At home, I kept opening the refrigerator and cupboards, wishing for American foods to magically appear. I wanted what the other kids had: Bundt cakes and casseroles, Cheetos and Doritos. . . . The more American foods I ate, the more my desires multiplied, outpacing my interest in Vietnamese food. I had memorized the menu at Dairy Cone, the sugary options in the cereal aisle at Meijer’s [grocery], and every inch of the candy display at Gas City: the rows of gum, the rows of chocolate, the rows without chocolate. . . . I knew Reese’s peanut butter cups, Twix, Heath Crunch, Nestlé Crunch, Baby Ruth, Bar None, Oh Henry!, Mounds and Almond Joy, Snickers, Mr. Goodbar[,] . . . Milk Duds, [and] Junior Mints. I dreamed of taking it all, plus the freezer full of popsicles and nutty, chocolate-coated ice cream drumsticks. I dreamed of Little Debbie, Dolly Madison, Swiss Miss, all the bakeries presided over by prim and proper girls.

—BICH MINH NGUYEN (2007: 50–51), an English professor at Purdue University, describes how food served as a powerful cultural symbol in her childhood as a Vietnamese American.

Growing up in Oakland . . . I came to dislike Chinese food. That may have been, in part, because I was Chinese and desperately wanted to be American. I was American, of
course, but being born and raised in Chinatown—in a restaurant my parents operated, in fact—I didn’t feel much like the people I saw outside Chinatown, or in books and movies.

It didn’t help that for lunch at school, my mother would pack—Ai ya!—Chinese food. Barbecued pork sandwiches, not ham and cheese; Chinese pears, not apples. At home—that is, at the New Eastern Café—it was Chinese food night after night. No wonder I would sneak off, on the way to Chinese school, to Hamburger Gus for a helping of thick-cut French fries.

—Author Ben Fong-Torres (2007: 11) describes his experiences as a Chinese American who desired to “Americanize” his eating habits.

Why are these authors concerned about the food they ate as children? For all of us, the food we consume is linked to our identity and to the larger culture of which we are a part. For people who identify with more than one culture, food and eating patterns may become a very complex issue. To some people, food consumption is nothing more than how we meet a basic biological need; however, many sociologists are interested in the sociology of food and eating because of their cultural significance in our lives (see Mennell, 1996; Mennell, Murcott, and van Otterloo, 1993).

What is culture? **Culture is the knowledge, language, values, customs, and material objects that are passed from person to person and from one generation to the next in a human group or society.**

As previously defined, a **society** is a large social grouping that occupies the same geographic territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations. Whereas a society is composed of people, a culture is composed of ideas, behavior, and material possessions. Society and culture are interdependent; neither could exist without the other.

In this chapter, we examine society and culture, with special attention to how our material culture, including the food we eat, is related to our beliefs, values, and actions. We also analyze culture from functionalist, conflict, symbolic interactionist, and postmodern perspectives. Before reading on, test your knowledge of food and culture by answering the questions in Box 3.1.
SHARPENING YOUR FOCUS

What are the essential components of culture?
To what degree are we shaped by popular culture?
How do subcultures and countercultures reflect diversity within a society?
How do the various sociological perspectives view culture?

Culture and Society in a Changing World

Understanding how culture affects our lives helps us develop a sociological imagination. When we meet someone from a culture vastly different from our own, or when we travel in another country, it may be easier to perceive the enormous influence of culture on people’s lives. However, as our society has become more diverse, and communication among members of international cultures more frequent, the need to appreciate diversity and to understand how people in other cultures view their world has also increased (Samovar and Porter, 1991b). For example, many international travelers and businesspeople have learned the importance of knowing what gestures mean in various nations (see Figure 3.1). Although the “hook ‘em Horns” sign—the pinky and index finger raised up and the middle two fingers folded down—is used by fans to express their support for University of Texas at Austin sports teams, for millions of Italians the same gesture means “Your spouse is unfaithful.” In Argentina, rotating one’s index finger around the front of the ear means “You have a telephone call,” but in the United States it usually suggests that a person is “crazy” (Axtell, 1991). Similarly, making a circle with your thumb and index finger indicates “OK” in the United States, but in Tunisia it means “I’ll kill you!” (Samovar and Porter, 1991a).

The Importance of Culture

How important is culture in determining how people think and act on a daily basis? Simply stated, culture is essential for our individual survival and for our communication with other people. We rely on culture because we are not born with the information we need to survive. We do not know how to take care of ourselves, how to behave, how to dress, what to eat, which gods to worship, or how to make or spend
money. We must learn about culture through interaction, observation, and imitation in order to participate as members of the group. Sharing a common culture with others simplifies day-to-day interactions. However, we must also understand other cultures and the world views therein.

Just as culture is essential for individuals, it is also fundamental for the survival of societies. Culture has been described as “the common denominator that makes the actions of individuals intelligible to the group” (Haviland, 1993: 30). Some system of rule making and enforcing necessarily exists in all societies. What would happen, for example, if all rules and laws in the United States suddenly disappeared? At a basic level, we need rules in order to navigate our bicycles and cars through traffic. At a more abstract level, we need laws to establish and protect our rights.

In order to survive, societies need rules about civility and tolerance toward others. We are not born knowing how to express kindness or hatred toward others, although some people may say “Well, that’s just human nature” when explaining someone’s behavior. Such a statement is built on the assumption that what we do as human beings is determined by nature (our biological and genetic makeup) rather than nurture (our social environment)—in other words, that our behavior is instinctive. An instinct is an unlearned, biologically determined behavior pattern common to all members of a species that predictably occurs whenever certain environmental conditions exist. For example, spiders do not learn to build webs. They build webs because of instincts that are triggered by basic biological needs such as protection and reproduction.

Humans do not have instincts. What we most often think of as instinctive behavior can actually be attributed to reflexes and drives. A reflex is an unlearned, biologically determined involuntary response to some physical stimuli (such as a sneeze after breathing some pepper in through the nose or the blinking of an eye when a speck of dust gets in it). Drives are unlearned, biologically determined impulses common to all members of a species that satisfy needs such as sleep, food, water, and sexual gratification. Reflexes and drives do not determine how people will behave in human societies; even the expression of these biological characteristics is channeled by culture. For example, we may be taught that the “appropriate” way to sneeze (an involuntary response) is to use a tissue or turn our head away from others (a learned response). Similarly, we may learn to sleep on mats or in beds.

**BOX 3.1 Sociology and Everyday Life**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Much Do You Know About Global Food and Culture?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>True</strong></td>
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Answers on page 76.
Most contemporary sociologists agree that culture and social learning, not nature, account for virtually all of our behavior patterns.

Because humans cannot rely on instincts in order to survive, culture is a “tool kit” for survival. According to the sociologist Ann Swidler (1986: 273), culture is a “tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and world views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.” The tools we choose will vary according to our own personality and the situations we face. We are not puppets on a string; we make choices from among the items in our own “tool box.”

Material Culture and Nonmaterial Culture

Our cultural tool box is divided into two major parts: material culture and nonmaterial culture (Ogburn, 1966/1922). Material culture consists of the physi-
cal or tangible creations that members of a society make, use, and share. Initially, items of material culture begin as raw materials or resources such as ore, trees, and oil. Through technology, these raw materials are transformed into usable items (ranging from books and computers to guns and tanks). Sociologists define technology as the knowledge, techniques, and tools that allow people to transform resources into usable forms, and the knowledge and skills required to use what is developed. From this standpoint, technology is both concrete and abstract. For example, technology includes a pair of scissors and the knowledge and skill necessary to make them from iron, carbon, and chromium (Westrum, 1991). At the most basic level, material culture is important because it is our buffer against the environment. For example, we create shelter to protect ourselves from the weather and to provide ourselves with privacy. Beyond the survival level, we make, use, and share objects that are both interesting and important to us. Why are you wearing the

Food is a universal type of material culture, but what people eat and how they eat it vary widely, as shown in these cross-cultural examples from the United Arab Emirates (upper left), Holland (upper right), and China (bottom photo). What might be some reasons for the similarities and differences that you see in these photos?

**material culture** a component of culture that consists of the physical or tangible creations (such as clothing, shelter, and art) that members of a society make, use, and share.

**technology** the knowledge, techniques, and tools that allow people to transform resources into a usable form and the knowledge and skills required to use what is developed.
particular clothes that you have on today? Perhaps you’re communicating something about yourself, such as where you attend school, what kind of music you like, or where you went on vacation.

Nonmaterial culture consists of the abstract or intangible human creations of society that influence people’s behavior. Language, beliefs, values, rules of behavior, family patterns, and political systems are examples of nonmaterial culture. A central component of nonmaterial culture is belief—the mental acceptance or conviction that certain things are true or real. Beliefs may be based on tradition, faith, experience, scientific research, or some combination of these. Faith in a supreme being and trust in another person are examples of beliefs. We may also have a belief in items of material culture. When we travel by airplane, for instance, we believe that it is possible to fly at 33,000 feet and to arrive at our destination even though we know that we could not do this without the airplane itself.

Cultural Universals

Because all humans face the same basic needs (such as for food, clothing, and shelter), we engage in similar activities that contribute to our survival. Anthropologist George Murdock (1945: 124) compiled a list of over seventy cultural universals—customs and practices that occur across all societies. His categories included appearance (such as bodily adornment and hairstyles), activities (such as sports, dancing, games, joking, and visiting), social institutions (such as family, law, and religion), and customary practices (such as cooking, folklore, gift giving, and hospitality). These general customs and practices may be present in all cultures, but their specific forms vary from one group to another and from one time to another within the same group. For example, although telling jokes may be a universal practice, what is considered to be a joke in one society may be an insult in another.

How do sociologists view cultural universals? In terms of their functions, cultural universals are useful...
because they ensure the smooth and continual operation of society (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). A society must meet basic human needs by providing food, shelter, and some degree of safety for its members so that they will survive. Children and other new members (such as immigrants) must be taught the ways of the group. A society must also settle disputes and deal with people’s emotions. All the while, the self-interest of individuals must be balanced with the needs of society as a whole. Cultural universals help fulfill these important functions of society.

From another perspective, however, cultural universals are not the result of functional necessity; these practices may have been imposed by members of one society on members of another. Similar customs and practices do not necessarily constitute cultural universals. They may be an indication that a conquering nation used its power to enforce certain types of behavior on those who were defeated (Sargent, 1987). Sociologists might ask questions such as “Who determines the dominant cultural patterns?” For example, although religion is a cultural universal, the traditional religious practices of indigenous peoples (those who first live in an area) have often been repressed and even stamped out by subsequent settlers or conquerors who have gained political and economic power over them. However, many people believe there is cause for optimism in the United States because the democratic ideas of this nation provide more guarantees of religious freedom than might be found in some other nations.

Components of Culture
Even though the specifics of individual cultures vary widely, all cultures have four common nonmaterial cultural components: symbols, language, values, and norms. These components contribute to both harmony and strife in a society.

Symbols
A symbol is anything that meaningfully represents something else. Culture could not exist without symbols because there would be no shared meanings among people. Symbols can simultaneously produce loyalty and animosity, and love and hate. They help us communicate ideas because they express abstract concepts with visible objects. For example, flags can stand for patriotism, nationalism, school spirit, or religious beliefs held by members of a group or society. Symbols can stand for love (a heart on a valentine), peace (a dove), or hate (a Nazi swastika), just as words can be used to convey these meanings. Symbols can also transmit other types of ideas. A siren is a symbol that denotes an emergency situation and sends the message to clear the way immediately. Gestures are also a symbolic form of communication—a movement of the head, body, or hands can express our ideas or feelings to others. For example, in the United States, pointing toward your chest with your thumb or finger is a symbol for “me.”

Symbols affect our thoughts about class. For example, how a person is dressed or the kind of car that he or she drives is often at least subconsciously used as a measure of that individual’s economic standing or position. With regard to clothing, although many people wear casual clothes on a daily basis, where the clothing was purchased is sometimes used as a symbol of social status. Were the items purchased at Walmart, Old Navy, Abercrombie & Fitch, or Saks Fifth Avenue? What indicators are there on the items of clothing—such as the Nike swoosh, some other logo, or a brand name—that say something about the status of the product? Automobiles and their logos are also symbols that have cultural meaning beyond the shopping environment in which they originate.

Finally, symbols may be specific to a given culture and have special meaning to individuals who share that culture but not necessarily to other people. Consider, for example, the use of certain foods to celebrate the Chinese New Year: Bamboo shoots and black moss seaweed both represent wealth, peanuts and noodles symbolize a long life, and tangerines represent good luck. What foods in other cultures represent “good luck” or prosperity?

Language
Language is a set of symbols that expresses ideas and enables people to think and communicate with one another. Verbal (spoken) language and
nonverbal (written or gestured) language help us describe reality. One of our most important human attributes is the ability to use language to share our experiences, feelings, and knowledge with others. Language can create visual images in our head, such as “the kittens look like little cotton balls” (Samovar and Porter, 1991a). Language also allows people to distinguish themselves from outsiders and to maintain group boundaries and solidarity (Farb, 1973).

Language is not solely a human characteristic. Other animals use sounds, gestures, touch, and smell to communicate with one another, but they use signals with fixed meanings that are limited to the immediate situation (the present) and cannot encompass past or future situations. For example, chimpanzees can use elements of Standard American Sign Language and manipulate physical objects to make “sentences,” but they are not physically endowed with the vocal apparatus required for oral language. As a result, nonhuman animals cannot transmit the more complex aspects of culture to their offspring. Humans have a unique ability to manipulate symbols to express abstract concepts and rules, and thus to create and transmit culture from one generation to the next.

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL REALITY  Does language create or simply communicate reality? Anthropological linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf have suggested that language not only expresses our thoughts and perceptions but also influences our perception of reality. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language shapes the view of reality of its speakers (Whorf, 1956; Sapir, 1961). If people are able to think only through language, then language must precede thought. If language actually shapes the reality we perceive and experience, then some aspects of the world are viewed as important and others are virtually neglected because people know the world only in terms of the vocabulary and grammar of their own language.

If language does create reality, are we trapped by our language? Many social scientists agree that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis overstates the relationship between language and our thoughts and behavior patterns. Although they acknowledge that language has many subtle meanings and that words used by people reflect their central concerns, most sociologists contend that language may influence our behavior and interpretation of social reality but not determine them.

LANGUAGE AND GENDER What is the relationship between language and gender? What cultural assumptions about women and men does language reflect? Scholars have suggested several ways in which language and gender are intertwined:

- The English language ignores women by using the masculine form to refer to human beings in general. For example, the word man is used generically in words like chairman and mankind, which allegedly include both men and women.
- Use of the pronouns he and she affects our thinking about gender. Pronouns show the gen-
nder of the person we expect to be in a particular occupation. For instance, nurses, secretaries, and schoolteachers are usually referred to as she, but doctors, engineers, electricians, and presidents are referred to as he.

- Words have positive connotations when relating to male power, prestige, and leadership; when relating to women, they carry negative overtones of weakness, inferiority, and immaturity (Epstein, 1988: 224). Table 3.1 shows how gender-based language reflects the traditional acceptance of men and women in certain positions, implying that the jobs are different when filled by women rather than men.

- A language-based predisposition to think about women in sexual terms reinforces the notion that women are sexual objects. Women are often described by terms such as fox, broad, bitch, babe, or doll, which ascribe childlike or even pet-like characteristics to them. By contrast, men have performance pressures placed on them by being defined in terms of their sexual prowess, such as dude, stud, and hunk (Baker, 1993).

Gender in language has been debated and studied extensively in recent years, and some changes have occurred. The preference of many women to be called Ms. (rather than Miss or Mrs. in reference to their marital status) has received a substantial degree of acceptance in public life and the media. Many organizations and publications have established guidelines for the use of nonsexist language and have changed titles such as chairman to chair or chairperson. “Men Working” signs in many areas have been replaced with “People Working.” Some occupations have been given “genderless” titles, such as firefighter or flight attendant. To develop a more inclusive and equitable society, many scholars suggest that a more inclusive language is needed (see Basow, 1992). Yet many people resist change, arguing that the English language is being ruined (Epstein, 1988).

**LANGUAGE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY** Language may create and reinforce our perceptions about race and ethnicity by transmitting preconceived ideas about the superiority of one category of people over another. Let’s look at a few images conveyed by words in the English language in regard to race/ethnicity:

- Words may have more than one meaning and create and/or reinforce negative images. Terms such as blackhearted (malevolent) and expressions such as a black mark (a detrimental fact)

**Table 3.1 Language and Gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MALE TERM</th>
<th>FEMALE TERM</th>
<th>NEUTRAL TERM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chairman</td>
<td>Chairwoman</td>
<td>Chair, chairperson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congressman</td>
<td>Congresswoman</td>
<td>Representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policeman</td>
<td>Policewoman</td>
<td>Police officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fireman</td>
<td>Lady fireman</td>
<td>Firefighter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airline steward</td>
<td>Airline stewardess</td>
<td>Flight attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race car driver</td>
<td>Woman race car driver</td>
<td>Race car driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrestler</td>
<td>Lady/woman wrestler</td>
<td>Wrestler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Female/woman professor</td>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Lady/woman doctor</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Spinster/old maid</td>
<td>Single person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male prostitute</td>
<td>Prostitute</td>
<td>Prostitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare recipient</td>
<td>Welfare mother</td>
<td>Welfare recipient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker/employee</td>
<td>Working mother</td>
<td>Worker/employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janitor/maintenance man</td>
<td>Maid/cleaning lady</td>
<td>Custodial attendant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Adapted from Korsmeyer, 1981: 122; and Miller and Swift, 1991.
and Chinaman’s chance of success (unlikely to succeed) associate the words black or Chinaman with negative associations and derogatory imagery. By contrast, expressions such as that’s white of you and the good guys wear white hats reinforce positive associations with the color white.

- Overtly derogatory terms such as nigger, kike, gook, honkey, chink, spic, and other racial-ethnic slurs have been "popularized" in movies, music, comic routines, and so on. Such derogatory terms are often used in conjunction with physical threats against persons and are increasingly viewed as words that should not be used even in a supposedly "joking" manner.

- Words are frequently used to create or reinforce perceptions about a group. For example, Native Americans have been referred to as “savages” and “primitive,” and African Americans have been described as “uncivilized,” “cannibalistic,” and “pagan.”

- The "voice" of verbs may minimize or incorrectly identify the activities or achievements of people of color. For example, the use of the passive voice in the statement “African Americans were given the right to vote” ignores how African Americans fought for that right. Active-voice verbs may also inaccurately attribute achievements to people or groups. Some historians argue that cultural bias is shown by the very notion that “Columbus discovered America”—given that America was already inhabited by people who later became known as Native Americans (see Stannard, 1992; Takaki, 1993).

- Adjectives that typically have positive connotations can have entirely different meanings when used in certain contexts. Regarding employment, someone may say that a person of color is “qualified” for a position when it is taken for granted that whites in the same position are qualified (see Moore, 1992).

In addition to these concerns about the English language, problems also arise when more than one language is involved. Across the nation, the question of whether or not the United States should have an “official” language continues to arise. Some people believe that there is no need to designate an official language; other people believe that English should be designated as the official language and that the use of any other language should be discouraged or negatively sanctioned. Recently, the city council in Farmers Branch—a suburb of Dallas, Texas—adopted a resolution declaring English as the official language of that city. According to the resolution, the use of a
common language “removes barriers of misunderstanding and helps to unify the people of Farmers Branch, [the state of Texas,] and the United States and helps to enable the full economic and civic participation of all of its citizens . . .” (City of Farmers Branch, 2006). This resolution was passed at the same time as a local law that banned “illegal immigrants” from renting apartments in Farmers Branch. Are deep-seated social and cultural issues embedded in social policy decisions such as these? Although the United States has always been a nation of immigrants, in recent decades this country has experienced rapid changes in population that have brought about greater diversity in languages and cultures. Recent data gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau (see “Census Profiles: Languages Spoken in U.S. Households”) indicate that although more than 80 percent of the people in this country speak only English at home, almost 20 percent speak a language other than English. The largest portion (over 10 percent of the U.S. population) of non-English speakers speak Spanish at home.

If we think about language from a functionalist perspective, we see that a shared language is essential to maintaining a common culture. From this approach, language is a stabilizing force in society and an important means of cultural transmission. Through language, children learn about their cultural heritage and develop a sense of personal identity in relationship to their group. For example, Latinos/as in New Mexico and south Texas use dichos—proverbs or sayings that are unique to the Spanish language—as a means of expressing themselves and as a reflection of their cultural heritage. Examples of dichos include Anda tu camino sin ayuda de vecino (“Walk your own road without the help of a neighbor”) and Amor de lejos es para pendejos (“A long-distance romance is for fools”). Dichos are passed from generation to generation as a priceless verbal tradition whereby people can give advice or teach a lesson (Gandara, 1995).

On the other hand, if we look at language from a conflict approach, language is a source of power and a means of social control. Language may be used to perpetuate inequalities between people and between groups because words can be used (whether or not intentionally) to “keep people in their place.” As the linguist Deborah Tannen (1993: B5) has suggested, “The devastating group hatreds that result in so much suffering in our own country and around the world are related in origin to the small intolerances in our everyday conversations—our readiness to attribute good intentions to ourselves and bad intentions to
others.” Language, then, is a reflection of our feelings and values.

Values
Values are collective ideas about what is right or wrong, good or bad, and desirable or undesirable in a particular culture (Williams, 1970). Values do not dictate which behaviors are appropriate and which ones are not, but they provide us with the criteria by which we evaluate people, objects, and events. Values typically come in pairs of positive and negative values, such as being brave or cowardly, hardworking or lazy. Because we use values to justify our behavior, we tend to defend them staunchly (Kluckhohn, 1961).

CORE AMERICAN VALUES  Do we have shared values in the United States? Sociologists disagree about the extent to which all people in this country share a core set of values. Functionalists tend to believe that shared values are essential for the maintenance of a society, and scholars using a functionalist approach have conducted most of the research on core values.

Basketball star Tim Duncan continues to set records in the NBA. Which core American values are reflected in sports such as basketball?

Analysts who focus on the importance of core values maintain that the following ten values, identified almost forty years ago by sociologist Robin M. Williams, Jr. (1970), are still very important to people in the United States:

1. Individualism. People are responsible for their own success or failure. Individual ability and hard work are the keys to success. Those who do not succeed have only themselves to blame because of their lack of ability, laziness, immorality, or other character defects.

2. Achievement and success. Personal achievement results from successful competition with others. Individuals are encouraged to do better than others in school and to work in order to gain wealth, power, and prestige. Material possessions are seen as a sign of personal achievement.

3. Activity and work. People who are industrious are praised for their achievement; those perceived as lazy are ridiculed. From the time of the early Puritans, work has been viewed as important. Even during their leisure time, many people “work” in their play. Think, for example, of all the individuals who take exercise classes, run in marathons, garden, repair or restore cars, and so on in their spare time.

4. Science and technology. People in the United States have a great deal of faith in science and technology. They expect scientific and technological advances ultimately to control nature, the aging process, and even death.

5. Progress and material comfort. The material comforts of life include not only basic necessities (such as adequate shelter, nutrition, and medical care) but also the goods and services that make life easier and more pleasant.

6. Efficiency and practicality. People want things to be bigger, better, and faster. As a result, great value is placed on efficiency (“How well does it work?”) and practicality (“Is this a realistic thing to do?”).

7. Equality. Since colonial times, overt class distinctions have been rejected in the United States. However, “equality” has been defined as “equality of opportunity”—an assumed equal chance to achieve success—not as “equality of outcome.”

8. Morality and humanitarianism. Aiding others, especially following natural disasters (such as floods or hurricanes), is seen as a value. The notion of helping others was originally a part of religious teachings and tied to the idea of morality. Today, people engage in humanitarian acts with-
out necessarily perceiving that it is the “moral” thing to do.

9. Freedom and liberty. Individual freedom is highly valued in the United States. The idea of freedom includes the right to private ownership of property, the ability to engage in private enterprise, freedom of the press, and other freedoms that are considered to be “basic” rights.

10. Racism and group superiority. People value their own racial or ethnic group above all others. Such feelings of superiority may lead to discrimination; slavery and segregation laws are classic examples. Many people also believe in the superiority of their country and that “the American way of life” is best.

Do you think that these values are still important today? Are there core values that you believe should be added to this list? Although sociologists have not agreed upon a specific list of emerging core values, various social analysts have suggested that some additional shared values in the United States today include the following:

- Ecological sensitivity, with an increased awareness of global problems such as overpopulation and global warming.
- Emphasis on developing and maintaining relationships through honesty and with openness, fairness, and tolerance of others.
- Spirituality and a need for meaning in life that reaches beyond oneself.

VALUE CONTRADICTIONS Is it possible for there to be a contradiction between values in a society? Yes, all societies—including the United States—have value contradictions. Value contradictions are values that conflict with one another or are mutually exclusive (achieving one makes it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve another). There are situations in which the core values of morality and humanitarianism may conflict with values of individual achievement and success. For example, humanitarian values reflected in welfare and other government aid programs continue to come into conflict with values that emphasize hard work and personal achievement. Today, some people are more ambivalent about helping people who are chronically poor or homeless than they are about helping recent victims of major natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, or earthquakes. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, for instance, many people in the United States were more willing to make generous contributions to help the survivors of this natural disaster than they were to help the long-term homeless and disadvantaged throughout the nation.

IDEAL VERSUS REAL CULTURE What is the relationship between values and human behavior? According to sociologists, we do not always act in accord with our stated values. Sociologists refer to this contradiction as a gap between ideal culture and real culture. Ideal culture refers to the values and standards of behavior that people in a society profess to hold. Real culture refers to the values and standards of behavior that people actually follow. For example, we may claim to be law-abiding (ideal cultural value) but smoke marijuana (real cultural behavior), or we may regularly drive over the speed limit but think of ourselves as “good citizens.”

Numerous studies have shown a discrepancy between ideal cultural values and people’s actual behavior. For example, a University of Arizona study known as the “Garbage Project” analyzed household waste to determine the rate of alcohol consumption in Tucson, Arizona. When people were asked about their level of alcohol consumption, individuals who lived in some areas of the city reported very low levels of alcohol use. However, when researchers analyzed their garbage, the researchers found that over 80 percent of those households consumed some beer, and more than half discarded eight or more empty beer cans a week (Haviland, 1993). This is only one of many examples of how people’s self-reporting of their beliefs or values may differ from their actual behavior. For this reason, societies have specific norms that govern human behavior.

Norms

Values provide ideals or beliefs about behavior but do not state explicitly how we should behave. Norms, on the other hand, do have specific behavioral expectations. Norms are established rules of behavior or standards of conduct. Prescriptive norms state what behavior is appropriate or acceptable. For example, persons making a certain amount of money are expected to file a tax return and pay any taxes they owe.
Norms based on custom direct us to open a door for a person carrying a heavy load. By contrast, proscriptive norms state what behavior is inappropriate or unacceptable. Laws that prohibit us from driving over the speed limit and “good manners” that preclude you from talking on your cell phone during class are examples. Prescriptive and proscriptive norms operate at all levels of society, from our everyday actions to the formulation of laws.

**FORMAL AND INFORMAL NORMS** Not all norms are of equal importance; those that are most crucial are formalized. Formal norms are written down and involve specific punishments for violators. Laws are the most common type of formal norms; they have been codified and may be enforced by sanctions. Sanctions are rewards for appropriate behavior or penalties for inappropriate behavior. Examples of positive sanctions include praise, honors, or medals for conformity to specific norms. Negative sanctions range from mild disapproval to the death penalty. In the case of law, formal sanctions are clearly defined and can be administered only by persons in certain official positions (such as police officers and judges), who are given the authority to impose the sanctions.

Norms considered to be less important are referred to as informal norms—unwritten standards of behavior understood by people who share a common identity. When individuals violate informal norms, other people may apply informal sanctions. Informal sanctions are not clearly defined and can be applied by any member of a group (such as frowning at someone or making a negative comment or gesture).

**FOLKWAYS** Norms are also classified according to their relative social importance. Folkways are informal norms or everyday customs that may be violated without serious consequences within a particular culture (Sumner, 1959/1906). They provide rules for conduct but are not considered to be essential to society’s survival. In the United States, folkways include using underarm deodorant, brushing our teeth, and wearing appropriate clothing for a specific occasion. Often, folkways are not enforced; when they are enforced, the resulting sanctions tend to be informal and relatively mild.

Folkways are culture specific; they are learned patterns of behavior that can vary markedly from one society to another. In Japan, for example, where the walls of restroom stalls reach to the floor, folkways dictate that a person should knock on the door before entering a stall (you cannot tell if anyone is there without knocking). However, people in the United States find it disconcerting when someone knocks on the door of the stall (A. Collins, 1991).

**MORES** Other norms are considered to be highly essential to the stability of society. Mores are a particular culture’s strongly held norms with moral and ethical connotations that may not be violated without serious consequences. Because mores (pronounced MOR-ays) are based on cultural values and are considered to be crucial for the well-being of the group, violators are subject to more severe negative sanctions (such as ridicule, loss of employment, or imprisonment) than are those who fail to adhere to folkways. The strongest mores are referred to as taboos. Taboos are mores so strong that their violation is considered to be extremely offensive and even unmentionable. Violation of taboos is punishable by the group or even, according to certain belief systems, by a supernatural force. The incest taboo, which prohibits sexual or marital relations between certain categories of kin, is an example of a nearly universal taboo.

Folkways and mores provide structure and security in a society. They make everyday life more predictable and provide people with some guidelines for appearance and behavior. As individuals travel in countries other than their own, they become aware of cross-cultural differences in folkways and mores. For example, women from the United States traveling in Muslim nations quickly become aware of mores, based on the Sharia (the edicts of the Qur’ an), that prescribe the dominance of men over women. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, women are not allowed to mix with men in public. Banks have branches with only women tellers—and only women customers. In hospitals, female doctors are supposed to tend only to children and other women (Alireza, 1990; Ibrahim, 1990).

**LAWS** Laws are formal, standardized norms that have been enacted by legislatures and are enforced by formal sanctions. Laws may be either civil or criminal. Civil law deals with disputes among persons or groups. Persons who lose civil suits may encounter negative sanctions such as having to pay compensation to the other party or being ordered to stop certain conduct. Criminal law, on the other hand, deals with public safety and well-being. When criminal laws are violated, fines and prison sentences are the most likely negative sanctions, although in some states the death penalty is handed down for certain major offenses.

As with material objects, all of the nonmaterial components of culture—symbols, language, values,
and norms—are reflected in the popular culture of contemporary society.

**Technology, Cultural Change, and Diversity**

Cultures do not generally remain static. There are many forces working toward change and diversity. Some societies and individuals adapt to this change, whereas others suffer culture shock and succumb to ethnocentrism.

**Cultural Change**

Societies continually experience cultural change at both material and nonmaterial levels. Changes in technology continue to shape the material culture of society. Although most technological changes are primarily modifications of existing technology, new technologies are changes that make a significant difference in many people’s lives. Examples of new technologies include the introduction of the printing press more than 500 years ago and the advent of computers and electronic communications in the twentieth century. The pace of technological change has increased rapidly in the past 150 years, as contrasted with the 4,000 years prior to that, during which humans advanced from digging sticks and hoes to the plow.

All parts of culture do not change at the same pace. When a change occurs in the material culture of a society, nonmaterial culture must adapt to that change. Frequently, this rate of change is uneven, resulting in a gap between the two. Sociologist William F. Ogburn (1966/1922) referred to this disparity as cultural lag—a gap between the technical development of a society and its moral and legal institutions. In other words, cultural lag occurs when material culture changes faster than nonmaterial culture, thus creating a lag between the two cultural components. For example, at the material cultural level, the personal computer and electronic coding have made it possible to create a unique health identifier for each person in the United States. Based on available technology (material culture), it would be possible to create a national data bank that included everyone’s individual medical records from birth to death. Using this identifier, health providers and insurance companies could rapidly transfer medical records around the globe, and researchers could access unlimited data on people’s diseases, test results, and treatments. However, the availability of this technology does not mean that it will be accepted by people who believe (nonmaterial culture) that such a national data bank would constitute an invasion of privacy and could easily be abused by others. The failure of nonmaterial culture to keep pace with material culture is linked to social conflict and societal problems. As in the above example, such changes are often set in motion by discovery, invention, and diffusion.

**Discovery** is the process of learning about something previously unknown or unrecognized. Historically, discovery involved unearthing natural elements or existing realities, such as “discovering” fire or the true shape of the Earth. Today, discovery most often results from scientific research. For example, the discovery of a polio vaccine virtually eliminated one of the major childhood diseases. A future discovery of a cure for cancer or the common cold could result in longer and more productive lives for many people.

As more discoveries have occurred, people have been able to reconfigure existing material and nonmaterial cultural items through invention. **Invention** is the process of reshaping existing cultural items into a new form. Guns, video games, airplanes, and First Amendment rights are examples of inventions that positively or negatively affect our lives today.
When diverse groups of people come into contact, they begin to adapt one another’s discoveries, inventions, and ideas for their own use. **Diffusion is the transmission of cultural items or social practices from one group or society to another** through such means as exploration, military endeavors, the media, tourism, and immigration. To illustrate, piñatas can be traced back to the twelfth century, when Marco Polo brought them back from China, where they were used to celebrate the springtime harvest, to Italy, where they were filled with costly gifts in a game played by the nobility. When the piñata traveled to Spain, it became part of Lenten traditions. In Mexico, it was used to celebrate the birth of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli (Burciaga, 1993). Today, children in many countries squeal with excitement at parties as they swing a stick at a piñata. In today’s “shrinking globe,” cultural diffusion moves at a very rapid pace as countries continually seek new markets for their products.

**Cultural Diversity**

*Cultural diversity* refers to the wide range of cultural differences found between and within nations. Cultural diversity between countries may be the result of natural circumstances (such as climate and geography) or social circumstances (such as level of technology and composition of the population). Some nations—such as Sweden—are referred to as *homogeneous societies*, meaning that they include people who share a common culture and who are typically from similar social, religious, political, and economic backgrounds. By contrast, other nations—including the United States—are referred to as *heterogeneous societies*, meaning that they include people who are dissimilar in regard to social characteristics such as religion, income, or race/ethnicity (see Figure 3.2).

Immigration contributes to cultural diversity in a society. Throughout its history, the United States has been a nation of immigrants. Over the past 185 years, more than 60 million “documented” (legal) immigrants have arrived here; innumerable people have also entered the country as undocumented immigrants. Immigration can cause feelings of frustration and hostility, especially in people who feel threatened by the changes that large numbers of immigrants may produce. Often, people are intolerant of those who are different from themselves. When societal tensions rise, people may look for others on whom they can place blame—or single out persons because they are the “other,” the “outsider,” the one who does not “belong.” Ronald Takaki, an ethnic studies scholar, described his experience of being singled out as an “other”:

I had flown from San Francisco to Norfolk and was riding in a taxi to my hotel to attend a conference on multiculturalism. . . . My driver and I chatted about the weather and the tourists. . . . The rearview mirror reflected a white man in his forties. “How long have you been in this country?” he asked. “All my life,” I replied, wincing. “I was born in the United States.” With a strong southern drawl, he remarked: “I was wondering because your English is excellent!” Then, as I had many times before, I explained: “My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880s. My family has been here, in America, for over a hundred years.” He glanced at me in the mirror. Somehow I did not look “American” to him; my eyes and complexion looked foreign. (Takaki, 1993: 1)

Have you ever been made to feel like an “outsider”? Each of us receives cultural messages that may
make us feel good or bad about ourselves or may give us the perception that we “belong” or “do not belong.” Can people overcome such feelings in a culturally diverse society such as the United States? Some analysts believe it is possible to communicate with others despite differences in race, ethnicity, national origin, age, sexual orientation, religion, social class, occupation, leisure pursuits, regionalism, and so on (see Box 3.2). People who differ from the dominant group may also find reassurance and social support in a subculture or a counterculture.

**Figure 3.2** Heterogeneity of U.S. Society

Throughout history, the United States has been heterogeneous. Today, we represent a wide diversity of social categories, including our religious affiliations, income levels, and racial–ethnic categories.

### Religious Affiliation
- Evangelical Protestants: 25.9%
- Roman Catholics: 23.4%
- Nonreligious: 18.5%
- Mainline Protestants: 18.0%
- Black Protestants: 7.8%
- Other Christians: 3.3%
- Jews: 2.0%
- Other: 1.1%

### Household Income
- Under $9,999: 9.6%
- $10,000 to $24,999: 20.0%
- $25,000 to $49,999: 29.2%
- $50,000 to $74,999: 19.1%
- $75,000 and over: 22.1%

### Race and Ethnic Distribution
- White (non-Hispanic): 68.2%
- African American: 12.4%
- Latino/a: 14.3%
- Asian: 4.2%
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders: 0.1%
- American Indian: 0.8%

*In Census Bureau terminology, a household consists of people who occupy a housing unit.
Includes Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Asian Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, and other Asians.
Includes Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or Chamorro, Samoan, and other Pacific Islanders.
Includes American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts.
SUBCULTURES  A subculture is a category of people who share distinguishing attributes, beliefs, values, and/or norms that set them apart in some significant manner from the dominant culture. Emerging from the functionalist tradition, this concept has been applied to distinctions ranging from ethnic, religious, regional, and age-based categories to those categories presumed to be “deviant” or marginalized from the larger society. In the broadest use of the concept, thousands of categories of people residing in the United States might be classified as participants in one or more subcultures, including Native Americans, Muslims, Generation Xers and Yers, and motorcycle enthusiasts. However, to see how subcultural participants interact with the dominant U.S. culture, many sociological studies of subcultures have limited the scope of inquiry to more visible, distinct subcultures such as the Old Order Amish and ethnic enclaves in large urban areas.

BOX 3.2 You Can Make a Difference

Understanding People from Other Cultures

Why study chemistry if one cannot effectively tell an audience how to use various chemicals responsibly? Or why study geography and history if one cannot link the environment and the past to people’s current ways of life? . . . (W)hy learn about culture and fail to appreciate differences among people and communicate the same message to others? (Kabagarama, 1993: vi–vii)

Daisy Kabagarama, a U.S. college professor who was born in Uganda, poses these questions in her provocative book Breaking the Ice (1993), in which she explains how to further the cross-cultural understanding needed with rapid population changes and globalization. We can help others communicate across cultures by passing Kabagarama’s techniques on to them:

• Get acquainted. Show genuine interest, have a sense of curiosity and appreciation, feel empathy for others, be nonjudgmental, and demonstrate flexibility.
• Ask the right questions. Ask general questions first and specific ones later, making sure that questions are clear and simple and are asked in a relaxed, nonthreatening manner.
• Consider visual images. Use compliments carefully; it is easy to misjudge other people based on their physical appearance alone, and appearance norms differ widely across cultures.
• Deal with stereotypes. Overcome stereotyping and myths about people from other cultures through sincere self-examination, searching for knowledge, and practicing objectivity.
• Establish trust and cooperation. Be available when needed. Give and accept criticism in a positive manner and be spontaneous in interactions with others, but remember that rules regarding spontaneity are different for each culture.

Electronic systems now link people around the world, making it possible for us to communicate with people from diverse racial–ethnic backgrounds and cultures without even leaving home or school. Try these websites for interesting information on multicultural issues and cultural diversity:

• Multicultural Pavilion provides resources on racism, sexism, and classism in the United States, as well as access to multicultural newsgroups, essays, and a large list of multicultural links on the web:
  http://www.edchange.org/multicultural
• MultiWorld is a bilingual (Chinese and English) e-zine that includes information on culture, people, art, and nature, along with sites about nations such as the United States, Canada, Ireland, China, Belgium, and Brazil. You can access MultiWorld by going to the following address:
  http://sunsite.nus.edu

The Old Order Amish  Having arrived in the United States in the early 1700s, members of the Old Order Amish have fought to maintain their distinct identity. Today, over 75 percent of the more than 100,000 Amish live in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, where they practice their religious beliefs and remain a relatively closed social network. According to sociologists, this religious community is a subculture because its members share values and norms that differ significantly from those of people who primarily identify with the dominant culture. The Amish have a strong faith in God and reject worldly concerns. Their core values include the joy of work, the primacy of the home, faithfulness, thriftiness, tradition, and humility. The Amish hold a conservative view of the family, believing that women are subordinate to men, birth control is unacceptable, and wives should remain at home. Children (about seven per family) are cherished and seen as an economic asset: They help with
the farming and other work. Many of the Old Order Amish speak Pennsylvania Dutch (a dialect of German) as well as English. They dress in traditional clothing, live on farms, and rely on the horse and buggy for transportation.

The Amish are aware that they share distinctive values and look different from other people; these differences provide them with a collective identity and make them feel close to one another (Schaefer and Zellner, 2007). The belief system and group cohesiveness of the Amish remain strong despite the intrusion of corporations and tourists, the vanishing farmlands, and increasing levels of government regulation in their daily lives (Schaefer and Zellner, 2007).

**Ethnic Subcultures** Some people who have unique shared behaviors linked to a common racial, language, or national background identify themselves as members of a specific subculture, whereas others do not. Examples of ethnic subcultures include African Americans, Latinos/Latinas (Hispanic Americans), Asian Americans, and Native Americans. Some analysts include “white ethnics” such as Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and Polish Americans. Others also include Anglo Americans (Caucasians).

Although people in ethnic subcultures are dispersed throughout the United States, a concentration of members of some ethnic subcultures is visible in many larger communities and cities. For example, Chinatowns, located in cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York, are one of the more visible ethnic subcultures in the United States. In San Francisco, over 100,000 Chinese Americans live in a twenty-four-block “city” within a city, which is the largest Chinese community outside of Asia. Traditionally, the core values of this subculture have included loyalty to others and respect for one’s family. Obedience to parental authority, especially the father’s, is expected, and sexual restraint and control over one’s emotions in public are also highly valued.

By living close to one another and clinging to their original customs and language, first-generation immigrants can survive the abrupt changes they experience in material and nonmaterial cultural patterns. In New York City, for example, Korean Americans and Puerto Rican Americans constitute distinctive subcultures, each with its own food, music, and personal style. In San Antonio, Mexican Americans enjoy different food and music than do Puerto Rican Americans or other groups. Subcultures provide opportunities for expression of distinctive lifestyles, as well as sometimes helping people adapt to abrupt cultural change. Subcultures can also serve as a buffer against the discrimination experienced by many ethnic or religious groups in the United States. However, some people may be forced by economic or social disadvantage to remain in such ethnic enclaves.

**Countercultures** Some subcultures actively oppose the larger society. A counterculture is a group that strongly rejects dominant societal values and norms and seeks alternative lifestyles (Yinger, 1960, 1982). Young people are most likely to join counter-
cultural groups, perhaps because younger persons generally have less invested in the existing culture. Examples of countercultures include the beatniks of the 1950s, the flower children of the 1960s, the drug enthusiasts of the 1970s, and members of nonmainstream religious sects, or cults.

Culture Shock

_Culture shock_ is the disorientation that people feel when they encounter cultures radically different from their own and believe they cannot depend on their own taken-for-granted assumptions about life. When people travel to another society, they may not know how to respond to that setting. For example, Napoleon Chagnon (1992) described his initial shock at seeing the Yanomamö (pronounced yah-noh-MAH-mah) tribe of South America on his first trip in 1964.

The Yanomamö (also referred to as the “Yano-mami”) are a tribe of about 20,000 South American Indians who live in the rain forest. Although Chagnon traveled in a small aluminum motorboat for three days to reach these people, he was not prepared for the sight that met his eyes when he arrived:

I looked up and gasped to see a dozen burly, naked, sweaty, hideous men staring at us down the shafts of their drawn arrows. Immense wads of green tobacco were stuck between their lower teeth and lips, making them look even more hideous, and strands of dark-green slime dripped from their nostrils—strands so long that they reached down to their pectoral muscles or drizzled down their chins and stuck to their chests and bellies. We arrived as the men were blowing ebene, a hallucinogenic drug, up their noses. . . . I was horrified. What kind of welcome was this for someone who had come to live with these people and learn their way of life—to become friends with them? But when they recognized Barker [a guide], they put their weapons down and returned to their chanting, while keeping a nervous eye on the village entrances. (Chagnon, 1992: 12–14)

The Yanomamö have no written language, system of numbers, or calendar. They lead a nomadic lifestyle, carrying everything they own on their backs. They wear no clothes and paint their bodies; the women insert slender sticks through holes in the lower lip and through the pierced nasal septum. In other words, the Yanomamö—like the members of thousands of other cultures around the world—live in a culture very different from that of the United States.

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

When observing people from other cultures, many of us use our own culture as the yardstick by which we judge their behavior. Sociologists refer to this approach as _ethnocentrism_—the practice of judging all other cultures by one’s own culture (Sumner, 1959/1906). Ethnocentrism is based on the assumption that one’s own way of life is superior to all others. For example, most schoolchildren are taught that their own school and country are the best. The school song, the pledge to the flag, and the national anthem are forms of _positive ethnocentrism_. However, _negative ethnocentrism_ can also result from constant emphasis on the superiority of one’s own group or nation. Negative ethnocentrism is manifested in derogatory stereotypes that ridicule recent immigrants whose customs, dress, eating habits, or religious beliefs are markedly different from those of dominant-group
members. Long-term U.S. residents who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups, such as Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinas/os, have also been the target of ethnocentric practices by other groups. An alternative to ethnocentrism is cultural relativism—the belief that the behaviors and customs of any culture must be viewed and analyzed by the culture’s own standards. For example, the anthropologist Marvin Harris (1974, 1985) uses cultural relativism to explain why cattle, which are viewed as sacred, are not killed and eaten in India, where widespread hunger and malnutrition exist. From an ethnocentric viewpoint, we might conclude that cow worship is the cause of the hunger and poverty in India. However, according to Harris, the Hindu taboo against killing cattle is very important to their economic system. Live cows are more valuable than dead ones because they have more important uses than as a direct source of food. As part of the ecological system, cows consume grasses of little value to humans. Then they produce two valuable resources—oxen (the neutered offspring of cows) to power the plows and manure (for fuel and fertilizer)—as well as milk, floor covering, and leather. As Harris’s study reveals, culture must be viewed from the standpoint of those who live in a particular society.

Cultural relativism also has a downside. It may be used to excuse customs and behavior (such as cannibalism) that may violate basic human rights. Cultural relativism is a part of the sociological imagination; researchers must be aware of the customs and norms of the society they are studying and then spell out their background assumptions so that others can spot possible biases in their studies. However, according to some social scientists, issues surrounding ethnocentrism and cultural relativism may become less distinct in the future as people around the globe increasingly share a common popular culture. Others, of course, disagree with this perspective. Let’s see what you think.

**A Global Popular Culture?**

Before taking this course, what was the first thing you thought about when you heard the term *culture*? In everyday life, culture is often used to describe the fine arts, literature, and classical music. When people say that a person is “cultured,” they may mean that the individual has a highly developed sense of style or aesthetic appreciation of the “finer” things; however, some sociologists who study culture further distin-

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<td>cultural relativism</td>
<td>the belief that the behaviors and customs of any culture must be viewed and analyzed by the culture’s own standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>popular culture</td>
<td>the component of culture that consists of activities, products, and services that are assumed to appeal primarily to members of the middle and working classes.</td>
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Bourdieu, people must be trained to appreciate and understand high culture. Individuals learn about high culture in upper-middle- and upper-class families and in elite education systems, especially higher education. Once they acquire this trained capacity, they possess a form of cultural capital. Persons from poor and working-class backgrounds typically do not acquire this cultural capital. Because knowledge and appreciation of high culture are considered a prerequisite for access to the dominant class, its members can use their cultural capital to deny access to subordinate-group members and thus preserve and reproduce the existing class structure. Unlike high culture, popular culture is presumed to be available to everyone.

**Forms of Popular Culture**

Three prevalent forms of popular culture are fads, fashions, and leisure activities. A *fad* is a temporary but widely copied activity followed enthusiastically by large numbers of people. Most fads are short-lived novelties. According to the sociologist John Lofland (1993), fads can be divided into four major categories. First, *object fads* are items that people purchase despite the fact that they have little use or intrinsic value. Recent examples include Harry Potter wands, SpongeBob SquarePants trading cards, and oversized sunglasses. Second, *activity fads* include pursuits such as body piercing, “surfing” the Internet, and the “free hugs” campaign, wherein individuals offer hugs to strangers in a public setting as a random act of kindness to make someone feel better. Third are *idea fads*, such as New Age ideologies including “The Secret,” as advocated by Oprah Winfrey and other celebrities. Fourth are *personality fads*, such as those surrounding celebrities such as Paris Hilton, Tiger Woods, 50 Cent, and Brad Pitt.

A *fashion* is a currently valued style of behavior, thinking, or appearance that is longer lasting and more widespread than a fad. Examples of fashion are found in many areas, including child rearing, education, arts, clothing, music, and sports. Soccer is an example of a fashion in sports. Until recently, only schoolchildren played soccer in the United States. Now it has become a popular sport, perhaps in part because of immigration from Latin America and other areas of the world where soccer is widely played.

Like soccer, other forms of popular culture move across nations. In fact, popular culture is the United States’ second largest export (after aircraft) to other nations (Rockwell, 1994). Of the world’s 100 most-attended films in the 1990s, for example, 88 were produced by U.S.-based film companies. Likewise, music, television shows, novels, and street fashions from the United States have become a part of many other cultures. In turn, people in this country continue to be strongly influenced by popular culture from other nations. For example, contemporary music and clothing in the United States reflect African, Caribbean, and Asian cultural influences, among others.

Will the spread of popular culture produce a homogeneous global culture? Critics argue that the world is not developing a global culture; rather, other cultures are becoming westernized. Political and religious leaders in some nations oppose this process,
which they view as cultural imperialism—the extensive infusion of one nation’s culture into other nations (see Box 3.3). For example, some view the widespread infusion of the English language into countries that speak other languages as a form of cultural imperialism. On the other hand, the concept of cultural imperialism may fail to take into account various cross-cultural influences. For example, cultural diffusion of literature, music, clothing, and food has occurred on a global scale. A global culture, if it comes into existence, will most likely include components from many societies and cultures.

**Sociological Analysis of Culture**

Sociologists regard culture as a central ingredient in human behavior. Although all sociologists share a similar purpose, they typically see culture through somewhat different lenses as they are guided by different theoretical perspectives in their research. What do these perspectives tell us about culture?

**Functionalist Perspectives**

As previously discussed, functionalist perspectives are based on the assumption that society is a stable, orderly system with interrelated parts that serve specific functions. Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) suggested that culture helps people meet their biological needs (including food and procreation), instrumental needs (including law and education), and integrative needs (including religion and art). Societies in which people share a common language and core values are more likely to have consensus and harmony.

How might functionalist analysts view popular culture? According to many functionalist theorists, popular culture serves a significant function in society in that it may be the “glue” that holds society together. Regardless of race, class, sex, age, or other characteristics, many people are brought together (at least in spirit) to cheer teams competing in major sporting events such as the Super Bowl or the Olympic Games. Television and the Internet help integrate recent immigrants into the mainstream culture, whereas longer-term residents may become more homogenized as a result of seeing the same images and being exposed to the same beliefs and values.

However, functionalists acknowledge that all societies have dysfunctions that produce a variety of societal problems. When a society contains numerous subcultures, discord results from a lack of consensus about core values. In fact, popular culture may undermine core cultural values rather than reinforce them. For example, movies may glorify crime, rather than hard work, as the quickest way to get ahead. According to some analysts, excessive violence in music videos, films, and television programs may be harmful to children and young people. From this perspective, popular culture can be a factor in antisocial behavior as seemingly diverse as hate crimes and fatal shootings in public schools.

A strength of the functionalist perspective on culture is its focus on the needs of society and the fact that stability is essential for society’s continued survival. A shortcoming is its overemphasis on harmony and cooperation. This approach also fails to fully account for factors embedded in the structure of society—such as class-based inequalities, racism, and sexism—that may contribute to conflict among people in the United States or to global strife.

**Conflict Perspectives**

Conflict perspectives are based on the assumption that social life is a continuous struggle in which members of powerful groups seek to control scarce resources. According to this approach, values and norms help create and sustain the privileged position of the powerful in society while excluding others. As the early conflict theorist Karl Marx stressed, ideas are cultural creations of a society’s most powerful members. Thus, it is possible for political, economic, and social leaders to use ideology—an integrated system of ideas that is external to, and coercive of, people—to maintain their positions of dominance in a society. As Marx stated,

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force in society, is at the same time, its ruling intellectual force. The class, which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production. . . . The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas. (Marx and Engels, 1970/1845–1846: 64)

Many contemporary conflict theorists agree with Marx’s assertion that ideas, a nonmaterial component of culture, are used by agents of the ruling class to af-
Chapter 3 • Culture

The role of the mass media in influencing people’s thinking about the foods that they should—or should not—eat is an example of ideological control (see Box 3.4).

How might conflict theorists view popular culture? Some conflict theorists believe that popular culture, which originated with everyday people, has been largely removed from their domain and has become nothing more than a part of the capitalist economy in the United States (Gans, 1974; Cantor, 1980, 1987). From this approach, media conglomerates such as Time Warner, Disney, and Viacom create popular culture, such as films, television shows, and amusement parks, in the same way that they would produce any other product or service. Creating new popular culture also promotes consumption of commodities—objects outside ourselves that we purchase to satisfy our human needs or wants (Fjellman, 1992). Recent studies have shown that moviegoers spend more money for popcorn, drinks, candy, and other concession-stand food than they do for tickets to get into the theater. Similarly, park-goers at Disneyland and Walt Disney World spend as much money on merchandise—such as Magic Kingdom pencils, Mickey Mouse hats, kitchen accessories, and clothing—as they do on admission tickets and rides (Fjellman, 1992).

From this perspective, people come to believe that they need things they ordinarily would not purchase. Their desire is intensified by marketing techniques that promote public trust in products and services provided by a corporation such as the Walt Disney Company. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 291) refers to this public trust as symbolic capital: “the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability.” Symbolic capital

 BOX 3.3 Sociology in Global Perspective

The Malling of China: What Part Does Culture Play?

What is five stories tall, the length of six football fields, and more than one and a half times bigger than the Pentagon? What has 230 escalators, more than 1,000 stores, 20,000 workers, and shops with names such as Ralph Lauren and Chanel?

Although many of us would think that the answer to this question is a shopping mall in the United States, the mall described here is the Golden Resources Shopping Mall, located in Beijing, China. Golden Resources is currently the world’s largest shopping mall, at six million square feet (Marquand, 2004). Other giant shopping theme parks, or

Is the proliferation of massive shopping malls in China—containing stores from the United States and Western Europe as well as local entities—an example of cultural diffusion? Or is the malling of China an example of cultural imperialism? Can “culture” actually be sold to people?
“Temples of consumerism,” are opening throughout China in an effort to lure consumers to settings that often resemble Las Vegas or Disneyland (Barboza, 2005).

Under communism, China had no shopping malls. Today, China is a hotbed for capitalist expansion, and shopping malls are viewed as “cash cows” by developers and entrepreneurs (Whiting, 2005). Many malls in China are being built by U.S. developers such as the Simon Property Group and Taubman Centers, Inc. In addition, many mall stores in China, such as Old Navy, Louis Vuitton, and Chanel, originated in the United States, Italy, France, or other nations of Western Europe. Although the first shopping malls were developed in the United States (Kowinski, 2002), the “shop till you drop” spirit evoked by these shopping complexes has spread throughout the world as malls have sprung up in Western Europe, Mexico, South America, the former Soviet Union, and Japan.

Is the malling of China and other nations an example of cultural imperialism—the extensive infusion of one nation’s culture into other nations? Or is “malling” nothing more than cultural diffusion—the transmission of cultural items or social practices from one group or society to another? Some analysts believe that “malling” and “branding” (the selling of a name-brand product for a higher price when a generic one would serve the same purpose) are not forms of cultural imperialism because people in nations such as China welcome the vast malls and see them as a source of cultural pride and as a sign of their own economic progress. However, other analysts disagree with this assessment because they believe that part of China’s culture is disappearing forever. Open-air food markets and old department stores that traditionally sold Chinese clothing and other merchandise indigenous to the Chinese culture have been replaced by chain stores and big-box retailers such as Wal-Mart, many of which are operated by giant U.S. corporations. From this perspective, culture is “for sale” in the giant shopping malls because malls are more than just a collection of stores that share a common geographic location. Theme-park shopping malls, for example, are carefully designed psychological selling machines that sell not only products and services but also cultural symbols of the good life and of social acceptance by one’s peers. This is a powerful form of selling culture to people who desperately want to become players in the twenty-first-century global economy.

Is consumerism a cultural universal shared by people worldwide as they gain new opportunities to shop and have a vast array of merchandise set before them to choose from? Although “shop till you drop” consumerism may be possible for some middle- and upper-income families in China and other nations, many of the world’s people cannot purchase the basic necessities of life, much less buy mall-hyped items such as the following, which are available at Beijing’s Golden Resources Shopping Mall: “goat-leather motorcycle jackets, Italian bathroom sinks, hand-made violins, grandfather clocks, colonial-style desks, and Jaguars” (Marquand, 2004: 1). An ad for Golden Resources proudly proclaims that it is “the mall that will change your life” (Marquand, 2004: 1). If we think about this statement from a sociological perspective, it raises interesting questions for all of us: Will the malling of China change the way of life and culture of people in that nation? Has the malling of America changed our culture and influenced how we spend our time? What do you think?

A strength of the conflict perspective is that it stresses how cultural values and norms may perpetuate social inequalities. It also highlights the inevitability of change and the constant tension between those who want to maintain the status quo and those who desire change. A limitation is its focus on societal discord and the divisiveness of culture.

Symbolic Interactionist Perspectives

Unlike functionalists and conflict theorists, who focus primarily on macrolevel concerns, symbolic interactionists engage in a microlevel analysis that views society as the sum of all people’s interactions. From this perspective, people create, maintain, and modify cul-
tured norms are not independent realities that automatically determine our behavior. Instead, we reinterpret them in each social situation we encounter. However, the classical sociologist Georg Simmel warned that the larger cultural world—including both material culture and nonmaterial culture—eventually takes on a life of its own apart from the actors who daily re-

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**BOX 3.4 Framing Culture in the Media**

**You Are What You Eat?**

The agonizing decision to pick Yale over Harvard didn’t come down only to academics for Philip Gant. . . . It also came down to his tummy. And his eco-savvy. . . . When he chose Yale last year, Gant wasn’t swayed by its running tab of presidential alumni: President Bush, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Gerald Ford and William Howard Taft. He was more impressed by Yale’s leading-edge dedication to serving “sustainable” food. . . . In addition to wanting sustainable food, students such as Gant want it to be organic: grown without pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics or hormones.

—USA Today reporting that “More University Students Call for Organic, ‘Sustainable’ Food” (Horovitz, 2006)

You may ask “What does a newspaper article about university cafeterias and organic food have to do with culture?”

The answer is simple: Food is very much a part of all cultures. What we eat and how it is grown and prepared are a product of the culture of the society in which we live. Fads and fashions in food may come and go, but we often become aware of them as a result of mass media such as television, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet. There are television networks and magazines devoted solely to the topic of food, and there are stories and articles about food on an almost daily basis in the other forms of mass media.

So why did USA Today report on Philip Gant’s concerns about campus food? At least in part, the article resulted from a recent emphasis on organic food reporting in the media. Organic food refers to crops that are grown without the use of artificial fertilizers or most pesticides and that are processed without ionizing radiation or food additives, and to meat that is raised without antibiotics or growth hormones.

What most of us know about the “good” and “bad” sides of organic foods comes from the media. According to some media analysts, organic foods contain some nutrients that are not present in commercial foods, and organic foods do not have certain toxins that may be present in commercial foods (Criminio, 1995). As one journalist stated, organic food methods “honor the fragile complexity of our ecosys-

tem, the health of those who work the land, and the long-term well-being of customers who enjoy [the] harvest . . . .” (Shapin, 2006). However, not all media reports agree on this issue: Some sources note that pesticides *are* used on organic farms (Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts, 2004) and that organic foods typically cost the consumer more money.

How stories are framed by journalists and others in the media may influence our thinking about food and how what we eat is related to other cultural beliefs and values. *Media framing* refers to the process by which information and entertainment is packaged by the mass media before being presented to an audience. How a story about food is framed has a major effect on how each of us feels about the subject of that story. When the media report that some type of food—spinach, packaged salads, or some brand of peanut butter—is being recalled by the manufacturer due to health concerns, for example, we may quit buying that particular product for a while.

Thinking specifically about the production of food, the media often use the term “Big Agra” to describe the major corporations around the globe that grow and market much of the food that we eat. These megacorporations own giant cultivated tracts that use procedures intended to maximize the crop yield, harvest that crop (whether plants or animals) at the lowest price possible, and distribute the crop to markets in the United States and other countries. Maximizing crop yield involves the use of chemicals and pesticides—and cheap labor. “Big Agra” obviously has a stake in the battle over how the media frame stories that compare their foods with organic foods; the organic food industry also has a stake in the battle. Accordingly, both sides attempt to influence how stories about their products are framed in the media because that can make a big difference in their respective profits. Whether it is fast food or fresh spinach, they want to have an impact on what you buy, and where.

How we come to think of “good” food and “bad” food is central to our culture. It affects what we choose to eat and how we view ourselves as part of the larger environment of which we are a part. Media framing is both a part of and an influence on our culture.
create social life. As a result, individuals may be more controlled by culture than they realize. Simmel (1990/1907) suggested that money is an example of how people may be controlled by their culture. According to Simmel, people initially create money as a means of exchange, but then money acquires a social meaning that extends beyond its purely economic function. Money becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Today, we are aware of the relative “worth” not only of objects but also of individuals. Many people revere wealthy entrepreneurs and highly paid celebrities, entertainers, and sports figures for the amount of money they make, not for their intrinsic qualities. According to Simmel (1990/1907), money makes it possible for us to relativize everything, including our relationships with other people. When social life can be reduced to money, people become cynical, believing that anything—including people, objects, beauty, and truth—can be bought if we can pay the price. Although Simmel acknowledged the positive functions of money, he believed that the social interpretations people give to money often produce individual feelings of cynicism and isolation.

A symbolic interactionist approach highlights how people maintain and change culture through their interactions with others. However, interactionism does not provide a systematic framework for analyzing how we shape culture and how it, in turn, shapes us. It also does not provide insight into how shared meanings are developed among people, and it does not take into account the many situations in which there is disagreement on meanings. Whereas the functional and conflict approaches tend to overemphasize the macrolevel workings of society, the interactionist viewpoint often fails to take these larger social structures into account.

**Postmodernist Perspectives**

Postmodernist theorists believe that much of what has been written about culture in the Western world is Eurocentric—that it is based on the uncritical assumption that European culture (including its dispersed versions in countries such as the United States, Australia, and South Africa) is the true, universal culture in which all the world’s people ought to believe (Lemert, 1997). By contrast, postmodernists believe that we should speak of cultures, rather than culture.

However, Jean Baudrillard, one of the best-known French social theorists, believes that the world of culture today is based on simulation, not reality. According to Baudrillard, social life is much more a spectacle that simulates reality than reality itself. People often gain “reality” from the media, where reality is not always as it might appear. Many U.S. children, upon entering school for the first time, have already watched more hours of television than the total number of hours of classroom instruction they will encounter in their entire school careers (Lemert, 1997). Add to this the number of hours that some will have spent playing computer games or surfing the Internet. Baudrillard refers to this social creation as hyperreality—a situation in which the simulation of reality is more real than the thing itself. For Baudrillard, everyday life has been captured by the signs and symbols generated to
represent it, and we ultimately relate to simulations and models as if they were reality.

Baudrillard (1983) uses Disneyland as an example of a simulation that conceals the reality that exists outside rather than inside the boundaries of the artificial perimeter. According to Baudrillard, Disney-like theme parks constitute a form of seduction that substitutes symbolic (seductive) power for real power, particularly the ability to bring about social change. From this perspective, amusement park “guests” may feel like “survivors” after enduring the rapid speed and gravity-defying movements of the roller coaster rides or see themselves as “winners” after surviving fights with hideous cartoon villains on the “dark rides”—when they have actually experienced the substitution of an appearance of power over their lives for the absence of real power. Similarly, the anthropologist Stephen M. Fjellman (1992) studied Disney World in Orlando, Florida, and noted that people may forget, at least briefly, that the outside world can be threatening while they stroll Disney World’s streets without fear of crime or automobiles. Although this freedom may be temporarily empowering, it also may lull people into accepting a “worldview that presents an idealized United States as heaven. . . . How nice if they could all be like us—with kids, a dog, and General Electric appliances—in a world whose only problems are avoiding Captain Hook, the witch’s apple, and Toad Hall weasels” (Fjellman, 1992: 317).

In their examination of culture, postmodernist sociologists point out that no single perspective can grasp the complexity and diversity of the social world. They also make us aware that reality may not be what it seems. According to the postmodernist view, no one authority can claim to know social reality, and we should deconstruct—take apart and subject to intense critical scrutiny—existing beliefs and theories about culture in hopes of gaining new insights (Ritzer, 1997).

Although postmodern theories of culture have been criticized on a number of grounds, we will examine only three. One criticism is postmodernism’s lack of a clear conceptualization of ideas. Another is the tendency to critique other perspectives as being “grand narratives,” whereas postmodernists offer their own varieties of such narratives. Finally, some analysts believe that postmodern analyses of culture lead to profound pessimism about the future.

Concept Table 3.A reviews the components of culture as well as how the four major perspectives view culture.

### Concept Table 3.A

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<th>Components of Culture</th>
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<td>Symbol</td>
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### Culture in the Future

As we have discussed in this chapter, many changes are occurring in the United States. Increasing cultural diversity can either cause long-simmering racial and ethnic antagonisms to come closer to a boiling point or result in the creation of a truly “rainbow culture” in which diversity is respected and encouraged.

In the future, the issue of cultural diversity will increase in importance, especially in schools. Multicultural education that focuses on the contributions of a wide variety of people from different backgrounds will continue to be an issue of controversy from kin-
dergarten through college. In the Los Angeles school district, for example, students speak more than 114 different languages and dialects. Schools will face the challenge of embracing widespread cultural diversity while conveying a sense of community and national identity to students.

Technology will continue to have a profound effect on culture. Television and radio, films and DVDs, and electronic communications will continue to accelerate the flow of information and expand cultural diffusion throughout the world. Global communication devices will move images of people’s lives, behavior, and fashions instantaneously among almost all nations. Increasingly, computers and cyberspace will become people’s window on the world and, in the process, promote greater integration or fragmentation among nations. Integration occurs when there is a widespread acceptance of ideas and items—such as democracy, rock music, blue jeans, and McDonald’s hamburgers—among cultures. By contrast, fragmentation occurs when people in one culture disdain the beliefs and actions of other cultures. As a force for both cultural integration and fragmentation, technology will continue to revolutionize communications, but most of the world’s population will not participate in this revolution.

From a sociological perspective, the study of culture helps us not only understand our own “tool kit” of symbols, stories, rituals, and world views but also expand our insights to include those of other people of the world, who also seek strategies for enhancing their own lives. If we understand how culture is used by people, how cultural elements constrain or further certain patterns of action, what aspects of our cultural heritage have enduring effects on our actions, and what specific historical changes undermine the validity of some cultural patterns and give rise to others, we can apply our sociological imagination not only to our own society but to the entire world as well (see Swidler, 1986).

New technologies have made educational opportunities available to a wider diversity of students, including persons with a disability. How will global communications technologies continue to change culture and social life in the future?

Chapter Review

- What is culture?
  Culture is the knowledge, language, values, and customs passed from one generation to the next in a human group or society. Culture can be either material or nonmaterial. Material culture consists of the physical creations of society. Nonmaterial culture is more abstract and reflects the ideas, values, and beliefs of a society.

- What are cultural universals?
  Cultural universals are customs and practices that exist in all societies and include activities and institu-
tions such as storytelling, families, and laws. Specific forms of these universals vary from one cultural group to another, however.

- **What are the four nonmaterial components of culture that are common to all societies?** These components are symbols, language, values, and norms. Symbols express shared meanings; through them, groups communicate cultural ideas and abstract concepts. Language is a set of symbols through which groups communicate. Values are a culture's collective ideas about what is acceptable or not acceptable. Norms are the specific behavioral expectations within a culture.

- **What are the main types of norms?** Folkways are norms that express the everyday customs of a group, whereas mores are norms with strong moral and ethical connotations and are essential to the stability of a culture. Laws are formal, standardized norms that are enforced by formal sanctions.

- **What are high culture and popular culture?** High culture consists of classical music, opera, ballet, and other activities usually patronized by elite audiences. Popular culture consists of the activities, products, and services of a culture that appeal primarily to members of the middle and working classes.

- **How is cultural diversity reflected in society?** Cultural diversity is reflected through race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion, occupation, and so forth. A diverse culture also includes subcultures and countercultures. A subculture has distinctive ideas and behaviors that differ from the larger society to which it belongs. A counterculture rejects the dominant societal values and norms.

- **What are culture shock, ethnocentrism, and cultural relativism?** Culture shock refers to the anxiety that people experience when they encounter cultures radically different from their own. Ethnocentrism is the assumption that one's own culture is superior to others. Cultural relativism views and analyzes another culture in terms of that culture's own values and standards.

- **How do the major sociological perspectives view culture?** A functionalist analysis of culture assumes that a common language and shared values help produce consensus and harmony. According to some conflict theorists, culture may be used by certain groups to maintain their privilege and exclude others from society's benefits. Symbolic interactionists suggest that people create, maintain, and modify culture as they go about their everyday activities. Postmodern thinkers believe that there are many cultures within the United States alone. In order to grasp a better understanding of how popular culture may simulate reality rather than being reality, postmodernists believe that we need a new way of conceptualizing culture and society.

### Key Terms

- counterculture 91
- cultural imperialism 95
- cultural lag 87
- cultural relativism 93
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- culture 73
- culture shock 92
- diffusion 88
- discovery 87
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Questions for Critical Thinking

1. Would it be possible today to live in a totally separate culture in the United States? Could you avoid all influences from the mainstream popular culture or from the values and norms of other cultures? How would you be able to avoid any change in your culture?

2. Do fads and fashions reflect and reinforce or challenge and change the values and norms of a society? Consider a wide variety of fads and fashions: musical styles, computer and video games and other technologies, literature, and political, social, and religious ideas.

3. You are doing a survey analysis of religious groups to determine the effects of popular culture on their views and behavior. What are some of the questions you would use in your survey?

Resources on the Internet

Chapter-Related Websites

The following websites have been selected for their relevance to the topics in this chapter. These sites are among the more stable, but please note that website addresses change frequently. For an updated list of chapter-related websites with URL links, please visit the Sociology in Our Times website (www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/kendall).

“What Is Culture?”
http://www.wsu.edu/gened/learn-modules/top_culture/culture-index.html
This site explores the concept of human culture. In addition to providing a baseline definition of culture, the site examines pivotal discussions as well as debates about culture and provides various student interpretations of culture, interesting links, and many other resources.

Cultural Studies Central
http://www.culturalstudies.net
Discuss, read about, and enjoy contemporary culture at this site, which features interactive commentary, informative links, and interactive web projects on topics such as art crimes, urban legends, and gender borders.

The Kendall Companion Website

www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/kendall
Visit this book’s companion website, where you’ll find more resources to help you study and successfully complete course projects. Resources include quizzes, flash cards, and updated web links, as well as special features such as GSS Data and Census 2000 information that put powerful research results at your fingertips.