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Chapter 2: Culture

Chapter Summary

This chapter examines how culture shapes our orientation to life. Culture includes many components such as gestures, language, values, norms and sanctions, folkways, mores, and taboos. Culture is not universal and varies according to time and place. Sociologists promote cultural relativism to understand and appreciate cultures other than our own. Subcultures and countercultures exist within cultures. Subcultures have their own cultures, but do not push against the mainstream culture. For example, teenagers could be considered a subculture. Countercultures, however, go against the mainstream culture. This chapter also examines the relationship between genes and human behavior; most sociologists consider genes to be an inadequate explanation of behavior. The chapter ends with a discussion of technology and how it plays a crucial role in changing culture across space. With the increased flow of technology, cultural diffusion has increased, shifting cultural norms from one country to another. On the other hand, cultural lag occurs when a cultural practice lags behind a technological change. Conversely, cultural leveling describes the process of countries becoming more similar to one another culturally.

Learning Objectives

LO 2.1 Explain what culture is, how culture provides orientations to life, and what practicing cultural relativism means. (p. 40)

LO 2.2 Know the components of symbolic culture: gestures, language, values, norms, sanctions, folkways, mores, and taboos; also explain the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. (p. 46)

LO 2.3 Distinguish between subcultures and countercultures. (p. 53)

LO 2.4 Discuss the major U.S. values and explain value clusters, value contradictions, value clashes, how values are lenses of perception, and ideal versus real culture. (p. 56)

LO 2.5 Explain what cultural universals are and why they do not seem to exist. (p. 60)

LO 2.6 Explain why most sociologists consider genes to be an inadequate explanation of human behavior. (p. 61)

LO 2.7 Explain how technology changes culture and what cultural lag and cultural leveling are. (p. 62)

Chapter Outline

A. What Is Culture?

2.1 Explain what culture is, how culture provides orientations to life, and what practicing cultural relativism means.

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1. The concept of culture is sometimes easier to grasp by description than by definition. All human groups possess culture, which consists of the language, beliefs, values, norms, and material objects passed from one generation to the next. Although the particulars of culture may differ from one group to another, culture itself is universal—all societies develop shared, learned ways of perceiving and participating in the world around them.
2. Culture can be subdivided into material culture and nonmaterial culture.
    a) Material culture—things such as jewelry, art, buildings, weapons, machines, clothing, and hairstyles
    b) Nonmaterial culture—a group's ways of thinking (beliefs, values, and assumptions) and common patterns of behavior (language, gestures, and other forms of interaction)
3. Culture provides a taken-for-granted orientation to life.
    a) We assume that our own culture is normal or natural; in fact, it is not natural, but rather is learned. It penetrates our lives so deeply that we take it for granted, and it provides the lens through which we perceive and evaluate things.
    b) It provides implicit instructions that tell us what we ought to do and a moral imperative that defines what we think is right and wrong.
    c) Coming into contact with a radically different culture produces "culture shock," which challenges our basic assumptions.
    d) A consequence of internalizing culture is ethnocentrism, using our own culture (and assuming it to be good, right, and superior) to judge other cultures. It is functional when it creates in-group solidarity, but can be dysfunctional if it leads to discrimination against those who are different.
4. Although all groups practice some forms of ethnocentrism, people can also employ cultural relativism, the practice of understanding a culture on its own terms without assessing its elements as any better or worse than one's own culture. Cultural relativism presents a challenge to ordinary thinking because we tend to use our own culture to judge others.
    a) Because we tend to use our own culture as the standard, cultural relativism presents a challenge to ordinary thinking.
    b) At the same time, this view helps us appreciate other ways of life.
    c) Robert Edgerton suggested developing a scale for evaluating cultures on their "quality of life." He argued that those cultural practices that result in exploitation *should* be judged as morally inferior to those that enhance people's lives.

B. Components of Symbolic Culture

2.2 Know the components of symbolic culture: gestures, language, values, norms, sanctions, folkways, mores, and taboos; also explain the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

1. Sociologists sometimes refer to nonmaterial culture as symbolic culture, because symbols are the central component of nonmaterial culture. Symbols include gestures, language, values, norms, sanctions, folkways, mores and taboos.
2. Gestures, or using one's body to communicate with others, are shorthand means of communication.
    a) People in every culture use gestures, although gestures and their meanings differ; confusion or offense can result because of misunderstandings over the meaning or misuse of a gesture.

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b) Experts disagree over whether any universal gestures exist. They tend to vary considerably around the world.

3. Language consists of a system of symbols that can be put together in an infinite number of ways to communicate abstract thought. Each word is a symbol to which a culture attaches a particular meaning. Language is important because it is the primary means of communication between people.
   a) It allows human experiences to be cumulative; each generation builds on the body of significant experiences that is passed on to it by the previous generation, thus freeing people to move beyond immediate experiences.
   b) It allows for a social or shared past. We are able to discuss past events with others.
   c) It allows for a social or shared future. Language allows us to plan future activities with one another.
   d) It allows the exchange of perspectives (i.e., ideas about events and experiences).
   e) It allows people to engage in complex, shared, goal-directed behavior.
4. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that not only does language express our thinking and perception, language actually shapes them because we are taught not only words but also a particular way of thinking and perceiving. Rather than objects and events forcing themselves onto our consciousness, our very language determines our consciousness.
5. Values are the standards by which people define good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Every group develops both values and expectations regarding the right way to reflect them.
6. Norms are the expectations, or rules of behavior, that develop out of a group's values.
7. Sanctions are the positive or negative reactions to the way in which people follow norms. Positive sanctions (a money reward, a prize, a smile, or even a handshake) are expressions of approval; negative sanctions (a fine, a frown, or harsh words) denote disapproval for breaking a norm.
8. To relieve the pressure of having to strictly follow the norms, some cultures have moral holidays—specified times when people are allowed to break the norms and not worry about being sanctioned. Mardi Gras is an example of a moral holiday in our society.
9. Some societies have moral holiday places, locations where norms are expected to be broken. An example would be red-light districts where prostitutes are allowed to work the streets.
10. Folkways are norms that are not strictly enforced, such as passing on the left side of the sidewalk. Breaking them may result in a dirty look.
11. Mores are norms a culture believes to be essential to core values and therefore insists on conformity to them. A person who steals, rapes, or kills has violated some of society's most important mores.
12. Norms that one group considers to be folkways another group may view as mores. A male walking down the street with the upper half of his body uncovered may be violating a folkway; a female doing the same thing may be violating a more.
13. Taboos are norms so strongly ingrained that even the thought of them is greeted with revulsion. Eating human flesh and having sex with one's parents are examples of such behavior and tend to span cultural boundaries.

A. Many Cultural Worlds: Subcultures and Countercultures

2.3 Distinguish between subcultures and countercultures.

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1. Subcultures are groups whose values and related behaviors are so distinct that they set their members off from the dominant culture.
   a) Each subculture is a world within the larger world of the dominant culture. It has a distinctive way of looking at life, but remains compatible with the dominant culture.
   b) U.S. society contains tens of thousands of subcultures. Some are quite broad (teenagers), while others are narrow (body builders). Some ethnic groups form subcultures, as do certain occupational groups.
2. Countercultures are groups whose values set their members in opposition to the dominant culture.
   a) While usually associated with negative behavior, some countercultures are not.
   b) The dominant culture often perceives countercultures as a threat because they challenge the culture's values; for this reason, the dominant culture will move against a particular counterculture to affirm its own core values. For example, in the 1800s, the Mormons challenged the dominant culture's core value of monogamy and were driven out of several states before settling in Utah.

A. Values in U.S. Society

2.4 Discuss the major U.S. values and explain value clusters, value contradictions, value clashes, how values are lenses of perception, and ideal culture versus real culture.

3. Because the United States is a pluralistic society made up of many different groups, competing value systems are common. Some sociologists, however, have tried to identify some underlying core values in the United States.
   a) Sociologist Robin Williams identified ten core values: achievement and success (especially, doing better than others); individualism (success due to individual effort); hard work; efficiency and practicality; science and technology (using science to control nature); material comfort; freedom; democracy; equality (especially of opportunity); and group superiority.
   b) Henslin updated Williams's list by adding education; religiosity (belief in a Supreme Being and following some set of matching precepts); and romantic love.
4. Values are not independent units; value clusters are made up of related core values that come together to form a larger whole. In the value cluster surrounding success, for example, we find hard work, education, efficiency, material comfort, and individualism all bound together.
5. Some values conflict with each other. Full expressions of democracy, equality, racism, and sexism cannot exist at the same time. These are value contradictions, and, as society changes, some values are challenged and undergo modification.
6. A cluster emerging in response to fundamental changes in U.S. society is made up of the values of leisure, self-fulfillment, physical fitness, and youthfulness. Another emerging value is concern for the environment.
   a) Valuing leisure is reflected in the huge recreation industry that exists today.
   b) Self-fulfillment is expressed through the human potential movement and on the popularity of self-help books and talk shows.
   c) While physical fitness is not a new value, it is emphasized more today, as evidenced by the interest in health foods, weight and diet, and the growth in the number of health clubs/physical fitness centers.

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d) Today, being young has taken on a new urgency, perhaps because of the generation of aging baby boomers who are trying to deny their biological fate.
e) Our history suggests a lack of concern for the environment; it was generally viewed as a challenge to be overcome. However, today a genuine concern exists for protecting the environment.

7. Change is seen as a threat to the established way of life, something that will undermine people's present and their future. Today's clash in values is often so severe that the term "culture wars" has been coined to refer to it.
8. Values and their supporting beliefs may blind people to other social circumstances. Success stories blind many people in the United States to the dire consequences of family poverty, lack of education, and dead-end jobs.
9. "Ideal culture" refers to the ideal values and norms of a people. What people actually do usually falls short of this ideal, and sociologists refer to the norms and values that people actually follow as "real culture."

A. Cultural Universals

2.5 Explain what cultural universals are and why they do not seem to exist.

1. Although many human activities are universal, there is no universally accepted way of doing any of them.
   a) Anthropologist George Murdock concluded that all human groups share certain cultural universals: customs about courtship, cooking, marriage, funerals, games, laws, music, myths, incest taboos, and toilet training are present in all cultures.
   b) Even so, the specific customs differ from one group to another. For example, there is no universal form of the family, no universal way of disposing of the dead, and no universal method of toilet training. Even incest is defined differently from group to group.

B. Sociobiology and Human Behavior

2.6 Explain why most sociologists consider genes to be an inadequate explanation of human behavior.

1. Sociobiologists argue that, as a result of natural selection, the basic cause of human behavior is biology.
   a) Just as the physical characteristics and instinctual behavior of animals are the result of natural selection (i.e., those genetic traits that aid in survival tend to become common to a species, while those that do not tend to disappear), so is human behavior.
   b) Edward Wilson has argued that religion, competition and cooperation, slavery and genocide, war and peace, and envy and altruism can all be explained in terms of genetic programming.
   c) Most sociologists reject this claim. Unlike other species, humans are capable of reasoning and abstract thought; we can consider alternatives, reflect on outcomes, and make choices.

C. Technology in the Global Village

2.7 Explain how technology changes culture and what cultural lag and cultural leveling are.

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1. Central to a group's material culture is its technology. In its simplest sense, technology can be equated with tools. In its broadest sense, technology also includes the skills or procedures necessary to make and use those tools.
    a) The emerging technologies of an era that make a major impact on human life are referred to as new technologies. The printing press and the computer are both examples of new technologies.
    b) The sociological significance of technology is that it sets the framework for the nonmaterial culture, influencing the way people think and how they relate to one another.
2. Some people fear that as artificial intelligence advances, it could become more human and overrun human culture.
3. Not all parts of culture change at the same pace; "cultural lag" was William Ogburn's term for material culture changing first and nonmaterial culture lagging behind.
4. Although for most of human history cultures have had little contact with one another, there has always been some contact among groups, resulting in groups learning from one another.
    a) This transmission of cultural characteristics is called cultural diffusion; it is more likely to produce changes in material culture than in nonmaterial culture.
    b) Cultural diffusion occurs more rapidly today, given the technology.
    c) Travel and communication unite the world to such an extent that the "other side of the world" has all but disappeared. This is leading to cultural leveling, where cultures become similar to one another.

Revel

Chapter Introduction: Video: *Hearing from Students: Culture*

Module 2.1: Journal: *Apply This to Your Life: Why the Dead Need Money*; Photo Gallery: *Standards of Beauty*; Journal: *Cultural Relativity*; End of Module Quiz: *QUIZ 2.1*

Module 2.2: Accordion Photo Gallery: *Figure 2.1*; Audio: *Hearing from the Author: Universal Gestures*; Download: *Audio Clip Transcript: Universal Gestures*; Audio: *Hearing from the Author: Language*; Download: *Audio Clip Transcript: Language*; Journal*: Apply This to Your Life: Race and Language*; Multimedia Gallery: *Moral Holiday: Mardi Gras*; End of Module Quiz: *QUIZ 2.2*

Module 2.3: Multimedia Gallery: *Looking at Subcultures*; Shared Writing: *Subculture*; End of Module Quiz: *QUIZ 2.3*

Module 2.4: Accordion: *Ten Core Values*; Accordion: *Additional Core Values*; Journal: *Apply This to Your Life: Core Values*; Accordion: *Emerging Value Clusters*; End of Module Quiz: *QUIZ 2.4*

Module 2.5: End of Module Quiz: *QUIZ 2.5*

Module 2.6: End of Module Quiz: *QUIZ 2.6*

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Module 2.7: Journal: *Applying the Sociological Perspective: Artificial Intelligence*; Audio: *Hearing from the Author: Cultural Diffusion in an Amazon Tribe*; Download: *Audio Clip Transcript: Cultural Diffusion in an Amazon Tribe*; End of Module Quiz: *QUIZ 2.7*;

Chapter Summary: Advanced Flashcards: *Chapter 2 Key Terms;* End of Chapter Quiz: *Culture*

Journal Prompts/Shared Writing

J 2.1
Journal Prompt: Cultural Diversity and Death
How do the traditional Chinese customs regarding the dead differ from your culture's customs?

J 2.2
Journal Prompt: Cultural Relativity
If you were reared in U.S. society, more than likely you think that eating frog legs is okay; eating ants or flies is disgusting; and eating cod sperm, maggot cheese, dogs, cats, and monkey brains is downright repugnant. How would you apply the concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism to your perceptions of these customs?

J 2.3
Journal Prompt: Shared Language
Do you think that the language controversy in Miami points to the future of the United States? Like the grandchildren of European immigrants who lost the ability to speak their grandparent's native language, when do you think the grandchildren of Mexican and South American immigrants will be unable to speak Spanish?

J 2.4
Journal Prompt: Race and Language
What terms do you use to refer to your race or ethnicity? What "bad" terms do you know that others have used to refer to your race or ethnicity? What is the difference in meaning between the terms you use and the "bad" terms? Where does that meaning come from?

J 2.5
Journal Prompt: Technology
How do you think developments in computing will change *your* life ten years from now?

SW 2.1
Shared Writing: Culture
What subculture are you a member of? Why do you think that your group is a subculture and not a counterculture? What is your group's relationship to the mainstream culture?

Special Features

- Cultural Diversity around the World: Why the Dead Need Money
- Cultural Diversity around the World: You Are What You Eat? An Exploration in Cultural Relativity

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- Cultural Diversity in the United States: Miami—Continuing Controversy over Language
- Cultural Diversity in the United States: Race and Language: Searching for Self-Labels
- Thinking Critically: Are We Prisoners of Our Genes?
- Sociology and New Technology: The End of Human Culture? Artificial Intelligence and Super-Smart Computers

Lecture Suggestions

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

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

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

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

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

Suggested Assignments

- Ask students to log on to the Internet and connect to three major newspapers available online from countries other than the United States. Have them spend at least fifteen minutes per paper examining as many features, stories, and advertisements as they can. From their examination, ask them if they can deduce any core values of the countries where the newspapers are published. Furthermore, ask them to consider how those core values may or

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may not differ from some of the "American" core values identified by Robin Williams and James Henslin. Then have students report their findings to the class while discussing to what extent newspapers, as examples of material culture, may or may not be indicative of their producing society's nonmaterial culture.

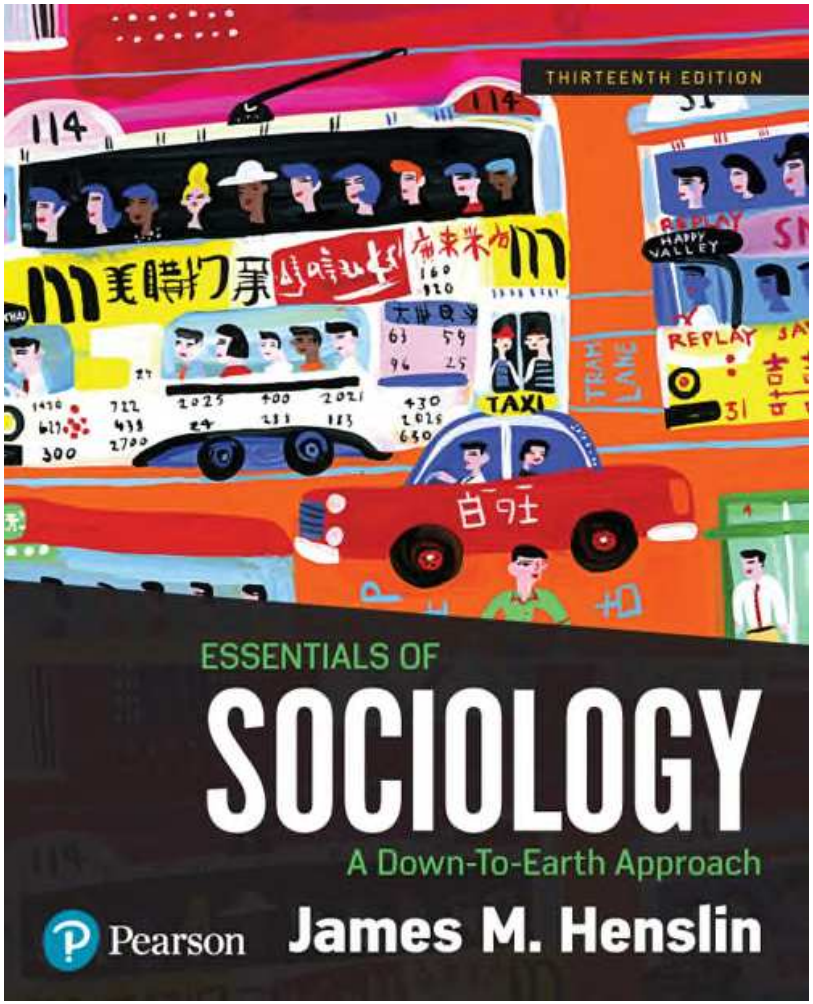
- Require each student to attend a cultural activity of an ethnic or racial group apart from their own and write a short paper on their impression of the experience. Students should record all the observations of material and nonmaterial culture they can observe.

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

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Essentials of Sociology

Thirteenth Edition



Chapter 2

Culture

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Figure 2.1 Gestures to Indicate Height, Southern Mexico



As shown here, three different hand gestures indicate the height of animals, plants, and people in Southern Mexico.

Source: By the author.

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