

# Characteristics of Culture

An introductory anthropology course presents what may seem like an endless variety of human societies, each with its own distinctive way of life, manners, beliefs, arts, and so on. Yet for all this diversity, these societies have one thing in common: Each is a group of human beings cooperating to ensure their collective survival and well-being.

Group living and cooperation are impossible unless individuals know how others are likely to behave in any given situation. Thus, some degree of predictable behavior is required of each person within the society. In humans, it is culture that sets the limits of behavior and guides it along predictable paths that are generally acceptable to those within the culture. The culturally specified ways in which we learn to act so that we conform to the social expectations in our community did not develop randomly. Among the major forces guiding how each culture has developed in its own distinctive way is a process known as adaptation.

## Culture and Adaptation

From generation to generation, humans, like all animals, have continuously faced the challenge of adapting to their environment, its conditions and its resources, as well as to changes over time. The term **adaptation** refers to a gradual process by which organisms adjust to the conditions of the locality in which they live. Organisms have generally adapted biologically as the frequency of advantageous anatomical and physiological features increases in a population through the process of natural selection. For example, body hair protects mammals from extremes of temperature, specialized teeth help them to procure the kinds of food they need, and so on. Short-term physiological responses to the environment—along with responses that become incorporated into an organism through interaction with the environment during growth and development—are other kinds of biological adaptations.

**adaptation** A series of beneficial adjustments to a particular environment.

# 2

### IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL LEARN TO

- Explain culture as a dynamic form of adaptation.
- Distinguish between culture, society, and ethnicity.
- Identify basic characteristics common to all cultures.
- Describe the connection among culture, society, and the individual.
- Define and critique ethnocentrism.



**Figure 2.1 A Living Bridge** This bridge in Meghalaya, India, is made of the roots of living strangler fig trees (*Ficus elastica*). Meghalaya ("Abode of the Clouds") is the wettest place on earth with an average rainfall of some 40 feet a year. Nearly all of the rain is during the summer monsoon season, turning rivers and streams into raging torrents. The tangled roots of strangler figs help keep riverbanks from washing away, and the Khazi people living in this region train the roots into living bridges. Shaping a bridge is an epic project that cannot be accomplished in a single lifetime. From one generation to the next, individuals pass on the knowledge of how to guide and connect the hanging roots so they grow into a strong bridge. Dozens of these bridges form part of an essential and complex network of forest paths connecting the valleys of Meghalaya. Some of them are many centuries old.

Humans, however, have increasingly come to depend on **cultural adaptation**, a complex of ideas, technologies, and activities that enables them to survive and even thrive in their environment. Biology has not provided people with built-in fur coats to protect them in cold climates, but it has given us the ability to make our own coats, build fires, and construct shelters to shield ourselves against the cold. We may not be able to run as fast as a cheetah, but we are able to invent and build vehicles that can carry us faster and farther than any other creature.

Through culture and its many constructions, the human species has secured not just its survival but its

expansion as well—at great cost to other species and, increasingly, to the planet at large. And by manipulating environments through cultural means, people have been able to move into a vast range of environments, from the icy Arctic to the searing Sahara Desert to the雨iest place on earth in northeast India (Figure 2.1).

This is not to say that everything human beings do is *because* it is adaptive to a particular environment. For one thing, people do not just react to an environment as given; rather, they react to it as they perceive it, and different groups may perceive the same environment in radically different ways. People also react to things other than the environment: their own biological traits, their beliefs and attitudes, and the short- and long-term consequences of their behavior for themselves and other people and life forms that share their habitats.

**cultural adaptation** A complex of ideas, technologies, and activities that enables people to survive and even thrive in their environment.



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**Figure 2.2 Center-Pivot Irrigation** What is adaptive at one time may not be at another. In the Central Plains of North America, irrigation systems and chemical fertilizers have resulted in large but unsustainable crop yields in a principal region of grain cultivation. Here we see crop fields in western Kansas that are watered by a center-pivot irrigation system fed by the Ogallala aquifer. The aquifer, which underlies eight states from southern South Dakota to northwestern Texas, provides about 30 percent of the nation's groundwater used for irrigation, plus drinking water to 82 percent of the people who live within the aquifer boundary. However, over the past five decades, the aquifer's water table has dropped dramatically, and some experts estimate it will dry up in as little as two decades. Moreover, in semi-arid regions steady winds hasten evaporation of surface water. This leads to a buildup of salts in the soil, eventually resulting in toxic levels for plants. Chemical fertilizers also contribute to the pollution problem.

Although people maintain cultures to deal with problems, some cultural practices have proved to be inadequate or ill-fitting, sometimes creating new problems—such as toxic air and water resulting from certain industrial practices and a growing worldwide obesity epidemic spurred on by fast food, spectator sports, motorized transport, electronic media, and other technologies reducing people's physical activity.

A further complication is the relativity of any particular adaptation: What is adaptive in one setting may be seriously maladaptive in another. For example, the hygiene practices of food-foraging peoples—their habits of garbage and human waste disposal—are appropriate to contexts of low population densities, a degree of residential mobility, and organic materials. But these same practices become serious health hazards in large, fully sedentary populations such as urban slums without space to dump (in)disposable waste, including plastic and chemicals. In fact, with almost 4 billion people living in cities, waste management is turning into a huge challenge in many parts of the world.

Similarly, behavior that is adaptive in the short run may be maladaptive over a longer period of time. For instance, the development of irrigation in ancient

Mesopotamia (southern Iraq) made it possible for people to increase food production, but it also caused a gradual accumulation of salt in the soil, which contributed to the downfall of that civilization about 4,000 years ago. Similar situations exist in parts of the United States today ([Figure 2.2](#)).

Today, in many parts of the world the development of prime farmland for purposes other than food production increases dependency on food raised in less than optimal environments. Marginal farmlands can produce high yields with costly technology. However, over time these yields will not be sustainable due to loss of topsoil, increasing salinity of soil, and silting of irrigation works, not to mention the high cost of fresh water and fossil fuel.

All told, for any culture to be successful across generations, it must produce collective human behavior that does not destroy its natural environment. Successful adaptation has been, and continues to be, a major challenge facing every society in its long-term quest for survival. In response to this challenge, our species has developed a great variety of cultures, each with its own unique features befitting the particular needs of societies located in different corners of the globe. So, what do we mean by *culture*?

## The Concept of Culture

Anthropologists conceived the modern concept of culture toward the end of the 19th century. The first comprehensive definition came from the British anthropologist Sir Edward Tylor. Writing in 1871, he defined *culture* as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871, p. 1).

Recent definitions tend to distinguish more clearly between actual behavior and the abstract ideas, values, feelings, and perceptions of the world that inform that behavior. To put it another way, *culture* goes deeper than observable behavior; it is a society's shared and socially transmitted ideas, values, emotions, and perceptions that are used to make sense of experience, generate behavior, and are reflected in that behavior.

## Characteristics of Culture

Through the comparative study of many human cultures, past and present, anthropologists have gained an understanding of the basic characteristics evident in all of them: Every culture is socially learned, shared, based on symbols, integrated, and dynamic. A careful study of these characteristics helps us to see the importance and the function of culture itself.

### Culture Is Learned

All culture is socially learned rather than biologically inherited. One learns one's culture by growing up with it, and the process whereby culture is passed on from one generation to the next is called **enculturation** (Figure 2.3).

Most animals eat and drink whenever the urge arises. Humans, however, are enculturated to do most of their eating and drinking at certain culturally prescribed times and feel hungry as those times approach. These eating times vary from culture to culture, as does what is eaten, how it is prepared, how it is consumed, and where. To add complexity, food is used to do more than merely satisfy nutritional requirements. When used to celebrate rituals and religious activities, as it often is, food "establishes relationships of give and take, of cooperation, of sharing, of an emotional bond that is universal" (Caroulis, 1996, p. 16).

Through enculturation every person learns socially appropriate ways of satisfying the basic biologically determined

needs of all humans: food, sleep, shelter, companionship, self-defense, and sexual gratification. It is important to distinguish between the needs themselves, which are not learned, and the learned ways in which they are satisfied—for each culture determines in its own way how these needs will be met. For instance, a French Canadian fisherman's idea of a great dinner and a comfortable way to sleep may vary greatly from that of a Kazakh nomad in Mongolia.

Most, if not all, mammals exhibit some degree of learned behavior. Several species may even be said to have elementary culture, in that local populations share patterns of behavior that, as among humans, each generation learns from the one before and that differ from one population to another. For example, research shows a distinctive pattern of behavior among lions of southern Africa's Kalahari Desert—behavior that fostered nonaggressive interaction with the region's indigenous hunters and gatherers and that each generation of lions passed on to the next. Moreover, Kalahari lion culture changed over a thirty-year period in response to new circumstances (Thomas, 1994). That said, it is important to note that not all learned behavior is cultural. For instance, a pigeon may learn tricks, but this behavior is reflexive, the result of conditioning by repeated training, not the product of enculturation.

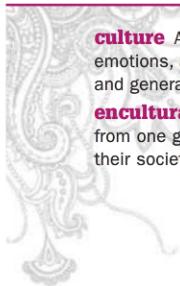
Beyond our species, examples of socially learned behavior are particularly evident among other primates. An example of this is the way a chimpanzee will take a twig, strip it of all leaves, and smooth it down to fashion a tool for extracting termites from their nest. Such toolmaking, which juveniles learn from their elders, is unquestionably a form of cultural behavior once thought to be exclusively human. In Japan, macaque monkeys have learned the advantages of washing sweet potatoes before eating them and passed the practice on to the next generation.

Within any given primate species, one population's way of life often differs from that of others, just as it does among humans. We have discovered both in captivity and in the wild that primates in general and apes in particular "possess a near-human intelligence, generally including the use of sounds in representational ways, a rich awareness of the aims and objectives of others, the ability to engage in tactical deception, and the faculty to use symbols in communication with humans and each other" (Reynolds, 1994, p. 4).

Our increasing awareness of such traits in our primate relatives has spawned numerous movements to extend human rights to apes—rights such as freedom from living in fear, respect for dignity, and not being subjected to incarceration (caging), exploitation (medical experimentation), or other mistreatment. The movement reached a milestone with the Kinshasa Declaration on Great Apes. Signed by over seventy representatives from twenty-four countries and many non-governmental organizations, convening in the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2005, this document affirms a commitment to protect great apes, like chimps, gorillas, and orangutans, and extends some human rights to our closest animal relatives (O'Carroll, 2008).

**culture** A society's shared and socially transmitted ideas, values, emotions, and perceptions, which are used to make sense of experience and generate behavior and are reflected in that behavior.

**enculturation** The process by which a society's culture is passed on from one generation to the next and individuals become members of their society.





**Figure 2.3 Stilt Fishing** A father practices the traditional art of stilt fishing with his son in Ahangama, Sri Lanka. It's a tough job, wading through shallow waters before dawn and sitting atop the uncomfortable platform for hours to catch small fish that sell for about 2 cents apiece. The art of stilt fishing has been passed from father to son for generations, but fewer and fewer families are building their lives around this profession today due to low profits, harsh conditions, and tourists who are scaring the fish away.

Trent Burkholder Photography

## Culture Is Shared

As a shared set of ideas, values, perceptions, and standards of behavior, culture is the common denominator that makes the actions of individuals intelligible to other members of their society. Culture enables individuals in a society to predict how fellow members are most likely to behave in a given circumstance, and it informs them how to react accordingly. **Society** may be defined as an organized group or groups of interdependent people who generally share a common territory, language, and culture and who act together for collective survival and well-being. The ways in which these people depend upon one another can be seen in such features as their economic, communication, and defense systems. They are also bound together by a general sense of common identity.

Because culture and society are such closely related concepts, anthropologists study both. Obviously, there can be no culture without a society. Conversely, there are no known human societies that do not exhibit culture. Without culture, human society quickly falls apart. This cannot be said for all other animal species. Ants and bees, for example, instinctively cooperate in a manner that clearly indicates a remarkable degree of social organization, yet this instinctual behavior is not a culture.

Although members of a society share a culture, it is important to realize that all is not uniform. For one thing, no two people share the exact same version of their culture. At the very least, there is some distinction between the roles of children and elders, men and women. This stems from the fact that there are obvious differences between infants, fully matured, and highly aged

individuals, as well as between female and male reproductive anatomy and physiology. Every society gives cultural meaning to biological sex differences by explaining them in a particular way and specifying what their significance is in terms of social roles and expected patterns of behavior.

Because each culture does this in its own way, there can be tremendous variation from one society to another. Anthropologists use the term **gender** to refer to the cultural elaborations and meanings assigned to the biological differentiation between the sexes. So, although one's sex is biologically determined, one's gender is socially constructed within the context of one's particular culture (**Figure 2.4** on the next page).

Apart from sexual differences directly related to reproduction, biological underpinnings for contrasting gender roles have largely disappeared in modern industrialized and postindustrial societies. For example, men and women are equally capable of accomplishing tasks requiring muscular strength, such as moving heavy automobile engines, because assembly lines use hydraulic lifts for the job. Nevertheless, all cultures exhibit at least some role differentiation related to biology—some far more so than others.

In addition to cultural variation associated with gender, there is also variation related to age. In any society, children are not expected to behave as adults, and the

**society** An organized group or groups of interdependent people who generally share a common territory, language, and culture and who act together for collective survival and well-being.

**gender** The cultural elaborations and meanings assigned to the biological differentiation between the sexes.

**Figure 2.4 Gender Identification**

In U.S. hospital nurseries, newborn girls are typically wrapped in pink blankets and boys in blue blankets. This is in response to popular expectations in the United States and many other countries that newborn infants be assigned a gender identity of either male or female. Yet significant numbers of infants are born each year whose genitalia do not conform to cultural expectations. Because only two genders are recognized, the usual reaction is to make the young bodies conform to cultural requirements through gender assignment surgery that involves constructing male or female genitalia. This is in contrast to many Native American cultures (among others), which have traditionally recognized more than two genders (Blackless et al., 2000).



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reverse is equally true. But then, who is a child and who is an adult? Again, although age differences are natural, cultures give their own meaning and timetable to the human life cycle. In North America, for example, individuals are generally not regarded as adults until the age of 18; in many other cultures, adulthood begins earlier—often around age 12, an age closer to the biological changes of adolescence.

### Subcultures: Groups Within a Larger Society

Besides age and gender differentiation, there may be cultural variation between subgroups in societies that share an overarching culture. These may be occupational groups in societies where there is a complex division of labor, or social classes in a stratified society, or ethnic groups in other societies. When such groups exist within a society—each functioning by its own distinctive set of ideas, values, and behavior patterns while still sharing some common standards—we call them **subcultures**.

Amish communities are one example of a subculture in North America. Specifically, they are an **ethnic group**—people who collectively and publicly identify

themselves as a distinct group based on various cultural features such as shared ancestry and common origin, language, customs, and traditional beliefs. The Amish originated in western Europe during the Protestant revolutions of the 16th century. Today, members of this group number about 100,000 and live mainly in the United States—in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana—as well as in Ontario, Canada (**Figure 2.5**).

These rural pacifists base their lives on their traditional Anabaptist beliefs, which hold that only adult baptism is valid and that “true Christians” (as they define them) should not hold government office, bear arms, or use force. They prohibit marriage outside their faith, which calls for obedience to radical Christian teachings, including social separation from what they see as the wider evil world and rejection of material wealth as vainglorious.

Among themselves, Amish people usually speak a German dialect known as Pennsylvania Dutch (from *Deutsch*, meaning “German”). They use formal German for religious purposes, although children learn English in school. Valuing simplicity, hard work, and a high degree of neighborly cooperation, they dress in a distinctive plain garb and even today rely on the horse for transportation as well as agricultural work (Hostetler & Huntington, 1992). In sum, the Amish share the same **ethnicity**. This term, rooted in the Greek word *ethnikos* (“nation”) and related to *ethnos* (“custom”), is the expression for the set of cultural ideas held by an ethnic group.

The goal of Amish education is to teach youngsters reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as Amish values. Adults in the community reject what they regard

**subculture** A distinctive set of ideas, values, and behavior patterns by which a group within a larger society operates, while still sharing common standards with that larger society.

**ethnic group** People who collectively and publicly identify themselves as a distinct group based on shared cultural features such as common origin, language, customs, and traditional beliefs.

**ethnicity** This term, rooted in the Greek word *ethnikos* (“nation”) and related to *ethnos* (“custom”), is the expression for the set of cultural ideas held by an ethnic group.



**Figure 2.5 Amish Barn Raising**

The Amish people have held onto their traditional agrarian way of life in the midst of industrialized North American society. Their strong community spirit—reinforced by close social ties between family and neighbors, common language, traditional customs, and shared religious beliefs that set them apart from non-Amish people—is also expressed in a traditional barn raising, a large collective construction project.

as worldly knowledge and the idea of schools producing good citizens for the state. Resisting all attempts to force their children to attend regular public schools, they insist that education take place near home and that teachers be committed to Amish ideals.

Amish nonconformity to mainstream culture has frequently resulted in conflict with state authorities, as well as personal harassment from people outside their communities. Pressed to compromise, they have introduced vocational training beyond junior high to fulfill state requirements, but they have managed to retain control of their schools and to maintain their way of life.

Confronted with economic challenges that make it impossible for most to subsist solely on farming, some Amish work outside their communities. Many more have established cottage industries and actively market homemade goods to tourists and other outsiders. Yet, although their economic separation from mainstream society has declined somewhat, their cultural separation has not (Kraybill, 2001). They remain a reclusive community, more distrustful than ever of the dominant North American culture surrounding them and mingling as little as possible with non-Amish people.

The Amish are but one example of the way a subculture may develop and be dealt with by the larger culture within which it functions. Different as they are, the Amish actually put into practice many values that other North Americans often respect in the abstract: thrift, hard work, independence, a close family life. The degree of tolerance accorded to them, in contrast to some other ethnic groups, is also due in part to the fact that the Amish are white Europeans; they are defined as being of the same race as those who historically comprise dominant mainstream

society. Notably, as elaborated upon elsewhere in this text, the concept of race has no biological validity when applied to humans, yet it still persists as a powerful social classification. This can be seen in the spatial organization of many U.S. cities in which certain neighborhoods are predominantly Asian, black, white, or Hispanic. This organizational pattern conforms to the racial categories long imposed by U.S. government bureaucracies, which officially reinforce and culturally reproduce a historical race-based ideology in U.S. society.

Implicit in the discussion thus far is that subcultures may develop in different ways. On the one hand, Amish subculture in the United States developed gradually in response to how these members of a strict evangelical Protestant sect have adapted to survive within the wider North American society, while holding tightly to the traditional way of life of their European ancestors. In contrast, North American Indian subcultures are distinctive ways of life rooted in traditions of formerly independent societies. The Native Americans endured invasion of their own territories and colonization by European settlers and were brought under the control of federal governments in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Although all American Indian groups have experienced enormous changes due to colonization, many have retained traditions significantly different from those of the dominant Euramerican culture surrounding them. This makes it difficult to determine whether they endure as distinct cultures as opposed to subcultures. In this sense, *culture* and *subculture* represent opposite ends of a continuum, with no clear dividing line between them. The Anthropology Applied feature examines the intersection of culture and subculture with an example concerning Apache Indian housing.

## ANTHROPOLOGY APPLIED

### New Houses for Apache Indians

By George S. Esber

The United States, in common with other industrialized countries of the world, contains a number of more or less separate subcultures. Those who live by the standards of one particular subculture have their closest relationships with one another, receiving constant reassurance that their perceptions of the world are the only correct ones and coming to take it for granted that the whole culture is as they see it. As a consequence, members of one subculture frequently have trouble understanding the needs and aspirations of other such groups. For this reason anthropologists, with their special understanding of cultural differences, are frequently employed as go-betweens in situations requiring interaction between peoples of differing cultural traditions.

As an example, while I was still a graduate student in anthropology, one of my professors asked me to work with architects and the Tonto Apache Indians in Arizona to research housing needs for a new tribal community. Although the architects knew about cross-cultural differences in the use of space, they had no idea how to get relevant information from the Indian people. For their part, the Apaches had no explicit awareness of their needs, for these were based on unconscious patterns of behavior. For that matter, few people are consciously aware of

the space needs for their own social patterns of behavior.

My task was to persuade the architects to hold back on their planning long enough for me to gather, through participant observation and a review of written records, the data from which Apache housing needs could be abstracted. At the same time, I had to overcome Apache anxieties over an outsider coming into their midst to learn about matters as personal as their daily lives as they are acted out, in and around their homes. With these hurdles overcome, I was able to identify and successfully communicate to the architects those features of Apache life having importance for home and community design. At the same time, discussions of my findings with the Apaches enhanced their own awareness of their unique needs.

As a result of my work, the Apaches moved into houses that had been designed with *their* participation, for *their* specific needs. Among my findings was the realization that the Apaches preferred to ease into social interactions rather than to shake hands and begin interacting immediately, as is more typical of the Anglo pattern. Apache etiquette requires that people be in full view of one another so each can assess the behavior of others from a distance prior to engaging in social

interaction with them. This requires a large, open living space. At the same time, hosts feel compelled to offer food to guests as a prelude to further social interaction. Thus, cooking and dining areas cannot be separated from living space. Nor is standard middle-class Anglo kitchen equipment suitable because the need for handling large quantities among extended families requires large pots and pans, which in turn calls for extra-large sinks and cupboards. Built with such ideas in mind, the new houses accommodated long-standing native traditions.

On a return visit to the Tonto Apache reservation in 2010, I found that the original houses were fine, but many more units had been squeezed in to accommodate growing needs on a restricted land base. A recent acquisition of new lands, which more than doubled the size of the tiny reservation, offers new possibilities. The Tonto Apache opened a casino in 2007. Its success has resulted in significant changes—from impoverishment to being one of the biggest employers in the area.

Adapted from Esber, G. S. (1987). *Designing Apache houses with Apaches*. In R. M. Wulff & S. J. Fiske (Eds.), *Anthropological praxis: Translating knowledge into action*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007. Reprinted by permission of George S. Esber.

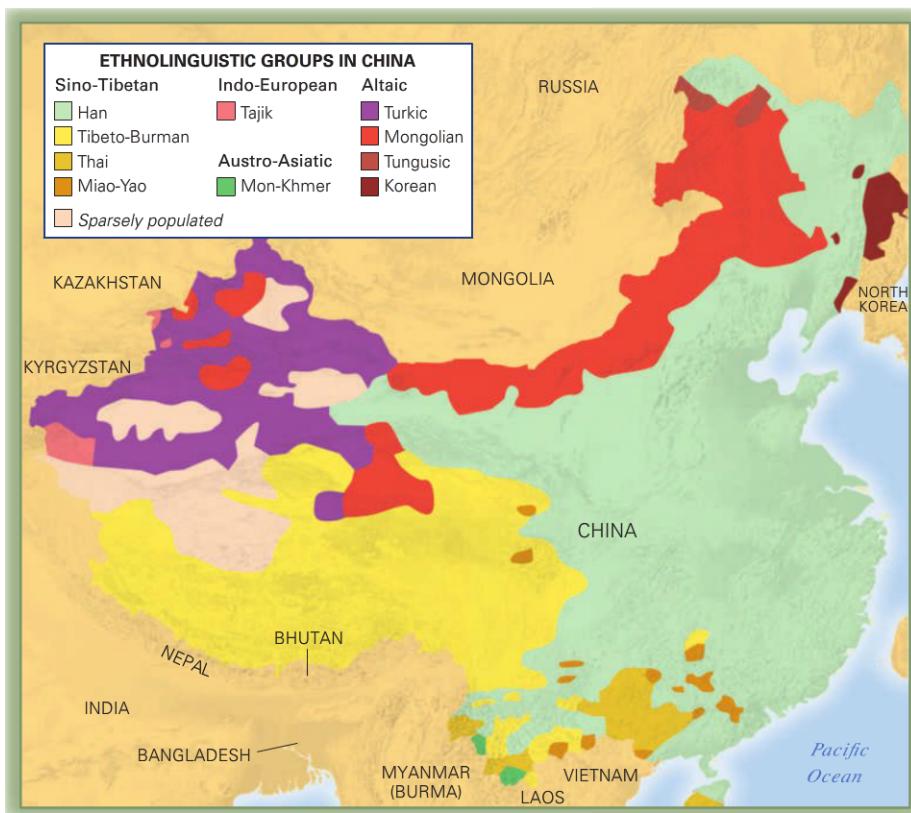
## Pluralism

Our discussion raises the issue of the multi-ethnic or **pluralistic society** in which two or more ethnic groups or nationalities are politically organized into one territorial state but maintain their cultural differences. Pluralistic

societies could not have existed before the first politically centralized states arose a mere 5,000 years ago. With the rise of the state, it became possible to bring about the political unification of two or more formerly independent societies, each with its own culture, thereby creating a more complex order that transcends the theoretical one culture—one society linkage.

Anthropology makes an important distinction between state and nation. *States* are politically organized territories that are internationally recognized, whereas

**pluralistic society** A society in which two or more ethnic groups or nationalities are politically organized into one territorial state but maintain their cultural differences.



**Figure 2.6 Ethnolinguistic Groups in China**

**Groups in China** China is the largest country in the world, with a population of 1.3 billion people. A pluralistic society, it has fifty-five officially recognized nationalities. By far the largest nationality, or ethnic group, is the Han, comprising about 90 percent of the population. However, there are many ethnic minorities speaking radically different languages and having different cultural traditions. For example, the Uyghur (pictured in Figure 2.7), numbering over 8 million, are a Turkic-speaking people in Xinjiang Province in northwestern China. Unlike most Han, who are Buddhists, most Uyghur are Sunni Muslims. Historically dominating the Chinese state, the Han typically see themselves as the "real" Chinese and ignore the ethnic minorities or view them with contempt. This ethnocentrism is also reflected in names historically used for these groups.

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*nations* are socially organized bodies of people who share ethnicity—a common origin, language, and cultural heritage. For example, the Kurds constitute a nation, but their homeland is divided among several states: Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. The international boundaries among these states were drawn up after World War I (1914–1918), with little regard for the region's indigenous ethnic groups or nations. Similar state formation processes have taken place throughout the world, especially in Asia and Africa, often making political conditions in these countries inherently unstable.

Pluralistic societies, which are common in the world today, all face the same challenge: They are composed of groups that, by virtue of their high degree of cultural variation, are all essentially operating by different sets of rules. Because social living requires predictable behavior, it may be difficult for the members of any one subgroup to accurately interpret and follow the different standards by which the others operate.

Unfortunately, *ethnocentrism*—defined in Chapter 1 as a belief that the ways of one's own culture are the only proper ones—may open the door to cross-cultural misunderstanding and distrust among different subgroups within a pluralistic society. Under stressful circumstances, such as lack of resources due to drought, neighboring

ethnic groups may become rivals and intolerance may escalate into violence. There are many examples of troubled pluralistic societies in the world today, including Afghanistan and Nigeria, where central governments face major challenges in maintaining peace and lawful order. In countries where one ethnic group is substantially larger than others, such as the Han in China, greater numbers may be used to political and economic advantage at the expense of minority groups (Figure 2.6 and Figure 2.7). We will return to the topic of ethnocentrism a bit later in this chapter.

## Culture Is Based on Symbols

Much of human behavior involves **symbols**—sounds, gestures, marks, and other signs that are linked to something else and represent them in a meaningful way. Because often there is no inherent or necessary relationship between a thing and its representation, symbols are arbitrary, acquiring specific meanings when people agree on usage in their communications.

**symbol** A sound, gesture, mark, or other sign that is arbitrarily linked to something else and represents it in a meaningful way.



**Figure 2.7 The Uyghur Minority in China** The Uyghur, a Turkic-speaking Muslim ethnic minority in China, live in the country's northwestern province of Xinjiang. Politically dominated by China's Han ethnic majority, who comprise 90 percent of the population, Uyghurs are proud of their cultural identity and hold onto their distinctive traditional heritage—as evident in this photo of a Uyghur family group eating together on carpets woven with traditional Uyghur designs.

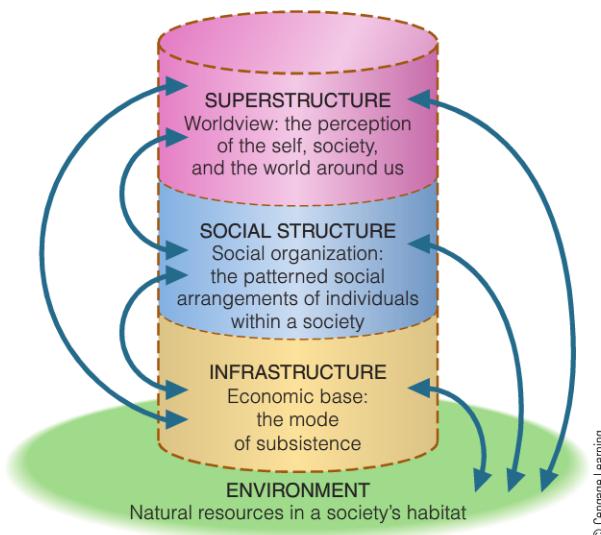
In fact, symbols—ranging from national flags to wedding rings to money—enter into every aspect of culture, from social life and religion to politics and economics. We are all familiar with the fervor and devotion that a religious symbol can elicit from a believer. An Islamic crescent, Christian cross, or a Jewish Star of David—as well as the sun among the Inca, a cow among the Hindu, a white buffalo calf among Plains Indians, or any other object of worship—may bring to mind years of struggle and persecution or may stand for a whole philosophy or religion.

The most important symbolic aspect of culture is language—using words to represent objects and ideas. Through language humans are able to transmit culture from one generation to another. In particular, language makes it possible to learn from cumulative, shared experience. Without it, one could not inform others about events, emotions, and other experiences. Language is so important that one of the four main subfields of anthropology is dedicated to its study.

## Culture Is Integrated

The breadth and depth of every culture is remarkable. It includes what people do for a living, the tools they use, the ways they work together, how they transform their environments and construct their dwellings, what they eat and drink, how they worship, what they believe is right or wrong, what gifts they exchange and when, who they marry, how they raise their children, how they deal with misfortune, sickness, death, and so on. Because these and all other aspects of a culture must be reasonably well integrated in order to function properly, anthropologists seldom focus on one cultural feature in isolation. Instead, they view each in terms of its larger context and carefully examine its connections to related features.

For purposes of comparison and analysis, anthropologists customarily imagine a culture as a structured system made up of distinctive parts that function together as an organized whole. Although they may sharply identify each part as a clearly defined unit with its own characteristics



**Figure 2.8 The Barrel Model of Culture** Every culture is an integrated and dynamic system of adaptation that responds to a combination of internal factors (economic, social, ideological) and external factors (environmental, climatic). Within a cultural system, there are functional relationships among the economic base (infrastructure), the social organization (social structure), and the ideology (superstructure). A change in one leads to a change in the others.

and distinctive place within the larger system, anthropologists recognize that social reality is complex and subject to change and that divisions among cultural units are seldom clear-cut.

Broadly speaking, a society's cultural features fall within three categories: social structure, infrastructure, and superstructure, as depicted in our "barrel model" (Figure 2.8).

To ensure a community's biological continuity, a culture must provide a social structure for reproduction and mutual support. **Social structure** concerns rule-governed relationships—with all their rights and obligations—that hold members of a society together. Households, families, associations, and power relations, including politics, are all part of social structure. It establishes group cohesion and enables people to consistently satisfy their basic needs, including food and shelter for themselves and their dependents, by means of work.

There is a direct relationship between a group's social structure and its economic foundation, which includes subsistence practices and the tools and other material equipment used to make a living. Because subsistence practices involve tapping into available resources to satisfy a society's basic needs, this aspect of culture is known as **infrastructure**. It comprises strategies for the production and distribution of goods and services considered necessary for life.

Supported by this economic foundation, a society is held together by a shared sense of identity and worldview

composed of a collection of ideas, beliefs, and values by which members of a society make sense of the world—its shape, challenges, and opportunities—and understand their place in it. Also known as ideology, this worldview is theoretically arranged in the model's **superstructure**. Including religion and political ideology, superstructure comprises a people's overarching ideas about themselves and the world around them—and it gives meaning and direction to their lives.

Influencing and reinforcing one another—continually adapting to changing demographic, technological, political-economic, and ideological factors—the interconnected features in these three interdependent structures together form part of a cultural system.

### Kapauku Culture as an Integrated System

The integration of economic, social, and ideological aspects of a culture can be illustrated by the Kapauku Papuans, a mountain people of Western New Guinea, studied in 1955 by anthropologist Leopold Pospisil (1963).

The Kapauku economy relies on plant cultivation, along with pig breeding, hunting, and fishing. Although plant cultivation provides most of the people's food, it is through pig breeding that men achieve political power and positions of legal authority.

Among the Kapauku, living in an area now claimed by Indonesia, pig breeding is a complex business. Raising a lot of pigs requires a lot of food to feed them. The primary fodder is sweet potatoes, grown in garden plots. According to Kapauku culture, certain garden activities and the tending of pigs are tasks that fall exclusively in the domain of women's work. Thus, to raise many pigs a man needs numerous women in the household. As a result, in Kapauku society multiple wives are not only permitted, they are highly desired. For each



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**social structure** The rule-governed relationships—with all their rights and obligations—that hold members of a society together. This includes households, families, associations, and power relations, including politics.

**infrastructure** The economic foundation of a society, including its subsistence practices and the tools and other material equipment used to make a living.

**superstructure** A society's shared sense of identity and worldview. The collective body of ideas, beliefs, and values by which members of a society make sense of the world—its shape, challenges, and opportunities—and understand their place in it. This includes religion and national ideology.

**Figure 2.9** Kapauku  
Papuan Village, Western

New Guinea Kapauku economy relies on plant cultivation, hunting, fishing, and especially on the breeding of pigs. Women are responsible for raising the pigs and their main fodder, sweet potatoes. Only men with numerous wives manage to acquire many pigs needed for wealth and prestige. As a result, in Kapauku society multiple wives are not only permitted, they are highly desired.



Courtesy © Jukka Rona

wife, however, a man must pay a bride-price, and this can be expensive. Furthermore, wives have to be compensated for their care of the pigs. Put simply, it takes pigs, by which wealth is measured, to get wives, without whom pigs cannot be raised in the first place. Needless to say, this requires considerable entrepreneurship. It is this ability that produces leaders in Kapauku society (**Figure 2.9**).

The interrelatedness of these elements with various other features of Kapauku culture is even more complicated. For example, one condition that encourages men to marry several women is a surplus of adult females, sometimes caused by loss of males through warfare. Among the Kapauku, recurring warfare has long been viewed as a necessary evil. By the rules of war, men may be killed but women may not. This system works to promote the imbalanced sex ratio that fosters the practice of having more than one wife. Having multiple wives tends to work best if all of them come to live in their husband's village, and so it is among the Kapauku. With this arrangement, the men of a village are typically blood relatives of one another, which enhances their ability to cooperate in warfare.

Considering all these factors, it makes sense that Kapauku typically trace descent (ancestry) through men, which, coupled with near-constant warfare, tends to promote male dominance. So it is not surprising to find that only men hold positions of leadership in Kapauku, as they appropriate the products of women's labor in order to enhance their political stature. Such male dominance is by no means characteristic of all human societies. Rather, as with the Kapauku, it arises only under particular sets of circumstances that, if changed, will alter the way in which men and women relate to each other.

## Culture Is Dynamic

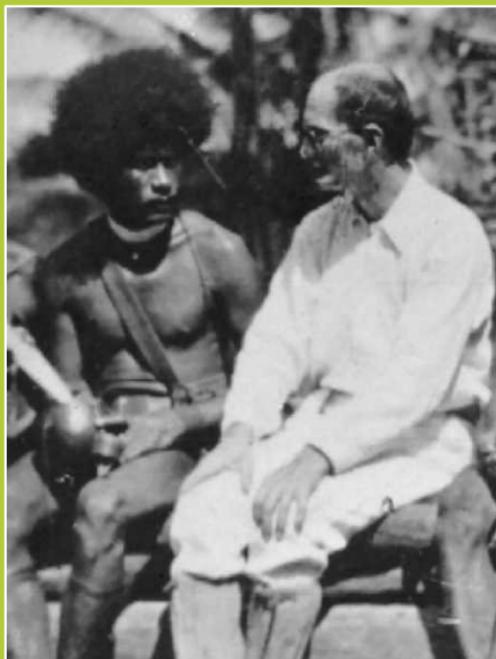
Cultures are dynamic systems that respond to motions and actions within and around them. When one element within the system shifts or changes, the entire system strives to adjust, just as it does when an outside force applies pressure. To function adequately, a culture must be flexible enough to allow such adjustments in the face of unstable or changing circumstances.

All cultures are, of necessity, dynamic, but some are far less so than others. When a culture is too rigid or static and fails to provide its members with the means required for long-term survival under changing conditions, it is not likely to endure. On the other hand, some cultures are so fluid and open to change that they may lose their distinctive character. The Amish mentioned earlier in this chapter typically resist change as much as possible but are constantly making balanced decisions to adjust when absolutely necessary. North Americans in general, however, have created a culture in which change has become a positive ideal, reflecting the ongoing technological, demographic, and social transformations in their society.

Every culture is dynamically constructed and, not unlike a thermostat regulating room temperature, able to cope with recurrent strains and tensions, even dangerous disruptions and deadly conflicts. Sharing a culture, members of a society are capable of dealing with crises, solving their conflicts, and restoring order. Sometimes, however, the pressures are so great that the cultural features in the system are no longer adequate or acceptable, and the established order is changed.

## ANTHROPOLOGIST OF NOTE

### Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942)



Courtesy Photo Aperture/Hearst Museum of Anthropology

Bronislaw Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands about 1916.

**Bronislaw Malinowski**, born in Poland, earned his doctorate in anthropology at the London School of Economics and later, as a professor there, played a vital role in making it an important center of anthropology. Renowned as a pioneer in participant observation, he stated that the ethnographer's goal is "to grasp the native's point of view . . . to realize *his* vision of *his* world."<sup>a</sup>

Writing about culture, Malinowski argued that people everywhere share certain biological and psychological needs and that the ultimate function of all cultural institutions is to fulfill those needs. Everyone, for example, needs to feel secure in relation to the physical universe. Therefore, when science and technology are inadequate to explain certain natural phenomena—such as eclipses or earthquakes—people develop religion and magic to account for those phenomena and to establish a feeling of security.

The quantity and quality of data called for by Malinowski's approach set new scientific standards for anthropological fieldwork. He argued that it was necessary to settle into the community being studied for an extended period of time in order to fully explain its culture. He demonstrated this approach with his research in the Trobriand Islands of the southern Pacific Ocean between 1915 and 1918. Never before had such intensive fieldwork been done nor had such theoretical insights been gained into the functioning of another culture.

<sup>a</sup>Malinowski, B. (1961). *Argonauts of the western Pacific* (p. 25). New York: Dutton.

## Functions of Culture

Polish-born British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski argued that people everywhere share certain biological and psychological needs and that the ultimate function of all cultural institutions is to fulfill these needs (see Anthropologist of Note). Others have marked out different criteria, but the idea is basically the same: A culture cannot endure if it does not deal effectively with basic challenges. It has to equip members of a society with strategies for the production and distribution of goods and services considered necessary for life. To ensure the biological continuity of the group, it must also offer a social structure for reproduction and mutual support. Further, it has to provide ways and means to pass on knowledge and enculturate new members so they can contribute to their community as well-functioning adults. Moreover, it must facilitate social interaction and provide ways to

avoid or resolve conflicts within their group as well as with outsiders.

Because a culture must support all aspects of life, as indicated in our barrel model, it must also meet the psychological and emotional needs of its members. This last function is met, in part, simply by the measure of predictability that each culture, as a shared design for thought and action, brings to everyday life. Of course, it involves much more than that, including a worldview that helps individuals understand their place in the world and face major changes and challenges. For example, every culture provides its members with certain customary ideas and rituals that enable them to think creatively about the meaning of life and death. Many cultures even make it possible for people to imagine an afterlife. Invited to suspend disbelief and engage in such imaginings, people find the means to deal with the grief of losing a loved one and to face their own demise with certain expectations.

In Bali, for instance, Hindu worshipers stage spectacular cremation rituals at special places where they burn the physical remains of their dead. After a colorful procession with musicians, the corpse is carried to a great cremation tower, or *wadah*, representing the three-layered cosmos. It is then transferred into a beautifully decorated sarcophagus, made of wood and cloth artfully shaped in the form of an animal—a bull when the deceased belonged to the island's highest Hindu status group ("caste") of priests and lawgivers (Brahmanas), a winged lion for the second highest status of warriors and administrators (Satrias), and a half-fish/half-elephant for the next status of merchants and traders (Wesias).

After relatives and friends place their offerings atop or inside the sarcophagus, a Hindu priest sets the structure on fire. Soon, the body burns, and according to Balinese Hindu belief, the animal sarcophagus symbolically guides the soul of the deceased to Bali's "mother" mountain Gunung Angung. This is the sacred dwelling place of the island's gods and ancestors, the place to which many Balinese believe they return when they die. Freed from the flesh, the soul may later transmigrate and return in corporeal form. This belief in reincarnation of the soul allows the Balinese to cope with death as a celebration of life.

In sum, for a culture to function properly, its various parts must be consistent with one another. But consistency is not the same as harmony. In fact, there is friction and potential for conflict within every culture—among individuals, factions, and competing institutions. Even on the most basic level of a society, individuals rarely experience the enculturation process in exactly the same way, nor do they perceive their reality in precisely identical fashion. Moreover, conditions may change, brought on by inside or outside forces.

## Culture, Society, and the Individual

Ultimately, a society is no more than a union of individuals, all of whom have their own special needs and interests. To survive, it must succeed in balancing the immediate self-interest of its individual members with the needs and demands of the collective well-being of society as a whole. To accomplish this, a society offers rewards for adherence to its culturally prescribed standards. In most cases, these rewards assume the form of social approval. For example, in contemporary North American society a person who holds a good job, takes care of family, pays taxes, and does volunteer work in the neighborhood may be spoken of as a "model citizen" in the community.

To ensure the survival of the group, each person must learn to postpone certain immediate personal satisfactions. Yet the needs of the individual cannot be overlooked entirely or emotional stress and growing resentment may erupt in the form of protest, disruption, and even violence.

Consider, for example, the matter of sexual expression, which, like anything that people do, is shaped by culture. Sexuality is important in every society for it helps to strengthen cooperative bonds among members, ensuring the perpetuation of the social group itself. Yet sex can be disruptive to social living. Without clear rules about who has sexual access to whom, competition for sexual privileges can destroy the cooperative bonds on which human survival depends. In addition, uncontrolled sexual activity can result in reproductive rates that cause a society's population to outstrip its resources. Hence, as it shapes sexual behavior, every culture must balance the needs of society against the individual's sexual needs and desires so that frustration does not build up to the point of being disruptive in itself.

Cultures vary widely in the way they go about this. On one end of the spectrum, societies such as the Amish in North America or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have taken an extremely restrictive approach, specifying no sex outside of marriage. On the other end are societies such as the Norwegians who generally accept premarital sex and often choose to have children outside marriage, or even more extreme, the Canela Indians in Brazil, whose social codes guarantee that, sooner or later, everyone in a given village has had sex with just about everyone of the opposite sex. Yet, even as permissive as the latter situation may sound, there are nonetheless strict rules as to how the system operates (Crocker & Crocker, 2004).

In all life issues, cultures must strike a balance between the needs and desires of individuals and those of society as a whole. When those of society take precedence, people may experience excessive stress. Symptomatic of this are increased levels of social tension, disruptive behavior, emotional depression, even suicide.

Although some societies require a greater degree of cultural uniformity from its members than others, every organized social group imposes pressure on its members to conform to certain cultural models, or standards, of acceptable public behavior, speech, and so on. These standards are commonly accepted and adhered to, and each society has institutions in place with a repertoire of cultural mechanisms to promote or enforce conformity. In many traditional societies, religious institutions play a major role in doing this, whereas a political party may impose conformity in communist state societies. In capitalist societies, business corporations operating on the basis of economic market principles impose conformity in numerous ways, including standards of beauty (see the Biocultural Connection).

## BIOCULTURAL CONNECTION

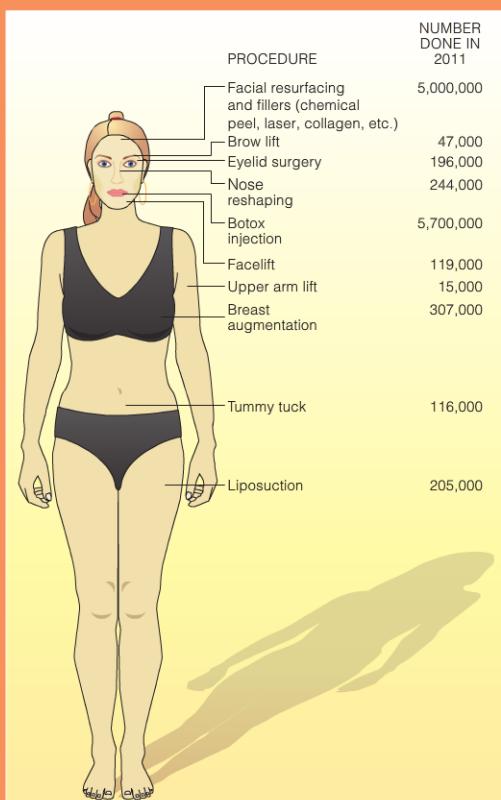
### Modifying the Human Body

Each healthy human individual, like any other biological organism, is genetically programmed to develop to its full potential. This includes reaching a certain maximum height as a fully mature adult. What that height is, however, varies per population group. Dutch adult males, for example, average well over 1 foot taller than Mbuti men, who do not generally grow taller than 5 feet (150 cm). Whether we actually become as tall as our genes would allow, however, is influenced by multiple factors, including nutrition and disease.

In many cultures, being tall is viewed positively, especially for men. To make up for any perceived flaw in height, there is not much men can do to appear taller beyond wearing shoes with thick soles. But, in other areas, there are many alternatives to increase attraction and improve social status. Playing on this desire, and fueling it, the fashion industry creates and markets ever-changing styles of shoes, dresses, hair-styles, lipstick, perfumes, nail polish, hats, and whatever else to beautify the human body.

For thousands of years, people across the world have also engaged in modifying the human body itself—with tattoos, piercings, circumcision, footbinding, and even altering skull shape. In addition, modern medical technology has provided a whole new range of surgical procedures aimed at this goal.

With medicine as big business, many surgeons have joined forces with the beauty industry in what anthropologist Laura Nader calls “standardizing” bodies. Focusing on women’s bodies, she notes “images of the body appear natural within their specific cultural milieus.”<sup>a</sup> For example, breast implants are not seen as odd within the cultural milieu of the United States, and female circumcision and infibulation (also known as female genital mutilation or



This figure shows selected cosmetic surgical and nonsurgical procedures in the United States in 2011. In total, there were 1.6 million cosmetic surgeries and 12.2 million non-surgical procedures (chemical peels, laser treatments, Botox injections, and so on) at a total cost of about \$10.4 billion. Ninety-one percent of the total were done on women.

FGM) are not considered odd among people in several African countries.

Many feminist writers “differentiate [FGM] from breast implantation by arguing that American women choose to have breast implants whereas in Africa women are subject to indoctrination”<sup>b</sup> given they experience circumcision as young girls. But is a woman’s decision to have breast implants, in fact, the result of indoctrination by the beauty-industrial complex?

This multibillion-dollar industry, notes Nader, “segments the female body and manufactures commodities of and for the body.”<sup>c</sup> Among millions of women

getting “caught in the official beauty ideology” are those in the United States who have breast implantation. On average, they are 36 years old with two children. Designated as the beauty industry’s “insecure consumers,” these women are “recast as patients” with an illness defined as hypertrophy (small breasts). Psychological health can be restored by cosmetic surgery correcting this so-called deformity in the female body.

The doctors who perform these operations are often regarded as therapists and artists as well as surgeons. One pioneering breast implant surgeon “took as his ideal female figure that of ancient Greek statues, which he carefully measured, noticing the exact size and shape of the breasts, their vertical and horizontal locations.”<sup>d</sup> In response to beauty marketing, the business of plastic surgery is now booming, and breast implantation is spreading across the globe.

#### BIOCULTURAL QUESTION

Have you or anyone close to you made body alterations? If so, were these changes prompted by an “official beauty ideology” or something else?

<sup>a</sup> Nader, L. (1997). Controlling processes: Tracing the dynamics of power. *Current Anthropology* 38, 715–717.

<sup>b</sup> Ibid.

<sup>c</sup> Ibid. See also Coco, L. E. (1994). Silicone breast implants in America: A choice of the official breast? In L. Nader (Ed.), *Essays on controlling processes* (pp. 103–132). Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers (no. 77). Berkeley: University of California Press; and Claeson, B. (1994). The privatization of justice: An ethnography of control. In L. Nader (Ed.), *Essays on controlling processes* (pp. 32–64). Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers (no. 77). Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>d</sup> Nader, 1997.

## Culture and Change

Anthropologists today recognize that few peoples still exist in total or near-total isolation; in our current age of globalization, we are witnessing a much accelerated pace of widespread and radical change, discussed in detail in the last chapter of this book. Like our ancestors, all of us experience changes in our lives, but not all change is cultural change.

As living creatures, we humans typically experience multiple changes in the course of a lifetime. Such changes are part of the human life cycle. The average life expectancy for people today is about 64 years (3 years more for women than for men). But in many countries it is at least 20 years less, whereas in others it is a decade or more longer (Japanese may expect to live, on average, 80 years).

No matter how long we live or the changes we experience in our personal lives, few of us have any impact on how our culture is structured or how it operates. For that reason, cultures have been known to remain unchanged for many centuries, sometimes even longer. For anthropologists, an understanding of how cultures change and how people create or respond to change is crucially important—not only for the sake of knowledge itself but also because this knowledge can be applied in preventing or solving problems triggered by change.

Change in a culture may result from one or more factors, such as new technology, foreign invasion, new trade goods, population growth, ecological shifts, and so on. Cultural changes may be generated by forces within a society or may be imposed from the outside. Either way, they lead to a modification of cultural ideas, values, and practices.

Although cultures must have some flexibility to remain adaptive, cultural change can also bring unexpected and sometimes disastrous results. For example, consider the relationship between culture and the droughts that periodically afflict so many people living in African countries just south

of the Sahara Desert. The lives of some 14 million nomadic herders native to this region are centered on cattle and other grazing animals. For thousands of years these nomads have migrated seasonally to provide their herds with pasture and water, utilizing vast areas of arid lands in ways that allowed them to survive severe droughts many times in the past.

Today, however, the nomadic way of life is frowned upon by the central governments of modern states in the region. Government officials actively discourage nomadism because it involves moving back and forth across relatively new international boundaries that are often impossible to guard, making it difficult to track the people and their animals for purposes of taxation and other government controls.

Viewing nomads as evading their authority, these governments have tried to stop the migratory herders from ranging through their traditional grazing territories and to convert them into sedentary villagers. Simultaneously, governments have aimed to press pastoralists into a market economy by giving them incentives to raise many more animals than required for their own needs so that the surplus could be sold to augment the tax base. Combined, these policies have led to overgrazing, erosion, and a lack of reserve pasture during recurring droughts. Thus, droughts today are far more disastrous than in the past because when they occur, they jeopardize the nomads' very existence (**Figure 2.10**).

The market economy that led nomads to increase their herds beyond sustainability is a factor in a huge range of cultural changes. Many nomads, including thousands of Kuchi herder families in Afghanistan pictured on the first page of this chapter, settle down as farmers or move to cities for cash-earning work opportunities. Across the globe, swift and often radical cultural change is driven by capitalism and its demand for market growth. Many welcome these changes, but others experience the loss of their traditional way of life as disturbing and feel powerless to stop, let alone reverse, the process.

**Figure 2.10**  
**Consequences of Cultural Change** Climate and politics have conspired to create serious cultural change among migratory herders. So it is in the arid African grassland regions of Kenya pictured here, where severe drought combined with restrictions on grazing lands have resulted in the death of many animals and turned others into "bones on hoofs." Such catastrophes have forced many herders in Kenya and elsewhere to give up their old lifeways entirely.



Tony Karumba/AFP/Getty Images

### VISUAL COUNTERPOINT

© David Kadiubowski/Corbis



AP Images/Sergey Ponomarev

**Figure 2.11 Perpetrating Ethnocentrism** Many people in the world consider their own nation superior to others, framing their nationalist pride by proclaiming to be a “master race,” “divine nation,” or “chosen people” and viewing their homeland as sacred. Such nationalist ideology is associated with militant ethnocentrism and dislike, fear, or even hatred of foreigners, immigrants, and ethnic minorities. For instance, most Russians now agree with the Nationalist slogan “Russia for the Russians,” and almost half believe their nation has a natural right to dominate as an empire. Russian Nationalists (right) are right-wing extremists, 10,000 of whom recently marched to St. Petersburg to protest the immigration of Azeri Tajiks, Turks, and other foreigners into Russia. In their extremism, they are matched by the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps in the United States. Active nationwide, Minutemen view whites as the only “true” Americans and are strongly anti-immigrant. The left photo shows the Minutemen in Palominas, Arizona, erecting a U.S.–Mexico border fence on private ranchland.

## Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

There are numerous highly diverse cultural solutions to the challenges of human existence. Anthropologists have been intrigued to find that people in most cultures tend to be ethnocentric and see their own way of life as the best of all possible worlds. This is reflected in the way individual societies refer to themselves: Typically, a society’s traditional name for itself translates roughly into “true human beings.” In contrast, their names for outsiders commonly translate into various versions of “subhumans,” including “monkeys,” “dogs,” “weird-looking people,” “funny talkers,” and so forth. When it comes to ethnocentrism, it is easy to find examples (**Figure 2.11**).

Anthropologists have been actively engaged in the fight against ethnocentrism ever since they started to study and actually live among traditional peoples with radically different cultures, thus learning by personal experience that these “others” were no less human than anyone else. Resisting the common urge to rank cultures, anthropologists have instead aimed to understand individual cultures and the general concept of culture. To do so, they have examined each culture on its own terms, discerning whether or not the culture satisfies the needs and expectations of the people themselves. If a people practiced human sacrifice or capital punishment, for example, anthropologists asked about the circumstances that made the taking of human life acceptable according to that particular group’s values.

This brings us to the concept of **cultural relativism**—the idea that one must suspend judgment of other peoples’

practices in order to understand those practices in their own cultural terms. Only through such an approach can one gain a meaningful view of the values and beliefs that underlie the behaviors and institutions of other peoples and societies as well as clearer insights into the underlying beliefs and practices of one’s own society.

Take, for example, the 16th-century Aztec practice of sacrificing humans for religious purposes. Few (if any) North Americans today would condone such practices, but by suspending judgment one can get beneath the surface and discern how it functioned to reassure the populace that the Aztec state was healthy and that the sun would remain in the heavens.

Moreover, an open-minded exploration of Aztec sacrifice rituals may offer a valuable comparative perspective on the death penalty today. Over two-thirds of the countries in the world—141—have now abolished it in law or practice. Among those countries where it continues, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Yemen are the most frequent executioners (Amnesty International, 2012).

Numerous studies by social scientists have clearly shown that the U.S. death penalty does not deter violent crime, any more than Aztec sacrifice really provided sustenance for the sun. In fact, cross-cultural studies show that homicide rates mostly decline after its abolition (Radelet & Lacock, 2009). Similar to Aztec human sacrifice, capital punishment may be seen as an institutionalized magical

**cultural relativism** The idea that one must suspend judgment of other people’s practices in order to understand them in their own cultural terms.

**42 CHAPTER 2** Characteristics of Culture

response to perceived disorder—an act that “reassures many that society is not out of control after all, that the majesty of the law reigns, and that God is indeed in his heaven” (Paredes & Purdum, 1990, p. 9).

Cultural relativism is essential as a research tool. However, employing it for research does not mean suspending judgment forever, nor does it require that anthropologists defend a people's right to engage in any cultural practice, no matter how destructive. All that is necessary is that we avoid *premature* judgments until we have a full understanding of the culture in which we are interested. Only then may anthropologists adopt a critical stance and in an informed way consider the advantages and disadvantages of particular beliefs and behaviors for a society and its members.

## Evaluation of Cultures

A valid question to ask is how well does a given culture satisfy the biological, social and psychological needs of those whose behavior it guides (Bodley, 2008). Specific indicators to answer this question are found in the nutritional status and general physical and mental health of its population; the incidence of violence, crime, and delinquency; the demographic structure, stability, and tranquility of domestic life; and the group's relationship to its resource base. The culture of a people who experience high rates of malnutrition (including obesity), violent crime, emotional disorders and despair, and environmental degradation may be said to be operating less well than that of another people who exhibit few such problems (**Figure 2.12**).

In a well-working culture, people “can be proud, jealous, and pugnacious, and live a very satisfactory life without feeling ‘*angst*,’ ‘*alienation*,’ ‘*anomie*,’ ‘*depression*,’ or any of the other pervasive ills of our own inhuman and civilized way of living” (Fox, 1968, p. 290). When traditional ways of coping no longer seem to work, and people feel helpless to shape their lives in their own societies, symptoms of cultural breakdown become prominent.

In short, a culture can be understood as a complex maintenance system designed to ensure the continued well-being of a group of people. Therefore, it may be



**Figure 2.12 Signs of Cultural Dissatisfaction** High rates of crime and delinquency are signs that a culture is not adequately satisfying a people's needs and expectations. This San Quentin Prison cellblock in California can be seen as such evidence. It is sobering to note that 25 percent of all imprisoned people in the world are incarcerated in the United States. In the past fifteen years the country's jail and prison population jumped from 1.6 million to 2.3 million. Ironically, people in the United States think of their country as “the land of the free,” yet it has the highest incarceration rate in the world (about 750 per 100,000 inhabitants). The median among all countries is about 125 per 100,000 inhabitants.

deemed successful as long as it secures the survival of a society in a way that satisfies its members.

What complicates matters is that any society is made up of groups with different interests, raising the possibility that some people's interests may be better served than those of others. For this reason, anthropologists must always ask *whose* needs and *whose* survival are best served by the culture in question. Only by looking at the overall situation can a reasonably objective judgment be made as to how well a culture is working.

Our species today is challenged by rapid changes all across the globe, much of it triggered by powerful technology and dramatic population growth. In our current age of globalization, we must widen our scope and develop a truly worldwide perspective that enables us to appreciate cultures as increasingly open and interactive systems.

## CHAPTER CHECKLIST

### What is cultural adaptation?

- Cultural adaptation—a complex of ideas, activities, and technologies that enables people to survive and even thrive in their environment—has enabled humans to survive and expand into a wide variety of environments.
- Cultures have always changed over time, although rarely as rapidly or massively as many are doing today. Sometimes what is adaptive in one set of circumstances or over the short run is maladaptive over time.

### What is culture, and what characteristics are common to all cultures?

- Culture is a society's shared and socially transmitted ideas, values, and perceptions that are used to make sense of experience and generate behavior and are reflected in that behavior.
- Although every culture involves a group's shared values, ideas, and behavior, this does not mean that everything within a culture is uniform. For instance, in all

cultures people's roles vary according to age and gender, and in some cultures there are other subcultural variations.

- A subculture (for example, the Amish) shares certain overarching assumptions of the larger culture, while observing its own set of distinct rules. Pluralistic societies are those in which two or more ethnic groups or nationalities are politically organized into one territorial state but maintain their cultural differences.
- In addition to being shared, all cultures are learned, with individual members learning the accepted norms of social behavior through the process of enculturation. Also, every culture is based on symbols—transmitted through the communication of ideas, emotions, and desires—especially language. And culture is integrated, so that all aspects function as an integrated whole (albeit not without tension, friction, and even conflict). Finally, all cultures are dynamically designed to adjust to recurrent strains and tensions.
- As illustrated in the barrel model, all aspects of a culture fall into one of three broad, interrelated categories: infrastructure (the subsistence practices or economic system), social structure (the rule-governed relationships), and superstructure (the ideology or worldview).
- Cultural change takes place in response to events such as population growth, technological innovation, environmental crisis, intrusion of outsiders, or modification of values and behavior within the culture. Although cultures must change to adapt to new circumstances, sometimes the unforeseen consequences of change are disastrous for a society.

### What is the connection between culture, society, and the individual?

- As a union of individuals, a society must strike a balance between the self-interest of individuals with the needs and demands of the collective well-being of the group. To accomplish this, a society rewards adherence to its culturally prescribed standards in the form of social approval.
- When individual needs and desires are eclipsed by those of society, the result may be stress and mental illness expressed in antisocial behavior such as alienation, substance abuse, or violence.

### What are ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, and what is the measure of a society's success?

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- Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own culture is superior to all others. To avoid making ethnocentric judgments, anthropologists adopt the approach of cultural relativism, which requires suspending judgment in order to understand each culture in its own terms.
- One unbiased measure of a culture's success is based on answering this question: How well does a particular culture satisfy the physical and psychological needs of those whose behavior it guides? The following indicators provide answers: the nutritional status and general physical and mental health of the population, the incidence of violence, the stability of domestic life, and the group's relationship to its resource base.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The barrel model offers a simple framework for imagining what a culture looks like from an analytical point of view. How would you apply that model to your own community and that of the Kuchi herders pictured at the beginning of this chapter?
2. Are you familiar with any subcultures or ethnic minorities in your own society? Could you make friends with or even marry someone from another subculture? What kind of problems would you be likely to encounter?
3. Peoples in all cultures across the world display ethnocentrism, but some more so than others. Considering today's globalization (as described in Chapter 1), do you think ethnocentrism poses more of a problem than in the past?
4. An often overlooked first step for developing an understanding of another culture is having knowledge and respect for one's own cultural traditions. Do you know the origins of the worldview commonly held by most people in your community? How do you think it developed over time, and what makes it so accepted or popular in your group today?
5. Currently, about 57 million humans die every year, and 135 million newborns join the more than 7 billion already crowding our planet. With finite natural resources and escalating piles of waste, do you think that technological inventions alone are sufficient to guarantee an additional 78 million more people annually a long and healthy life in pursuit of happiness?

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## Challenge Issue

Anthropologists take on the challenge of studying and describing cultures around the world and finding scientific explanations for their differences and similarities. Why do people think, feel, and act in certain ways—and find it wrong or impossible to do otherwise? Answers must come from fact-based knowledge about cultural diversity—knowledge that is not culture-bound and is widely recognized as significant. Over the years, anthropology has generated such knowledge through various theories and research methods. In particular, anthropologists obtain information through long-term, full-immersion fieldwork based on participant observation. Here we see anthropologist Lucas Bessire enjoying the taste of *ajidabia* (a variety of wild honey) with Ayoreo Indian companions alongside a newly found beehive in the dry forest of the Gran Chaco in Paraguay, South America—one involved moment among many in the all-engaging challenge of anthropological fieldwork.