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Culture

Sociology uses specific terms and concepts that enable us to see those linkages discussed above and to make sense of both ourselves and the world we live in. Every academic field uses certain concepts as the lenses through which it sees and therefore understands the world, much like the lenses of eyeglasses help us see what we need to see much more clearly. For example, psychologists might use terms like *cognition*, *unconscious*, or *ego*; economists would use terms like *supply and demand*, *production cycle*, or *profit margins*.

The lenses through which sociologists see the world are broad terms like *society* and *culture*; structural terms like *institutions*; and cultural terms like *values* and *norms*. (We will discuss all these terms in the coming chapters.) Larger structures—institutions and/or organizations like the economy, government, family, or corporation—offer the larger, general patterns of things. And *agency* stresses the individual decisions that we make, ourselves, to create and shape our own destiny.

What makes us human? What differentiates human life from other animals' lives? One answer is culture. **Culture** refers to the sets of values and ideals that we understand to define morality, good and evil, appropriate and inappropriate. Culture defines larger structural forces and also how we perceive them. While dogs or horses or chimpanzees live in social groupings, they do not transmit their culture from one generation to the next. Although they learn and adapt to changing environmental conditions, they do not consciously build on the experiences of previous generations, transmitting to their children the wisdom of their ancestors. What makes human life different is that we alone have a conscious "history," a continuity of generations and a purposive direction of change. Humans have culture.

Culture is the foundation of society—both the material basis for social life and the ideas, beliefs, and values that people have. **Material culture** consists of the things people make and the things they use to make them—the tools they use, the physical environment they inhabit (forests, beaches, mountains, fertile farmlands, or harsh desert). **Nonmaterial**

culture consists of the ideas and beliefs that people develop about their lives and their world. Anthropologists have explained how people who live near dense forests, where animals are plentiful and food abundant, will develop very different cultural values from a culture that evolves in the desert, in which people must constantly move to follow an ever-receding water supply.

Our culture shapes more than what we know, more than our beliefs and our attitudes; culture shapes our human nature. Some societies, like the Yanomamo in Brazil, "know" that people are, by nature, violent and aggressive, and so they raise everyone to be violent and aggressive. But others, like the Tasaday tribe in the Philippines, "know" that people are kind and generous, and so everyone is raised to be kind and generous. In the United States, our culture is diverse enough that we can believe both sides. On the one hand, "everybody knows" that everyone is only out for him- or herself, and so it shouldn't surprise us that people cheat on exams or their taxes or drive over the speed limit. On the other hand, "everybody knows" that people are neighborly and kind, and so it doesn't surprise us that most people *don't* cheat on exams or their taxes and they drive under the speed limit.

Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity means that the world's cultures are vastly different from each other. Their rich diversity sometimes appears exotic, sometimes tantalizing, and sometimes even disgusting. Even within American culture, there are subcultures that exhibit beliefs or behaviors that are vastly different from those of other groups. And, of course, culture is hardly static: Our culture is constantly changing, as beliefs and habits change. For example, in the early nineteenth century, it was a common prescribed cultural practice among middle-class New Englanders for a dating couple to be expected to share a bed together with a board placed down the middle, so that they could become accustomed to each other's sleeping behavior but without having sex. Parents would welcome their teenage children's "bundling" in a way they might not feel particularly comfortable doing today.

What do you think?



America is famously egocentric, and the stereotype of the insensitive, ignorant American tourist is pervasive and persistent. When any group is in power, it is easy to grow unaware of the cultures of others and to judge and dismiss them. So, what do you think? How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like Americans.

- | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Strongly agree | 3. Neither agree nor disagree | 5. Strongly disagree |
| 2. Agree | 4. Disagree | |



What does America think?

(Actual Survey Data from the General Social Survey.)

Thirty-four percent of the respondents said they had no opinion. Forty-two percent said they thought the world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like Americans, and 24 percent disagree. There was a big difference in opinion by social class.

More Like Americans by Class %

	Lower	Working	Middle	Upper	Row Total
Strongly Agree	27.5	17.4	14.2	5.4	15.9
Agree	28.6	24.5	27.3	20.2	26.1
Neither Agree nor Disagree	33.9	37.4	31.7	34.0	34.2
Disagree	6.9	16.6	19.9	26.9	18.1
Strongly Disagree	3.2	4.0	6.9	13.5	5.8

Think about It Some More

- How do you explain the social class differences in response?
- Do you think this kind of ethnocentrism is unique to the United States?

References: See Davis et al., page 511.

Often, when we encounter a different culture, we experience **culture shock**, a feeling of disorientation, because the cultural markers that we rely on to help us know where we are and how to act have suddenly changed. Sometimes, the sense of disorientation leads us to retreat to something more comfortable and reassert the values of our own cultures. We find other cultures weird, or funny, or sometimes we think they're immoral. In the 2003 movie *Lost in Translation*, Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson ex-

perience the strange limbo of living in a foreign culture during an extended stay at a Tokyo hotel. They develop an unlikely bond of friendship, finding each other as a source of familiarity and comfort.

The condemnation of other cultures because they are different is called **ethnocentrism**, a belief that one's culture is superior to others. We often use our own culture as the reference point by which we evaluate others. William Graham Sumner, the sociologist who first coined the term, described ethnocentrism



Oppression or freedom? To many Westerners, the hijab is a symbol of woman's subordinate status. But this Muslim woman thinks otherwise.

as seeing “one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it” (Sumner, [1906] 2002, p. 12). Ethnocentrism can be relatively benign, as a quiet sense of superiority or even cultural disapproval of the other culture, or it can be aggressive, as when people try to impose their values on others by force.

Sociologists must constantly guard against ethnocentrism because it can bias our understandings of other cultures. It’s helpful to remember that each culture justifies its beliefs by reference to the same guiding principles, so when Yanomamo people act aggressively, they say, “Well, that’s just human nature,” which is exactly what the Tasaday say when they act kindly toward each other. Because each culture justifies its activities and organization by reference to these universals—God’s will, human nature, and the like—it is difficult for any one of us to stand in judgment of another’s way of doing things. Therefore, to a large extent, sociologists take a position of **cultural relativism**, a position that all cultures are equally valid in the experience of their own members.

At the same time, many sociologists also believe that we should not shy away from

claiming that some values are, or should be, universal values to which all cultures should subscribe. For example, the ideals of human rights that all people share—these are values that might be seen as condemning slavery, female genital mutilation, the killing of civilians during wartime, the physical or sexual abuse of children, the exclusion of married men from prosecution for rape of their wives. Some have suggested that these universal human rights are themselves the ethnocentric imposition of Western values on other cultures, and they may be. But they also express values that virtually every culture claims to hold, and so they may be close to universal. Cultural relativism makes us sensitive to the ways other people organize their lives, but it does not absolve us from taking moral positions ourselves.

Cultures vary dramatically in the ways they go about the most basic activities of life: eating, sleeping, producing goods, raising children, educating them, making friends, making love, forming families. This diversity is sometimes startling; and yet, every culture shares some central elements. Every culture has history, a myth of origin, a set of guiding

principles that dictates right and wrong, with justifications for those principles.

Subcultures and Countercultures

Even within a particular culture there are often different subgroups. Subcultures and countercultures often develop within a culture.

Subcultures. A **subculture** is a group of people within a culture who share some distinguishing characteristics, beliefs, values, or attributes that set them apart from the dominant culture. Some groups within a society create their own subcultures, with norms and values distinct from the mainstream, and usually their own separate social institutions. Roman Catholics were once prohibited from joining fraternal organizations such as the Masons, so they founded their own, the Knights of Columbus. Because ethnic and sexual minorities are often subjected to negative stereotyping, they often produce their own organizations, media, and even travel agencies.

Subcultures are communities that constitute themselves through a relationship of *difference* to the dominant culture. They can be a subset of the dominant culture, simply exaggerating their set of interests as the glue that holds them together as a community. So, for example, generation Y is a youth subculture, a group for which membership is limited to those of a certain age who believe they have characteristics that are different from the dominant culture. Members of a subculture are part of the larger culture, but they may draw more on their subcultural position for their identity. Membership in a subculture enables you to feel “one” with others and “different” from others at the same time.

Countercultures. Subcultures that identify themselves through their *difference and opposition* to the dominant culture are called countercultures. Like subcultures, **countercultures** offer an important grounding for identity, but they do so in opposition to the dominant culture. As a result, countercultures demand a lot of conformity from members because they define themselves in opposition, and they may be more totalistic than a subculture. One can imagine, for example, belonging to several different subcultures, and these may exist in tandem with membership in the official culture. But countercultural membership often requires a sign

of separation from the official culture. And it would be hard to belong to more than one.

As a result, countercultures are more often perceived as a threat to the official culture than a subculture might be. Countercultures may exist parallel to the official culture, or they may be outlawed and strictly policed. For example, the early Christians thought they were a subculture, a group with a somewhat separate identity from the Jews (another subculture) and the Romans. But the Romans were too threatened, and the Christians were seen as a counterculture that had to be destroyed.

Like subcultures, countercultures create their own cultural forms—music, literature, news media, art. Sometimes these may be incorporated into the official culture as signs of rebellion. For example, blue jeans, tattoos, rock and rap music, leather jackets, and wearing black pants and shirts together all have their origins as signs of countercultural rebellion from the hippie, ghetto, or fringe sexual cultures. But they were incorporated into consumerism and have now achieved mainstream respectability.



Sometimes a countercultural movement can change a society. In 1989, writer Vaclav Havel led the “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia and became the country’s president.

The term *counterculture* came into widespread use during the 1960s to describe an emerging subculture based on age (youth), behaviors (marijuana and psychedelic drug use, “free” sexual practices), and political sensibilities (liberal to radical). Gradually, this subculture became well defined in opposition to the official culture, and membership required wearing certain androgynous fashions (tie-dyed shirts, sandals, bell-bottom blue jeans, “peasant” blouses), bodily practices (everyone wearing their hair long), musical preferences, drug use, and anti-Vietnam War

politics. Other countercultures sprang up in many other countries, and some, like those in the Czech Republic and Poland, even became the dominant political parties during periods of radical reform.

Countercultures are not necessarily on the left or the right politically—what they are is oppositional. In the contemporary United States, there are groups such as White supremacist survivalists as well as back-to-the-land hippies on communes: Both represent countercultures (and, given that they tend to be rural and isolated, they may also be neighbors!).

Elements of Culture

All cultures share six basic elements: material culture, symbols, language, rituals, norms, and values.

Material Culture

As we mentioned earlier, material culture consists of both what people make and what they make it with. Every society must solve basic needs of subsistence: provision of food and shelter from the elements for both the person and the family (shelter and clothing). Material culture includes the environment we inhabit and the tools we develop to survive in it. Those tools are the level of technology. We organize our societies to enable us to collectively meet these basic subsistence needs for food, clothing, and shelter. We develop different cultures based on the climate, the available food supply, and the geography of our environment.

Symbols

As humans wrestle with the meanings of their material environment, we attempt to represent our ideas to others. We translate what we see and think into symbols. A **symbol** is anything—an idea, a marking, a thing—that carries additional meanings beyond itself to others who share in the culture. Symbols come to mean what they do only in a culture; they would have no meaning to someone outside. Take, for example, one of the most familiar symbols of all, the cross. If one is Christian, the cross carries with it certain meanings. But to someone else, it might be simply a decoration or a reference to the means of execution

in the Roman era. And to some who have seen crosses burning on their lawns, they may be a symbol of terror. That’s what we mean when we say that symbols take on their meaning only inside culture.

Symbols are representations of ideas or feelings. In a single image, a symbol suggests and stands in for something more complex and involved. The donkey and elephant stand for America’s Democratic and Republican parties; a smiley face stands for happiness (even if it also stands for shallowness); red parentheses stand for Bono’s Red Campaign to fight AIDS; the bald eagle represents the American nation.

Symbols can be created at any time. Witness the recent various ribbons—red for AIDS awareness, pink for breast cancer awareness. But many symbols developed over centuries and in relative isolation from one another. In the case of older symbols, the same ones may mean completely different things in different cultures. For example, the color red means passion, aggression, or danger in the United States, while it signifies purity in India and is a symbol of celebration and luck in China. White symbolizes purity in the West, but in Eastern cultures is the color of mourning and death.

Symbols are not always universally shared, and many cultural conflicts in society are over the meaning and appropriateness of certain symbols. Consider flags, for example. Many people around the world feel deeply patriotic at the sight of their nation’s flag. My grandfather would actually often weep when he saw the American flag because it reminded him of his family’s arduous journey to this country as an immigrant and the men who fought and died alongside him in World War I. Flags are important symbols and are displayed at