



## chapter 2



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# Culture and Society

**ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR SONGS** of the past quarter-century was “We Are the World,” written in 1984 by Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson to raise money for starving children in Africa and originally sung by some of the biggest stars in the musical pantheon. It expresses a feeling that we’re all one, that people are people everywhere, and that we’re all the same.

And yet you might well find yourself feeling uncomfortable, in a class or in casual conversation, if someone were to actually ask you a question based on that idea. “Well, how do you Asian Americans feel about that?” or “Well, as a woman, don’t you agree that . . . ?” At those moments, you aren’t likely to feel very much like “we are the world.” You’re more likely to say, “Well, I can’t speak for all of them, so this is just my own personal opinion.”

We sometimes feel like we vacillate between abstract universalism (we are the world) and very specific particularism (it’s just me). Neither is wrong, but neither is the whole story. It’s the mission of sociology to



connect those two levels, those two experiences, to connect you as a discrete individual with the larger society in which you live.

As we saw in the last chapter, one of the most concise yet profound definitions of sociology is C. Wright Mills’s idea that sociology “connects biography and history”—that is, it

**What makes human life different from other species is that we alone have a conscious “history,” a continuity of generations and a purposive direction of change. Humans have culture.**

connects you, as an individual, to the larger social *contexts* in which you find yourself. This connection raises important questions for us: How much “free will” do I actually have? Can I control my own destiny or am I simply the product of those larger contexts? Both—and neither. We have an enormous amount of freedom to choose our paths—probably more than any entire population in history. And yet, as we will

see, those choices are constrained by circumstances that we neither chose nor created. Another way of saying this is found in the first paragraphs of a book by Karl Marx (1965):

*Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.*

It is this connection—between the personal and the structural—that defines the sociological perspective. The sociological perspective enables us to see how nature and nurture combine, how things are changing and how they are eternal and timeless, how we are shaped by our societies and how we in turn shape them—to see, in essence, how it can be both the best of times and the worst of times.

## 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*. 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.

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 experience 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

**Oppressed or free? To many Westerners, these Afghan women are oppressed by traditional cultural practices. But they describe themselves as free and full participants in their culture. (These women are standing in line to vote in Afghanistan’s first direct presidential election in 2004.) ▼**



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 as seeing “[o]ne’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. 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. Ethnic and sexual minorities often appear in mass media as negative stereotypes, or they do not appear at all, so they produce their own movies, novels, magazines, and television programs.

Subcultures arise when a group has two characteristics, prejudice from the mainstream, and social power. *Prejudice* (literally “prejudging”) refers to beliefs about members of another group based on stereotypes or falsehoods that lead one to

diminish that other group's value. Without prejudice, people will have no motive to produce subcultures. And without social power, they won't have the ability. 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, that believes it has 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 they 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.

The term *counterculture* came into widespread use during the 1960s to describe an emerging subculture based on age (youth), behaviors (marijuana use, 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!).

**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. ▼**



## 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. 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. A heart stands for love; a red ribbon signifies AIDS awareness and solidarity; the bald eagle represents the American national character.

Symbols can be created at any time. Witness the recent and now widely known red AIDS ribbon or the pink ribbon 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

**Flags can be powerful cultural symbols, eliciting strong emotions. To some, the Stars and Bars (a battle flag of the Confederate states during the Civil War) is a symbol of Southern heritage; to the majority of Americans (and people around the world), it is a symbol of racism and a reminder of slavery. ▼**



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 solemn ceremonial moments and at festivals and sports events. Is burning the American flag a protected form of speech, a way for Americans to express their dissent from certain policies, or is it the deliberate destruction of the symbol of the nation, tantamount to an act of treason? And what about waving the flag of a different nation, like the one where your ancestors may have come from? To some, it's harmless, an expression of ethnic pride, like waving Irish flags on St. Patrick's Day; but others think it borders on treason, like waving the flag of the former Soviet Union or the Iraqi flag at a demonstration. To some, waving the Confederate flag is a symbol of civic pride, or of Southern heritage, while to others the Confederate flag is a symbol of racism.

These examples illustrate how symbols can often become politicized, endowed with meaning by different groups, and used as forms of political speech. Symbols elicit powerful emotions because they express the emotional foundations of our culture.

## Language

**Language** is an organized set of symbols by which we are able to think and communicate with others. Language is also the chief vehicle by which human beings create a sense of self. It is through language that we pose questions of identity—"Who am I?"—and through our linguistic interactions with others that we constitute a sense of ourselves. We need language to know what we think as well as who we are.

In the thirteenth century, Frederick II, Holy Roman emperor, decided to perform an experiment to see if he could discover the "natural language of man." What language would we speak if no one taught us language? He selected some newborn babies and decreed that no one speak to them. The babies were suckled and nursed and bathed as usual, but speech and songs and lullabies were strictly prohibited. All the babies died. We need to interact with other people to survive, let alone thrive. And language enables us to accomplish this interaction.

Language is not solely a human trait. There is ample evidence that other animals use sounds, gestures, facial expressions, and touch to communicate with each other. But these expressions seem to always relate to events in the present—nearby food sources, the presence of danger—or immediate expressions of different feelings or moods. What makes the human use of language different from that of animals is that we use language to transmit culture, to connect us to both the past and the future, to build on the experiences of previous generations. Even the most linguistically capable chimps cannot pass that kind of language on to their offspring.

Language does not merely reflect the world as we know it; language actually shapes our perceptions of things. In 1929, two anthropologists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, noticed that the Hopi Indians of the Southwest seemed to have no verb tenses, no ways for them to state a word in the past, present, or future tense. Imagine speaking to your friends without being able to put your ideas in their proper tense. Although common sense held that the function of language was to express the world we already perceived, Sapir and Whorf concluded that language, itself, provides a cultural lens through which people perceive the world. What became known as the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** states that language shapes our perception.

Sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1989) noted that, in English, there are different words for "jelly" and "jam," while Hebrew, his native language, did not distinguish





▲ **Language is a conceptual framework for understanding our social world. Every culture transmits its values through language.**

## Did you know?

You've probably heard that the Eskimo have a very large number of words for snow, much larger than the English. It's a myth. Linguist Geoff Pullum (1991) has shown that the Inuit (native peoples of the Arctic regions) use a "polysynthetic" language—that is, they create single words out of many different ideas, so it might seem as if they have a lot of different words for the same thing. In English, we use separate words in the phrase "the snow under the tree"; an Inuit might express this in one word. In fact, English has more words for different types of snow than most Inuit languages (see Pullum, 1991, and <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language/og/archives/004003.html>).

between the two and had only one word. Only when he learned English, he writes, did he actually "see" that they were different. Having the language for the two things made it possible for him to see them. In France, there is a specific ailment called a pain in the liver, a *crise de foie*. Americans find the idea strange because that sort of pain is given a generic "stomach ache." (In fact, when I lived in France, I found it somewhat amusing to think that they knew exactly which internal organ was in pain!) And there is no word for "gentrification" in Spanish. An Argentine colleague of mine first heard the word when he moved to New York City, and when he returned to Buenos Aires, he couldn't believe how different the city looked to him, now that he had the language to describe the changes he saw. Ask yourself or anyone you know who speaks more than one language about how different things actually *are* different when you speak Chinese, or Russian, or French, or Spanish.

We often say that we'll "believe it when we see it"—that empirical proof is required for us to believe something. But it's equally true that we "see it when we believe it"—we cannot "see" what we don't have the conceptual framework to understand.

Because language not only reflects the world in which we live but also shapes our perception of it, language is also political. Consider, for example, the battles over the implicit gender bias of using the word *man* to include both women and men, and the use of the masculine pronoun *he* as the "inclusive" generic term. Some words, such as *chairman* or *policeman* make it clear that the position carries a gender—whether the occupant of the position is male or female.

Even the appellation for women and men was made the object of political struggle. While referring to a man as "Mr." indicates nothing about his marital status, appellations for women referred only to their status as married (Mrs.) or unmarried (Miss). To create a neutral, parallel term for women, Ms., took several years before it became commonplace.

Similarly, language conveys cultural attitudes about race and ethnicity. This happens not simply through the use of derogatory slang terms, but also in the construction of language itself. Adjectives or colloquial phrases may convey ideas about the relative values of different groups, simply through the association of one with the other: "a black mark against you," "good guys wear white hats," "a Chinaman's chance," or "to Jew someone down" all encode stereotypes in language.

The idea of a single unifying language has also become a hot-button issue in the United States. If language is central to the smooth functioning of society, what does it imply about that unity when "only" 82 percent of Americans speak only English at home, and more than 17 percent speak a different language (10 percent of them speaking Spanish)?

## Ritual

Shared symbols and language are two of the most important processes that enable cultures to cohere and persist over time. Another process is **rituals**, by which members of a culture engage in a routine behavior to express their sense of belonging to the culture. Rituals both symbolize the culture's coherence by expressing our unity and also create that coherence by enabling each member to feel connected to the culture.

What  
do **you**  
think?



### English as the Official Language

Although the majority of people living in the United States speak English, the question of whether or not to make it the official language is one that elicits strong emotions and arguments on both sides. Those who are against a single official language argue that the United States is a multicultural country that should have space for more than one language, that the rest of the world is multilingual, and that an official language is exclusionary. Those in favor of an official national language maintain that the policy does not mean an English-only nation, that it's cost-effective, and that such a policy will unite Americans. So, what do you think?

#### Do you favor or oppose making English the official language of the United States?

- Favor  
 Oppose

See the back of the chapter to compare your answers to national survey data.

Source: General Social Survey, 2004.

For example, the national anthem is sung at the beginning of most major professional events (although not at the beginning of NASCAR, tennis, or boxing matches) and major college athletic events. We're celebrating the flag, the symbol of our country ("the republic for which it stands"). But this ritual is rarely, if ever, performed in other countries and would be unimaginable before a professional soccer match in Latin America or Europe.

## Norms

**Norms** are the rules a culture develops that define how people should act and the consequences of failure to act in the specified ways. Cultural "norms" and cultural "values" are often discussed together; values are the ideas that justify those standards, or norms. Norms prescribe behavior within the culture, and values explain to us what the culture has determined is right and wrong. Norms tell us *how* to behave; values tell us *why*. Norms and values not only guide our own goals and actions but also inform our judgments of others.

The basic set of norms in Western societies was set down in the Ten Commandments and other ancient texts and include prescriptions to remain humble and religiously obedient to both God and one's parents, as well as normative prohibitions on theft, adultery, murder, and desiring what you don't have. The New Testament is filled with values as well, such as reciprocity ("do unto others as you would have them do unto you") and "let he who is without sin cast the first stone," which implies self-knowledge, restraint, and refusal to judge others.

## Did you know?

Citizens of many countries revere their flag, but only the United States has a Pledge of Allegiance. Why? Contrary to common opinion, it is not because we are especially patriotic. Rather, it is because we are capitalists.

In 1892, the magazine *Youth's Companion* was selling American flags to its readers, and it introduced the pledge as part of its advertising campaign. The success of the pledge as a sales tool spurred President Benjamin Harrison to think it would be a good way to promote recognition of the American flag among immigrants. So, he decreed that it be recited daily in the schools. It was not officially recognized as the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States until 1945, and the words "under God" were introduced in 1954.

Like the other components of culture, norms and values vary from place to place. What might be appropriate behavior in one culture, based on its values, might be inappropriate, or even illegal, in another. While eating together in a restaurant, for example, Americans might feel insulted if they didn't get to order their own meals. Individual choice is very important, and often others (the waiter, our dining companions) will compliment us on our choice. In China, the person at the top of the hierarchy typically orders for everyone, and it is assumed the food will be shared. Individual choice matters little; self-esteem is gained through group participation, not individual choice.

Similarly, in China, when opening a new restaurant, the owner typically will invite local leaders, including police, the tax collector, and political officials, for free meals. It is understood that in exchange for these free meals, the officials will treat the new business kindly. This is because the culture stresses social reciprocity and mutual obligations to each other. In the United States, however, such behavior would be seen as corruption, attempted bribery, and both the restaurant owner and the officials who accepted such “gifts” would be breaking the law.

Norms and values also vary within cultures. For example, while images of wealth and success may be inspiring to some Americans, Hispanics tend not to approve of overt materialistic displays of success. While Americans over the age of 40 might find it inappropriate for you to text message in a social situation, younger people often feel virtual relationships are just as important and “present” as interpersonal ones right in the same room (Twenge, 2006). Enforcement varies, too. Teenagers, for example, may care deeply about norms and standards of their peers but not about the judgment of others.

Norms also change over time. For example, not that long ago, norms surrounding the use of telephones included not calling someone or talking on the phone during the dinner hour unless it was an emergency. Now telemarketers target that time slot as a good time to call people because they are likely to be home from work, and people routinely talk on cell phones right at the dinner table, even in restaurants. People check voice mail and text message each other during college classes (!) and during business meetings, when it used to be considered highly inappropriate to initiate or allow interruptions in these settings, again, except in an emergency. People walk around plugged into iPods and MP3 players even on the job, at museums or other cultural events, and in social groups.

Technology has been a major driver of new norms and new mores over the past several decades. After all, technological inventions have created some entirely new social situations, new kinds of encounters and relationships, which have spawned new social norms and mores to organize them. Think about it—there are sets of informal rules about appropriate behavior on elevators, in airplanes, or at urinals, to name just a few examples. The Internet has spawned a particularly wide range of new norms, mores, and language. “Netiquette” is now so elaborate that book-length manuals are written about it, and magazines frequently offer service features to help their readers avoid a Web faux pas (Table 2.1).

Norms consist of folkways, mores, and laws, depending on their degree of formality in society. **Folkways** are relatively weak and informal norms that are the result of patterns of action. Many of the behaviors we call “manners” or etiquette are folkways. Other people may

**Each culture develops norms surrounding basic life experiences. For example, table manners—how we dress, the utensils we use, and dining etiquette—vary considerably from one culture to the other. ▼**



notice when we break them, but infractions are seldom punished. For example, there are no formal laws that prohibit women from wearing white to a wedding, which is informally reserved for the bride alone. But people might think you have bad taste or bad manners, and their informal evaluation is often enough to enforce those unwritten rules.

**Mores** (pronounced more-ayz) are stronger norms that are informally enforced. These are perceived as more than simple violations of etiquette; they are moral attitudes that are seen as serious even if there are no actual laws that prohibit them. Today, some would argue that showing up for a college interview wearing flip-flops or with hair still wet from a shower violates mores; it doesn't break any laws, but it would probably sink your application.

**Laws** are norms that have been organized and written down. Breaking these norms involves the disapproval not only of immediate community members but also the agents of the state, who are charged with punishing such norm-breaking behavior. Laws both restrict our activities, prohibiting certain behaviors (like theft, for example), and enhance our experiences by requiring other activities. For example, the Social Security law requires that both employers and employees contribute to their retirement funds, whether they want to or not, so that we will have some income when we retire.

## Values

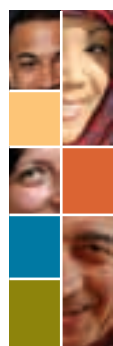
**Values** are the ethical foundations of a culture, its ideas about right and wrong, good and bad. They are among the most basic lessons a culture can transmit to its young

**TABLE 2.1**

### Internet Slang

Many of the English speakers on the Web (366 million of them!) use and invent Internet slang—shortcuts and stylized renderings of common expressions. Popular terms include:

10X	Thanks
LOTI	Laughing on the inside
2U2	To you, too
2L8	Too late
TMI	Too much information
IRL	In real life
O Rly	Oh, really
JOOC	Just out of curiosity
BTDT	Been there, done that
SCNR	Sorry, could not resist
W/E	Whatever!
CU	See you (later)
: - )	smile or happy
: - (	frown or sad
: - O	surprised
: - D	open-mouthed smile, "rly" happy



## Sociology and our World

### Changing Mores around Smoking

In the 1950s and 1960s, smoking was permitted virtually everywhere—in restaurants and bars, in airplanes, and offices. Elevators had ashtrays because it was assumed people would smoke there. If you held a dinner party in the 1950s, you would have been seen as an inconsiderate host if you failed to put out a box or holder containing cigarettes for your guests. All the movie stars smoked. It was cool. Glamorous. Sexy. Smoking was a socially desirable thing to do.

Since the 1980s, though, smoking has been increasingly proscribed, both by informal mores that suggest that people who blow smoke in your direction are inconsiderate and by formal laws that restrict where you can and cannot smoke. Today, in your college or university, people are probably prohibited from smoking in their own offices.

This significant change occurs because our understanding of the effects of smoking have changed and also because our values have changed. Today, we might place health higher than pleasure on a hierarchy of values, and we believe that the rights of those who do not smoke are more significant than the rights of those who do.

because values constitute what a society thinks about itself. (The process of value transmission is called *socialization*, discussed in Chapter 5.)

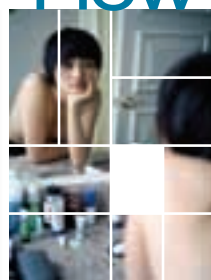
As such, values are the foundation for norms, and norms express those values at different levels of complexity and formality. When members of a culture decide that something is right or wrong, they often enact a law to prescribe or proscribe it. Less than 100 years ago, women were not permitted to vote, because they were not considered rational enough to make an informed decision or because, as married women, they were the property of their husbands. Less than 40 years ago, women were prohibited from service in the nation's military, police forces, and fire departments. Today, our values have changed about women's abilities, and discriminatory laws have been defeated.

Values respond to norms, and changes in our laws are often expected to produce a change in values over time. When our values about racial equality began to change, laws were enacted to prohibit discrimination. These laws were not completely popular when they were first enacted, but over time our values have shifted to better conform to the laws. Seat belt and helmet laws were incredibly unpopular when they were first passed, over significant resistance from both individuals and the automobile manufacturers. But now most Americans conform to these laws, even when there are no police around to watch them.

Even the values we hold are more fluid than we often think. Values are both consistent abstract ethical precepts *and* convenient, fluid, and internally contradictory rationalizations of our actions. Sometimes we consider them before we act; other times we apply them after the fact. In that sense they're more like contradictory childhood aphorisms—"he who hesitates is lost" versus "look before you leap"—than they are the Ten Commandments.

**What Are American Values?** In the United States, many of our values are contained in the Pledge of Allegiance: political unity in the face of a crisis ("one nation," "indivisible"), religious belief ("under God"), freedom and equality ("with liberty and justice

## How do we know what we know?



### Our Values—and Others' Values

We often think of our values as a consistent set of ethical principles that guide all our actions, but the reality is more complex. Anyone who has ever made, but not kept, a New Year's resolution knows that there are often big gaps between our values and our actions. As a result, sociologists point to a difference between "ideal" cultures, the values, norms, and ideals to which we aspire, and "real" cultures, which represent those ideals as we enact them

on a daily basis. It turns out we are quite forgiving of our own failures to live up those ideal values, although we are often less forgiving of others' failures. We hold others to higher standards than we hold ourselves. And we also believe that we live closer to our values than others do.

For example, the Pew Research Center, a research and charitable foundation, completed a survey in which Americans were asked about their own values and the values they perceive that others hold. An overwhelming majority of Americans

said responsibility (92 percent), family life (91 percent), and friendship (85 percent) were their primary guiding principles. But they also felt that less than half of other Americans felt that way. Over two-thirds listed generosity (72 percent) and religious faith (68 percent) as guiding principles for themselves, but only about one-fifth (20 percent) for their fellow citizens. By contrast, only 37 percent of these same Americans thought prosperity and wealth were important values for them but for 58 percent of others (Pew, 2007). Perhaps we consider ourselves more moral than other people; perhaps we just let ourselves off the hook more readily. Or perhaps it's a little bit of each.

for all”). And like all such statements, there are inconsistencies, even within the “one nation.” For example, to be free implies the absence of restraints on individual behavior, as in doing whatever you please to the environment or underpaying workers in the name of making money. But “justice for all” may require just those constraints so that each person would have an equal chance.

In his famous studies of American values, sociologist Robin Williams Jr. (1970) enumerated a dozen “core” American values. These are:

1. *Achievement and success.* Americans highly value personal achievement—succeeding at work and at school; gaining wealth, power, and prestige; and successfully competing with others.
2. *Individualism.* The individual is the centerpiece of American life. Individuals take all credit and all responsibility for their lives. Individualism is, according to another study of American values, “the very core of American culture” (Bellah et al., 1986, p. 142).
3. *Activity and work.* Americans believe one should work hard and play hard. One should always be active. Americans work longer hours with fewer vacations than any other industrial society, and this gap is growing. We believe that hard work pays off in upward mobility.
4. *Efficiency and practicality.* Americans value efficient activity and practicality. Being practical is more highly valued than being intellectual.
5. *Science and technology.* We are a nation that relies daily on scientific breakthroughs, supporting research into the farthest recesses of outer space and infinitesimal subatomic particles for clues about our existence and tiny genetic markers for cures for illness.
6. *Progress.* Americans believe in constant and rapid progress, that everything should constantly be “new and improved.”
7. *Material comfort.* Americans value living large; we believe that “living well is the best revenge.”
8. *Humanitarianism.* We believe in helping our neighbors, especially during crises, and value personal kindness and charity.
9. *Freedom.* Americans believe that freedom is both the means and the end of a great society. We resist any limitations on our freedom and believe that the desire for freedom is a basic human need, which may even justify imposing freedom on others.
10. *Democracy.* Americans believe in a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” a government that represents them. Democracy also entails the right to express your own opinion.
11. *Equality.* Americans believe that everyone is created equal and entitled to the same rights that everyone else enjoys.
12. *Racism and group superiority.* At the same time as we believe in equality of opportunity, we also believe that some people are superior to others. Usually, we assume that “our” group is superior to the others. Historically, the dominant group—men, Whites, heterosexuals—has assumed it was superior, but in recent years, some Blacks, women, and homosexuals have professed that their marginality gives them a “special” angle of vision and that they are, in fact, superior.

You’ll notice that these values are internally inconsistent: The beliefs in equality and group superiority, for example, or humanitarianism and achievement, can be

contradictory. In fact, we might even say that Americans hold the opposite of these 12 values at the same time. For example, these *also* seem to be American values:

1. *Luck and pluck.* We value success, but we may not care how one achieves it. Mobsters are folk heroes and even TV celebrities. Over 90 percent of Americans gamble; in 1993, we spent over \$500 billion on illegal and legal gambling—a 1,900 percent increase since 1976. Americans buy more lottery tickets than any other country; casinos are a growing industry; Americans gamble on sports and horse racing and in organized gambling arenas.
2. *Community.* Americans may believe in individualism, but we are also a nation of civic-minded volunteers, animated by a spirit of community, who help out our neighbors in times of crisis. No other nation has so many volunteer fire departments, for example.
3. *Leisure and cheating.* While we value affluence, we often don't really want to work very hard to achieve it. We claim to believe in honest toil, but an enormous number of Americans cheat on their income tax, and more than one-third of Americans steal at least occasionally on their jobs (Overell, 2003). We believe that honesty is the best policy but also that, as French philosopher Blaise Pascal said, "Mutual cheating is the foundation of society."
4. *Luxury.* We also believe that indulging in luxury is a sign of virtue as well as a vice. We are often willing to pay double the price for an article of clothing or a car if it has the right designer label on it. We like bling.
5. *Religion.* And we are also a nation that is three times more likely to believe in the virgin birth of Jesus (83 percent) as in evolution (28 percent). Ninety-four percent of adults believe in God, 86 percent believe in miracles, 89 percent believe in heaven, and 73 percent believe in the devil and in hell. (Ninety-one percent of Christians believe in the virgin birth, as do 47 percent of non-Christians [Kristof, 2003].)
6. *"Karma."* While we believe in science and progress, 51 percent of us also believe in ghosts and 27 percent believe in reincarnation. "What goes around comes around."
7. *Distrust the rich.* Although it's true that we value the good life, we also believe that the rich are immoral and probably unhappy. "The best things in life are free"; "money is the root of all evil"; and "it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" are the sorts of phrases one is likely to hear in such discussions.

**Americans both love and distrust the rich and famous. We both emulate them and often take a secret pleasure in their downfall. Here, celebrity Paris Hilton greets fans as she leaves prison, June, 2007. ▼**



8. *Entitlement.* Our culture values "looking out for number one" and making sure that we do what we believe will make us feel good. Everyone feels entitled to the good life. Everyone has a right to his or her own opinion—even if that opinion is wrong.
9. *Tolerance has its limits.* Americans believe in tolerance, especially for themselves. We support diversity but live near, work with, and marry those who are most similar to ourselves. We believe people should be free to do whatever they want in the privacy of their own homes, as long as they don't flaunt it in public.
10. *Security over democracy.* Freedom may be curtailed in the name of security. Recent surveys and the enactment of the Patriot Act of 2002 severely limit

Americans' freedoms, but many Americans see that as a small price to pay for security from terrorist attack.

11. *Inequality.* Americans also believe that unequal incomes and experiences are the result of individual effort, and so they are justified. We tolerate inequality by seeing it as a by-product of unequal individual efforts.
12. *We're all just people.* Americans don't like to be seen as members of a group, although they like to see others that way.

**Emerging Values.** Values aren't timeless; they all have histories. They change. As a result, there may be some values that are emerging now as new values. Some of these may become core values; others may be absorbed or discarded. Those recently observed by sociologists include physical fitness, environmentalism, and diversity/multiculturalism. And yet each of these emerging values may actually contradict others: We want to stay in shape but do not want to work hard at exercise or diets; we want to protect the environment but not at the expense of developing roads, housing, and extracting natural resources or driving the cars we want to drive; we believe in multiculturalism but oppose political efforts that would force different groups of people to go to school together or live closer to each other. Though we believe that everyone is equal, we increasingly marry people with similar education levels and befriend people whose backgrounds are similar to our own (Brooks, 2004).

**Changing and Contradictory Values.** One good example of this difference is Americans' attitudes about homosexuality. Most Americans agree with the statement that homosexuality is "wrong" and have felt that way for the past 40 years. In 1991, the General Social Survey (GSS), perhaps the most definitive ongoing study of Americans' attitudes, found that 71 percent said gay sex was always wrong. By 2002, the percentage of Americans who felt that homosexuality was always wrong had fallen to 53 percent—barely a majority.

Yet few would disagree that Americans' attitudes about homosexuality have changed dramatically in those 40 years. The difference is that most Americans are unlikely to apply that "ideal" value to their own interactions. So most Americans may hold an opinion that homosexuality is wrong, but they also believe that their gay or lesbian friend, colleague, or relative should be free to pursue his or her life without discrimination.

On the other hand, the recent visibility of homosexuality—the Supreme Court's decision striking down antisodomy laws, the popularity of gay-themed television shows, the ordination of an openly gay Episcopal bishop, and the debate about gay marriage—has led to a slight downturn in support for equality. Support for equality for gays and lesbians seems to stop at the marriage altar.

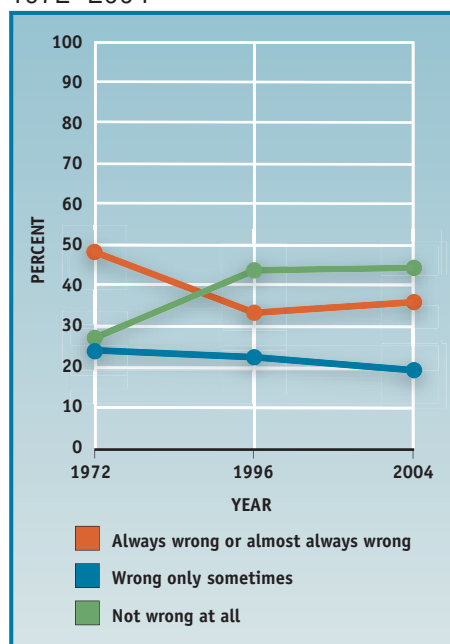
American attitudes about heterosexual sex often show a similar pattern. In 1972, the GSS found that 37 percent of Americans felt sex before marriage is always wrong. By 1996, that figure had dropped to only 24 percent. Yet nonmarital sex has become an accepted feature of American life during the past 25 years (Figure 2.1). The number of cohabitating couples has grown 1,000 percent in the United States since 1960, with more than 4.7 million couples currently living together. Between 1965 and 1974, only 10 percent of marriages were preceded by a period of cohabitation. But between 1990 and 1994, that number increased to 57 percent, and it remains there today. Nonmarital sex is a standard plot element routinely portrayed in American TV programs, movies, books, even commercials, with little public outcry.

## Did you know?

Americans have long believed they share a set of common values with other democratic, industrialized countries, especially the United Kingdom, continental Europe, and Canada. Yet recent studies show that majorities in these countries think the spread of American ideas is a bad thing for the world. A Pew Research Center poll of 44 countries, the broadest single opinion poll ever taken, found half of all Britons, two-thirds of Germans, and 71 percent of French think the spread of American values is a bad thing (Pew, 2007). A Harris poll (2004) found Canadians equally divided—36 percent positive, 36 percent negative—in their views of American values.



**FIGURE 2.1** American Attitudes about Nonmarital, Heterosexual Sex, 1972–2004



Notes: Women consistently think it is more wrong; White people are more likely than Black people to say it is wrong; and the upper class is least likely to think it is wrong.

Source: General Social Survey Data, 1972–2004.

There are two consequences of holding such contradictory and inconsistent values. For one thing, it means that values are less the guiding principles of all our actions and more a sort of collection of attitudes we can hold situationally to justify and rationalize our beliefs and actions. And it also means that we become a deeply divided nation, in which clusters of attitudes seem to cohere around two separate poles. In the 2004 presidential election, these were the “red” states (those that voted for George W. Bush) and the “blue states” (those that voted for John Kerry).

Sometimes expressed as a “culture war” between the left and the right, liberals and conservatives, these clusters suggest that the United States is a deeply and fundamentally divergent society, in which attitudes and behaviors tend to revolve around two opposing positions. Many different groups may also hold different sets of values.

## Cultural Expressions

Cultures are the sets of symbols and rituals that unite groups of people, enable them to feel part of something bigger and more enduring than just their own individual existence. Despite the remarkable diversity in the world’s cultures, they also share certain features in common.

## Universality and Localism

Culture is both universal and local. Every culture has families, legal systems, and religion. All cultures engage in sports and music, dancing and jokes. All cultures prescribe some forms of bodily rituals—from adorning the body to styling the hair to transforming the body. The specific forms of these universals may vary from one culture to another, but all cultures exhibit these forms.

The anthropologist George Murdock (1945) identified 67 **cultural universals**—that is, rituals, customs, and symbols—that are evident in all societies (Table 2.2). What purpose do these rituals serve that they would appear everywhere? Another

**TABLE 2.2**

### Cultural Universals

Contemporary anthropologists have identified these categories of cultural universals:

1. *Material Culture*—food, clothing (and adornment of the body), tools and weapons, housing and shelter, transportation, personal possessions, household articles
2. *The Arts, Play, and Recreation*—folk art, fine arts, standards of beauty and taste
3. *Language and Nonverbal Communication*—nonverbal communication, language
4. *Social Organization*—societies, families, kinship systems
5. *Social Control*—governmental institutions, rewards and punishments
6. *Conflict and Warfare*
7. *Economic Organization*—trade and exchange, production and manufacturing, property, division of labor, standard of living
8. *Education*—formal and informal education
9. *World View*—belief systems, religion

Source: George P. Murdock, “On the Universals of Culture,” in Linton, *The Science of Man in the World Crisis* (1945); *Universals of Culture*, Alice Ann Cleveland, Jean Craven, and Maryanne Danfelter: Intercom, 92/93.

anthropologist, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952), argued that these cultural universals permit the society to function smoothly and continuously. Other sociologists have disputed the inevitability of some universals, arguing that some may have been imposed from outside through conquest or even cross-cultural contact.

Cultural universals are broad and basic categories, allowing for significant variation as well. Although all cultures manifest religious beliefs, some may lead to behaviors that are tolerant and peace loving, while others may lead to violence and war. Cultural universals are expressed locally, experienced at the level of families, communities, and regions in ways that connect us not only to large and anonymous groups like our country but also to smaller, more immediate groups. Culture is not *either* universal or local; rather, to the sociologist, culture is *both* universal *and* local. Sometimes we feel our connection more locally and resent efforts to connect us to larger organizations. And then, often at times of crisis like September 11, 2001, Americans put aside their cultural differences and feel passionately connected.

## High Culture and Popular Culture

Typically, when we hear the word *culture*, we think of an adjective describing someone (a “cultured” person) or a possession, as in a line in a song by Paul Simon, “the man ain’t got no culture.” In the common usage, *culture* refers to having refined aesthetic sensibilities, knowing fine wines, classical music, opera, and great works of literature. That is, the word *culture* is often synonymous with what we call *high culture*. High culture attracts audiences drawn from more affluent and largely White groups, as any visit to a major art museum will attest.

High culture is often contrasted with “popular culture,” the culture of the masses, the middle and working class. **Popular culture** includes a wide variety of popular music, nonhighbrow forms of literature (from dime novels to comic books), any forms of spectator sports, and other popular forms of entertainment, like television, movies, and video games. Again, sociologists are interested less in what sorts of cultural activities are classified as high or low and more interested in the relationships between those levels, who gets to decide what activities are classified as high or low, and how individuals negotiate their way through both dimensions. And sociologists are interested in the way that certain cultural forms shift their position, from low to high or high to low. Notice, for example, how comic books have been the subject of major museum shows in recent years, and they are now being seen as high culture *and* popular culture.

The connection between high and low culture is often expressed through comedy because comedy can painlessly reveal our own cultural biases. For example, the actress Lily Tomlin used to delight her audiences with a clever critique of this distinction. Portraying a homeless “bag lady,” she professed confusion about modern culture. She held up a picture of a big Campbell’s soup can. “Soup,” she said. Then she held up a poster of the Andy Warhol painting of that same soup can—a poster from the Museum of Modern Art. “Art,” she said. Back and forth she went. “Soup.” “Art.” “Soup.” “Art.” Confusing, huh?

This contrast is not only confusing, but often value laden, as if it is somehow morally superior to attend an opera sung in a language you do not understand than it is to go see a performance by the Dixie Chicks, or somehow better to view modern art in a museum than to watch NASCAR on television. (Or better to do anything than to watch television!) The split between high culture and popular culture is often coded in our language—some people “see films” and others “watch movies.” Other linguistic codes are also used; for example, only the upper class uses the word “summer” as a verb, as in, “We summer in Maine.” One rarely says he or she “summers” in Toledo.



▲ The divide between high culture and popular culture is often very wide. Some viewers of this Picasso painting might think their 12-year-old can paint better than that. This painting sold for \$85 million at auction.

ture requires the acceptance of certain rules, certain sets of criteria for evaluation. And this establishes certain cultural elites with privileged knowledge: the proper ways to like something. These elites are cultural “gatekeepers” who permit entry into high culture circles only to those whom the elites have deemed worthy of entry. Such gate-keeping is far less about aesthetic taste and far more about social status.

Actually, both high and popular culture consumption has such rules for appreciation. For example, imagine someone who doesn’t know these rules attending the opera in the way he or she might attend a U2 concert: singing along loudly with each aria, holding up a lighter at the end of a particularly good song, standing on his or her chair, and swaying to the music. Now, imagine an opera buff attending a U2 concert, sitting politely, applauding only at the end of the concert, and calling out “bravo” to the band. Both concertgoers will have got it wrong—both of them will have failed to express the appropriate ways to show they like something.

The sociologist tries to make no value judgment about which form of culture one appreciates—actually, virtually all of us combine an appreciation of both popular and high culture at various times and places. And both carry specific norms about value and criteria for evaluating whether something is good or not. To the

Sociologists approach this divide between high culture and popular culture as, itself, a sociological issue. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued that different groups possess what he called “cultural capital,” a resource that those in the dominant class can use to justify their dominance. **Cultural capital** is any “piece” of culture—an idea, an artistic expression, a form of music or literature—that a group can use as a symbolic resource to exchange with others. If I have access to this form of culture, and you want to have access to it, then I can “exchange” my access to access to those forms of capital that you have.

If there is a divide between high culture and popular culture, Bourdieu argues, then the dominant class can set the terms of training so that high culture can be properly appreciated. That is, the proper appreciation of high cul-



## Sociology and our World

### The High Culture–Low Culture Divide

The divide between popular culture and high culture is not nearly as clear as we like to think. In fact, the strict separation is bad history, because many of those cultural products that are now enshrined in “high culture” were originally popular forms of entertainment. Take Shakespeare, for example. Did you know that originally, Shakespeare’s plays were performed for mass audiences, who would shout out for the performers to do encores of their favorite scenes? In fact, Shakespeare himself added a little blood and gore to his tragedies to appeal to the mass audience. Opera also was originally a mass entertainment, which was

appropriated by music critics in the nineteenth century, when they developed rules for appreciating it that excluded all but the richest and most refined (see Levine, 1988).

Some popular culture can become high culture. Recall Andy Warhol’s painting of a soup can. Similarly, jazz was initially denounced as racially based, sexually charged popular culture. Now some people believe you need a Ph.D. in music theory just to “appreciate” John Coltrane or Miles Davis.

Equally, some elements of high culture can become part of popular culture. For example, various fashion styles of upper-class life—for example, collared “polo” shirts, even those decorated with little polo players—are worn by large numbers of people who would never set foot in the upper-class arena of the polo field.

sociologist, what is interesting is how certain cultural forms become established as high or popular and how they change, which groups promote which forms of culture, and the debates we have about whether something is really art—or a can of soup.

## Forms of Popular Culture

Popular culture refers not only to the forms of high culture (like art, music, or literature) that are enjoyed by the middle and working classes. Popular culture also refers to those objects, ideas, and values that people may hold at a specific moment. While we have seen that high culture changes, one of popular culture's defining qualities is its fluidity: It is constantly changing, constantly establishing new trends and discarding old ones. We can differentiate between two types of popular culture trends, fads and fashions.

**Fads.** Fads are defined by being short-lived, highly popular, and widespread behaviors, styles, or modes of thought. Often they are associated with other cultural forms. They are often created and marketed to generate “buzz” because if they catch on, they can be enormously profitable. Sociologist John Lofland (1993) identified four types of fads:

1. *Objects.* These are objects people buy because they are suddenly popular, whether or not they have any use or intrinsic value. Hula hoops, yo-yos, poodle skirts, mood rings, Day-Glo, Beanie Babies, Cabbage Patch Kids, Furbies, Pokemon or Yu-Gi-Oh! trading cards, and various children's confections are often good examples of object fads.
2. *Activities.* These are behaviors that suddenly everybody seems to be doing, and you decide to do it also, or else you'll feel left out. These can include various risk-taking behaviors—car surfing—or sports like rock climbing or simply going to a certain tourist destination that is suddenly “in.” Dances like the Moonwalk, the Bump, the Hustle, and before them the Swim, the Twist, and the Watusi are activity fads. Diets are top examples of activity fads today.
3. *Ideas.* Sometimes an idea will spread like wildfire, and then, just as suddenly, slip out of view. The Celestine prophesy, beliefs in UFOs, various New Age ideas, and “everything you needed to know you learned in kindergarten” are examples of idea fads.
4. *Personalities.* Some celebrities burst on the scene for their accomplishments, for example, athletes (Tiger Woods, LeBron James) or rock stars (Norah Jones, Bono, Eminem). Yet others are simply “famous for being famous”—everyone knows about them and seems to care about them, but few actually know what they've done to merit the attention. Anna Nicole Smith, Paris Hilton, and Jessica Simpson are examples of the latter.

Today there are also Internet fads, sometimes called “Internet memes,” which suddenly circulate wildly and/or draws millions of hits through the World Wide Web. Internet memes, defined as “self-propagating units of culture,” include people (like Mr. T, the A-Team actor who is considered one of the earliest Internet fads); video, audio, and animation segments; and various websites and blogs that suddenly become “in” places to read and post.

**Fashion.** A **fashion** is a behavior, style, or idea that is more permanent than a fad. It may originate as a fad and become more widespread and more acceptable over time. For example, the practice of tattooing, once associated with lower-class and even dangerous groups, became a fad in the 1990s but is today an accepted part of fashion, with over one-fourth of Americans under 25 years old having at least one tattoo.

Fashions involve widespread acceptance of the activity, whether it is music, art, literature, clothing, or sports. Because fashions are less fleeting than fads, they involve the cultural institutions that mediate our relationships with culture. Fashions may become institutionalized and aggressively marketed to ensure that people know that unless you subscribe to a particular fashion, you will be seen as an outsider. While fads may appear to bubble up from below, fashions are often deliberately created. (In reality, fads are also likely to have been created.)

## The Politics of Popular Culture

Most cultural elites are culturally conservative (regardless of how they vote or what sorts of policies they favor). That is, they wish to conserve the cultural forms that are currently in place and the hierarchies of value that are currently given to them. The status quo, as Bourdieu argued, reproduces their cultural dominance. As a result, changes in popular culture typically come from the margins, not the center—from those groups who have been excluded from the cultural elites and thus develop cultural expressions that are, at least in part, forms of cultural resistance.

Take clothing, for example. Blue jeans were once a workingman's attire. In fact, Levi Strauss invented blue jeans to assist gold miners in California in their muddy work. Appropriated by the youth culture in the 1960s as a form of clothing rebellion against the bland conformity of 1950s campus fashion, blue jeans were considered a fad—until kids' parents started to wear them. Then fashion designers got into the act, and the fad became a fashion. Today these symbols of a youthful rejection of materialism can cost up to \$500 a pair.

Trends in clothing, music, and other tastes in popular culture often originate today among three marginalized groups: African Americans, young people, and gay men and lesbians. As we've seen, blue jeans were once a youthful fashion statement of rebellion. Many men's fashions in clothing or accessories often have their origins among gay men (clothing styles, pierced ears) or Black inner-city youth (hoodie sweatshirts, skater shoes and pants). White suburban embrace of hip-hop and rap echoes the same embrace of soul and R&B in the 1960s (see the movie *Animal House*), or even the same embrace of jazz and bebop in successive generations. Clever marketers are constantly on the lookout for trends among the marginalized groups that can be transformed into luxury items. If you want to know what White suburban boys will be wearing and what music they'll be listening to in five years, take a look at what Black teenagers or gay men are wearing and listening to today.

**Often members of the dominant culture appropriate cultural styles of marginalized groups because they believe them to be more authentic and slightly transgressive. ▼**



## The Globalization of Popular Culture

It's not just American teenagers who are dressing in the latest fashions. Tourists visiting in other countries are often surprised at how closely the fashion styles resemble those in the United States. Interestingly, this occurs both through the deliberate export of specific cultural items and also through the ways in which cultural forms of resistance are expressed by young people and minorities.

Sometimes culture is exported deliberately. Popular culture—movies, music, books, television programs—is the second largest category of American export to the rest of the world (the first is aircraft). Large corporations like Nike, Disney, Coca-Cola, and Warner Brothers

work very hard to insure that people in other countries associate American products with hip and trendy fashions in the States.

Some see this trend as a form of **cultural imperialism**, which is the deliberate imposition of one's country's culture on another country. The global spread of American fashion, media, and language (English as the world's lingua franca in culture, arts, business, and technology) is often seen as an imposition of American values and ideas as well as products. Cultural imperialism is not usually imposed by governments that require citizens to consume some products and not others. It is cultural in that these products become associated with a lifestyle to which citizens of many countries aspire. But it is criticized as imperialist in that the profits from those sales are returned to the American corporation, not the home country.

On the other hand, cultural transfer is not nearly as one directional as many critics contend. There are many cultural trends among Americans that originated in other countries. Imported luxury cars, soccer, reggae, wine, beer, and food fads all originate in other countries and become associated with exotic lifestyles elsewhere.

And sometimes, global cultural trends emerge from below, without deliberate marketing efforts. In the 1970s, when I was doing my dissertation research in Paris, I kept seeing young men wearing navy blue V-neck sweaters with UCLA imprinted on the chest. Since I was a student at Berkeley, UCLA was familiar (even though a rival), and so one day I approached one guy and asked, in French, if he had gone to UCLA. He looked blankly at me. I asked again, pointing to his sweater. He shrugged his shoulders and said what sounded like "oooo-klah?" a reasonable French phonetic pronunciation. He had no idea it was a university, but it was simply the fashion among French students to wear "American-style" sweaters. Even today, you can see sweatshirts on Europeans that advertise incorrectly "University of Yale" or "California University."

## Culture as a Tool Kit

The social movement of popular culture from margin to center reveals a final element in the sociological approach to culture. Culture is not a thing one does or does not have, nor is it a level of refinement of taste and sensibility. It is not a constant throughout our lives, and it doesn't simply evolve and grow as we mature and develop.

Culture is a complex set of behaviors, attitudes, and symbols that individuals *use* in their daily relationships with others. It is, as sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) calls it, a "tool kit," a sort of repertoire of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct their identities. Culture is not passively inherited, transmitted from one generation to the next through various institutions, so that each generation eventually obtains all the requisite symbols, linguistic skills, and values of the society. Culture is diverse, and one uses different parts of it in different circumstances with different groups for different reasons.

## Cultural Change

Cultures are dynamic, constantly changing. Sometimes that rate of change may seem faster or slower than at other times. And sometimes change feels sudden and dramatic, producing conflict between those who support change and those who resist it. Culture wars often are symbolic clashes—of ideas, symbols, values—between groups who

**Cultural artifacts are often exported to other societies, which tend to incorporate them into their own culture. As much a "brand" as a player, David Beckham was exported by Europe to the L.A. Galaxy in 2007 with the hopes that he could invigorate professional soccer in the United States. ▼**



support certain changes and those who want to resist change. And while some change is inevitable, not every change is necessarily beneficial.

Although cultures are constantly changing, all the elements of culture do not change at the same time or in the same ways. In some cases, as we saw, changes among some marginalized groups become fashions for the mainstream after a period of time. It is often the case that changes in material culture—the level of technology, material resources—change more rapidly than changes in cultural institutions like the family or religion. At those moments, societies experience what sociologist William Ogburn called **culture lag**—the gap between technology and material culture and its social beliefs and institutions.

At those times, the beliefs and values of a society have to catch up to the changes in technology or material life (Ogburn, [1922] 1966). For example, changes in communication technology have dramatically transformed social life, but our values have failed to keep pace. Cell phones, text messaging, and instant messaging, combined with e-mail and other Internet-based modes of communication, have dramatically altered the ways in which people interact. Yet the cultural mores that govern such interaction—etiquette, manners, norms governing appropriate behavior—have not yet caught up to the technology. Occasionally, this results in confusion, discomfort, or conflict. We're constantly creating new norms to respond to these changes—like laws regarding cell phone use while driving or policies on text messaging in class.

My grandfather once told me that the single greatest change in his lifetime was not television but the introduction of the radio when he was a child. The invention of the radio completely changed his life in the city. Before the radio, the streets of the city were teeming with people sitting outside in the evening, talking, discussing, and arguing about current events and gossiping about their neighbors. Suddenly, the streets were deserted, as everyone stayed home to listen to this new invention. To him, television just added pictures, but staying home with the family had already been established by radio. (This example also suggests that the cultural norm of “family time” in the evenings is also a historical product.)

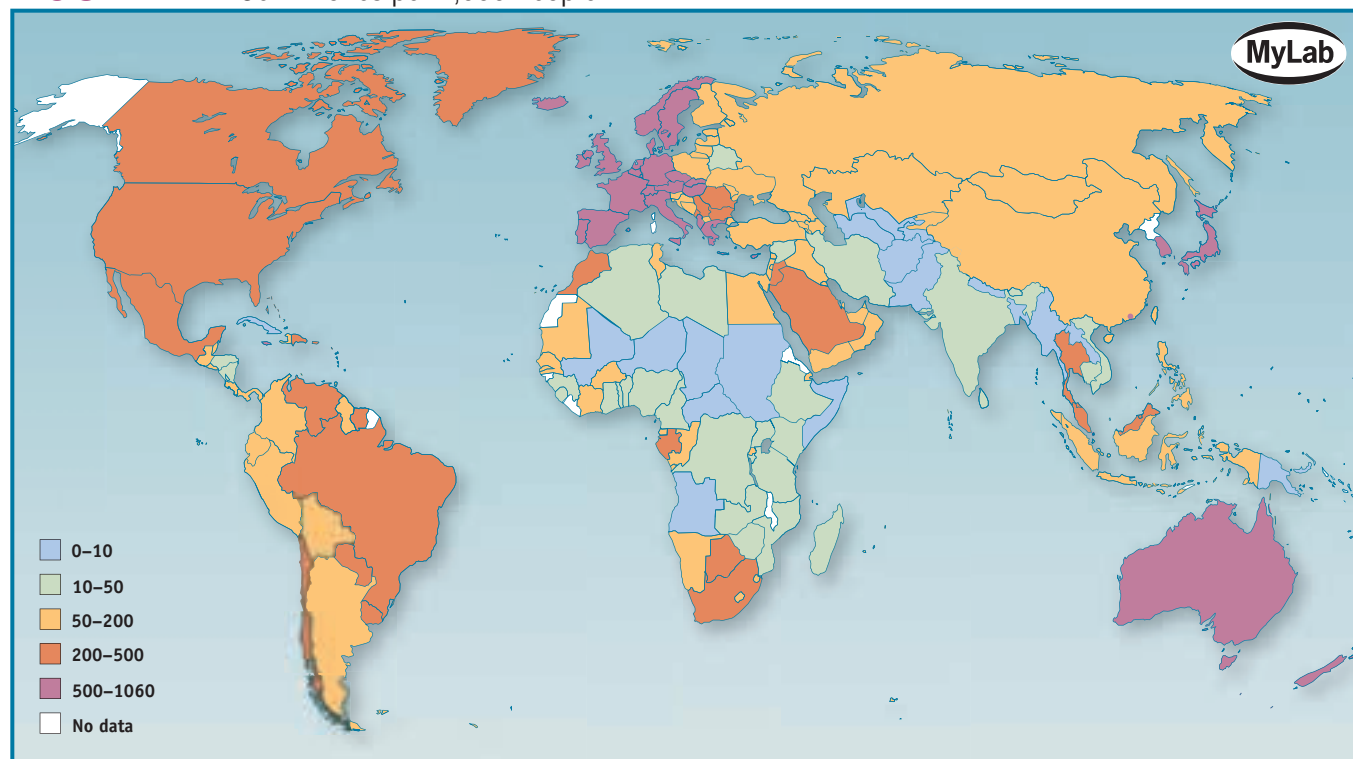
Culture lag is a relatively gradual process by which nonmaterial elements of culture catch up with material culture. In this instance, we can also speak of **cultural diffusion**, which means the spreading of new ideas through a society, independent of population movement. As the impact of the technological innovation ripples through the rest of society, eventually a new equilibrium will be reached (Figure 2.2). Then all goes smoothly until the next technological breakthrough.

But sometimes, technological breakthroughs also enable groups within a society, or an entire society, to impose its values on others. Cultures can change dramatically and suddenly by conquest as well as by diffusion. The impact is often stark, sudden, and potentially lethal. Sometimes conquest can deliberately transform the culture of the colonized, as when missionaries force conquered groups to convert to the religion of the conqueror or be put to death. In those instances, the entire belief system of the culture, its foundation, is dismantled and replaced by a foreign one.

In other cases, it is less immediate or direct, but no less profound. The first European colonists who came to the New World in the sixteenth century were able

**Cultures do not change uniformly. Culture lag describes how changes in material culture (like technology) outpace the values and norms of the traditional culture, which attempts to incorporate them. ▼**



**FIGURE 2.2** Cell Phones per 1,000 People

Source: From United Nations Environment Programme/GRID-Arendal website, <http://maps.grida.no>. Cartogram reproduced by permission of the authors, Vladimir Tikunov (Department of Geography, University of Moscow) and Philippe Rekacewicz (Le Monde diplomatique, Paris).

to subdue the indigenous peoples of North America by superior technology (like muskets and artillery), by the manipulation of religious beliefs about the potential benevolent foreigners, and by the coincidental importation of diseases, like syphilis, which killed millions more Native Americans than the colonists' bullets. It is possible that other food-borne diseases, like avian flu and mad cow disease, could have an almost equally devastating impact on local cultures today.

Intercultural contact need not be accomplished through force. Today, global cultural forms are emerging that diffuse across national boundaries and are incorporated, unevenly and incompletely, into different national and local cultures. These often result in odd juxtapositions—a consultant in rural Africa talking on a cell phone or downloading information from a laptop standing next to a woman carrying a pail of water on her head. But these are no odder than a scene you might well have witnessed in many parts of the United States just 70 years ago—cars speeding past homes with outhouses and outdoor water pumps. Culture spreads unevenly and unequally and often is accompanied by significant opposition and conflict.

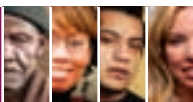
## Culture in the 21st Century

Concepts such as culture, values, and norms help orient the sociologist, providing a way to understand the world he or she is trying to study. They provide the context, the “field” in which myriad individual experiences, motivations, and behaviors take place. They are necessary to situate our individual experiences; they are the concepts by which sociologists connect individual biography and history. They are the concepts that we’ll use to understand the forces that hold society together and those that drive it apart.



Cultures are constantly changing—from within and through their contact with other cultures. A global culture is emerging of shared values and norms, shared technologies enabling common behaviors and attitudes. Increasingly, we share habits, fashions, language, and technology with a wider range of people than ever in human history. We are in that sense all becoming “one.” And, at the same time, in our daily lives, we often resist the pull of these global forces and remain steadfastly loyal to those ties that bind us to local cultural forms—kinship and family, our ethnic group, religion, or community.

The cultural diversity that defines most industrialized societies also defines American society, and that diversity will continue to provide moments of *both* combination *and* collision, of separation and synthesis. Most people are rarely “all-American” or feel completely like members of one ethnic or racial subculture. We’re both. To be a hyphenated American—an Asian-American or Italian-American, for example—is a way of expressing the fact that we don’t have to choose. Sometimes you may feel more “Italian” than American, and other times you may feel more “American” than Italian. And then, finally, there are times when you feel specifically Italian-American, poised somewhere between, distinct and unique, and yet not completely fitting into either. As Bono sings in the U2 song “One”: “We’re one but we’re not the same.”



## Chapter Review

- 1. How do sociologists see culture?** Culture is the connection between the personal and the structural, between how we are shaped by our society and how we are in turn shaping it. It is both the material basis for social life and the ideas, beliefs, and values that guide social life. Most people think their culture is “normal,” and this belief can lead to culture shock when they are exposed to unfamiliar cultures and to ethnocentrism, which involves condemning other groups for being different. Even within a single culture, there are differences between groups that lead to the formation of subcultures (groups that are part of the larger culture but have distinct characteristics) and countercultures (subcultures are in opposition to the larger culture).
- 2. What are the elements of culture?** All cultures share five basic elements. Material culture is what people make (food, clothing, tools, and the like) and the things they use to make it. The next universal element is symbols, or things that represent something else and have a shared social meaning. Language is how we think and communicate with others and the way we create a sense of self; it both reflects how we see the world and shapes how we see it. The last universal element is rituals, which are routinized behaviors that express belonging to a culture.
- 3. How is culture expressed in a society?** Cultural universals are those components of culture that exist in all societies. They include material culture, the arts and play, language and nonverbal communication, social organization, a system of social control, conflict and warfare, economic organization, a system of education, and a shared worldview. But these broad, basic categories include a lot of variation. Sometimes the word *culture* is used to describe the high culture of arts and literature. High culture is contrasted with popular culture, which is more inclusive. Pierre Bourdieu described how knowledge of high culture, or cultural capital, is used to reinforce social status. Popular culture often occurs as trends like fads and fashions, which spread worldwide through globalization.
- 4. What is the difference between norms and values?** The core elements of culture are norms and values. Norms are expectations for behavior, and values are the ideas that justify those expectations. Norms are based on one’s status and establish one’s role in society. Norms and values are transmitted through socialization and vary by culture and by groups within a culture. They also change over time. Norms come in various stages of seriousness of transgression and consequences. Values are ethical ideas about what is right or wrong, good or bad. They are shared by members of a society. Values and norms interact and change each other. Laws, which are formal norms, are expected to change values. Often, though, there are big gaps between values and actions, between “ideal” and “real” cultures.
- 5. How does culture change?** Cultures are constantly changing. Changes in ideas, symbols, or values often ensue in a symbolic clash called culture wars. Technological changes can happen faster than social ideas change, which can lead to a culture lag, which results often in

confusion or discomfort. Technological changes often spread quickly in what is called cultural diffusion. Cultures change in other ways as well, such as after a

conquest or simply through the increased interaction of globalization. In addition, a global culture is developing where we share technology, fashion, and values.

## KeyTerms

Counterculture (p. 41)  
 Cultural capital (p. 54)  
 Cultural diffusion (p. 58)  
 Cultural diversity (p. 39)  
 Cultural imperialism (p. 57)  
 Cultural relativism (p. 40)  
 Cultural universal (p. 52)  
 Culture (p. 38)  
 Culture lag (p. 58)

Culture shock (p. 39)  
 Ethnocentrism (p. 39)  
 Fad (p. 55)  
 Fashion (p. 55)  
 Folkway (p. 46)  
 Language (p. 43)  
 Law (p. 47)  
 Material culture (p. 38)  
 More (p. 47)

Nonmaterial culture (p. 39)  
 Norm (p. 45)  
 Popular culture (p. 53)  
 Ritual (p. 44)  
 Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (p. 43)  
 Subculture (p. 40)  
 Symbol (p. 42)  
 Value (p. 47)

What  
 does  
 America  
 think?



### English as Our Official Language

These are actual survey data from the General Social Survey, 2004.

#### Do you favor or oppose making English the official language of the United States?

Overall, slightly more than three-quarters of the U.S. population favor English as the official language of the United States. There are significant class differences in this, with those who identify as lower class being less likely than other groups to be in favor.

English as Official Language, by Social Class, Percent

	LOWER	WORKING	MIDDLE	UPPER	ROW TOTAL
Favor	70.2	75.8	79.8	78.4	77.5
Oppose	29.8	24.2	20.2	21.6	22.5

#### CRITICAL THINKING | DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can we explain the social class differences in responses to this survey question?
2. How do you think the results might have differed had we looked at them by race or by gender?

► Go to this website to look further at the data. You can run your own statistics and crosstabs here: <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsta+gss04>

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