

UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY

An Introduction to Sociology

SECOND EDITION

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1817



HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, New York
Cambridge, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington,
London, Mexico City, São Paulo, Singapore, Sydney

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Printer and Binder: Arcada/Kingsport Press

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Persell, Caroline Hodges.
Understanding society.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Sociology. I. Title.

HM51.P45 1987 301 86-22784

ISBN 0-06-045124-6

86 87 88 89 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CULTURE

"A group of Arab oil workers sent to Texas for training found American teaching methods impersonal. Several Japanese workers at a U.S. manufacturing plant had to learn how to put courtesy aside and interrupt conversations when there was trouble. Executives of a Swiss-based multinational couldn't understand why its American managers demanded more autonomy than their European counterparts."

"Jose Carlos Villates, a business manager for animal health products at American Cyanamid Co., also had a problem with office protocol. Back in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, where he was raised, business people would begin meetings with relaxed chitchat. At the company's headquarters in Wayne, NJ, though, he says he picks up 'signals or body language' that Americans find such sociability time wasting. But even after 15 months in the U.S., Mr. Villates feels uncomfortable plunging abruptly into business. 'It strikes us as cold-blooded,' he says."

"'Most people think that culture is manners, food, dress, arts and crafts,' says Clifford Clarke, president of IRI International, a Redwood City, CA, consulting company. 'They don't realize that how you motivate a guy is culturally determined. Every managerial task is culturally determined.'" (Bennett, 1986, p. 33)

Culture affects almost everything we do, think, and feel. Culture surrounds us like the air we breathe. It shapes our habits, behaviors, language, and interpersonal style. Often it does this in invisible ways—for example, by influencing our ideas about what is "natural," just, or beautiful. Culture affects what we take for granted, as well as what we question.

In this chapter we define what sociologists mean by culture, consider how culture helps to set humans apart from other species, explore common features in the culture of many societies, look at explanations for cultural variation, analyze changes in American culture and values, critically examine sociobiology (a field that stresses the importance of a biological rather than a cultural basis for human behavior), and consider whether culture smothers individualism.

DEFINING THE CONCEPT

Even a definition of culture depends on culture. In the German, Scandinavian, and Slavic language groups the word "culture" tends to mean a particular way of life, whether of a people, a time period, or a group. But in Italian and French, the word refers more to art, learning, and a general process of human development (Williams, 1976, p. 81). Both meanings exist today as the word is used in English. It is helpful to distinguish so-called high culture (classical music, opera, ballet, art, literature, and so forth) from all processes and products of human activity. High culture is associated with class distinctions, and is sometimes put down with the affected pronunciation "culchah" (Williams, 1976). We will use the term culture in its more general social sense to mean the customs of a group or a society.

Culture refers to all the symbolic and learned aspects of human society. Material culture includes things, technology, and the arts. Nonmaterial culture includes language and other symbols, knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and customs. Culture has a certain durability. This does not mean it is unchanging; culture changes constantly. Indeed, it is like a living, breathing entity. Only the rate of change varies from one society to another. But there is an important historical dimension to it that cannot be ignored. Culture has a certain coherence, although it may contain contradictions. Ruth Benedict (1934), in her famous book *Patterns of Culture*, referred to "cultural configurations."

When people encounter a new culture, they can see, hear, feel, and otherwise sense the existence of a culture that differs from their own. When such changes are very dramatic, they say they experience "culture shock" from the jolt of so many unfamiliar activities. It takes time to adjust to the different tempo, social styles, food, and activities. Even experienced anthropologists who have made numerous trips to study other cultures report they feel culture shock when they return home. In the United States, visitors from the North to the South, or vice versa, also notice differences in tempo, politeness, language, customs, and diet. Northerners may get impatient with the apparent slowness of southern service; southerners may be shocked by what seems like northern rudeness. We tend to take culture for granted until we are confronted with differences or changes.

Although culture and society are intimately bound together, it is possible to separate them, at least conceptually. Society consists of people and their inter-



We all tend to take our own culture for granted until we are struck with sudden cultural changes or contrasts.

actions. Culture is all the socially learned behaviors, beliefs, feelings, and values the members of a group or society experience. It includes customs and language. It affects how people interact, the meanings they place on different interactions, and how interactions are organized. Society is like the actors in a play, and culture is like the script they follow (or do not follow in some cases). Culture provides tested techniques for dealing with various problems that arise in the course of finding food, water, shelter, sex, and ways of living together that minimize friction and maximize cooperation.

The capacity to create, transmit, and modify culture dramatically distinguishes humans from animals. Animals appear to depend on instincts, imitative social learning, or trial and error for solving their survival problems. Humans rely much more on cultural prescriptions. If culture distinguishes humans from animals, it is important to consider the similarities between us and animals, as well as the unique features of human life.

HUMAN UNIQUENESS

Which biological traits do we share with other animals and which represent unique features? We are born and

we die. Unlike humans, most animals appear to be unaware of the fate that awaits them. Humans, like our closest relatives the great apes, are a sociable species, preferring to live in groups rather than alone. We interact with one another often and enjoy being affectionate. We have unusually large brains, which have grown dramatically in size during the last 3 million years of evolution (Wilson, 1975a). The increasing size of the brain has meant ever-increasing intelligence for members of the species, leading to increasingly complex culture and technology, and less reliance on instincts. Many insects and animals inherit instincts for behaving in certain ways. **Instincts** are genetically determined patterns of behaviors triggered by certain conditions and over which animals have little or no control. Beavers, for example, have an instinctual response to cut down trees with their teeth. If, however, they cut through the trunk of a tree and it does not fall because its branches are caught in the branches of other trees, the beaver will start chewing all over again. Their instincts tell them to chew until the tree falls. For humans, culture and reasoning greatly outweigh instinctual bases for behavior.

We have very useful hands that are strong, precise, and skillful. Having an opposing thumb means that we can grasp, grip, and manipulate in ways few other species can. This allows us to make and then to use all kinds of tools and implements.

Human feet, legs, and backs have evolved in such a way that we can walk and run easily in an upright position, something most animals are unable to do for any length of time. Human females can have sexual intercourse any time during the year, rather than being limited to a particular period of female "heat" or estrus. This year-round potential for sexual activity increases the chances that humans will form relatively lasting social-sexual relationships. These relationships are particularly important in view of the long period of human infant dependency. Human infants need care from others for a number of years to meet their physical needs and to learn their culture. Finally, along with our primate forebears, we are very talkative.

The combination of large brains and useful hands has enabled humans to adapt to widely varying geographical locations. Humans live more widely and more densely than any other mammal species on earth. The inventions of our brains, hands, and tongues can be passed along to our descendants. Each generation in turn will adapt or modify existing cultural forms and continue the never-ending process of cultural creation.

CULTURAL UNIVERSALS

All human societies appear to share certain cultural features, although the particular forms they take differ dramatically. These are called **cultural universals** and include the use of language and other symbols, the existence of norms and values, and the tension between ethnocentrism (the attitude that one's own culture is superior to all others) and cultural relativism (the view that the customs and ideas of a society must be viewed within the context of that society).

Common Cultural Elements

After comparing 220 societies, anthropologist George Murdock identified cultural elements found in all of them. These universal elements include age grading, athletic sports, cooking, dancing, folklore, hospitality, hygiene, joking, mourning, personal names, and soul concepts. Although these cultural features exist in all the societies studied, their particular content varied widely. Every culture, for example, has symbols and language, but there are many different symbolic meanings and languages.

Symbols

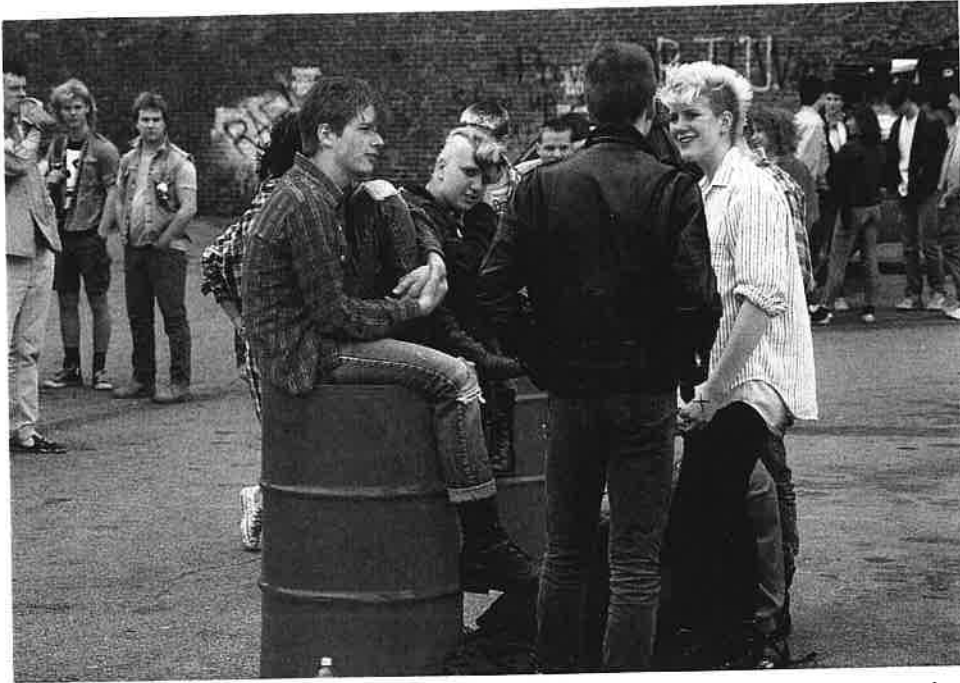
More than any other animal, humans fill the physical and social world with symbolic meanings. A **symbol** is any object or sign that produces a shared social response. A piece of rock, an animal, the moon, a cross, a glance at another person, a piece of paper with the word "dollar" on it are all imbued with various meanings and sometimes mythical or magical qualities. The symbolic meaning placed upon something may be separated from its physical aspects.

Symbols share several characteristics. First, they are socially developed. The sun may symbolize strength to you or to me, but unless that meaning is shared with others, it will not become a significant symbol. So, one feature of symbols is that they are socially shared. Black symbolizes mourning for many Americans, but New Guinea women paint themselves white to show grief. Second, symbols may have more than one meaning. A stack of hundred-dollar bills can symbolize wealth, happiness, greed, materialism, and a host of other things, depending on the meanings people attribute to it. So all meanings are not equally shared, and a variety of symbols can arise from an object like the stack of bills. Third, there is a certain amount of cultural arbitrariness in the meanings assigned to particular symbols, and symbols may differ in time and place. The skirt, for instance, has traditionally symbolized femininity in Western cultures, although Scottish men proudly wear kilts without being considered feminine. Many women wear pants and are considered no less feminine, and the meaning of long hair on men has varied widely.

One of the features of a highly diverse society such as ours is that people share different symbolic universes. That is, the symbolic meaning your group agrees on for something may not be shared by other groups. Wearing jeans may symbolize that someone is unpretentious, unconcerned with displaying material success, desirous of comfort, unhappy doing laundry, and a host of other meanings you could supply. Designer jeans, however, introduced an element of status competition into casual dressing. In our society there is less and less common meaning attached to cultural symbols. It used to be that driving a large car was a sign of success. But is it still? If you asked 20 different people, I think you would get 20 different responses. The size of one's car no longer means the same thing to everyone in our society.

Language

Of all the symbols humans use, language is the most highly developed. **Language** consists of spoken or



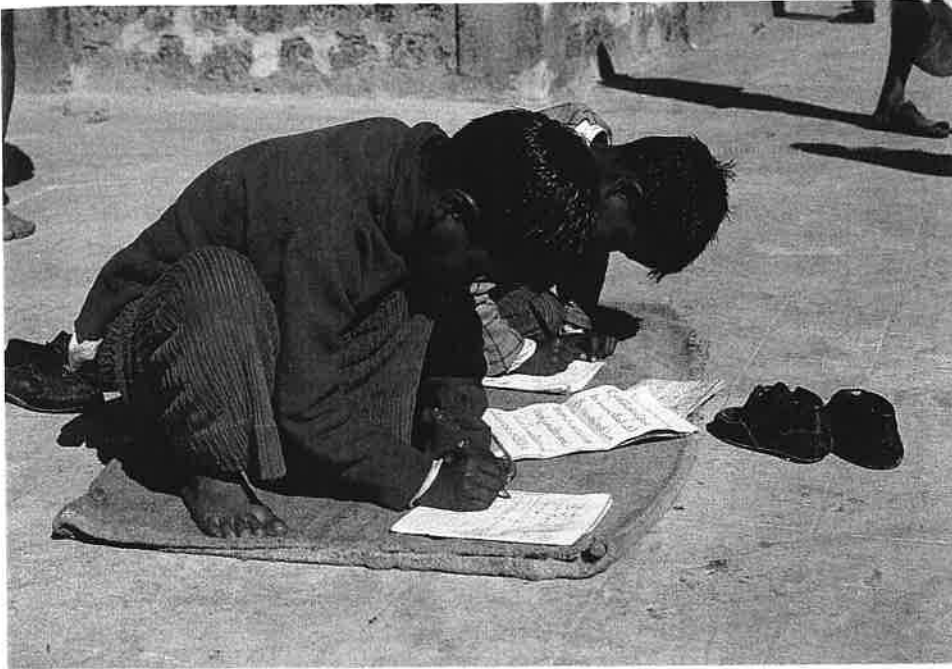
"Punk" hair and dress styles are a symbolic way of eliciting responses, sometimes strong ones, from others.

written symbols combined into a system and governed by rules. It enables us to share with others our ideas, thoughts, experiences, discoveries, fears, plans, and desires. Written language extends our capacity to communicate through time and space. Without language, it would be difficult to transmit culture, and culture would develop exceedingly slowly. Language is a critical key to understanding any culture and any society. It is the secret to reaching beyond ourselves, which is the heart of our social existence. A person may be a superb athlete, mechanic, or cook, but teaching or talking about that skill requires language. Otherwise, learning can only come from imitating actions.

Yet the importance of language goes even further. Two American linguists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, argue that language shapes the way people think and the way they view reality. If this is the case, it helps to explain why both the civil rights movement and the women's movement have been concerned about the use of language. Contrast the words "boy" and "man" with respect to what they say about a person's role and stature in society. Similarly, use of the words "girl" and "woman" has been important to the women's move-

ment. Not only are roles and statuses reflected in language, but language seems to shape a person's identity and sense of self. Language concepts can raise mental fences around the conceptions of self available to us and to others. The concept of "old" as applied to people in our society, for example, has generally implied that "old" people do not want or need sex, despite recent research showing that they desire and enjoy sexual relations of all kinds (Starr and Weiner, 1980). And by excluding sex as part of the identity of an "old" person, older people and the people around them may not be able to address their sexual needs.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language characteristics influence thought has been extensively criticized. Some argue that thought and culture shape language. Others hold that the iron grip of language over all our thought categories has not been demonstrated. However, people tend to see natural objects, such as colors, in the terms language provides. An artist may have words for 14 shades of red, and "see" them accordingly, whereas the Jale of New Guinea name and "see" the world only in terms of warm and cold color categories. Even social perceptions seem to be shaped by language,



Language, especially written language, is the most highly developed form of human symbol. Learning to read and write is a way young people can become cultural participants in their society. This helps to explain why these youngsters in Sikkim, India, are struggling to learn to write.

as research on teachers' expectations for "gifted" and "slow" learners suggests. In short, language does in some ways shape how we see the world and makes it difficult, although not impossible, to experience the world in alternative ways. Becoming aware of how language may limit us is the first step toward breaking free of those limits."

Language also provides clues to what a culture considers important. Farmers have many words to describe various types of soil, reflecting its importance to them. Our culture has numerous slang words for money (including "bread," "dough," "jack," "simoleons," "kale," "greenbacks," "bucks," "bones," "wad," "shekels," and "do-re-mi"), suggesting the importance of money in our culture.

Language also identifies the members of a group. If you "know the language," whether of football, electronics, or human physiology, you are a long way toward being "in" the group. If you do not know the language, you probably will not be accepted as part of the inner group, and also may not know what is going on. (This applies to sociology as well. You need to learn enough sociological "lingo" to pass the course you are taking.)

Finally, language can obscure as well as clarify. For example, the phrase "nuclear events" refers to *accidents* in nuclear power plants, but plays down their importance and removes them from the realm of human responsibility.

Norms

Suppose you were taking a seminar with 20 other students and you circulated a list with your names and telephone numbers on it. Then assume that several members of the seminar began receiving obscene phone calls, apparently from someone in the class. How would you feel if you received a call? Probably you would feel outraged. Your feelings would be intensified because the caller would be violating a social norm. **Norms** refer to shared rules about acceptable and unacceptable social behavior. In this case, the phone numbers were shared to advance the work of the seminar, not to aid obscene phone callers.

All societies have norms, although their content differs from one society to the next. In rural West Africa

today, if a stranger knocks on the door in the middle of the night, the norm is to invite the person in and offer food and a place to sleep (even if only on the floor). In downtown Los Angeles, this would not be the normative response to a midnight caller. Norms provide guidelines about what is "acceptable" or appropriate behavior in a given situation. They go beyond suggesting what people *might* do, however, in that they also contain an aspect of what they *ought* to do. Quite often they come to believe that they *should* behave in a certain way. Probably most of us feel that we ought to avoid talking out loud to ourselves in a crowded public place.

Norms apply to more than behavior, however. Even emotions are saddled and bridled by norms, as Hochschild (1983) points out. We think to ourselves, "I ought to feel grateful for all they have done for me," or "I shouldn't have felt so angry," suggesting that we are comparing our feelings to a normative standard. These examples suggest that norms, like other features of culture, slip into people's minds in subtle ways.

We may be unaware of how strongly norms weave together the fabric of social life. In an effort to unearth these normative threads, Harold Garfinkel had his students set out to disrupt the usual flow of social life. He asked them to do such things as go home for dinner with their parents and act as though they were a stranger visiting there for the first time: "Yes, thank you, Mrs. Jones, I would like to have some more lima beans." "Mr. Jones, how is your bowling team doing?" It took very little of this "bizarre" behavior for the parents to react: "What's wrong with you? Are you sick? Are you playing games with us? Why are you behaving this way?" Some became rather heated.

In another experiment, researchers Stanley Milgram and John Sabini (1978) asked students to ride a crowded bus or subway during rush hour when there were no seats left. They were to approach a stranger and ask if they could please have his or her seat. This was such counternormative behavior that many students found they could not do it. They simply felt "too awkward." It was easier for them to ask for the seat when they could give a reason: "I feel dizzy," or "I just got out of the hospital." Other passengers were more likely to give up their seats when presented with a "legitimate" reason. Otherwise, you can imagine the reactions the students received. Part of their discomfort in asking undoubtedly arose from anticipating those reactions. And that discomfort is a clue to the existence of a social norm.

Four kinds of norms can be identified, depending

on the degree of conformity that is required. **Folkways** require less conformity; they are social customs to which people generally conform, but receive little pressure to do so. We are expected to wear matching socks (if we wear socks), to wear clothes without holes in them, to speak when introduced to someone, to shake hands when someone offers a hand, and to eat at least some of what is offered us when we are a guest at dinner. Violations of folkways do not usually arouse moral outrage. People who do not accept the social customs of the group may be considered odd or sloppy, but they are not likely to be arrested for their behavior.

Mores, on the other hand, are strongly held social norms. Their violation arouses a sense of moral outrage. A naked baby on an American beach may be violating a folkway (to some), but a naked man on anything except a nude beach is violating mores, and indeed is breaking the law in most communities. Violating mores excites strong public reaction, and usually involves legal sanctions as well, since most are written into formal law. **Laws** are norms that have been formally enacted by a political body. Pre-literate societies do not usually have formal laws or lawyers. Laws may be enforced by the police, military, or some other state organization.

A **taboo** is a strongly prohibited social practice. It is the strongest form of social norm. The most nearly universal rule in all known human cultures is the **incest taboo**—the prohibition of sexual intercourse between fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, brothers and sisters, and sometimes other relatives as well. The wide appearance of this taboo suggests that it may have developed early in human evolution. Just because something is taboo, however, does not mean it never happens. Indeed, there is growing evidence that the incest taboo is violated fairly frequently (although no definitive statistics exist on how often incest occurs). The taboo nature of incest is evident in the fact that people do not practice it openly. Moreover, they are usually so embarrassed or ashamed that they are afraid to discuss what happened to them. The existence of such feelings signals the presence of a taboo behavior.

Social norms are supported by sanctions. A **sanction** is a reward or penalty directed at desired or undesired behavior. Negative sanctions include disapproving looks, negative gossip, social shunning, imprisonment, and the electric chair. Positive sanctions range from prizes such as the Nobel award, praise, applause, esteem, and financial rewards, to smiles. The effectiveness of a sanction depends on how the receiver feels about it

and about the people giving it. Electrocutation is fairly universal in its negative impact, whereas prizes may mean little or a great deal to the people winning them.

The type of sanction helps us to distinguish between folkways and mores. Violations of folkways usually receive only social sanctions, such as stares, snide remarks, or other signs of disapproval. Mores are usually backed up with formal sanctions. Taboos vary as to whether or not they have formal sanctions. Norms may be socially sanctioned, as in the case of norms about appropriate dress, or legally sanctioned, as in the case of norms against beating up people and stealing their money. Norms are rooted in social values.

Values

Norms are concrete applications of values in everyday life. **Values** are strongly held general ideas people share about what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Values are more general than norms in that they do not prescribe specific behaviors for concrete situations. In fact, the same values may support a number of different—or even competing—norms. For example, parents who value their families may be torn between working hard in their occupations and spending more time at home. Both behaviors may be normative expressions of the underlying value of commitment to their families. Examples of values generally held in our society include freedom, justice, and individualism. The normative counterparts to these more general values are freedom of speech, equal justice before the law, and the right to privacy.

A society's values are important to understand because they influence the content of both norms and laws. How can we tell what we, our neighbors, or other societies value? Sociologist Robin Williams (1960) suggests a number of indicators of the choices people make that may point to their underlying values. Patterns of money expenditure, directions of interest (in literature, movies, music, and other arts), and direct statements all provide clues to what individuals, groups, or societies value. Some families, for example, spend their extra money on cars, boats, furniture, or clothing, whereas others may spend it on books, education, and concerts. These choices reflect different sets of cultural values. To these can be added time allocation (how much time people spend on various activities), as another indicator of how highly they value the activities or the goals those



How people choose to spend their leisure time is one indicator of their values.

activities represent. Value statements may reflect what people see as **ideal**, whereas time or money expenditures may be better indicators of their **real values**.

In any given situation more than one value may be operating. A desire for efficiency in business clashes with a growing value on humanizing the work setting. You may value friendship and also value getting your schoolwork done. Often these values compete for one's time and attention. Many societies experience tension

and even conflict over competing values. Developing nations often experience conflict over preserving valued traditions and modernizing. Industrialized countries face conflicts between the values of equality and rewarding merit. Even when they have conflicting values, though, most societies have a tendency to see their own values as superior to those of other societies.

Ethnocentrism

The tendency to see one's own culture as superior to all others is called **ethnocentrism**. At its most extreme, ethnocentrism involves taking one's own culture for granted and being unaware of the existence of any culture, values, behaviors, or beliefs besides one's own. In a somewhat less extreme form, it is the tendency to see one's culture as superior to all other cultures, even though one is aware that other cultures and societies exist. Ethnocentric people tend to judge all other cultures by the standards of their own, and to see them as inferior, unnatural, or wrong when they diverge. An American oil company executive, for instance, expressed disgust over the way Arab workers in the desert would stop working for an entire day if someone they knew came along. From the American's ethnocentric viewpoint, work was much more important than being sociable. To the Arab, however, whose cultural values were shaped by centuries of dealing with the dangers of the desert, "a friend in the desert is much more important than work."

Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is the opposite of ethnocentrism. In this view, no belief, practice, behavior, or custom is assumed to be inherently good or bad, right or wrong. Instead, cultural practices are assessed in terms of how they work within a particular culture as a whole. Do various cultural practices contradict each other? Are the features of the culture highly integrated? What are the major cultural configurations of a particular society? How do they compare with those of other societies? These are some of the sociological questions we can ask about culture.

In a society with numerous ethnic groups, for example, sociologists may try to understand why some groups value large families while others prefer having no children. The sociologist may personally prefer one posi-

tion, and even make a moral judgment about what he or she thinks is better. It is important, however, to try to separate one's analysis of the causes and consequences of a cultural feature from one's moral evaluation of it. By becoming aware of personally held values and norms, we can better understand how they affect our reactions to other cultures. Some people may find cultural practices that appeal to them in other societies—for example, the greater social cooperation shown by Native American children or the sexual permissiveness of the Trobriand Islanders off New Guinea (Wax and Wax, 1971).

CULTURAL VARIATION

Within the general cultural similarities found in many societies, there are vast differences in what people eat, what they believe, and how they behave. The Dutch, Eskimos, and Japanese eat raw fish; Americans usually eat it cooked, if at all.

The very term *American* is ethnocentric because members of U.S. society have taken for themselves the more general geographic term which applies to Canadians, Mexicans, Central Americans, and all South Americans. Despite the fact that they live in some part of America, we residents of the United States seem to be saying that we are the only "true" Americans.

The Chinese like dog meat but loathe cow milk; we like both cow milk and meat but do not eat dogs. Some tribes in Brazil love ants but are repulsed by venison; some Americans enjoy venison but are repelled by the thought of eating ants (Harris, 1974, p. 35). Clearly, although hunger is an underlying biological drive, the tastes people develop to satisfy hunger are culturally acquired.

Like eating habits, sexual preferences are culturally influenced. In an extensive survey of cross-cultural sexual practices, Ford and Beach (1951) found that societies ranged from permissive to restrictive in their treatment of sexuality. Restrictive societies try to keep children from learning anything about sex, and they check any spontaneous sexual activities. For example, the Ainae (a technologically simple, peaceful, monogamous tribe in Brazil) and the Ashanti (a complex society in Ghana) forbid children to masturbate. By contrast, in permissive societies such as those in the Pacific Islands, both boys and girls freely engage in autoerotic and heterosexual play, including oral-genital contacts and



These Swedish, Mexican, and Chinese countermen and the food they are serving reflect the existence of subcultures within the United States. Members of a subculture have a number of unique features, including their taste in food, yet they also share characteristics with the dominant culture in which they live.

imitative coitus (Katchadourian and Lunde, 1972).

Economic activities also vary. Some societies stress acquisition and the display of wealth (perhaps U.S. society more than most). Others, such as the Kwakiutl Indians of the Pacific Northwest, make great ceremonies (called *potlatches*) of giving away their possessions to others. The more they can give away, the higher their status. In some societies wealth is indicated by the number of wives a man can support or by how fat family members are. In other societies wealth is related to how slender family members are, or how hefty their bank accounts. Members of Chinese communes and of Israeli *kibbutzim* share valued tools, resources, and goods, with only a few personal possessions retained as private property. In other societies virtually all property is privately owned.

Within the same society, different subcultures may exist. A **subculture** refers to the values, attitudes, behaviors, and life-styles of a social group, which is distinct from, but related to, the dominant culture of a society. The concept assumes the existence of a clearly

identifiable and agreed upon dominant culture, but the fragmentation of contemporary U.S. culture, for example, makes it difficult to identify such a dominant culture. Despite this problem with the concept, sociologists use it to highlight the way many ethnic groups—Japanese-Americans, Italian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Jewish-Americans—may have subcultural identities that distinguish them from other ethnic groups in the United States. At the same time, they are also members in various legal and cultural senses of the larger U.S. society.

Sociologists do not agree on how distinctive cultural patterns need to be in order to form a separate subculture. Although most would agree that various ethnic groups have distinctive subcultures, the term has also been used to refer to the social patterns of adolescent street gangs and rock musicians, and of various occupations and social classes. The anthropologist Charles Valentine (1971) suggests that many individuals are **bicultural**—that is, they are able to understand and function well in more than one cultural group. Black Americans

and Hispanics, for instance, may enjoy the food, music, and speech of their subculture, but also understand and function well in the white culture that predominates in the United States.

Some subcultures are not merely different from the larger culture of a society, but stand in sharp opposition to it. A **counterculture** is defined as "a set of norms and values of a group that sharply contradicts the dominant norms and values of the society of which that group is a part" (Yinger, 1977, p. 833). Various religious cults, such as the Hare Krishna, or drug-oriented groups, or political radicals may all develop a counterculture. Yinger believes that the changes in values and norms desired by countercultures cannot proceed far without parallel changes in social structure and character.

Vast differences in food preferences, sexual behavior, economic activity, and subcultures call for explanations. Three major explanations for cultural variation have been offered: the ecological view, the functionalist view, and the Marxian view.

CULTURE, INDIVIDUALISM, AND CHANGE

Are Individuals Trapped by Culture?

If culture powerfully influences how people learn to behave, does this mean we are somehow trapped by our culture and lose the chance for independent action? Clearly not. Culture influences us, but we also shape its direction. Culture provides us with valued strategies that have been developed by our ancestors. In this way it may offer opportunities for action as well as limitations on what we can do. But individuals retain the capacity for self-reflection. They do not always accept traditions blindly. Recently observed changes in American values suggest that things need not always be the way they are now. Other factors also help to keep us from being prisoners of culture.

Cultural relativism suggests that ours is not the only way of doing something, nor is it necessarily the best way. Cultural diversity based on the existence of many subgroups, each of which possesses somewhat different values and norms, helps to provide knowledge of alternatives and offers the possibility of finding a comfortable group or subculture. The existence of countercultures or social movements dedicated to encouraging cultural change indicates that cultural features may be changed by conscious actions.

Sources of Cultural Change

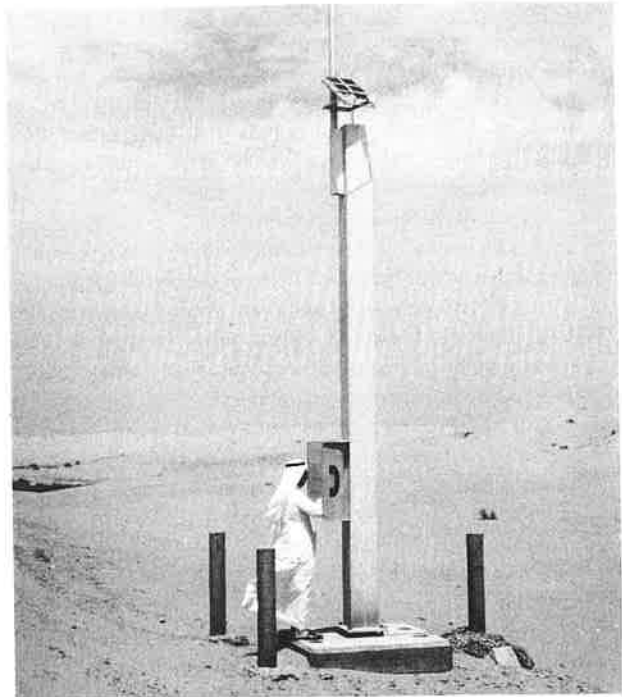
Cultures may remain relatively constant for long periods of time if their ecological and population context remains relatively stable and if they have little or no contact with other cultures. However, most societies in the “global village” that is now our world are bombarded with stimuli for cultural change. As a result, cultural changes stem from a variety of sources.

1. **Structural Changes.** Structural changes include demographic and economic changes. The Baby Boom and the declining birthrates that followed it in U.S. society represent sudden and dramatic changes in the size and shape of the population, as we will see in Chapter 19. Along with major migrations like the ones experienced by the United States around the turn of the century and to a lesser degree since 1950 (see Figure 11.2), such demographic changes can produce notable cultural changes. Economic changes like the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, the amount of economic growth in a society, and the globalization of the world economy (discussed in Chapter 20) may also promote cultural changes.

2. **Invention.** **Inventions** are new cultural creations, often produced by combining existing cultural elements in new ways. Inventions occur in all areas of material and cultural life, from the observation that corn grows better when dead fish are planted with it to the realization that representative government may work more effectively than dictatorship. Although some people may enjoy invention for its own sake, without regard to its usefulness, the old maxim “necessity is the mother of invention” captures the conditions under which inventions often occur, are adopted, and spread. The rate of invention in industrial societies has taken off in the last century like a jet plane. (See the box on microelectronics and cultural transformation.)

3. **Discovery.** **Discovery** involves uncovering something that existed but was unknown. The Pacific Coast Indians discovered the existence of copper, which had both ornamental and hunting value. Imagine when humans discovered fire for the first time, and realized what potential it contained. The discovery of new, dangerous, and yet untreatable diseases may lead to cultural changes. For example, we might expect sexual norms to become more restrictive as a result of increasing concerns over sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS.

4. **Diffusion.** When people of different cultures



Even remote corners of the world have been bombarded with technological inventions such as this solar-powered telephone.

come into contact, useful inventions and discoveries are likely to be **diffused**—that is, spread from one to another group on a voluntary basis. The advantages of using fire, for example, or clay pots to hold water, could readily be seen by observers from other tribes, who could then adopt such techniques themselves. The rate of diffusion has greatly increased because of jet planes, television, and satellite communications.

5. **Cultural imposition.** Cultures may also be imposed by one group on another—as, for instance, when one society occupies or dominates another one. Systems of taxation, government, language, military service, and religion may then be required of people in the subjugated group.

6. **Cultural revolution.** Cultures may be imposed by some on others; they may also be resisted or opposed, as occurred in the Chinese cultural revolution or in the counterculture in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Cultural revolution involves the repudiation of many existing cultural elements and the substitution of new ones.

Cultural changes suggest that culture is not rigid, but bends or moves in response to changing conditions

and human actions. Hence people help to shape their culture at the same time that it influences them.

SUMMARY

1. Even one's definition of culture varies by culture, ranging from the way of life of a group or society to their artistic products. In this book we use the first, more general definition. Culture includes material objects like tools, homes, and art, as well as nonmaterial elements such as norms, values, language, and other symbols.
2. Humans share sociability and communication with other primates but have much more highly developed

brains, language capacity, and tool-using capabilities.

3. A number of common cultural features appear in all societies. These include the use of symbols and language, the existence of norms and values, and a tension between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. The forms they take differ, however.

4. Language is one of the most important features of

human society. It allows us to share ideas, plans, and feelings. Written language extends communication through time and space. Language may also limit perception of the world, but it is possible to overcome such limitations through conscious effort and analysis. Language provides clues to what a culture values and what it seeks to hide.

5. Norms are shared expectations about desirable and undesirable behavior and contain an "ought to" aspect that affects emotions as well as minds.

6. Values are more general ideas, also strongly held, about what is desirable and undesirable.

7. The tendency to see one's own culture, language, norms, and values as superior to others is called ethnocentrism. It may be accentuated by stress or hostility. Cultural relativism, on the other hand, means viewing cultural practices within the context of the culture in which they occur.

8. Cultural variations exist in food preferences, sexual practices, economic activities, and other social behaviors. Three explanations have been offered for these variations. The ecological view suggests that cultural differences emerge from population pressures or other environmental constraints. Functionalist theory explains social facts according to how they work within the integral system of culture. The Marxian view suggests that cultural variations emerge from changing systems of pro-

duction, and benefit dominant groups more than subordinate groups.

9. American cultural values may include individualism, equality, active mastery, involvement with the external world, openness, rationality, and orderliness. Despite these core values, several social observers suggest that American values have changed in recent decades, moving away in the 1960s and 1970s, from self-denial, the "work ethic," and future planning toward a new focus on self, stress on leisure, and living for today rather than for the future. In the 1980s a new trend toward greater commitment and shared community may be emerging.

10. The emerging field of sociobiology raises the question of how much of human behavior is genetically determined. Edward Wilson, a leading sociobiologist, suggests that biology provides humans with a wide range of potentialities, but that environment and culture are the keys to behavioral variations within this range. Critics of sociobiology are concerned that biological hypotheses that lack supporting evidence may be used to legitimate the status quo.

11. Rapid social changes may help individuals avoid being trapped in their culture, since things need not always be the way they are. Sources of cultural change include structural changes, invention, discovery, diffusion, cultural imposition, and cultural revolution.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Bell, Daniel. 1976. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Harper & Row. A scholarly analysis of how the conditions behind the expansion of cap-

italism (including advertising and installment credit) create a set of cultural attitudes that helps to undermine the motivation for capital investment.

Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press. A noteworthy study of middle-class Americans' search for meaning and commitment in the 1980s.

Elias, Norbert. 1978. "On blowing one's nose." Pp. 145–150 in *History of Manners*, Vol. 1—*The Civilizing Process*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. A discussion of what was considered proper behavior in the sixteenth century, showing how norms are codified and suggesting how rules of etiquette are one way that class distinctions are reinforced.

Harris, Marvin. 1974. *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*. New York: Random House. Contains numerous cross-cultural examples of different eating habits, customs, and beliefs, and tries to explain why they occur.

Hochschild, Arlie R. 1983. *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Explores the way individuals learn culturally prescribed norms to govern feelings as well as behavior.

Lasch, Christopher. 1979. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Norton. Examines changes in society and culture and how they affect the feelings and behaviors of individuals today.

Turkle, Sherry. 1984. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. New York: Simon & Schuster. A study of how computers are changing the self-conceptions of individuals.

Yankelovich, Daniel. 1981. *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*. New York: Bantam Books. Suggests that Americans may be changing their attitudes and values and searching for a new ethic of commitment.