a language with its own distinctive accent, vocabulary, and in some cases grammatical characteristics. For example, what Americans call a “stove,” the English call a “cooker.” Further, a “truck” and an “elevator” in the United States would be called a “lorry” and a “lift” in England.

**The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis** The principle of linguistic relativity, developed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf and popularly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, suggests that because of their different cultural content and structure, languages affect how their speakers think and behave. For example, researchers have found that people more easily identify color differences when they have a language to describe different shades of similar colors (Kay and Kempton 1984). That is, having words to differentiate distinct colors in the red spectrum (including scarlet, crimson, rose, magenta, and maroon) helps us to see those different colors.

This hypothesis is controversial, however. Many scholars believe it overstates the influence of language on thought (Pinker 2007). They point out that, like other aspects of culture, languages adapt to changing circumstances and that speakers absorb or invent new vocabulary for things as they become culturally important.

Nonetheless, language reflects the broader cultural contexts in which it evolved. As a result, every culture tends to develop unique words, phrases, and expressions that are difficult, if not impossible, to translate into another language. In that sense, language helps to shape how we see the world. For example, the Mandarin word guanxi (pronounced “gwan-shee”) translates literally as something like “connection,” but it refers to a sort of social currency in traditional Chinese society. People can accumulate guanxi by doing good deeds for others or by giving them gifts, and they can “spend” their guanxi by asking for favors owed. In a society in which bonds of obligation form a crucial part of social life, such a word has a significant cultural meaning that cannot be translated easily into English (Moore 2004).

**Language and Social Interaction** As we saw in Chapter 1, the symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes micro-level interactions—people’s everyday behaviors—as the building blocks of society. Rather than focusing on large-scale institutions and processes, symbolic interactionists look at how people make sense of the world through the meanings they attach to their own and others’ actions. As a result, sociologists working in this tradition are particularly attuned to the importance of the role of symbols and language in human interaction.

For example, through intensive interviews with clinically depressed adults, sociologist David Karp (1996) found that the specific language that they use helps to define their reality. This self-definition in turn shapes the actions people with depression can envision, and ultimately, initiate. Early in their experiences, respondents often did not have an adequate vocabulary for naming their trouble.

By eventually coming to name their condition as “depression,” they began to see it in a new light. In naming their experience depression, Karp’s respondents developed a new sense of self, which shaped their response to their pain. Their illness identity also influenced how they interacted with family and friends, and helped to break the social isolation that is at the center of the depression experience. They also had to grapple with the exact meaning of this new label, however. One of Karp’s interviewees says: “I think of it less as an illness and more something that society defines. That’s part of it, but then, it is physical. Doesn’t that make it an illness? That’s a question I ask myself a lot. Depression is a special case because everyone gets depressed. . . . I think that I define it as not an illness. It’s a condition. . . . It’s something that I can deal with. It’s something that I can live with. I don’t have to define it as a problem” (Karp 1996, 53). In contrast, other interviewees were comfortable with the definition of depression as “mental illness” and worked to find a “cure”—both distinctly medical ways to define and interpret the situation.

Karp alludes repeatedly to the importance of language throughout his study. He points out that the ideas of “anxiety” and “depression” do not exist in many languages and, therefore, that people who speak those languages cannot use them to define their reality. Even the title of Karp’s study—Speaking of Sadness—alludes to the importance of language.

**Reproducing Culture: Behavior**

In the context of culture, behaviors are the actions associated with a group that help to reproduce a distinct way of life. When parents remind their children to tuck in their shirt, greet people with a firm handshake, and say “thank you” in response to a gift or an act of kindness, they are helping to encourage a particular set of behaviors considered worthwhile in U.S. culture. These are small matters, but the accumulation of people’s many small, everyday actions—at home, at work, at play, at worship—helps distinguish one culture from another.

Behavior also calls attention to the difference between ideal culture, what the members of a culture report to be their values, beliefs, and norms, and real culture, what they actually do, which may or may not reflect the ideal. For example, gender equality is an increasingly professed cultural value in American
society, but in most two-career households, women do more housework than men (Hook 2010).

Although culture is a social phenomenon, it also permeates the most private and intimate parts of our lives. Take the case of body hair. Do you shave your legs? Your underarms? Your pubic hair? Your head? Your face? In most cases, your answers to those questions are influenced heavily by cultural norms. Since World War I, for example, most women in the United States have shaved their legs and underarms, a behavior that seems “normal” to them. Yet this practice is less common in many European nations (where in some cases it is associated with prostitution), and it is unheard of in other parts of the world. Similarly, men’s shaving their faces (but not their underarms or legs) is the norm in much of our society.

Even sexual practices—perhaps the most intimate of all human activity—vary significantly from culture to culture. Cultures differ in their attitudes toward masturbation, premarital sex, homosexuality and bisexuality, prostitution, and other forms of sexual behavior. Even feeling discomfort, awkwardness, or titillation at reading about topics like body hair and sexual practices reflects a culture-laden response. Although advertisers routinely appeal to cultural norms about hair removal to sell products, and sexual imagery permeates the popular media, most people in the United States rarely engage in frank discussion about such topics.

Cultural behavior also encompasses larger scale, organized phenomena such as religious and political rituals (the president’s annual state of the union speech), theatrical entertainment (rock concerts), and sports spectaculars (Super Bowl). Indeed, the widespread popularity of the Super Bowl—and the behaviors surrounding it, including those of viewers as well as the athletes and other participants—likely reflects some unique features of U.S. culture that Americans may take for granted but that may well appear odd to someone from a different culture. Thinking sociologically, what is the meaning of such an event for viewers? What might the popularity of the

The Super Bowl is a cultural phenomenon that has as much to do with the extravaganza as it does with football. Major corporations unveil new advertising campaigns during the broadcast, international pop stars perform in choreographed half-time shows, and the U.S. Air Force stages a high-profile flyover just before kick-off each year. Watching the Super Bowl has become an annual ritual for millions of Americans—even those who don’t necessarily like football very much.

CORE CONCEPTS CHALLENGE

Put yourself in the shoes of someone from a different culture who watches a football game in the United States for the first time. What would that person make of the game? Might it seem violent, for example? Now, think of how you might react if you were to watch a game you are unfamiliar with, like cricket, a wildly popular sport in much of the rest of the world.
Super Bowl—even among people who don’t like football—tell us about the ideas and values of U.S. culture? In short, understanding culture requires us to examine the complex ways people derive meaning from the cultural behaviors of everyday life. People both create culture and are shaped by it.

**Objects: The Artifacts of Culture**

Sociologists often refer to the principal elements of material culture as *cultural objects* (also sometimes called “cultural artifacts”), which are the physical items that are created by and associated with people who share a culture. Cultural objects are often variations on basic items found in daily life. Consider the many varieties of bread, for instance. Tortillas, baguettes, bagels, and puri bread are cultural objects commonly associated with Mexican, French, Jewish, and Indian cultures, respectively. We live in a culture in which electronic devices of all sorts—such as computers, cell phones, and digital music players—are significant cultural objects.

Cultural objects are found not only in your home, however. Highly prized creations such as works of art or religious icons are also cultural objects. Museums are filled with both ordinary and extraordinary objects that help to tell the story of a particular culture. And the museums themselves, as well as other public buildings, peoples’ homes, the streets and highways that connect them, gas stations, water reservoirs, and indeed any aspect of the landscape used or modified by humans—are also cultural objects.

Popular media products—such as books and magazines, films and television programs, songs and photographs—are also cultural objects. Analyzing popular media content often reveals a good deal of information about the culture that produced it at a particular moment in history. At the same time, it can be difficult to see the underlying assumptions embedded in the popular media of one’s own culture.

**Culture, Ideology, and Power**

We have seen how culture helps to define our world, providing models for appropriate attitudes and behavior. How we dress and speak, whom we admire and despise, and how we mourn and mark holidays are all shaped by our immersion in a particular culture. Since people are typically deeply imbedded within their own culture, they usually find it difficult to see its underlying ideas. Sociologists have long paid attention to the assumptions built into any culture, arguing that what people take for granted is one of the keys to recognizing how culture and power are intertwined. One way to understand the meeting of culture and power is to understand ideology.

Ideology is a tricky term that is used in a variety of ways. Sociologists typically define ideology as a system of meaning that helps define and explain the world and that makes value judgments about that world. Simply put, an ideology is a comprehensive worldview. When we think sociologically about a culture’s ideology, we inevitably pay close attention to the most basic assumptions the people living within that culture make, and the consequences of those assumptions.

Within each culture, there is a *dominant ideology*, a widely held and regularly reinforced set of assumptions that generally support the current social system and serve the interests of authorities. Even when most people within a culture agree about how the world works, though, most scholars concur that a dominant ideology cannot prevent the emergence of alternative worldviews. Instead, different ideological perspectives, representing different interests with unequal power, engage in a kind of cultural contest. Some ideas and practices are so deeply familiar that most of us have difficulty thinking critically about them or even imagining alternatives.

In considering how culture works through ideology, we need to remember that our commonsense assumptions, the things we take for granted, suggest a particular understanding of the social world, and such assumptions have consequences. In the United States, for example, many people believe that it is simply a matter of common sense that women are better nurturers than men, that education is a route to economic success, and that the United States promotes democracy around the world. When people adopt such commonsense assumptions—as they do with a wide range of ideas—they are also accepting a certain set of beliefs, or an ideology, about the social world.

Similarly, ideology shapes what we define as “natural.” We generally think that what is natural is more enduring and stable than what is created by humans. As a result, the structures we define as natural come to be seen as permanent and therefore difficult to challenge. Consider some examples of social relationships that are often seen as natural. Is it natural that some people are rich and others are poor, that most citizens are disconnected from politics, or that people prefer to live in neighborhoods with others of the same racial or ethnic background? If all these situations are simply natural, then we have...
little reason to be concerned about economic inequality, political apathy, or residential segregation because they are not social problems but the natural order of things. What people think of as natural and normal, then, is fundamentally about ideology.

To effectively wield power, those with power within a culture must continually reinforce the idea that certain assumptions are simply “common sense” and “natural” because people’s life experiences are likely to lead them to question these assumptions. (In Chapter 5 we explore this link between culture and power, especially as it relates to justifying inequality.) In recent years, for example, widespread cultural assumptions about the definition of marriage have weakened. Gay and lesbian activists demanding the right to same-sex marriage have challenged, sometimes successfully, the longstanding belief that marriage is restricted to a relationship between a man and a woman.

In addition, even in the most repressive societies, some people will not accept the dominant ideology, some people may resist it, and changing historical conditions will undermine certain aspects of it. Ultimately, when we look at ideology from a sociological point of view, we can see the ways that culture is a contested arena that defines our underlying, and often changing, conceptions of the world.

Cultural Diversity

Consider the case of “Billy,” described in a manual used to train volunteers with CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), a nonprofit network of advocates for abused and neglected children. After making a visit to observe his home environment, a social worker recommended that Billy be kept in foster care (National CASA 2007). She cited the following reasons in her report:

- Billy did not have a space of his own and had to sleep in a room with several other people.
- Billy’s mother did not seem to be his primary caregiver, instead letting his grandmother take on that responsibility.
- Billy did not appear to be affectionate with his grandmother; indeed, he seemed intimidated by or even scared of her since he would not look at her directly but instead averted his eyes.

Billy, however, was Native American, and the cultural practices of his tribe explained these supposedly problematic behaviors. In some Native American tribes, for example—as well as in Japanese, Hawaiian, and other cultures—leaving a child alone in his or her own room is considered a form of neglect. Instead, people in these cultures maintain close and continuous contact between a child and other family members, which they see as essential to healthy and loving development. In addition, in some Native American cultures it is perfectly normal for a parent to defer to a grandparent when it comes to child-rearing decisions. Leaving children in the care of grandparents is not considered neglect but a sign of respect for elders in the family. Finally, in averting his eyes, Billy was not showing fear but rather a traditional sign of respect for his grandmother, with whom he in fact had a close and loving relationship. If the social worker had had a better understanding of Billy’s culture, she could have avoided the inappropriate recommendation.

Social tasks—preparing food, creating shelter, raising children, entertaining, governing—are universal in all cultures, but the methods people use to accomplish these tasks vary dramatically. Thus culture is highly diverse, varying not only across time, but also among different societies as well as within a single society. This variation is one of the reasons why “cultural awareness” training is an important part of many professions. Billy’s social worker could have benefited from more cultural awareness. For a tragic example of the need for cultural awareness training, see the Sociology Matters box on page 72.

Understanding the diversity across cultures in different societies is more important now than ever before. For much of human history, only a few travelers interacted with people from cultures other than their own. Travel was difficult, expensive, and often dangerous. Today, widespread mobility, a global economy, and technological advances have brought people from many distinct cultures into more frequent and ongoing contact. Mass media—especially television and the Internet—have introduced people to the ideas, images, sounds, and practices of different cultures, even if they don’t know the languages people within them speak. As the Sociology Works box on page 73 illustrates, understanding cultural diversity is crucial in today’s business world.

To understand the impact of cultural diversity, it is essential to grasp the various types of cultures within our own and other societies, their positions in relation to one another, and how they interact in what has become an increasingly multicultural world.

Dominant Culture, Subcultures, and Countercultures

When we talk about societies—our own or those of other countries—it is common to speak about them as sharing a single culture (for example, “U.S. culture” or “Afghan culture”). To a degree, this is true; societies share basic cultural features. However, societies are large-scale, complex arrangements that inevitably contain internal differences, as well. Competing cultural systems exist even in what appear to be homogeneous societies.

Rather than consisting of a single culture, most societies contain a dominant culture, a culture that permeates the society and that represents the ideas and practices of those in positions of power, as well as a number of subcultures, cultures associated with smaller groups in the society that have distinct norms, values, and lifestyles that set them apart from the dominant culture.

Political and educational institutions, major businesses, the mass media, and educational institutions, among others, mostly reflect the dominant culture. For example, until quite recently (and some would argue, still today) the dominant
Cultural Competence and Health Care

Lia Lee was a Hmong child living in California. The Hmong are an ethnic group from the Southeast Asian country of Laos whose culture is rooted in a rural way of life. When Lia was born in a California county hospital, her mother spoke no English, and the medical staff spoke no Hmong. At just three months old, Lia experienced fainting episodes, which doctors attributed to epileptic seizures. Over the next four years, Lia's doctors struggled to control her symptoms by prescribing a dozen different drugs in dosages and combinations that changed more than twenty times.

This dizzying array of treatments would have been confusing to anyone, but Lia's family was especially ill-prepared to understand the process. Illiterate even in their own Hmong language, they were able to follow their doctor's advice only intermittently. Instead, they turned for relief to their culture's familiar religious beliefs about illness. According to that tradition, Lia's fainting spells were caused by the temporary departure of her soul from her body, a condition whose name roughly translates as "the spirit catches you and you fall down." Lia's parents sent away to Thailand for sacred charms to protect her and changed the child's name to fool the evil spirits (Underwood and Adler 2005).

As U.S. society becomes ever more culturally diverse, health care workers are increasingly treating people like Lia and her family, whose beliefs about sickness and health differ dramatically from those of mainstream Western medicine. To treat these patients effectively, health care workers need to pay close attention to their cultural beliefs and traditions. Unfortunately, the Western doctors did not understand the Hmong culture, and Lia's family did not understand the doctors' efforts. As a result, the medical treatment was ineffective. Four years after her initial symptoms, Lia experienced a massive seizure that left her in a vegetative state. She remains in a coma today, well into her twenties.

Lia's story is perhaps an extreme example, but dealing with gaps in communication between patients and health care workers caused by cultural differences is a very real and growing challenge. The federal government, along with several universities, private foundations, and organizations representing health care providers, has launched a variety of public and private initiatives to promote and ensure cultural competence—the ability to understand and address the needs of people from different cultures (Rees and Ruiz 2003). For example, some states have enacted regulations that require medical facilities to provide culturally competent care to groups that make up a certain percentage of the community's population. As one key element of this care, facilities are required to make available interpreters fluent in both the language and the cultural traditions of different groups. Organizations such as Resources for Cross Cultural Health Care (diversityrx.org) have stepped up to the challenge. One recent study found that medical interpreters, those who facilitate bilingual communication in hospitals, often act as an essential part of a medical team, becoming informal co-diagnosticians, even though these interpreters do not have formal medical training (Hsieh 2007).

As part of their training, medical students are also learning about the important role of culture in their patients' lives. One book has become required reading in more than 100 medical schools. Titled The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down, it's the tragic story of Lia Lee (Fadiman 1998).

think about it

1. Have you or your family ever had trouble communicating with a doctor or been uncertain about what is happening at a hospital? If so, do you think cultural differences help explain why?
2. How might cultural differences cause problems with communication in school or at work?
As an undergraduate, Dean Foster didn’t have a clue what he would do with sociology, but he thought the subject was fascinating. He found especially appealing the basic premise that “we can understand how we work as cultural and social beings and use this understanding to improve our collective lives.” When he looks back today and considers the benefits he gained from sociology, his list is extensive: “My professional career, cross-cultural friendships, life goals, and purpose.”

Foster is the founder and president of DFA (Dean Foster Associates) Intercultural Global Solutions. DFA helps organizations and businesses working with other cultures around the globe to develop intercultural competencies. Foster spends much of his time travelling to present intercultural seminars, give speeches, and conduct interviews around the world. Describing his work as the “perfect job,” Foster notes that “I meet wonderful people from places I only could have dreamed I would visit and work in as a child. I help deal with important cross-cultural challenges in ways that I like to believe change people’s lives.”

When working internationally, businesses must anticipate and address some common differences among cultures. For example, different cultures have various ideas about time. Some value punctuality; in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland being late is considered a sign of disrespect and incompetence. In the countries of Latin America, by contrast, there is more latitude when it comes to meeting times and deadlines.

In addition, norms governing appropriate relationships between employers and their employees can vary a great deal from one culture to another. In some countries, employees are expected to be deferential to their bosses, avoiding eye contact with them and obeying instructions without comment. In other countries, employees are expected to be candid, although still respectful, with their bosses, giving their input on the task at hand. In all these cases, global businesses must understand the cultural norms within a given society—and convey that understanding to their employees—if they are to communicate and work successfully in international settings.

A cottage industry of diversity training specialists such as Dean Foster—often with backgrounds in sociology, anthropology, and psychology—has emerged in response to the growing need of businesses for cultural awareness in today’s global economy. Foster notes, however, that when he was a student, “there was no such field as intercultural training, so there were no internships, mentors, or courses of study.” In fact, he first earned a living as a songwriter and folksinger, playing in clubs in New York’s Greenwich Village. By the mid-1980s, though, he had used his sociological knowledge to start one of the first intercultural training consultancies.

Foster’s work, he says, forces him “to constantly expect that which cannot be imagined, a testament to the power of culture, and the limits it places on us as cultural beings. I find this is the same kind of challenge that sociology places on us when we try to imagine how is it that we who we are and behave as we behave. I deal with this question professionally every day.”

**think about it**

1. When international businesspeople come to the United States, what do you think they need to know about culturally specific work routines that people in this country are likely to take for granted?
2. In your travels, have you experienced uncertainty about basic cultural norms? What happened? What did you learn as a result?

Members of a subculture, then, share a common identity, whether they are extreme-sports enthusiasts, science fiction fans, or Civil War reenactors. Although subcultures typically do not have a formal membership structure, they usually develop a specialized language or style and specific behaviors and objects relevant to their culture. Trekkers—a subculture consisting of fans of the television and movie franchise *Star Trek*—share a language about the fictional Starfleet and a science-fiction version of future space exploration, and they know the various *Star Trek* heroes and villains and the lessons of their multigenerational adventures in great detail. Attending *Star Trek* fan conventions, dressing up as specific *Star Trek* characters; and collecting *Star Trek* memorabilia—even if some of your friends and coworkers think such behavior is
A subculture that organizes itself in opposition to the dominant culture may be categorized as a **counterculture**, which **champions values and lifestyles distinctly opposed to those of the dominant culture**. Members of countercultures challenge widely held values and attitudes and reject mainstream cultural norms.

In the past half-century, a series of youth-based countercultures have challenged aspects of the dominant culture in U.S. society. For example, young hippies in the 1960s had a distinctive lifestyle and language. They challenged traditional authority by experimenting with recreational drugs, practicing communal living, espousing “free love,” and protesting against the Vietnam War. Punks in the 1970s developed their own particular style, including then-atypical piercings and provocative hairstyles, along with a defiant attitude. In recent decades, hip-hop has introduced new music, language, dance, and fashion at the same time that those within hip-hop culture advance a powerful critique of racism and racial discrimination.

Subcultures—including countercultures—often introduce innovation and change to mainstream culture. Features of a subculture that might appear radical or threatening may over time be incorporated into the dominant culture. For example, in U.S. society, tattoos were once found exclusively among various subcultures such as sailors and bikers but have long since moved into the mainstream. Access to birth control, racial intermarriage, equal rights for women, and a host of other social reforms began their life as part of the beliefs and values of political subcultures, only to achieve broad mainstream acceptance eventually. Which aspects of today’s subcultures do you think are likely to be incorporated into mainstream culture in your lifetime?

**High Culture and Popular Culture**

Societies contain not only a dominant culture and various subcultures, but also different cultural expressions that are related to people’s position in society. Sociologists have in fact long recognized the relationship between culture and economic inequality. **High culture** refers to cultural forms associated with elites that are widely recognized as valuable and legitimate. Examples of high culture include art galleries, the opera, classical music, and literature. Historically, high culture has been the domain of the wealthy and highly educated. Although others may not be formally excluded from these activities, their expense and the specialized knowledge that is often needed to understand and enjoy them can serve to restrict access to those who are able to afford them.

Proponents of high culture may define these cultural forms as the best and most enduring representations of a nation’s culture. After all, disciplines that study high culture such as art history and music education are typically part of the high school and college curriculum, and many people associate the very idea of becoming “cultured” with visiting museums or attending the symphony. In contrast, **popular culture** refers to cultural forms that are widespread and commonly embraced...
Popular culture includes such widely accessible forms as television programs, Hollywood films, rock concerts, spectator sports, and amusement parks. To enjoy popular culture, a person generally does not need a substantial amount of money or specialized knowledge.

The distinction between high and popular culture suggests a fundamental conflict. As sociologist Herbert Gans (1999) maintains, “advocates of high culture attack popular culture as a mass culture that has harmful effects on both individuals consuming it and on society as a whole. The users of popular culture fight back mostly by ignoring the critique and rejecting high culture” (pp. 3–4). In the early twenty-first century, however, the distinction between high and popular culture has become blurry. More people, including elites, now consume a diverse mixture of high and popular culture.

Various hybrid cultural forms—such as graffiti art exhibited in museums or the pop musician Sting’s performing his songs with the Royal Philharmonic Concert Orchestra—mix elements from both types; and many forms of popular culture, including highly rated television programs and best-selling novels, are widely enjoyed by elites as well as other demographic groups. Nevertheless, as Gans points out, the distinction between high and popular culture remains helpful since the cultural choices people make are still influenced significantly by their social standing.

**The Commercialization of Culture**

Hector is driving to school with the radio playing when one of his favorite songs comes on. He turns up the volume and sings along as the artist praises a certain line of designer clothes. The lyrics are a result of work by Maven Strategies, a company that negotiates deals between major corporate advertisers and hip-hop artists. A corporation will pay the artists to mention its brand names of sneakers, watches, vodka, and other products. Although most songs do not include paid advertisements, in 2004—the year Maven Strategies began cutting such deals—product brand names were mentioned almost 1,000 times in the top twenty singles on the Billboard charts (Williams 2005). This type of product placement, which continues today, is just one of many ways that commercialism—the marketing and sale of products—has become entrenched in contemporary popular culture.

Today, many cultural objects are commodities—products to be bought and sold—and these objects are increasingly produced by corporate conglomerates (Mosco 2009; Schiller 1989; Schor 2005). The stories children learn and the music people listen to are produced and marketed by multinational corporations like Disney and Sony. Corporations now sponsor a broad range of cultural creations, from rock concerts to museum exhibits (Rectanus 2002). From expensive tickets to major events to one-dollar DVD rentals from a kiosk, we spend much of our lives—and many of our dollars—buying cultural products.

This focus on commerce has meant that the language and images of advertising have increasingly entered public and private space, surrounding us with pictures and symbols whose primary purpose is to get us to buy something. Some communities see this as a problem and are fighting back, however. In 2007, new “Clean City” laws went into effect in São Paulo, Brazil—a city of 11 million people—that essentially banned all outdoor advertising. As the president of the city council noted, “What we are aiming for is a complete change of culture [. . .] things were out of hand and the population has made it clear it wants this” (Roher 2006).

With the ever-growing influence of commercialism, people increasingly tend to measure the value of most cultural objects by their profitability. How many copies of that book or this CD were sold? What was the highest rated television program last week? What were the box office standings for movies released this weekend? Such concerns reflect a culture in which the dollar sign increasingly denotes “success.” As we see throughout this book, especially in Chapter 14, the commercialization of cultural and social life—its packaging, promotion, and sale by major corporations—is an important feature of our changing world, both in the United States and globally.

**Multiculturalism**

Because so many societies today contain many subcultures and cultural diversity, there is an increasing emphasis on multiculturalism, the recognition, valuing, and protection of the distinct cultures that make up a society. Rather than assume that all people will adopt the ideas and practices of the dominant culture—a process known as assimilation—multicultural societies accept, accommodate, and even celebrate differences in language, religion, customs, dress, traditions, and beliefs. Institutions that acknowledge and accommodate different cultures, such as certain businesses and universities, can also be considered multicultural.

**thinking about culture**

Which policies does your college have that promote multiculturalism?

In Chapter 10, *culture* helps us to understand how various racial and ethnic groups have interacted in the United States throughout its history.
Because they live in a multicultural society, many people in the United States are exposed regularly to a number of different cultures. Consider the variety of ethnic foods that you can choose from. Major U.S. cities today are likely to have restaurants featuring the food of many different cultures, including Italian, Mexican, Greek, Thai, Chinese, Ethiopian, and Indian cuisine, among others. Fairs and festivals celebrate the food, dress, music, and dances of various cultures. More significantly, in communities that are home to a variety of cultural groups, you are also likely to find institutions associated with these groups, such as temples, mosques, churches, and other places of worship. Businesses such as sari shops and halal butchers sell products not available in mainstream dress shops and grocery stores. Of course, the presence of different cultural groups often means a variety of languages, as well. Today’s major cities are often home to people who speak dozens of different languages—and their school systems must cope with this linguistic diversity.

Because of the nature of a multicultural society, a significant number of people within it grow up and live their lives defined by more than one culture. If a student speaks English at school but a different language at home, that bilingual capability is a sure sign that he or she lives in two different cultures at the same time. Some immigrant families straddle the society and culture into which they were born and where they now live (Smith and Gurnizo 1998). Some travel back and forth to their countries of origin; others send money to aid relatives there. Some are even involved in the political affairs of their native countries (Levitt 2004). Television and the Internet help people stay in touch with the news and entertainment culture of their native countries, even while they live in their newly adopted homes. For example, the satellite service Dish Network offers a variety of packages with channels based on countries and regions, such as Africa, China, South Asia, and Israel, and programming in languages such as French, German, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Farsi, Arabic, and Urdu.

People who live in a multicultural society have an extraordinary opportunity to learn about and appreciate the rich diversity of human cultures. Diversity also brings with it challenges and problems, however, as people with different ways of life attempt to coexist. Unfortunately, cultural differences often lead to inequality and conflict as groups with more power oppress, exploit, or otherwise discriminate against those who are different and who have less power. The long, ugly history of religious conflict, ethnic clashes, racist violence, and warfare between nations is one result of this tendency. Therefore, to understand culture more fully, we must inevitably study conflict, relations of power (a topic explored in Chapter 5), and the domination of some groups by others.

CULTURE: CONSENSUS AND CONFLICT
People from the same culture may share the same language, religion, worldview, history, and traditions. When this happens, cultures nurture and promote consensus, cohesiveness, and solidarity through a shared collective identity. However, just as the common bond of culture creates a sense of “us,” it can also create a sense of “them”—those outside the culture who are different in some way. Perhaps the outsiders speak a different language, practice a different religion, dress differently, or are from a different social class. Whatever the distinction, as those who share a culture increase the sense that they have a common bond, they often have a tendency to marginalize, belittle, or even demonize “outsiders” who have a different culture.

Cultural conflict is most likely to emerge when values and beliefs differ among different cultures. Contrasting beliefs about religion and clashes over core values have been the source of or justification for many conflicts over the centuries. Unlike questions that can be answered with scientific evidence, disputes about values and beliefs cannot be resolved by appeals to reason. The cultural conflicts that result from these disputes can be intense and ongoing.

One source of cultural conflict is ethnocentrism, the judging of other cultures by the standards of one’s own on the assumption that one’s own is superior. Out of ignorance, the social worker mentioned earlier in this chapter was being ethnocentric in judging the Native American family’s childrearing practices through the lens of her own culture. Had she known more about how children are brought up in that society, she would have understood that the family had a different approach that could also achieve the goal of raising a healthy child. This family’s experience is a relatively mild example, but ethnocentrism can have harsh and even violent consequences if members of one culture act upon a conviction that their ideas, values, and
way of life are superior to those of another culture. An ethnocentric worldview can be the source of xenophobia, the unreasonable fear and hatred of foreigners or people from other cultures, which, at its extreme, can result in genocide—the deliberate and systematic destruction of a cultural, racial, or political group. What types of ethnocentrism are most prevalent in the United States today?

Much of the history of colonialism, in which one country conquers or dominates others, is the story of ethnocentrism in action. The Europeans who conquered much of the world from the sixteenth century into the twentieth were confident that their way of life was superior to that of the people whose lands they colonized. They often sought to “civilize” the native peoples, teaching them their language, and converting them to Christianity. As the native peoples resisted, the result was centuries of conflict.

In contrast to ethnocentrism, cultural relativism is the practice of understanding a culture by its own standards. Cultural relativism does not require adopting or agreeing with the ideas and practices of another culture, but rather making the effort to understand the culture on its own terms and with a willingness to acknowledge it as a viable alternative to one’s own. In other words, to practice cultural relativism we need to understand a culture, not judge it, as, for example, when we seek to learn about religious rituals or family traditions in a different culture.

Studying cultures other than their own (an especially important task in this era of globalization) often requires sociologists to practice cultural relativism so that they can focus their attention on a group’s unique values, beliefs, and practices. Such cross-cultural understanding is difficult to achieve; it is hard for any of us to operate outside of the logic of our own culture. At the same time, once we are able to recognize our own values and beliefs—key dimensions of our own culture—we have taken an important first step toward understanding the experiences of people who live in very different societies.

**THE CRITICS OF MULTICULTURALISM** Less than two weeks after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush framed the assault in cultural terms by telling Congress and the people of the United States that the members of Al Qaeda, the Islamic fundamentalist group that had claimed responsibility, had attacked because, “They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.” That quotation came to symbolize one way of thinking about the ongoing conflict between Western secular societies and Islamic societies. It suggested the conflict was based on fundamentally incompatible cultures.

One of the best-known discussions of this concept of a “cultural clash” came from political scientist Samuel Huntington (1993, 1998), who argued that after the end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, most new global conflicts would now take place between cultures rather than countries. He went on to describe what he saw as eight basic cultures (which he termed “civilizations”) in the world: Western (United States, Australia, and Western Europe), Eastern Orthodox (Russia), Latin American, Islamic, Japanese, Chinese, Hindu (India), and African. These civilizations, he contended, are based on fundamentally different religious beliefs. The Islamic world, for example, has few democratic institutions because it does not have a cultural history of separating religious and secular authority, of valuing social pluralism, and of protecting individual rights and civil liberties from the power of the state. In this way, it differs fundamentally from Western civilization. Huntington maintained that as long as globalization results in more frequent contacts between people

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The infamously xenophobic Ku Klux Klan, which had several million members during its heyday in the 1920s, appropriated Christian symbolism to promote a white supremacist agenda that asserted the superiority of white Protestants and attacked the supposedly alien influence of black people and most immigrants, including non-Protestant Whites. Today, some Muslim extremists similarly invoke religious symbolism in calling for attacks against perceived threats from the alien cultural influence of nonbelievers. Just as most Christians rejected the Klan, most Muslims reject these extremist views.
living in these civilizations, we are doomed to experience more frequent cultural conflict.

There is no doubt that increased contact between vastly different cultures can result in conflict. However, if we analyze Huntington’s thesis from a sociological perspective, we can quickly expose some of its shortcomings. For one thing, it oversimplifies the complex mix of cultures around the world and glosses over the enormous variation within each of these cultures (Arnason 2001). None of the so-called civilizations Huntington identifies has a single unified culture. As globalization advances and more people, products, and ideas flow across national borders, cultures continue to blend. Also, by focusing exclusively on culture, Huntington’s theory ignores the ways that longstanding inequalities in the distribution of privilege and power have helped to fuel global conflict (Evans 1997).

In addition, many different cultures do share common values. President Bush recognized these shared values when he told a graduating class at West Point, “The peoples of the Islamic nations want and deserve the same freedoms and opportunities as people in every nation.” His earlier quotation about hating freedom targeted the Al Qaeda extremists who attacked the United States. However, violent Islamic extremists do not represent the broader Islamic culture, which encompasses a range of beliefs and values. Indeed, intense debates within Muslim societies regarding democracy, the role of women, and other cultural matters take place every day.

The results of global public opinion surveys show that democracy is widely popular in both Western and Islamic cultures—even though it has yet to flourish in Muslim countries despite 2011’s Arab Spring uprisings. However, those same surveys show significant differences in the degree of support for gender equality, social tolerance, and freedom of speech (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Welzel and Inglehart 2010), indicating that the reality is complicated, not just a matter of a simple clash of civilizations or an idealized belief that all societies share a unified set of cultural values.

As we have seen, different cultures within a society can also encounter the problem of incompatible values or beliefs. Feminist political philosopher Susan Okin (1999, 117) argues that “many cultures oppress some of their members, in particular women, and . . . they are often able to socialize these oppressed members so that they accept, without question, their designated cultural status.” For example, polygamy, clitoridectomy (the removal of the clitoris) or other forms of genital cutting, and the prearranged marriage of children are all accepted practices within some cultures. What, if anything, should be done when people from such cultures move to Western societies, where those practices are considered violations of individual rights? Should their adoptive countries accept these practices out of respect for different cultural traditions? Or do Western notions of individual freedom, human rights, and gender equality trump these traditional customs? Such questions have been on the front pages of newspapers in Europe. For example, in 2010 the French parliament enacted legislation that prohibits Muslim women from wearing face-covering veils in public places, on the grounds that such clothing conflicts with the values of French secular society (Crumley 2009; Erlanger 2010). This issue raises complex questions about incompatible cultural values and practices and challenges us to consider whether it is legitimate to condemn cultural practices we find offensive and whether we can articulate a universal standard of human rights.

Some critics of multiculturalism are not concerned with such questions because they reject its value entirely. Instead of
Sponsor festivals and other events celebrating their traditions. Because New York City is so ethnically diverse, activities celebrating cultural pride take place throughout the city all year long, including the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in March, celebrating the experiences of the Irish and Irish Americans; the Puerto Rican Day Parade in June; the West Indian Carnival in September, which celebrates Caribbean cultures and histories; and the Chinese New Year Parade in January or February. The idea of embracing and celebrating one’s cultural heritage has become firmly embedded in U.S. society as well as in many other countries.

**Religious Fundamentalism**

A worldwide resurgence of religious belief among fundamentalists who believe in the literal interpretation of sacred texts such as the Bible encouraging people from diverse cultural traditions to coexist peacefully, these critics argue that new immigrants must assimilate into the dominant culture of their adoptive country; otherwise, they maintain, the common ground that is essential to unite a nation will be lost (Huntington 2005; Schmidt 1997). Some of these critics call for teaching Christian values in schools, the adoption of “English-only” laws, an end to bilingual education, and strict limits on immigration, among other measures, to shore up the dominant culture. As we will explore in Chapter 10, these arguments are similar to those made a century ago when new Irish, Russian, Italian, Polish, and other European immigrants arrived in the United States in great numbers. Back then these ethnic cultures were seen as a threat to American values.

Societies do need common ground—supplied by their cultures—to function successfully, and sociologists since Emile Durkheim have recognized this need. Nevertheless, cultures are also evolving constantly. Think about how global travel, electronic communications, the global economy, and widespread immigration have changed contemporary society. Already contemporary U.S. society has found many ways to accommodate the peaceful coexistence of diverse cultural traditions.

In fact, culture can also be a basis for connection and exchange in ways that help to prevent, or even heal, conflicts. Cross-cultural experiences—from reading the novels, studying the art, or learning about the cuisine of another culture to traveling to other countries, studying new languages, or hosting foreign visitors in your home or school—may provide a bridge that promotes greater understanding and improved relationships across national boundaries. Indeed, throughout history the trend has been in the direction of increased tolerance, accommodation, and appreciation among different cultures.

**Cultural Activism**

Many people are understandably passionate about cultural issues, which often reflect their deepest concerns. As a result, people from across the political spectrum participate in a wide range of public activities aimed at promoting or contesting culturally specific ideas and practices. In this section, we briefly review three contemporary forms of cultural activism: organizations that promote cultural pride, religious fundamentalism, and anticorporate activism.

**Cultural Pride Organizations**

In communities throughout the United States, a variety of civic organizations maintain and promote particular cultures. They provide children with classes about their cultural heritage and sponsor festivals and other events celebrating their traditions. Because New York City is so ethnically diverse, activities celebrating cultural pride take place throughout the city all year long, including the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in March, celebrating the experiences of the Irish and Irish Americans; the Puerto Rican Day Parade in June; the West Indian Carnival in September, which celebrates Caribbean cultures and histories; and the Chinese New Year Parade in January or February. The idea of embracing and celebrating one’s cultural heritage has become firmly embedded in U.S. society as well as in many other countries.

**Religious Fundamentalism**

A worldwide resurgence of religious belief among fundamentalists who believe in the literal interpretation of sacred texts such as the Bible...
Whether they are motivated by pride in a culture, religious fundamentalists are using their faith as the basis for their activism. They criticize the cultural values and practices of Western secular society and develop ways to preserve and promote their own cultural values.

Islamic fundamentalists have challenged the export of Western culture to traditionally Muslim societies. They condemn what they perceive as the hedonism and decadent lifestyles promoted in such cultural products, themes that they say contradict Islamic teachings. They are especially angered by what they see as anti-Islamic media content. Pakistan, for example, ordered Internet providers to block Facebook in 2010 because one of its pages promoted “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day”—an action that violates Islamic beliefs. The ban was lifted once the page was removed. Islamic fundamentalists have turned to strict religious schooling and mass media, especially the Internet, to promote more traditional values and defend them against the onslaught of Western media.

Similarly, in the United States, Christian fundamentalists have fought—unsuccessfully—to eliminate from the mainstream media sexual imagery, violence, positive portrayals of homosexuality, and other content they find objectionable and contrary to their religious teachings. At the same time, these activists promote their religious beliefs through home-schooling, religiously based private schools, religious radio and television broadcasting, and religious books, movies, pop music, and other media content. These efforts have had a significant impact on the political culture of the United States, where religious conservatives are a significant political and cultural force.

**ANTICORPORATE ACTIVISM** The role corporations play in shaping culture is a source of contention in many countries. Critics of corporate power in the United States and elsewhere, especially on the political left, engage in yet another form of cultural activism, protesting concentrated media ownership and an unregulated global economy. In the United States, anticorporate cultural activists have established small but vibrant independent media outlets for music, art, news, and other cultural products outside of the mainstream commercial corporate system. Groups such as the Media Foundation, with its signature magazine *Adbusters*, promote a form of activism called “culture jamming,” which refashions popular brand images to express a critical message about commercial culture, as in the billboard shown on this page.

Culture jamming is a form of activism that attaches new and subversive meanings to well-known corporate brands, often rewriting popular advertising campaigns. This Australian billboard, complete with the Nike swoosh, associates the Nike brand with slave labor—a powerful critique of Nike’s labor practices.

Whether they are motivated by pride in a culture, by religious belief, or by opposition to corporate power, campaigns by cultural activists often lead to passionate public expression and debate. Although many of the issues taken on by cultural activists receive scant attention in mainstream public policy arenas, this form of activism often produces broad public discussion, testifying to the significance of culture in our everyday lives.
Imagine two twenty-something young women discussing their favorite television programs. “I enjoy watching Divorce Court,” says one. “I love Friends and Martin,” replies the other. “They are so real... They show it how it is” (Miranda 2003). This exchange, overheard a few years ago, would be too ordinary to mention except for one thing: It took place not on Main Street, U.S.A., but rather in a CD shop in Nairobi, Kenya, in east Africa.

Since 1990, television in Kenya has expanded from a single state-run station broadcasting a few hours a day to more than half a dozen channels operating in different parts of the country, some broadcasting twenty-four hours a day. Rarely, however, does the country’s rich and diverse mix of local cultures and some thirty indigenous languages figure in the programming on these channels. It is much cheaper to import foreign programs to fill the air time than to produce original programming, so viewers often have no choice but to watch Western—usually U.S.—programming. As a result, a generation of Kenyan youth has grown up watching reruns of old American television series and soap operas.

Some Kenyans worry that this flood of Western media is washing away all that is distinct about their local cultures. As David Makali, director of the Media Institute in Nairobi, puts it, “In Kenya, TV has become a major avenue of cultural promotion, and it is really terrible the way Western culture has taken over. The people are being brainwashed, and we are losing out culturally” (Miranda 2003).

Kenya is hardly alone. Much of the rest of the world has been experiencing a similar media-driven globalization of culture (Crothers 2009). And as in Kenya, media globalization has primarily meant a massive export of Western television, movies, music, and other cultural products to poorer nations that lack the resources or technological infrastructure to support a large media industry of their own. These Western products are often popular, but they also generate resentment as a kind of foreign invasion that is displacing local cultural practices and challenging traditional values and lifeways. In the other direction, U.S. media products present a limited image that can leave audiences in foreign cultures with misconceptions about American society.

The flood of U.S. media inundating foreign markets may have crested, however. Local media industries have begun competing for local audiences, and new digital media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook are providing new channels of distribution that challenge the dominance of foreign media and offer visibility to local productions that might otherwise be invisible. Locally produced programs, finely attuned to the local culture, tend to be very popular, and local producers have sometimes successfully competed with global media conglomerates by providing alternatives to the homogenized global fare. In Nigeria, for example, popular locally produced films circulate widely on home video, and in much of Latin America telenovelas (locally produced romantic serials similar to soap operas) are among the most popular television programs (Akpabio and Mustapha-Lambe 2008; Flew 2007). Such projects are often produced on a shoe-string budget, however, and are unable to match the slick production values Western audiences often expect.

The fusion of different cultural traditions into a new, creative object or idea is as old as art itself. Today, however, the opportunities for communication among cultures are greater than ever before. However, because of the imbalance between wealthy and poor parts of the globe, affluent countries have been doing most of the talking while hearing very little from other parts of the world. With today’s technologies, however, artists in poor countries can feasibly begin to make themselves heard.
1. Culture is an essential part of social life. It must be taught and learned and exists only in the context of groups.

2. The elements of culture include values, beliefs, knowledge, and norms (the ideas of culture); language and other forms of symbolic communication (for transmitting culture); and behaviors and material objects.

3. Within each culture, there is a dominant ideology that generally supports the current social system and serves the interests of authorities.

4. Most societies contain a dominant culture as well as a number of subcultures and countercultures.

5. Multiculturalism refers to the willingness to recognize, value, and protect the distinct cultures that make up a society.

6. Ethnocentrism is the practice of judging another culture by the standards of one’s own. In contrast, cultural relativism is the practice of understanding a culture by its own standards.

7. Examples of cultural activism include cultural pride organizations, religious fundamentalism, and anticorporate activism.

8. Media globalization has primarily taken the form of the massive export of Western—primarily U.S.—media products to poorer nations. The flood of U.S. media may have crested, however, as local media industries have begun to take advantage of new digital technologies to compete for local audiences.
Critical Thinking: Questions and Activities

1. Why is “culture” a core concept in sociology? How can the concept of culture help us to understand social life?
2. Why do changes in today’s world make it especially important to understand the concept of culture?
3. Imagine that, because of your sociological training, you have been chosen to select the items to be included in a time capsule for your community that will be opened 100 years from now. Assuming the time capsule is about the size of a large suitcase, what cultural artifacts would you choose to represent your “way of life”? Explain why you believe these items are the most important.
4. Suppose you live in a foreign country and know little about the United States. Watch an hour of prime-time television and take careful notes about what you have learned about U.S. society. Were the media images you saw an accurate representation of U.S. society? Why or why not? What lessons about the United States might the export of such cultural products be teaching people in other societies?

Key Terms

behaviors (p. x) the actions associated with a group that help to reproduce a distinct way of life.
beliefs (p. x) the specific convictions or opinions that its people generally accept as being true.
counterculture (p. x) a subculture that champions values and lifestyles distinctly opposed to those of the dominant culture.
cultural lag (p. x) the ways that new technological developments often outpace the norms that govern our collective experiences with these new technologies.
cultural object (p. x) a physical item that is created by and associated with people who share a culture.
cultural relativism (p. x) the practice of understanding a culture by its own standards.
culture (p. x) the collection of values, beliefs, knowledge, norms, language, behaviors, and material objects shared by a people and socially transmitted from generation to generation.
culture shock (p. x) the experience of being disoriented because of a lack of knowledge about an unfamiliar social situation.
culture war (p. x) an intense disagreement about core values and moral positions.
dialect (p. x) a variant of a language with its own distinctive accent, vocabulary, and in some cases grammatical characteristics.
dominant culture (p. x) a culture that permeates a society and that represents the ideas and practices of those in positions of power.
dominant ideology (p. x) a widely held and regularly reinforced set of assumptions that generally support the current social system and serve the interests of authorities.
ethnocentrism (p. x) the practice of judging another culture by the standards of one’s own.
folkways (p. x) group habits or customs that are common in a given culture.
high culture (p. x) cultural forms associated with elites that are widely recognized as valuable and legitimate.
ideal culture (p. x) what the members of a culture report to be their values, beliefs, and norms.

ideology (p. x) a system of meaning that helps define and explain the world and that makes value judgments about that world.
knowledge (cultural) (p. x) the range of information, awareness, and understanding that helps us navigate our world.
language (p. x) an elaborate system of symbols that allows people to communicate with one another in complex ways.
material culture (p. x) the physical objects produced by people in a particular culture, including tools, clothing, toys, works of art, shopping malls, and housing.
mores (p. x) norms that are strictly enforced, with potentially severe penalties for violating them.
multiculturalism (p. x) the recognition, valuing, and protection of the distinct cultures that make up a society.
nonmaterial culture (p. x) the ideas of a culture, including values and beliefs, accumulated knowledge about how to understand and navigate the world, and standards or “norms” about appropriate behavior.

norms (p. x) a culture’s rules and expectations for “appropriate” behavior.
popular culture (p. x) cultural forms that are widespread and commonly embraced within a society.
real culture (p. x) what members of a culture actually do, which may or may not reflect the ideal.

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (p. x) the idea that because of their different cultural content and structure, languages affect how their speakers think and behave.
society (p. x) a group of people who live together in a specific territory and share a culture.
subculture (p. x) cultures associated with smaller groups in society that have distinct norms, values, and lifestyles setting them apart from the dominant culture.
symbol (p. x) anything—a sound, a gesture, an image, an object—that represents something else.
value (p. x) a deeply held principle or standard that people use to make judgments about the world, especially in deciding what is desirable or worthwhile.
xenophobia (p. x) an unreasonable fear or hatred of foreigners or people of a different culture.