At a fairground in Iran, a girl enjoys a Spiderman ride. Shared learned behavior—what we call culture—can move across international borders to become part of foreign societies.
Culture 3
In this excerpt from his journal article “Body Ritual among the Nacirema,” anthropologist Horace Miner casts his observant eye on the intriguing rituals of an exotic culture. If some aspects of this culture seem familiar to you, however, you are right, for what Miner is describing is actually the culture of the United States (“Nacirema” is “American” spelled backward). The “shrine” Miner writes of is the bathroom; he correctly informs us that in this culture, one measure of wealth is how many bathrooms one’s home has. In their bathroom rituals, he goes on, the Nacirema use charms and magical potions (beauty products and prescription drugs) obtained from specialized practitioners (such as hair stylists), herbalists (pharmacists), and medicine men (physicians).

Using our sociological imaginations, we could update Miner’s description of the Nacirema’s charms, written in 1956, by adding tooth whiteners, anti-aging creams, Waterpiks, and hair gel.

When we step back and examine a culture thoughtfully and objectively, whether it is our own culture in disguise or another less familiar to us, we learn something new about society. Take Fiji, an island in the Pacific where a robust, nicely rounded body has always been the ideal for both men and women. This is a society in which “You’ve gained weight” traditionally has been considered a compliment, and “Your legs are skinny,” an insult. Yet a recent study shows that for the first time, eating disorders have been showing up among the young people in Fiji. What has happened to change their body image? Since the introduction of cable television in 1995, many Fiji islanders, especially young women, have begun to emulate not their mothers and aunts, but the small-waisted stars of television programs currently airing there, like Gilmore Girls and Lost. Studying culture in places like Fiji, then, sheds light on our own society (A. Becker 2007; Fiji TV 2009).

In this chapter we will study the development of culture around the world, including the cultural effects of the worldwide trend toward globalization. We will see just how basic the study of culture is to sociology. Our discussion will focus both on general cultural practices found in all societies and on the
wide variations that can distinguish one society from another. We will define and explore the major aspects of culture, including language, norms, sanctions, and values. We will see how cultures develop a dominant ideology, and how functionalist and conflict theorists view culture. We’ll also see what can happen when a major corporation ignores cultural variations. Finally, in the Social Policy section we will look at the conflicts in cultural values that underlie current debates over bilingualism.

**What Is Culture?**

Culture is the totality of learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects, and behavior. It includes the ideas, values, and artifacts (for example, DVDs, comic books, and birth control devices) of groups of people. Patriotic attachment to the flag of the United States is an aspect of culture, as is a national passion for the tango in Argentina.

Sometimes people refer to a particular person as “very cultured” or to a city as having “lots of culture.” That use of the term culture is different from our use in this textbook. In sociological terms, culture does not refer solely to the fine arts and refined intellectual taste. It consists of all objects and ideas within a society, including slang words, ice cream cones, and rock music. Sociologists consider both a portrait by Rembrandt and the work of graffiti spray painters to be aspects of culture. A tribe that cultivates soil by hand has just as much culture as a people that relies on computer-operated machinery. Each people has a distinctive culture with its own characteristic ways of gathering and preparing food, constructing homes, structuring the family, and promoting standards of right and wrong.

The fact that you share a similar culture with others helps to define the group or society to which you belong. A fairly large number of people are said to constitute a society when they live in the same territory, are relatively independent of people outside their area, and participate in a common culture. Metropolitan Los Angeles is more populous than at least 150 nations, yet sociologists do not consider it a society in its own right. Rather, they see it as part of—and dependent on—the larger society of the United States.

A society is the largest form of human group. It consists of people who share a common heritage and culture. Members of the society learn this culture and transmit it from one generation to the next. They even preserve their distinctive culture through literature, art, video recordings, and other means of expression.

Sociologists have long recognized the many ways in which culture influences human behavior. Through what has been termed a tool kit of habits, skills, and styles, people of a common culture construct their acquisition of knowledge, their interactions with kinfolk, their entrance into the job market—in short, the way in which they live. If it were not for the social transmission of culture, each generation would have to reinvent television, not to mention the wheel (Swidler 1986).

Having a common culture also simplifies many day-to-day interactions. For example, when you buy an airline ticket, you know you don’t have to bring along hundreds of dollars in cash. You can pay with a credit card. When you are part of a society, you take for granted many small (as well as more important) cultural patterns. You assume that theaters will provide seats for the audience, that physicians will not disclose confidential

Dance, like many other aspects of culture, can be expressed in many different ways. On the left, pop star Christina Aguilera executes the latest moves on tour. On the right, traditional Irish step dancers perform in a street parade.
information, and that parents will be careful when crossing the street with young children. All these assumptions reflect basic values, beliefs, and customs of the culture of the United States.

Today, when text, sound, and video can be transmitted around the world instantaneously, some aspects of culture transcend national borders. The German philosopher Theodor Adorno and others have spoken of the worldwide culture industry that standardizes the goods and services demanded by consumers. Adorno contends that globally, the primary effect of popular culture is to limit people’s choices. Yet others have shown that the culture industry’s influence does not always permeate international borders. Sometimes the culture industry is embraced; at other times, soundly rejected (Adorno [1971] 1991:98–106; Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 2002).

Cultural Universals
All societies have developed certain common practices and beliefs, known as cultural universals. Many cultural universals are, in fact, adaptations to meet essential human needs, such as the need for food, shelter, and clothing. Anthropologist George Murdock (1945:124) compiled a list of cultural universals, including athletic sports, cooking, funeral ceremonies, medicine, marriage, and sexual restrictions.

The cultural practices Murdock listed may be universal, but the manner in which they are expressed varies from culture to culture. For example, one society may let its members choose their own marriage partners; another may encourage marriages arranged by the parents.

Not only does the expression of cultural universals vary from one society to another; within a society, it may also change dramatically over time. Each generation, and each year for that matter, most human cultures change and expand through the processes of innovation and diffusion.

Ethnocentrism
Many everyday statements reflect our attitude that our own culture is best. We use terms such as underdeveloped, backward, and primitive to refer to other societies. What “we” believe is a religion; what “they” believe is superstition and mythology.

It is tempting to evaluate the practices of other cultures on the basis of our own perspectives. Sociologist William Graham Sumner (1906) coined the term ethnocentrism to refer to the tendency to assume that one’s own culture and way of life represent the norm or are superior to all others. The ethnocentric person sees his or her own group as the center or defining point of culture and views all other cultures as deviations from what

**Think about It**
What would be the major differences between this map and a map based on your world view? What would account for those differences?

**FIGURE 3-1 A PALESTINIAN WORLD VIEW**

**MAPPING LIFE WORLDWIDE**

Source: Fellmann et al. 2007:76.

This map, drawn by a high school student in Gaza, reflects the emphasis on pan-Arabism in the Palestinian educational curriculum. Al-Sham refers to "Greater Syria," a region that encompasses Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinian territories.
is “normal.” Westerners who think cattle are to be used for food might look down on India’s Hindu religion and culture, which views the cow as sacred. Or people in one culture may dismiss as unthinkable the mate selection or child-rearing practices of another culture. As Figure 3-1 shows, our view of the world is dramatically influenced by the society in which we were raised.

Ethnocentric value judgments have complicated U.S. efforts at democratic reform of the Iraqi government. Before the 2003 war in Iraq, U.S. planners had assumed that Iraqis would adapt to a new form of government in the same way the Germans and Japanese did following World War II. But in the Iraqi culture, unlike the German and Japanese cultures, loyalty to the family and the extended clan comes before patriotism and the common good. In a country in which almost half of all people, even those in the cities, marry a first or second cousin, citizens are predisposed to favor their own kin in government and business dealings. Why trust a stranger from outside the family? What Westerners would criticize as nepotism, then, is actually an acceptable, even admirable, practice to Iraqis (J. Tierney 2003).

Conflict theorists point out that ethnocentric value judgments serve to devalue groups and to deny equal opportunities. Functionalists, on the other hand, point out that ethnocentrism serves to maintain a sense of solidarity by promoting group pride. Denigrating other nations and cultures can enhance our own patriotic feelings and belief that our way of life is superior. Yet this type of social stability is established at the expense of other peoples. Of course, ethnocentrism is hardly limited to citizens of the United States. Visitors from many African cultures are surprised at the disrespect that children in the United States show their parents. People from India may be repelled by our practice of living in the same household with dogs and cats. Many Islamic fundamentalists in the Arab world and Asia view the United States as corrupt, decadent, and doomed to destruction. All these people may feel comforted by membership in cultures that in their view are superior to ours.

Cultural Relativism

While ethnocentrism means evaluating foreign cultures using the familiar culture of the observer as a standard of correct behavior, cultural relativism means viewing people’s behavior from the perspective of their own culture. It places a priority on understanding other cultures, rather than dismissing them as “strange” or “exotic.” Unlike ethnocentrists, cultural relativists employ the kind of value neutrality in scientific study that Max Weber saw as so important.

Cultural relativism stresses that different social contexts give rise to different norms and values. Thus, we must examine practices such as polygamy, bullfighting, and monarchy within the particular contexts of the cultures in which they are found. Although cultural relativism does not suggest that we must unquestionably accept every cultural variation, it does require a serious and unbiased effort to evaluate norms, values, and customs in light of their distinctive culture.

Consider the practice of children marrying adults. Most people in North America cannot fathom the idea of a 12-year-old girl marrying. The custom, which is illegal in the United States, is common in West Africa and South Asia. Should the United States respect such marriages? The apparent answer is no. In 2006 the U.S. government spent $623 million to discourage the practice in 16 of the 20 countries with the highest child-marriage rates (Figure 3-2 on page 56).

From the perspective of cultural relativism, we might ask whether one society should spend its resources to dictate the norms of another. However, federal officials have defended the government's actions. They contend that child marriage deprives girls of education, threatens their health, and weakens public health efforts to combat HIV/AIDS (Jain and Kurz 2007; B. Slavin 2007).

Sociobiology and Culture

While sociology emphasizes diversity and change in the expression of culture, another school of thought, sociobiology, stresses the universal aspects of culture. Sociobiology is the systematic study of how biology affects human social behavior. Sociobiologists assert that many of the cultural traits humans display, such as the almost universal expectation that women will be nurturers and men will be providers, are not learned but are rooted in our genetic makeup.

Sociobiology is founded on the naturalist Charles Darwin’s (1859) theory of evolution. In traveling the world, Darwin had noted small variations in species—in the shape of a bird’s beak, for example—from one location to another. He theorized that over hundreds of generations, random variations in genetic makeup had helped certain members of a species to survive in a particular environment. A bird with a differently shaped beak might have been better at gathering seeds than other birds, for instance. In reproducing, these lucky individuals had passed on their advantageous genes to succeeding generations. Eventually, given their advantage in survival, individuals with the variation began to outnumber other members of the species. The species was slowly adapting to its environment. Darwin called this process of adaptation to the environment through random genetic variation natural selection.

Sociobiologists apply Darwin’s principle of natural selection to the study of social behavior. They assume that particular forms of behavior become genetically linked to a species if they contribute to its fitness to survive (van den Berghe 1978). In its extreme form, sociobiology suggests that all behavior is the result of genetic or biological factors and that social interactions play no role in shaping people’s conduct.

Sociobiologists do not seek to describe individual behavior on the level of “Why is Fred more aggressive than Jim?” Rather, they focus on how human nature is affected by the genetic composition of a group of people who share certain characteristics (such as men or women, or members of isolated tribal bands). In general, sociobiologists have stressed the basic genetic heritage that all humans share and have shown little interest in speculating about alleged differences between racial groups or nationalities. A few researchers have tried to trace specific behaviors, like criminal activity, to certain genetic markers, but those markers are not deterministic. Family cohesiveness, peer group behavior, and other social factors can override genetic influences on behavior (Guo et al. 2008; E. Wilson 1975, 1978).

Some researchers insist that intellectual interest in sociobiology will only deflect serious study of the more significant influence on human behavior, the social environment. Yet Lois Wladis Hoffman (1985), in her presidential address to the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, argued that sociobiology poses a valuable challenge to social scientists to better document
their own research. Interactionists, for example, could show how social behavior is not programmed by human biology, but instead adjusts continually to the attitudes and responses of others.

Certainly most social scientists would agree that there is a biological basis for social behavior. But there is less support for the extreme positions taken by certain advocates of sociobiology. Like interactionists, conflict theorists and functionalists believe that people’s behavior rather than their genetic structure defines social reality. Conflict theorists fear that the sociobiological approach could be used as an argument against efforts to assist disadvantaged people, such as schoolchildren who are not competing successfully (Guterman 2000; Segerstråle 2000; E. Wilson 2000).

Development of Culture around the World

We’ve come a long way from our prehistoric heritage. The human species has produced such achievements as the novels of Leo Tolstoy, the art of Pablo Picasso, and the films of Ang Lee. As we begin a new millennium, we can transmit an entire book around the world via the Internet, clone cells, and prolong lives through organ transplants. We can peer into the outermost reaches of the universe or analyze our innermost feelings. In this section we will examine two of the social processes that make these remarkable achievements possible: innovation and the diffusion of culture through globalization and technology.

Innovation

The process of introducing a new idea or object to a culture is known as innovation. Innovation interests sociologists because of the social consequences of introducing something new. There are two forms of innovation: discovery and invention. Discovery involves making known or sharing the existence of an aspect of reality. The finding of the DNA molecule and the identification of a new moon of Saturn are both acts of discovery. A significant factor in the process of discovery is the sharing of newfound knowledge with others. In contrast, an invention results when existing cultural items are combined into a form that did not exist before. The bow and arrow, the automobile, and the television are all examples of inventions, as are Protestantism and democracy.

Globalization, Diffusion, and Technology

The recent emergence of Starbucks, the worldwide chain of coffeehouses, is just one illustration of the rapidly escalating trend toward globalization (see Chapter 1). While people in Asia are beginning to enjoy coffee, people in North America are discovering sushi. Some have become familiar with the bento box, a small
SOCIOMETRY IN THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

3-1 Life in the Global Village

Imagine a “borderless world” in which culture, trade, commerce, money, and even people move freely from one place to another. Popular culture is widely shared, whether it be Japanese sushi or U.S. running shoes, and the English speaker who answers questions over the telephone about your credit card account is as likely to be in India or Ireland as in the United States. In this world, even the sovereignty of nations is at risk, challenged by political movements and ideologies that span nations.

There is no need to imagine this world, for we are already living in the age of globalization. African tribal youngsters wear Simpsons T-shirts; Thai teens dance to techno music; American children collect Hello Kitty items. Ethnic accessories have become a fashion statement in the United States, and Asian martial arts have swept the world.

What caused this great wave of cultural diffusion? First, sociologists take note of advances in communications technology. Satellite TV, cell phones, the Internet, and the like allow information to flow freely across the world, linking global markets. In 2008, this process reached a point where consumers could view videos on handheld devices and surf the Internet on their wireless cell phones, shopping online at Amazon.com, eBay, and other commercial Web sites from cars, airports, and cafeterias. Second, corporations in the industrial nations have become multinational, with both factories and markets in developing countries. Business leaders welcome the opportunity to sell consumer goods in populous countries such as China. Third, these multinational firms have cooperated with global financial institutions, organizations, and governments to promote free trade—unrestricted or lightly restricted commerce across national borders.

Globalization is not universally welcomed. Many critics see the dominance of “businesses without borders” as benefiting the rich, particularly the very wealthy in industrial countries, at the expense of the poor in less developed nations. They consider globalization to be a successor to the imperialism and colonialism that oppressed Third World nations for centuries.

Another criticism of globalization comes from people who feel overwhelmed by globalization. Embedded in the concept of globalization is the notion of the cultural domination of developing nations by more affluent nations. Simply put, people lose their traditional values and begin to identify with the culture of dominant nations. They may discard or neglect their native languages and dress as they attempt to copy the icons of mass-market entertainment and fashion. Even James Bond movies and Britney Spears may be seen as threats to native cultures.

Even James Bond movies and Britney Spears may be seen as threats to native cultures.

LET’S DISCUSS

1. How are you affected by globalization? Which aspects of globalization do you find advantageous and which objectionable?
2. How would you feel if the customs and traditions you grew up with were replaced by the culture or values of another country? How might you try to protect your culture?


Technology in its many forms has increased the speed of cultural diffusion and broadened the distribution of cultural elements. Sociologist Gerhard Lenski has defined technology as “cultural information about how to use the material resources of the environment to satisfy human needs and desires” (Nolan and Lenski 2009:37). Today’s technological developments no longer...
Cultural practices may spread through diffusion, but they undergo change in the process. Because this McDonald’s restaurant in Riyadh serves Saudi Arabsians, McRibs are out and McArabia—grilled chicken on flatbread—is in. Note the separate lines for men and women.

When a society’s nonmaterial culture (its values and laws) does not keep pace with rapid changes in its material culture, people experience an awkward period of maladjustment called culture lag.

The transition to nuclear power generation that began in the second half of the 20th century brought widespread protests against the new technology, as well as serious accidents that government officials were poorly prepared to deal with. Tensions over the controversial technology have not run as high in some countries as in others, however. France, where this nuclear power plant is situated, generates 78 percent of all its electricity through nuclear power. The technology is not as controversial there as in the United States and Canada, which generate less than 20 percent of their electricity through nuclear reaction.

Sociologist William F. Ogburn (1922) made a useful distinction between the elements of material and nonmaterial culture. Material culture refers to the physical or technological aspects of our daily lives, including food, houses, factories, and raw materials. Nonmaterial culture refers to ways of using material objects, as well as to customs, beliefs, philosophies, governments, and patterns of communication. Generally, the nonmaterial culture is more resistant to change than the material culture. Consequently, Ogburn introduced the term culture lag to refer to the period of maladjustment when the nonmaterial culture is still struggling to adapt to new material conditions. For example, the ethics of using the Internet, particularly issues concerning privacy and censorship, have not yet caught up with the explosion in Internet use and technology (Griswold 2004).

Resistance to technological change can lead not only to culture lag, but to some real questions of cultural survival (Box 3-2).

Cultural Variation

Each culture has a unique character. Inuit tribes in northern Canada, wrapped in furs and dieting on whale blubber, have little in common with farmers in Southeast Asia, who dress for the heat and subsist mainly on the rice they grow in their paddies. Cultures adapt to meet specific sets of circumstances, such as climate, level of technology, population, and geography. Thus, despite the presence of cultural universals such as courtship and religion, great diversity exists among the world’s many cultures. Moreover, even within a single nation, certain segments of the populace develop cultural patterns that differ from the patterns of the dominant society.

Subcultures

Rodeo riders, residents of a retirement community, workers on an offshore oil rig—all are examples of what sociologists refer to as subcultures. A subculture is a segment of society that shares a distinctive pattern of mores, folkways, and values that differs from the pattern of the larger society. In a sense, a subculture can be thought of as a culture existing within a larger, dominant culture. The existence of many subcultures is characteristic of complex societies such as the United States.

Members of a subculture participate in the dominant culture while at the same time engaging in unique and distinctive forms of behavior. Frequently, a subculture will develop an argot, or specialized language, that distinguishes it from the wider society. Athletes who play parkour, an extreme sport that combines forward running with fence leaping and the vaulting of walls, water barriers, and even moving cars, speak an argot they devised especially to describe their feats. Parkour runners talk about doing

use your sociological imagination

If you grew up in your parents’ generation—without computers, e-mail, MP3 players, and cell phones—how would your daily life differ from the one you lead today?
As a result, these employees have formed a tight-knit subculture they have the day off, no one else is free to socialize with them. Celebrating, call center employees see only each other; when Hindu festival of lights. While most Indian families are home for Thanksgiving—not on Indian holidays like Diwali, the Western-style dinners, dances, and coveted consumer goods take for granted. In return they offer perks such as Western, grueling pace U.S. work habits, including the one elder, the Bororo are now confined to six small reservations of about 500 square miles—much less than the area officially granted them in the 19th century. In Mato Grosso, a heavily forested state near the Amazon River, loggers have been clear-cutting the land at a rate that alarms the Bororo. Indigenous tribes are no match for powerful agribusiness interests, one of whose leaders is also governor of Mato Grosso. Blairo Maggi, head of the largest soybean producer in the world, has publicly trivialized the consequences of the massive deforestation occurring in Mato Grosso. Though Maggi said he would propose a three-year moratorium on development, opponents are skeptical that he will follow through on the promise. Meanwhile, indigenous groups like the Bororo struggle to maintain their culture in the face of dwindling resources. Though the tribe still observes the traditional initiation rites for adolescent boys, members are finding it difficult to continue their hunting and fishing rituals, given the scarcity of game and fish in the area. Pesticides in the runoff from nearby farms have poisoned the water they fish and bathe in, threatening both their health and their culture’s survival.

**LET’S DISCUSS**

1. How do you think the frontier in Brazil today compares to the American West in the 1800s? What similarities do you see?
2. What does society lose when indigenous cultures die?

family and holiday traditions. In response to such negative public opinion, the government of the Indian state where call centers are located has banned schools from teaching English rather than Kannada, the local language. Beginning in 2008, some 300,000 students were affected by the ban (Chu 2007; Kalita 2006).

Another shared characteristic among some employees at Indian call centers is their contempt for the callers they serve. In performing their monotonous, repetitive job day after day, hundreds of thousands of these workers have come to see the faceless Americans they deal with as slow, often rude customers. As described in the recent Indian bestseller One Night @ the Call Centre, new trainees quickly learn the “35 = 10 rule,” meaning that a 35-year-old American’s IQ is the same as a 10-year-old Indian’s. Such shared understandings underpin this emerging subculture (Bhagat 2007; Gentleman 2006).

Functionalist and conflict theorists agree that variation exists within a culture. Functionalists view subcultures as variations of particular social environments and as evidence that differences can exist within a common culture. However, conflict theorists suggest that variations often reflect the inequality of social arrangements within a society. A conflict theorist would view the challenges to dominant social norms by African American activists, the feminist movement, and the disability rights movement as reflections of inequity based on race, gender, and disability status. Conflict theorists also argue that subcultures sometimes emerge when the dominant society unsuccessfully tries to suppress a practice, such as the use of illegal drugs.

Countercultures

By the end of the 1960s, an extensive subculture had emerged in the United States, composed of young people turned off by a society they believed was too materialistic and technological. This group included primarily political radicals and hippies who had dropped out of mainstream social institutions. These young men and women rejected the pressure to accumulate more and more cars, larger and larger homes, and an endless array of material goods. Instead, they expressed a desire to live in a culture based on more humanistic values, such as sharing, love, and coexistence with the environment. As a political force, this subculture opposed the United States’ involvement in the war in Vietnam and encouraged draft resistance (Flacks 1971; Roszak 1969).

When a subculture conspicuously and deliberately opposes certain aspects of the larger culture, it is known as a counterculture. Countercultures typically thrive among the young, who have the least investment in the existing culture. In most cases, a 20-year-old can adjust to new cultural standards more easily than someone who has spent 60 years following the patterns of the dominant culture (Zellner 1995).

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, people around the United States learned of the existence of terrorist groups operating as a counterculture within their country. This was a situation that generations have lived with in Northern Ireland, Israel and the Palestinian territory, and many other parts of the world. But terrorist cells are not necessarily fueled only by outsiders. Frequently people become disenchanted with the policies of their own country, and a few take very violent steps.

Culture Shock

Anyone who feels disoriented, uncertain, out of place, or even fearful when immersed in an unfamiliar culture may be experiencing culture shock. For example, a resident of the United States who visits certain areas in China and wants local meat for dinner may be stunned to learn that the specialty is dog meat. Similarly, someone from a strict Islamic culture may be shocked when first seeing the comparatively provocative dress styles and open displays of affection that are common in the United States and various European cultures.

All of us, to some extent, take for granted the cultural practices of our society. As a result, it can be surprising and even disturbing to realize that other cultures do not follow our way of life. The fact is that customs that seem strange to us may be considered normal and proper in other cultures, which may see our own mores and folkways as odd.

Use your sociological imagination

You arrive in a developing African country as a Peace Corps volunteer. What aspects of a very different culture do you think would be the hardest to adjust to? What might the citizens of that country find shocking about your culture?

Role of Language

Language is one of the major elements of culture that underlie cultural variations. It is also an important component of cultural capital. Recall from Chapter 1 that Pierre Bourdieu used the term cultural capital to describe noneconomic assets, such as
family background and past educational investments, which are reflected in a person’s knowledge of language and the arts.

Members of a society generally share a common language, which facilitates day-to-day exchanges with others. When you ask a hardware store clerk for a flashlight, you don’t need to draw a picture of the instrument. You share the same cultural term for a small, portable, battery-operated light. However, if you were in England and needed this item, you would have to ask for an electric torch. Of course, even within the same society, a term can have a number of different meanings. In the United States, *pot* signifies both a container that is used for cooking and an intoxicating drug. In this section we will examine the cultural influence of language, which includes both the written and spoken word and nonverbal communication.

**Language: Written and Spoken**

Seven thousand languages are spoken in the world today—many more than the number of countries. Within a nation’s political boundaries, the number of languages spoken may range from only one (as in North Korea) to several hundred (as in Papua New Guinea, with 820). For the speakers of each one, whether they number 2,000 or 200 million, language is fundamental to their shared culture (Gordon 2005).

The English language, for example, makes extensive use of words dealing with war. We speak of “conquering” space, “fighting” the “battle” of the budget, “waging war” on drugs, making a “killing” on the stock market, and “bombing” an examination; something monumental or great is “the bomb.” An observer from an entirely different and warless culture could gauge the importance that war and the military have had in our lives simply by recognizing the prominence that militaristic terms have in our language. On the other hand, in the Old West, words such as *gelding, stallion, mare, piebald, and sorrel* were all used to describe one animal—the horse. Even if we knew little of that period in history, we could conclude from the list of terms that horses were important to the culture. Similarly, the Sami people of northern Norway and Sweden have a rich diversity of terms for snow, ice, and reindeer (Haviland et al. 2008; Magga 2006).

Language is, in fact, the foundation of every culture. **Language** is an abstract system of word meanings and symbols for all aspects of culture. It includes speech, written characters, numerals, symbols, and nonverbal gestures and expressions. Because language is the foundation of every culture, the ability to speak other languages is crucial to intercultural relations. Throughout the Cold War era, beginning in the 1950s and continuing well into the 1970s, the U.S. government encouraged the study of Russian by developing special language schools for diplomats and military advisers who dealt with the Soviet Union. And following September 11, 2001, the nation recognized how few skilled translators it had for Arabic and other languages spoken in Muslim countries. Language quickly became a key, not only to tracking potential terrorists, but to building diplomatic bridges with Muslim countries willing to help in the war against terrorism.

Language does more than simply describe reality; it also serves to shape the reality of a culture. For example, most people in the United States cannot easily make the verbal distinctions concerning snow and ice that are possible in the Sami culture. As a result, they are less likely to notice such differences.

The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, named for two linguists, describes the role of language in shaping our interpretation of reality. According to Sapir and Whorf, because people can conceptualize the world only through language, language *precedes* thought. Thus, the word symbols and grammar of a language organize the world for us. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis also holds that language is not a given. Rather, it is culturally determined and encourages a distinctive interpretation of reality by focusing our attention on certain phenomena (Sapir 1929).

For decades, the Navajo have referred to cancer as *lood doo nádzíihii*. Now, through a project funded by the National Cancer Institute, the tribal college is seeking to change the phrase. Why? Literally, the phrase means “the sore that does not heal,” and health educators are concerned that tribal members who have been diagnosed with cancer view it as a death sentence. Their effort to change the Navajo language, not easy in itself, is complicated by the Navajo belief that to talk about the disease is to bring it on one’s people (Fonseca 2008).

Similarly, feminists have noted that gender-related language can reflect—although in itself it does not determine—the traditional acceptance of men and women in certain occupations. Each time we use a term such as *mailman, policeman, or firefighter*, we are implying (especially to young children) that these occupations can be filled only by males. Yet many women work as *letter carriers, police officers, and firefighters*—a fact that is being increasingly recognized and legitimized through the use of such nonsexist language.
Language can also transmit stereotypes related to race. Look up the meanings of the adjective black in dictionaries published in the United States. You will find dismal, gloomy or forbidding, destitute of moral light or goodness, atrocious, evil, threatening, clouded with anger. In contrast, dictionaries list pure and innocent among the meanings of the adjective white. Through such patterns of language, our culture reinforces positive associations with the term (and skin color) white and negative associations with black. Is it surprising, then, that a list meant to prevent people from working in a profession is called a blacklist, while a lie that we think of as somewhat acceptable is called a white lie?

Language can shape how we see, taste, smell, feel, and hear. It also influences the way we think about the people, ideas, and objects around us. Language communicates a culture's most important norms, values, and sanctions. That's why the decline of an old language or the introduction of a new one is such a sensitive issue in many parts of the world (see the Social Policy section at the end of this chapter).

Nonverbal Communication

If you don't like the way a meeting is going, you might suddenly sit back, fold your arms, and turn down the corners of your mouth. When you see a friend in tears, you may give a quick hug. After winning a big game, you probably high-five your teammates. These are all examples of nonverbal communication, the use of gestures, facial expressions, and other visual images to communicate.

We are not born with these expressions. We learn them, just as we learn other forms of language, from people who share our same culture. This statement is as true for the basic expressions of happiness and sadness as it is for more complex emotions, such as shame or distress (Fridlund et al. 1987).

Like other forms of language, nonverbal communication is not the same in all cultures. For example, sociological research done at the micro level documents that people from various cultures differ in the degree to which they touch others during the course of normal social interactions. Even experienced travelers are sometimes caught off guard by these differences. In Saudi Arabia, a middle-aged man may want to hold hands with a partner after closing a business deal. In Egypt, men walk hand in hand in the street; in cafés, they fall asleep while lounging in each other's arms. These gestures, which would shock an American businessman, are considered compliments in those cultures. The meaning of hand signals is another form of nonverbal communication that can differ from one culture to the next. In Australia, the thumbs-up sign is considered rude (Passero 2002; Vaughan 2007).

A related form of communication is the use of symbols to convey meaning to others. Symbols are the gestures, objects, and words that form the basis of human communication. The thumbs-up gesture, a gold star sticker, and the smiley face in an e-mail are all symbols. Often deceptively simple, many symbols are rich in meaning, and may not convey the same meaning in all social contexts. Around someone's neck, for example, a cross can symbolize religious reverence; over a grave site, a belief in everlasting life; or set in flames, racial hatred.

Some symbols or gestures, such as the basic emotional expressions—a smile, a look of horror—may be close to universal. Not long ago, a team of linguists, social scientists, and physical scientists collaborated on a system for communicating with those who live thousands of years from now, long after people have ceased to speak our languages. The challenge was to create a series of signs and explanations that would warn future generations of the dangers posed by the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), a nuclear waste repository in New Mexico. For the next few centuries, warning signs engraved in English, Spanish, Russian, French, Chinese, Arabic, and Navajo will alert those in the area to the presence of the underground dump, which will remain highly radioactive for at least 10,000 years. But the signs also include pictographs that researchers hope will be understandable to people who live millennia from now, no matter what their language (Figure 3-3; Department of Energy 2004; Piller 2006).

use your sociological imagination

Besides your language and gestures, what other aspects of your culture might seem unusual to people in India, Japan, or France?

Norms and Values

“Wash your hands before dinner.” “Thou shalt not kill.” “Respect your elders.” All societies have ways of encouraging and enforcing what they view as appropriate behavior while discouraging and punishing what they consider to be improper behavior. They also have a collective idea of what is good and desirable in
The symbols on this subsurface marker at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico are an attempt to communicate the presence of hazardous waste to people who may live 10,000 years from now. Would these symbols convince you not to dig? Might future generations misinterpret them?

FIGURE 3-3 A TIMELESS ALERT

DANGER
POISONOUS RADIOACTIVE WASTE HERE
DO NOT DIG OR DRILL

The symbols on this subsurface marker at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico are an attempt to communicate the presence of hazardous waste to people who may live 10,000 years from now. Would these symbols convince you not to dig? Might future generations misinterpret them?

In Iraq, a female member of the U.S. Army searches a covered Muslim woman. The searches, which are necessary to prevent terrorist attacks, violate a Muslim norm that forbids touching by strangers.

In this section we will learn to distinguish between the closely related concepts of norms and values.

**Norms**

Norms are the established standards of behavior maintained by a society. For a norm to become significant, it must be widely shared and understood. For example, in movie theaters in the United States, we typically expect that people will be quiet while the film is shown. Of course, the application of this norm can vary, depending on the particular film and type of audience. People who are viewing a serious artistic film will be more likely to insist on the norm of silence than those who are watching a slapstick comedy or horror movie.

**Types of Norms** Sociologists distinguish between norms in two ways. First, norms are classified as either formal or informal. Formal norms generally have been written down and specify strict punishments for violators. In the United States, we often formalize norms into laws, which are very precise in defining proper and improper behavior. Sociologist Donald Black (1995) has termed law “governmental social control,” meaning that laws are formal norms enforced by the state. Laws are just one example of formal norms. The requirements for a college major and the rules of a card game are also considered formal norms.

In contrast, informal norms are generally understood but not precisely recorded. Standards of proper dress are a common example of informal norms. Our society has no specific punishment or sanction for a person who comes to school, say, wearing a monkey suit. Making fun of the nonconforming student is usually the most likely response.

Norms are also classified by their relative importance to society. When classified in this way, they are known as mores and folkways. Mores (pronounced “mores”) are norms deemed highly necessary to the welfare of a society, often because they embody the most cherished principles of a people. Each society demands obedience to its mores; violation can lead to severe penalties. Thus, the United States has strong mores against murder, treason, and child abuse, which have been institutionalized into formal norms.

Folkways are norms governing everyday behavior. Folkways play an important role in shaping the daily behavior of members
Confirming Pages

When is a kiss more than a kiss? In India, public displays of affection are decidedly not the norm, even among movie stars. When Richard Gere swept actress Shilpa Shetty into his arms at an AIDS awareness event, protests erupted, and some outraged onlookers demanded that he be sanctioned.

You are a high school principal. What norms would you want to govern the students’ behavior? How might those norms differ from those appropriate for college students?

Acceptance of Norms People do not follow norms, whether mores or folkways, in all situations. In some cases, they can evade a norm because they know it is weakly enforced. It is illegal for U.S. teenagers to drink alcoholic beverages, yet drinking by minors is common throughout the nation. (In fact, teenage alcoholism is a serious social problem.)

In some instances, behavior that appears to violate society’s norms may actually represent adherence to the norms of a particular group. Teenage drinkers are conforming to the standards of their peer group when they violate norms that condemn underage drinking. Similarly, business executives who use shady accounting techniques may be responding to a corporate culture that demands the maximization of profits at any cost, including the deception of investors and government regulatory agencies.

Norms are violated in some instances because one norm conflicts with another. For example, suppose that you live in an apartment building and one night hear the screams of the woman next door, who is being beaten by her husband. If you decide to intervene by ringing their doorbell or calling the police, you are violating the norm of minding your own business, while at the same time following the norm of assisting a victim of violence.

Even if norms do not conflict, there are always exceptions to any norm. The same action, under different circumstances, can cause one to be viewed as either a hero or a villain. Secretly tapping telephone conversations is normally considered illegal and abhorrent. However, it can be done with a court order to obtain valid evidence for a criminal trial. We would heap praise on a government agent who used such methods to convict an organized crime figure. In our culture, we tolerate killing another human being in self-defense, and we actually reward killing in warfare.

Acceptance of norms is subject to change as the political, economic, and social conditions of a culture are transformed. Until the 1960s, for example, formal norms throughout much of the United States prohibited the marriage of people from different racial groups. Over the past half century, however, such legal prohibitions were cast aside. The process of change can be seen today in the increasing acceptance of single parents and growing support for the legalization of marriage between same-sex couples (see Chapter 14).

When circumstances require the sudden violation of long-standing cultural norms, the change can upset an entire population. In Iraq, where Muslim custom strictly forbids touching by strangers for men and especially for women, the war that began in 2003 has brought numerous daily violations of the norm. Outside important mosques, government offices, and other facilities likely to be targeted by terrorists, visitors must now be patted down and have their bags searched by Iraqi security guards. To reduce the discomfort caused by the procedure, women are searched by female guards and men by male guards. Despite that concession, and the fact that many Iraqis admit or even insist on the need for such measures, people still wince at the invasion of their personal privacy. In reaction to the searches, Iraqi women have begun to limit the contents of the bags they carry or simply to leave them at home (Rubin 2003).

Sanctions

Suppose a football coach sends a 12th player onto the field. Imagine a college graduate showing up in shorts for a job interview at
Values influence people’s behavior and serve as criteria for evaluating the actions of others. The values, norms, and sanctions of a culture are often directly related. For example, if a culture places a high value on the institution of marriage, it may have norms (and strict sanctions) that prohibit the act of adultery or make divorce difficult. If a culture views private property as a basic value, it will probably have stiff laws against theft and vandalism.

The values of a culture may change, but most remain relatively stable during any one person’s lifetime. Socially shared, intensely felt values are a fundamental part of our lives in the United States. Sociologist Robin Williams (1970) has offered a list of basic values. It includes achievement, efficiency, material comfort, nationalism, equality, and the supremacy of science and reason over faith. Obviously, not all 307 million people in this country agree on all these values, but such a list serves as a starting point in defining the national character.

Each year more than 240,580 entering college students at 340 of the nation’s four-year colleges fill out a questionnaire about their attitudes. Because this survey focuses on an array of issues, beliefs, and life goals, it is commonly cited as a barometer of the nation’s values. The respondents are asked what values are personally important to them. Over the past 40 years, the value of “being very well-off financially” has shown the strongest gain in popularity; the proportion of first-year college students who endorse this value as “essential” or “very important” rose from 44 percent in 1967 to 76.8 percent in 2008 (Figure 3-4 on Page 66). In contrast, the value that has shown the most striking decline in endorsement by students is “developing a meaningful philosophy of life.” While this value was the most popular in the 1967 survey, endorsed by more than 80 percent of the respondents, it had fallen to sixth place on the list by 2008, when it was endorsed by 51.4 percent of students entering college.

During the 1980s and 1990s, support for values having to do with money, power, and status grew. At the same time, support for certain values having to do with social awareness and altruism, such as “helping others,” declined. According to the 2008 nationwide survey, only 44.7 percent of first-year college students stated that “influencing social values” was an “essential” or “very important” goal. The proportion of students for whom “helping to promote racial understanding” was an essential or very important goal reached a high of nearly 42 percent in 1992, then fell to 37.3 percent in 2008. Like other aspects of culture, such as language and norms, a nation’s values are not necessarily fixed.

Whether the slogan is “Plant a Tree” or “Think Green,” students have been exposed to values associated with environmentalism. How many of them accept those values? Poll results over the past 40 years show fluctuations, with a high of nearly 46 percent of students indicating a desire to become involved in cleaning up the environment. Beginning in the 1980s, student support for embracing this objective had dropped to around 20 percent or even lower (see Figure 3-4). Even with recent attention to global warming, the proportion remains level at only 29.5 percent of first-year students in 2008.

Recently, cheating has become a hot issue on college campuses. Professors who take advantage of computerized services that can identify plagiarism, such as the search engine Google, have been shocked to learn that many of the papers their students hand in

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<th>TABLE 3-1</th>
<th>NORMS AND SANCTIONS</th>
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<td><strong>Sanctions</strong></td>
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a large bank. Or consider a driver who neglects to put any money into a parking meter. These people have violated widely shared and understood norms. So what happens? In each of these situations, the person will receive sanctions if his or her behavior is detected.

Sanctions are penalties and rewards for conduct concerning a social norm. Note that the concept of reward is included in this definition. Conformity to a norm can lead to positive sanctions such as a pay raise, a medal, a word of gratitude, or a pat on the back. Negative sanctions include fines, threats, imprisonment, and stares of contempt.

Table 3-1 summarizes the relationship between norms and sanctions. As you can see, the sanctions that are associated with formal norms (which are written down and codified) tend to be formal as well. If a college coach sends too many players onto the field, the team will be penalized 15 yards. The driver who fails to put money in the parking meter will receive a ticket and have to pay a fine. But sanctions for violations of informal norms can vary. The college graduate who goes to the bank interview in shorts will probably lose any chance of getting the job; on the other hand, he or she might be so brilliant that bank officials will overlook the unconventional attire.

The entire fabric of norms and sanctions in a culture reflects that culture’s values and priorities. The most cherished values will be most heavily sanctioned; matters regarded as less critical will carry light and informal sanctions.

Values

Though we each have our own personal set of standards—which may include caring or fitness or success in business—we also share a general set of objectives as members of a society. Cultural values are these collective conceptions of what is considered good, desirable, and proper—or bad, undesirable, and improper—in a culture. They indicate what people in a given culture prefer as well as what they find important and morally right (or wrong). Values may be specific, such as honoring one’s parents and owning a home, or they may be more general, such as health, love, and democracy. Of course, the members of a society do not uniformly share its values. Angry political debates and billboards promoting conflicting causes tell us that much.

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<td>Testimonial dinner</td>
<td>Firing from a job</td>
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<td>Cheers</td>
<td>Bullying</td>
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foreign opinion of the United States had become quite negative (J. Hunter 1991; Kohut 2005, 2007).

In the past 20 years, extensive efforts have been made to compare values in different nations, recognizing the challenges in interpreting value concepts in a similar manner across cultures. Psychologist Shalom Schwartz has measured values in more than 60 countries. Around the world, certain values are widely shared, including benevolence, which is defined as “forgiveness and loyalty.” In contrast, power, defined as “control or dominance over people and resources,” is a value that is endorsed much less often (Hitlin and Piliavin 2004; S. Schwartz and Bardi 2001).

Despite this evidence of shared values, some scholars have interpreted the terrorism, genocide, wars, and military occupations of the early 21st century as a “clash of civilizations.” According to this thesis, cultural and religious identities, rather than national or political loyalties, are becoming the prime source of international conflict. Critics of this thesis point out that conflict over values is nothing new; only our ability to create havoc and violence has grown. Furthermore, speaking of a clash of “civilizations” disguises the sharp divisions that exist within large groups. Christianity, for example, runs the gamut from Quaker-style pacifism to certain elements of the Ku Klux Klan’s ideology (Berman 2003; Huntington 1993; Said 2001).

Culture and the Dominant Ideology

Functionalist and conflict theorists agree that culture and society are mutually supportive, but for different reasons. Functionals maintain that social stability requires a consensus and the support of society’s members; strong central values and common norms provide that support. This view of culture became popular in sociology beginning in the 1950s. It was borrowed from British anthropologists who saw cultural traits as a stabilizing element in a culture. From a functionalist perspective, a cultural trait or practice will persist if it performs functions that society seems to need or contributes to overall social stability and consensus.

Conflict theorists agree that a common culture may exist, but they argue that it serves to maintain the privileges of certain groups. Moreover, while protecting their own self-interest, powerful groups may keep others in a subservient position. The term dominant ideology describes the set of cultural beliefs and practices that helps to maintain powerful social, economic, and political interests. This concept was first used by Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukacs (1923) and Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1929), but it did not gain an audience in the United States until the early 1970s. In Karl Marx’s view, a capitalist society has a dominant ideology that serves the interests of the ruling class.

From a conflict perspective, the dominant ideology has major social significance. Not only do a society’s most powerful groups and institutions control wealth and property; even more important, they control the means of producing beliefs about reality through religion, education, and the media. Feminists would also argue that if all a society’s most important institutions tell women they should be subservient to men, that dominant
SOCIOLOGY ON CAMPUS

3-3 A Culture of Cheating?

On November 21, 2002, after issuing several warnings, officials at the U.S. Naval Academy seized the computers of almost 100 midshipmen suspected of downloading movies and music illegally from the Internet. Officers at the school may have taken the unusually strong action to avoid liability on the part of the U.S. government, which owns the computers students were using. But across the nation, college administrators have been trying to restrain students from downloading pirated entertainment for free. The practice is so widespread, it has been slowing down the high-powered computer networks colleges and universities depend on for research and admissions.

Illegal downloading is just one aspect of the growing problem of copyright violation, both on campus and off. Now that college students can use personal computers to surf the Internet, most do their research online. Apparently, the temptation to cut and paste passages from Web site postings and pass them off as one’s own is irresistible to many. Surveys done by the Center for Academic Integrity show that from 1999 to 2005, the percentage of students who approved of this type of plagiarism rose from 10 percent to 41 percent. At the same time, the percentage who considered cutting and pasting from the Internet to be a serious form of cheating fell from 68 percent to 23 percent. Perhaps the worst form of Internet plagiarism is the purchase of entire papers from other writers. Increasingly, the Web sites that sell essays to students are based in other countries, including India, Ukraine, Nigeria, and the Philippines.

A recent cross-cultural study compared cheating by students in Lebanon and the United States. Researchers found a high willingness to cheat among students in both countries: 54 percent of the U.S. students and 80 percent of the Lebanese students reported having cheated in some way during the past year. In both cultures, students were more willing to cheat if they perceived their peers to be dishonest and if they thought their cheating was unlikely to be reported.

More than proctoring of exams or reliance on search engines to identify plagiarism, educating students about the need for academic honesty seems to reduce the incidence of cheating.

The Center for Academic Integrity estimates that at most schools, more than 75 percent of the students engage in some form of cheating. Students not only cut passages from the Internet and paste them into their papers without citing the source; they share questions and answers on exams, collaborate on assignments they are supposed to do independently, and even falsify the results of their laboratory experiments. Worse, many professors have become inured to the problem and have ceased to report it.

To address what they consider an alarming trend, many schools are rewriting or adopting new academic honor codes. This renewed emphasis on honor and integrity underscores the influence of cultural values on social behavior. Observers contend that the increase in student cheating reflects widely publicized instances of cheating in public life, which have served to create an alternative set of values in which the end justifies the means. When young people see sports heroes, authors, entertainers, and corporate executives exposed for cheating in one form or another, the message seems to be “Cheating is OK, as long as you don’t get caught.” More than proctoring of exams or reliance on search engines to identify plagiarism, then, educating students about the need for academic honesty seems to reduce the incidence of cheating. “The feeling of being treated as an adult and responding in kind,” says Professor Donald McCabe of Rutgers University, “it’s clearly there for many students. They don’t want to violate that trust.”

LET’S DISCUSS

1. Do you know anyone who has engaged in Internet plagiarism? What about cheating on tests or falsifying laboratory results? If so, how did the person justify these forms of dishonesty?
2. Even if cheaters aren’t caught, what negative effects does their academic dishonesty have on them? What effects does it have on students who are honest? Could an entire college or university suffer from students’ dishonesty?

Sources: Argetsinger and Krim 2002; Bartlett 2009; Center for Academic Integrity 2006; McCabe et al. 2008; R. Thomas 2003; Zernike 2002.

ideology will help to control women and keep them in a subordinate position.

A growing number of social scientists believe that it is not easy to identify a core culture in the United States. For support, they point to the lack of consensus on national values, the diffusion of cultural traits, the diversity within our culture, and the changing views of young people (look again at Figure 3-4). Yet there is no way of denying that certain expressions of values have greater influence than others, even in as complex a society as the United States.

If cultural values vary within the United States, they vary even more significantly from one country to the next. The following case study illustrates what can happen when a corporation attempts to export U.S. cultural values to another country.

Table 3-2 on page 68 summarizes the major sociological perspectives on culture. How one views a culture—whether from an ethnocentric point of view or through the lens of cultural relativism—has important consequences in the area of social policy. It also has serious consequences in business, as our case study on Wal-Mart demonstrates.

A hot issue today is the extent to which a nation should accommodate non-native language speakers by sponsoring bilingual programs. We’ll take a close look at this issue in the Social Policy section, on page 69.
by some measures, Wal-Mart is the largest corporation in the world. By other measures, it is the world’s 14th largest economy. Indeed, the Arkansas-based retailer’s annual revenue—over one-third of a trillion dollars—surpasses the total value of goods and services produced in many countries, such as Sweden.

Wal-Mart’s rise to the status of an economic superpower has not been without criticism. Opponents have criticized its policy of shutting out labor unions, its lack of commitment to elevating women to managerial positions, its slowness to provide adequate health care benefits, and its negative impact on smaller retailers in the areas where its stores are located. Nonetheless, U.S. consumers have embraced Wal-Mart’s “everyday low prices.” The reaction has not been as positive when the discount giant has tried to enter countries where consumers hold different cultural values (Barbaro 2008).

The company, now located in 15 countries, has not been an unqualified success abroad. In 2006 Wal-Mart pulled out of Germany, due in part to its failure to adjust to the national culture. German shoppers, accustomed to no-nonsense, impersonal service, found Wal-Mart employees’ smiling, outgoing style off-putting. The company’s “ten-foot attitude”—a salesperson who comes within 10 feet of a customer must look the person in the eye, greet the person, and ask if he or she needs help—simply did not play well there. Food shoppers, used to bagging their own groceries, were turned off by Wal-Mart’s practice of allowing clerks to handle their purchases. Furthermore, German employees, who had grown up in a culture that accepts workplace romances, found the company’s prohibition against on-the-job relationships bizarre.

Unfortunately, executives did not react quickly enough to the cultural clash. Despite their need for cultural know-how, they passed up the opportunity to install German-speaking managers in key positions. While the company struggled to adjust to unfamiliar cultural standards, fierce competition from German retailers cut into its profits. After an eight-year effort that cost the company one billion dollars, Wal-Mart’s executives conceded defeat.

Wal-Mart’s withdrawal from Germany was its second exit of the year. Earlier in 2006, the company sold all its facilities in South Korea, where its warehouse-style stores were not appreciated by shoppers accustomed to more elegant surroundings. Today, the successful U.S. retailer is learning not to impose its corporate culture on foreign customers and employees. No longer does the company plan to sell golf clubs in Brazil, where the game is rarely played, or ice skates in Mexico, where skating rinks are hard to find. More important, the corporate giant has begun to study the culture and social patterns of potential customers (Landler and Barbaro 2006; Saporito 2007; Wal-Mart 2007; A. Zimmerman and Nelson 2006).

Wal-Mart’s mistakes in Germany and South Korea are instructive. Even without a background in sociology, most businesspeople know that culture is fundamental to society. Yet they often fail to adjust to new cultures when they enter foreign markets. Today, as Wal-Mart prepares to enter China and India, two massive consumer markets, executives are determined to repeat the company’s success in Latin America, rather than its failure in Germany and South Korea (Nussbaum 2006).
The Issue
All over the world, nations face the challenge of how to deal with residential minorities who speak a language different from that of the mainstream culture.

Bilingualism refers to the use of two or more languages in a particular setting, such as the workplace or schoolroom, treating each language as equally legitimate. Thus, a teacher of bilingual education may instruct children in their native language while gradually introducing them to the language of the host society. If the curriculum is also multicultural, it will teach children about the mores and folkways of both the dominant culture and the subculture.

To what degree should schools in the United States present the curriculum in a language other than English? This issue has prompted a great deal of debate among educators and policymakers.

The Setting
Because languages know no political boundaries, minority languages are common in most nations. For example, Hindi is the most widely spoken language in India, and English is used widely for official purposes, but 18 other languages are officially recognized in the nation of about 1 billion people.

According to the Bureau of the Census, 59 million residents of the United States over age five—that’s about 19 percent of the population—spoke a language other than English as their primary language at home in 2007 (Figure 3-5). Indeed, 32 different languages are each spoken by at least 200,000 residents of this country (Bureau of the Census 2006b; Shin and Bruno 2003).

Throughout the world, schools must deal with incoming students who speak many different languages. Do bilingual programs in the United States help these children to learn English? It is difficult to reach firm conclusions because bilingual programs in general vary so widely in their quality and approach. They differ in the length of the transition to English and in how long they allow students to remain in bilingual classrooms. Moreover, results have been mixed. In the years since California effectively dismantled its bilingual education program, reading and math scores of students with limited English proficiency have not shown dramatic improvement, especially in the lower grades. Yet a major overview of 17 different studies, done at Johns Hopkins University, found that students who are offered lessons in both English and their home languages make better progress than similar students who are taught only in English (R. Slavin and Cheung 2003).

Sociological Insights
For a long time, people in the United States demanded conformity to a single language. This demand coincided with the functionalist view that language serves to unify members of a society. Immigrant children from Europe and Asia—including young Italians, Jews, Poles, Chinese, and Japanese—were expected to learn English once they entered school. In some cases, immigrant children were actually forbidden to speak their native languages on school grounds. Little respect was granted to immigrants’ cultural traditions; a young person would often be teased about his or her “funny” name, accent, or style of dress.
Recent decades have seen challenges to this pattern of forced obedience to the dominant ideology. Beginning in the 1960s, active movements for Black pride and ethnic pride insisted that people regard the traditions of all racial and ethnic subcultures as legitimate and important. Conflict theorists explain this development as a case of subordinated language minorities seeking opportunities for self-expression. Partly as a result of these challenges, people began to view bilingualism as an asset. It seemed to provide a sensitive way of assisting millions of non-English-speaking people in the United States to learn English in order to function more effectively within the society.

The perspective of conflict theory also helps us to understand some of the attacks on bilingual programs. Many of them stem from an ethnocentric point of view, which holds that any deviation from the majority is bad. This attitude tends to be expressed by those who wish to stamp out foreign influence wherever it occurs, especially in our schools. It does not take into account that success in bilingual education may actually have beneficial results, such as decreasing the number of high school dropouts and increasing the number of Hispanics in colleges and universities.

**Policy Initiatives**

Bilingualism has policy implications largely in two areas: efforts to maintain language purity and programs to enhance bilingual education. Nations vary dramatically in their tolerance for a variety of languages. China continues to tighten its cultural control over Tibet by extending instruction of Mandarin, a Chinese dialect, from high school into the elementary schools, which will now be bilingual along with Tibetan. In contrast, nearby Singapore establishes English as the medium of instruction but allows students to take their mother tongue as a second language, be it Chinese, Malay, or Tamil.

In many nations, language dominance is a regional issue—for example, in Miami or along the Tex-Mex border, where Spanish speaking is prevalent. A particularly virulent bilingual hot spot is Quebec, the French-speaking province of Canada. The Québécois, as they are known, represent 83 percent of the province’s population, but only 25 percent of Canada’s total population. A law implemented in 1978 mandated education in French for all Quebec’s children except those whose parents or siblings had learned English elsewhere in Canada. While special laws like this one have advanced French in the province, dissatisfied Québécois have tried to form their own separate country. In 1995, the people of Quebec indicated their preference of remaining united with Canada by only the narrowest of margins (50.5 percent). Language and language-related cultural areas both unify and divide this nation of 33 million people (The Economist 2005b; Schaefer 2010).

Policymakers in the United States have been somewhat ambivalent in dealing with the issue of bilingualism. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provided for bilingual, bicultural education. In the 1970s, the federal government took an active role in establishing the proper form for bilingual programs. However, more recently, federal policy has been less supportive of bilingualism, and local school districts have been forced to provide an increased share of funding for their bilingual programs. Yet bilingual programs are an expense that many communities and states are unwilling to pay for and are quick to cut back. In 1998, voters in California approved a proposition that all but eliminated bilingual education: it requires instruction in English for 1.4 million children who are not fluent in the language.

In the United States, repeated efforts have been made to introduce a constitutional amendment declaring English as the nation’s official language. In 2006, the issue arose once again during debates over two extremely controversial congressional proposals—a House bill that would have criminalized the presence of illegal immigrants in the United States and expanded the penalties for aiding them, and a Senate bill that offered some illegal immigrants a path to citizenship. In an attempt to reach a compromise between the two sides, legislative leaders introduced a proposal to make English the national language. As they described it, the legislation would not completely outlaw bilingual or multilingual government services. As of 2008, 30 states had declared English their official language—an action that is now more symbolic than legislative in its significance.

Public concern over a potential decline in the use of English appears to be overblown. In reality, most immigrants and their offspring quickly become fluent in English and abandon their mother tongue. Figure 3-6 presents data from Southern California, a region with a high

**FIGURE 3-6 PROPORTION OF IMMIGRANT GROUP MEMBERS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WHO SPEAK THE MOTHER TONGUE, BY GENERATION**

Note: Based on a survey of 5,703 people in Metropolitan Los Angeles and San Diego from 2000 to 2004. Generation 1 includes those who came to the United States before age 15; Generation 2 includes those who were born in the United States to at least one foreign-born parent. Generation 3 includes those who were born in the United States to U.S.-born parents, but had one or more foreign-born grandparents.

proportion of immigrants. It shows a steady, rapid move toward English, particularly in the first generation. Despite the presence of a large Latin enclave in the region, even Spanish-speaking immigrants quickly become speakers of English.

Nevertheless, many people are impatient with those immigrants who continue to use their mother tongue. The release in 2006 of “Nuestro Himno,” the Spanish-language version of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” produced a strong public reaction: 69 percent of those who were surveyed on the topic said the anthem should be sung only in English. In reaction against the Spanish version, at least one congressman defiantly sang the national anthem in English—with incorrect lyrics. And the proprietor of a restaurant in Philadelphia posted signs advising patrons that he would accept orders for his famous steak sandwiches only in English. Throughout the year, passions ran high as policymakers debated how much support to afford people who speak other languages (J. Carroll 2006; U.S. English 2009).

In the end, the immigrant’s experience, whether in the United States or Australia, is not only about learning a new language. It is about learning a whole new culture—a new totality of socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects, and behavior (Viramontes 2007).

Let’s Discuss
1. Have you attended a school with a number of students for whom English is a second language? If so, did the school set up a special bilingual program? Was it effective? What is your opinion of such programs?
2. The ultimate goal of both English-only and bilingual programs is for foreign-born students to become proficient in English. Why should the type of program students attend matter so much to so many people? List all the reasons you can think of for supporting or opposing such programs. What do you see as the primary reason?
3. Besides bilingualism, can you think of another issue that has become controversial recently because of a clash of cultures? If so, analyze the issue from a sociological point of view.
Key Terms

Argot Specialized language used by members of a group or subculture. (page 58)

Bilingualism The use of two or more languages in a particular setting, such as the workplace or schoolroom, treating each language as equally legitimate. (69)

Counterculture A subculture that deliberately opposes certain aspects of the larger culture. (60)

Cultural relativism The viewing of people’s behavior from the perspective of their own culture. (55)

Cultural universal A common practice or belief found in every culture. (54)

Culture The totality of learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects, and behavior. (53)

Culture industry The worldwide media industry that standardizes the goods and services demanded by consumers. (54)

Culture lag A period of maladjustment when the nonmaterial culture is still struggling to adapt to new material conditions. (58)

Culture shock The feeling of surprise and disorientation that people experience when they encounter cultural practices that are different from their own. (60)

Culture war The polarization of society over controversial cultural elements. (66)

Diffusion The process by which a cultural item spreads from group to group or society to society. (57)

Discovery The process of making known or sharing the existence of an aspect of reality. (56)

Dominant ideology A set of cultural beliefs and practices that helps to maintain powerful social, economic, and political interests. (66)

Ethnocentrism The tendency to assume that one’s own culture and way of life represent the norm or are superior to all others. (54)

Folkway A norm governing everyday behavior whose violation raises comparatively little concern. (63)

Formal norm A norm that has been written down and that specifies strict punishments for violators. (63)

Informal norm A norm that is generally understood but not precisely recorded. (63)

Innovation The process of introducing a new idea or object to a culture through discovery or invention. (56)

Invention The combination of existing cultural items into a form that did not exist before. (56)

Language An abstract system of word meanings and symbols for all aspects of culture; includes gestures and other nonverbal communication. (61)

Law Governmental social control. (63)

Material culture The physical or technological aspects of our daily lives. (58)

Mores Norms deemed highly necessary to the welfare of a society. (63)

Nonmaterial culture Ways of using material objects, as well as customs, beliefs, philosophies, governments, and patterns of communication. (58)

Norm An established standard of behavior maintained by a society. (63)

Sanction A penalty or reward for conduct concerning a social norm. (65)

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis A hypothesis concerning the role of language in shaping our interpretation of reality. It holds that language is culturally determined. (61)

Society A fairly large number of people who live in the same territory, are relatively independent of people outside their area, and participate in a common culture. (53)

Sociobiology The systematic study of how biology affects human social behavior. (55)

Subculture A segment of society that shares a distinctive pattern of mores, folkways, and values that differs from the pattern of the larger society. (58)

Symbol A gesture, object, or word that forms the basis of human communication. (62)

Technology Cultural information about how to use the material resources of the environment to satisfy human needs and desires. (57)

Value A collective conception of what is considered good, desirable, and proper—or bad, undesirable, and improper—in a culture. (65)

Self-Quiz

Read each question carefully and then select the best answer.

1. Which of the following is an aspect of culture?
   a. a comic book
   b. the patriotic attachment to the flag of the United States
   c. slang words
   d. all of the above

2. People’s needs for food, shelter, and clothing are examples of what George Murdock referred to as
   a. norms.
   b. folkways.
   c. cultural universals.
   d. cultural practices.

3. What term do sociologists use to refer to the process by which a cultural item spreads from group to group or society to society?
   a. diffusion
   b. globalization
   c. innovation
   d. cultural relativism

4. The appearance of Starbucks coffeehouses in China is a sign of what aspect of culture?
   a. innovation
   b. globalization
   c. diffusion
   d. cultural relativism

5. Which of the following statements is true according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis?
   a. Language simply describes reality.
   b. Language does not transmit stereotypes related to race.
   c. Language precedes thought.
   d. Language is not an example of a cultural universal.

6. Which of the following statements about norms is correct?
   a. People do not follow norms in all situations. In some cases, they evade a norm because they know it is weakly enforced.
   b. In some instances, behavior that appears to violate society’s norms may actually represent adherence to the norms of a particular group.
   c. Norms are violated in some instances because one norm conflicts with another.
   d. all of the above

7. Which of the following statements about values is correct?
   a. Values never change.
   b. The values of a culture may change, but most remain relatively stable during any one person’s lifetime.
   c. Values are constantly changing; sociologists view them as being very unstable.
   d. all of the above
8. Which of the following terms describes the set of cultural beliefs and practices that help to maintain powerful social, economic, and political interests?
   a. mores
   b. dominant ideology
   c. consensus
   d. values

9. Terrorist groups are examples of
   a. cultural universals.
   b. subcultures.

10. What is the term used when one places a priority on understanding other cultures, rather than dismissing them as “strange” or “exotic”?
    a. ethnocentrism
    b. culture shock
    c. cultural relativism
    d. cultural value

11. ____________________ are gestures, objects, and/or words that form the basis of human communication.

12. ____________________ is the process of introducing a new idea or object to a culture.

13. The bow and arrow, the automobile, and the television are all examples of ____________________.

14. Sociologists associated with the ____________________ perspective emphasize that language and symbols offer a powerful way for a subculture to maintain its identity.

15. “Put on some clean clothes for dinner” and “Thou shalt not kill” are both examples of ____________________ found in U.S. culture.

16. The United States has strong ____________________ against murder, treason, and other forms of abuse that have been institutionalized into formal norms.

17. From a(n) ____________________ perspective, the dominant ideology has major social significance. Not only do a society’s most powerful groups and institutions control wealth and property; more important, they control the means of production.

18. Countercultures (e.g., hippies) are typically popular among the ____________________, who have the least investment in the existing culture.

19. A person experiences ____________________ ____________________ when he or she feels disoriented, uncertain, out of place, even fearful, when immersed in an unfamiliar culture.

20. From the ____________________ perspective, enthocentrism serves to maintain a sense of solidarity by promoting group pride.

THINKING ABOUT MOVIES

The Namesake (Mira Nair, 2007)

An Indian couple emigrates from Calcutta to New York City to start a new life and a new family. Their firstborn son, Gogol Ganguli (Kal Penn), grows up rejecting his parents' Bengali culture, even though most of the family's social ties are to other Bengalis. He adopts colloquial American speech, chooses a wealthy Caucasian woman for his girlfriend, and rechristens himself “Nick.” Then his father’s sudden death makes him rethink his relationship to the Bengali culture.

This movie is rife with examples of culture seen from a sociological point of view. Look for the scenes in which Gogol’s parents suffer culture shock after moving to New York City. Watch for examples of bilingualism as Gogol speaks to his family, switching back and forth from English to Bengali.

For Your Consideration
1. What are some of the differences between Gogol’s parents’ values and those of his Caucasian girlfriend?
2. How is language used in the film to reinforce feelings of a shared culture?

Smoke Signals (Chris Eyre, 1998)

Lanky, geeky Thomas Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams) and athletic Victor Joseph (Adam Beach) live on a Coeur d’Alene Indian reservation in Idaho. Thomas’s parents died in a fire when he was a baby; he was saved by Victor’s father. After hearing that Victor’s father has died in Phoenix, the two decide to take a road trip to learn more about the man who played such a pivotal role in their lives. At first Victor does not want his nerdy sidekick’s company, but Thomas has saved enough money to bankroll the trip. The two grow closer as they learn more about themselves and their lost patriarch.

This movie portrays the subculture of contemporary Coeur d’Alene Indians who live in the mainstream culture but hold on to their Native American norms and values. Watch for the scene in which Victor tells Thomas how to act “properly stoic,” demonstrating how members of the tribe reinforce the norms of their subculture.

For Your Consideration
1. What informal norms of the Coeur d’Alene culture does the movie show?
2. How do Thomas and Victor deal with the representations of Native American tribal people presented in mainstream films and television?