Culture is the sum of symbols, ideas, forms of expression, and material products associated with a social system. It is a dynamic medium through which societies create a collective way of life reflected in such things as beliefs, values, music, literature, art, dance, science, religious ritual, and technology. In this sense, it is literally the source from which we create most of what we experience as reality, and as such its place in human life is enormously important.

Although it includes both material and nonmaterial aspects, the essence of culture consists of ideas. These depend on the human ability to use symbols in order to attach meaning to experience and perceptions and thereby think about the world (Geertz 1973). Therefore, it is with symbols that we begin.

NONMATERIAL CULTURE: SYMBOLS, LANGUAGE, AND IDEAS

Take a moment to look at figure 2.1 (see p. 21). What is it? On a piece of paper make a list of all the answers you can think of. Do not read any further until you have at least four items on your list.

What is figure 2.1 a picture of? "A bunch of dots"? "Two lines of dots, one shorter than the other, joined at a right angle two-thirds of the way up the longer line"? "A cross"? The first two answers are mere physical descriptions; the third goes beyond what the lines look like to say what they *are*. It transforms the lines into a *symbol* by attaching *meaning* to them; and it is meaning that is at the heart of **nonmaterial culture.**

A **symbol** is anything that represents more than itself. In many cultures a cross—whether made of two sticks or lines on a piece of paper—is more than what our eyes see: people pay great attention to it, carry it around their necks, and hang it in their homes. In many places, however, and during many periods of history, people would see nothing more than a pair of sticks held together or two lines joined at right angles.

There are four kinds of symbols: symbolic *objects* (flags representing nations, money representing labor and goods); symbolic *characteristics* of objects (purple for royalty, yellow for cowardice); **gestures,** actions (a wink, a raised right hand) that have meaning in particular cultural contexts (Malandro and Barker 1983; Patterson 1983); and the vast range of *spoken and written words* that make up *language.* The fourth kind of symbol is so important that it deserves a separate discussion. Language is the most important set of symbols in any culture, for it contains the building blocks used to construct ideas.

In a culture, then, symbols are more than what they appear to be; they *are* what they *mean.* Suppose you walk down a street and come upon an auction. You spy an empty seat in the shade and, feeling tired, you sit down to watch. On

Overview

Every social system includes cultural elements that profoundly shape the nature of social life and the terms on which we live it. In this chapter we take a detailed look at the different kinds of elements found in every system's culture and get some idea of how they fit together. Briefly review the chapter outline for this chapter to get an idea of its structure and what it includes.

the auction block is a large ornate desk, and the bidding is high. "Two thousand dollars," the auctioneer barks. "Do I hear twenty-one hundred?" Suddenly, your nose itches and you scratch it with your finger. Just then, the auctioneer points at you and shouts, "Twenty-one hundred! Going once? Going twice! Sold!"

Strictly speaking, you only scratched your nose to relieve an itch. You had no intention of bidding. You got into trouble because in the social system of an auction it is agreed that a nose scratch is more than a physical act; it is a gesture, a symbolic act that represents more than itself: a nose scratch at an auction is a positive response to the auctioneer's call for bids. How do you get out of it? "I didn't *mean* anything by it," you say. "I just scratched my nose."

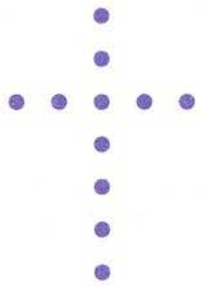


FIGURE 2.1

What is it?

Symbol systems tell us how to mark and interpret perceptions, depending on the social situation. Hence, the auctioneer categorizes a nose scratch as a bid at certain points in the auction (but not at others) and never does so outside of auctions. Depending on the situation, the simple act of touching your nose can have many meanings: when con artists are about to "string" a victim, a finger on the side of the nose means "all is ready"; or a thumb drawn across the nose can signify contempt. A single action can be transformed into many different meaningful gestures, depending on the context.

This example illustrates a vital aspect of symbols: *we respond to them just as we respond to what they represent.* While the word *fire* represents something that can hurt us, the word itself cannot; yet the word *fire* can make us run just as readily as the actual presence of fire. Without the word, we can experience fire only with our senses, but with the word, fire exists as an *idea* even when there is no fire: It exists in our minds, and when we share the symbol with other people, it exists among us. We can think about it and teach each other about it. We can attach the idea of "fire" to things that have no relation to it, as in "the fiery anger in her eyes." Symbols, themselves, then, are *real* to us; and as W. I. Thomas (1931) pointed out, what we define as real has real consequences.

Symbols are created, which means that there is nothing inherent in any symbol that gives it power over us; its power lies in what it signifies to those who share its meaning. If children learn the meaning of *danger* by touching a hot stove and hearing the word from an adult, the word *danger* can be used to keep them away from all kinds of things that might not be dangerous at all. This is why the meaning of a behavior is often more important to us than its objective characteristics or consequences.

Culture provides a framework of symbols and ideas that we use to interpret what we perceive, and people's appearance and behavior are fully understandable only if we pay attention to their cultural context. If we feed our guests roast chicken and after the meal tell them they just consumed the flesh of a dog, their reaction depends only in part on what they actually ate or think they ate. To predict their response, we must know the system of meaning they use to interpret what they did—some Asians, for example, might thank us for the delicacy, while most Europeans would look disgusted.

Language

There would be no culture without **language,** which includes both the collection of symbols (words) and the rules for their use that we use to think and communicate with one another. Without culture, humans would be hard-pressed to survive. We are not born knowing how to avoid danger or provide food for ourselves, but we do have the ability to use symbols, to categorize objects, and, most important, to teach those categories to one another.

Every language has two elements: a collection of words, and a set of rules—syntax and grammar—that governs the arrangement of words to express

thoughts. Some words—such as *telephone*—have fixed meanings, while many depend on their relation to other words. The phrase *he threw up* means one thing followed by the words *his lunch,* but quite another in the poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas," in which the father "ran to the window and threw up the sash."

The words and their meanings contained in a language represent distinctions that users make as they perceive their world. To Alaska's Inuit, a detailed understanding of different kinds of snow is vital for survival. Inuit languages typically include as many as twenty different words for snow—snow that is good for making igloo blocks, hard and crusty snow, dry snow drifted by the wind, and so on—while English has only one. English, on the other hand, has an enormous number of words used in making precise scientific measurements. A nanosecond (one billionth of a second) is a unit of time that exists only in computer operations and is otherwise beyond human experience (see Rifkin 1987).

The second element of language—the rules of syntax and grammar—tells us how to arrange words in order to express ourselves. Different arrangements of the same words convey very different meanings, as in *The whale swallowed Jonah* or *Jonah swallowed the whale,* or convey nothing at all, as in *Whale Jonah the swallowed.*

Meaning also depends on the cultural context. The subtlety of such variations is painfully obvious to those who learn a language as adults and thereby often know only literal meanings. A foreign dinner guest who hears "Oh, you *must* try some of this stew" might interpret the statement as an order, not as friendly encouragement. The social relationship between the speaker and the hearer can also be important in determining meanings: "I love you" spoken by a child to a parent has a different meaning than when spoken between two unrelated adults.

The complexity of language reflects the complexity of culture as a system for representing and interpreting the world. As Farb (1973) points out, even the simplest statements are impressively complex.

> Children who unravel a simple statement like "The chair broke" must do more than decode a grammatical utterance. They must first master the subtle category of things that *break,* like *chairs* and also *machines* and *windowpanes.* Then they must distinguish the category of things that *break* from things that *tear,* like *paper* and *bedsheets,* or things that *smash,* like *vases* and *cars.* They must next interpret the influence on the chair of the verb *broke* out of all the possibilities that verb implies, such as that the breaking of a chair is conceptually different from breaking the bank at Monte Carlo or from waves breaking on a beach. To achieve all this, children unconsciously unravel the sentence into parts that can be analyzed, and then put the elements together again in a meaningful fashion. (pp. 262–63)

The language of words is not the only type of language found in cultures. Mathematics is a language used to represent the quantitative aspects of reality: it is a set of symbols (such as *2, 3,* +, ×, =) with specific rules that define their relationships to each other ($2 + 3 = 5$ or $2 \times 3 = 6$). Musical notation is also a language, symbols on paper representing sounds.

Language develops from the interactions of social life, and those who share a culture use its language to represent reality (Berger and Luckman 1967). The fact that the words *wizard, bachelor,* and *Indian brave* have more positive connotations than do *witch, spinster,* and *Indian squaw* reflects long-standing patterns of discrimination against women. To grow up with these categories of meaning affects the way people think about women and men, and thus, as patterns of living foster certain views of reality, those views in turn help to sustain and reproduce those same patterns of social life.

The Uses of Language

Language is the foundation of culture because language is what we use to represent what we perceive, feel, think, and do. We use it to label and describe the world, and in doing so, we create what most of us experience as reality. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, for example, and threw much of the industrialized world into a panic about threats to oil supplies and the possibility of war, most people—including national leaders—became aware of what was happening, not by being there or seeing pictures, but by listening to what reporters, politicians, and others wrote and said. What most people treated as real about those events was based entirely on words used to represent them. In turn, what we take to be real is critically important as we decide how to respond to what we believe is happening.

On a smaller scale, we use language to describe our inner feelings and thoughts, to create and sustain impressions in people's minds about who we are, and to think about ourselves and, often, to reflect on the difference between who we think we are and who we think we ought to be. On both levels, language is a profoundly important resource that makes social life a creative, dynamic process. This is true not only in the limited literal sense of creating works of literature, but in terms of creating all of the kinds of knowledge that we experience as reality.

In addition to its uses to represent reality, language fulfills three other social functions (Farb 1973). First, language allows us to assume that those who share the language with us (our **speech community**) know what we mean when we talk or write. It is precisely our expectation that strangers will understand us when we speak that makes a language social; a "personal" language is not a language at all, for its meanings are not shared. Because there is practically no one who speaks Latin in an existing social environment, for example, it is described as a "dead" language.

Second, the common language of a speech community allows its members to distinguish themselves from outsiders, helping to maintain group boundaries and solidarity (see Edwards 1984, Stevens and Swicegood 1987). When U.S. blacks leave urban ghettos to attend college, for example, they often find on their return that subtle changes in their use of language alienate them from friends who now see them as outsiders to their speech community. Similarly, if immigrants do not learn their new society's language, they must restrict themselves to small groups that encompass their speech community. When the children of immigrants learn the new language while their parents cling to the old, a distance often results between family members who participate in what amount to different cultures.

Wars have been fought over which language would dominate in a culture (see McRae 1984, 1986). The struggle between French and English Canadians in Quebec is centered on the French Canadians' insistence that French have the same importance as English, that bank tellers, for example, be able to speak French (La Ponce 1987). Today, language laws in Quebec require that business signs be printed in French, and French-speaking residents refer to themselves as "Quebecois," not as "French-Canadians" (see Hiller 1991). There has been similar controversy in the United States about the idea of adopting English as the "official" language. Although mainstream social life is certainly carried on in English, some fear that to include other languages—most notably Spanish—in schools and public affairs undermines the sense of solidarity and national identity that rest on sharing a common language. As of 1990, laws declaring English to be the official language had passed in seventeen states and were pending in nine others. The public is evenly split, however, on the question of whether English should be the only language used in schools (Davis and Smith 1993).

Overview

Symbols

Objects
Characteristics of objects
Gestures
Written and spoken language

And Their Uses

Representing and creating reality
Communication
Defining group boundaries
Performative language

Third, some utterances, known as **performative language,** constitute meaningful actions simply by being spoken. To say "I promise" *is* to make a promise, just as saying "I do" seals a marriage. To *say* "I quit" *is* to quit; when a police officer *says* "You're under arrest," you *are* under arrest; and when a teacher says "Class dismissed," the class *is* dismissed. When a friend looks you in the eyes and says "I love you" for the first time, it is often more than an expression of feeling. It is an invitation to enter into a relationship with particular expectations; that it is an offer is painfully clear if you fail to reciprocate with "I love you, too." If you do reciprocate, you, too, may have done more than express feelings. The general terms of your new relationship are established simply by uttering such phrases, and they can be undone only with other performative utterances, such as "I don't love you any more." What makes such language performative is its specialized culturally recognized authority to change existing relationships or create new ones.

Perhaps the most marvelous aspect of language, aside from its sheer complexity and seemingly endless variations, is that we are able to participate in it with little or no conscious effort. It is so familiar to us, so close to our everyday lives, that we are likely to think of it as an inherent part of each human being. Language, however, does not arise from the isolated experience of individuals, even though each of us possesses the abilities that make language possible. The creation of a single word is complete only when two or more people share its meaning. A single mind can create a sound, but until it has a shared meaning it is only a noise, not a word. The development of separate languages—English, French, Swahili, Chinese, Hebrew, Arabic, or the thousands of others—rests not on differences in physiology or psychology, but on the endless variations produced by social interactions extending across many generations.

Beliefs: Defining What Is Real

Beliefs are symbolic statements about what is real, such as "There is a God," "There are 100 centimeters in a meter," and "The way to get ahead in the world is to work hard." All of these are beliefs because they try to describe some aspect of reality. Whether or not we accept them as true, they are nonetheless beliefs.

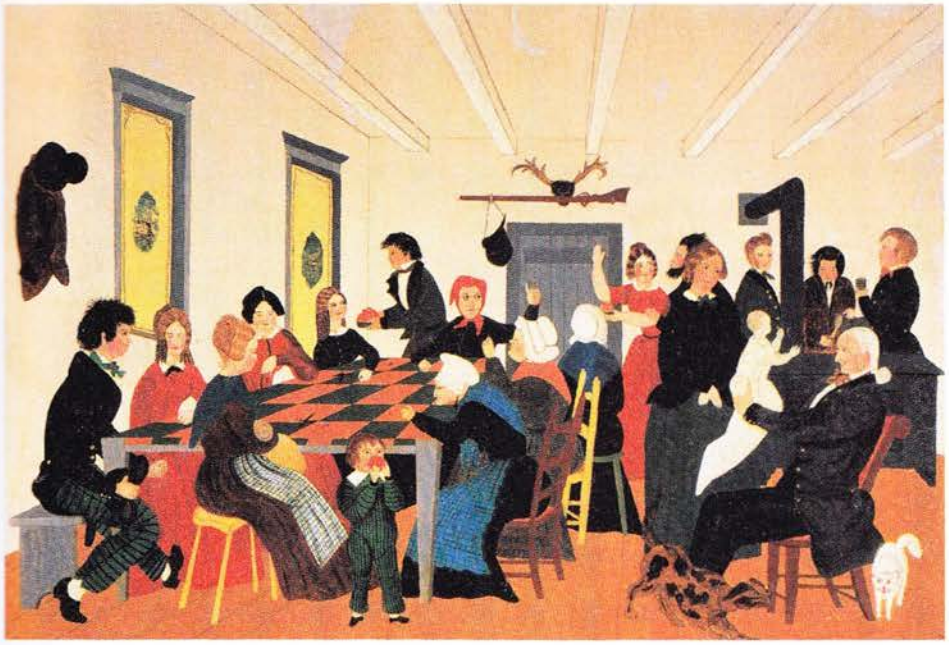
Overview

The first part of this chapter has introduced symbols, the basic nonmaterial cultural elements that enable human beings to create meaning. Meaning, in turn, is used to create ideas that help us to define what is real, what is important, how we should feel, and the expectations that regulate social relationships. In short, language is used to create beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms, each of which is described in the following sections.

Not all statements about what is real are *cultural* beliefs. A belief is cultural only if the ultimate authority for its validity lies outside of individuals—in our assumptions that others share in that belief. When the astronomer Copernicus observed the heavens and concluded that the earth was not the center of the universe, his sole authority rested in his own observations, and his belief—at least initially—was strictly a personal one. Copernicus and, later, Galileo were persecuted not because their beliefs were incorrect, but because they contradicted those of the culture and challenged an entire system of religious beliefs about the relationship between God and humanity.

Beliefs are important because we use them to construct much of what we experience as reality itself. Modern economic life, for example, would be impossible without the shared belief that money will be accepted when you go to the store to buy something. Scientists could not do their work without the belief that the scientific method is a valid way to understand the natural world. Families could not exist without shared beliefs that define who is a relative and who is not. And little would be left of religions if we took away their beliefs that define the meaning of life and the place of human beings in the scheme of things.

Beliefs furnish us with the "obvious" facts of our existence: it is "obvious" to anyone reading this book that the earth is round. But it was equally obvious to some living in fifteenth-century Europe that the earth was flat and that



One of the hallmarks of nonindustrial societies is the need for cooperation for survival. This 1854 picture of a quilting party in Virginia shows not only a common effort toward producing basic household goods, but also a sense of community. Both are more difficult to find in modern industrial societies, where independence and competition have become more important than cooperation.

anyone sailing far enough from land would surely fall off the edge. Nothing, then, in itself, is either obvious or obscure. What we call "obvious" is that which we do not question, and whether or not we question it is often more a matter of culture than of objective reality. Just as beliefs provide us with categories for sorting perceptions and experiences, so they limit our awareness to those things that have a place in our cultural framework.

Values: Defining What Is Important

Whereas beliefs define what is real, cultural **values** identify what is most important, preferable, or desirable (see One Step Further 2.1). "Honesty is better than dishonesty," "Competition is better than cooperation," and "People should not engage in premarital sex" are all statements about what some people think *should* be rather than about what necessarily is. Notice that in everyday speech people often use the word *belief* to refer to what is in fact a value. "I believe people *should* be honest" is a cultural value statement, since it describes what *ought* to be, not what is. "I believe that most people *are* basically honest," however, is a belief, since it refers to what is rather than to what should be.

We are born preferring some states of being over others. Infants prefer warmth to extreme cold or heat, satiation to hunger or thirst, comfort to pain, and contact to isolation. There are no ideas involved in such preferences, for infants have no symbols with which to construct ideas. In contrast, values are abstract ideas about goals. Many readers of this book attend college, even if doing so involves considerable hardship, because they share the value that education, as an end in itself, is inherently desirable. It is "good" to be educated, and more education is better than less. Many also share the value that being able to use our brains well is more desirable than being able to use our hands well, and that high-prestige, high-paying jobs are more desirable than lower-prestige, lower-paying ones. The desirability of education is reflected in the choices individuals make, but as an idea its authority lies in culture, not in individuals, just as we saw earlier in the case of beliefs.

PUZZLE

WHAT IS A PERSON?

Is this a person? Why or why not? Are you aware of people who would answer these questions differently? What is the basis of the difference? How does this question differ from "Is the earth round?"

On both sides of the abortion controversy, sincere people argue about not when life literally begins, but at what point a fetus becomes a person in a social sense, subject to the protections of its community. As you can see in the section on beliefs, such arguments persist because they have less to do with objective scientific fact than with the beliefs that make up a basic part of culture.

ONE STEP FURTHER 2.1

Is Premarital Sex Wrong?

Only a minority (36%) of U.S. adults hold the value that premarital sex is always or almost always wrong (David and Smith, 1993), but like most values in complex societies, the positions people take on this issue depend strongly on their social characteristics. The figures in table A show differences by education, region of the country, family income, age, race, gender, and ethnicity in the percentage of adults saying that premarital sex is always or almost always wrong. If you have not yet studied chapter 6, you might want to look at "How to Read a Table" on p. 104 before going on.

Notice how strongly some social characteristics affect the tendency to disapprove of premarital sex:

TABLE A Percentage Who Say Premarital Sex Is Always or Almost Always Wrong, by Selected Social Characteristics, United States

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS	PERCENTAGE WHO DISAPPROVE OF PREMARITAL SEX	SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS	PERCENTAGE WHO DISAPPROVE OF PREMARITAL SEX
Education		*Age*	
Less than high school graduate	47	18–25	25
High school graduate	36	26–39	26
Some college	31	40–59	33
College degree	29	60 and older	58
Graduate education	26	*Religion*	
Region		Protestant	44
Northeast	27	Catholic	26
Midwest	37	Other	14
South	43	*Race*	
West	41	White	36
Family Income		People of color	36
Less than $10,000	46	*Gender*	
$10,000 to $20,000	33	Female	39
$20,000 to $30,000	32	Male	32
$30,000 to $40,000	38		
$40,000 to $60,000	36		
$60,000 or more	27		

SOURCE: Computed from 1993 General Social Survey data.

The more education people have, the less likely they are to disapprove.

Southerners are most likely to disapprove, people living in the Northeast are least likely to.

The higher the family income is, the less likely adults are to disapprove.

The elderly are more than twice as likely to disapprove than younger people are (58% vs. 25%).

Protestants disapprove more than Catholics do (44% vs. 26%), and "others" (which includes Jews and those with no religious preference) are a distant third (14%).

Whites and people of color are equally likely to disapprove.

Women are more likely than men to disapprove (39% vs. 32%).

There has been a steady decline in disapproval of premarital sex, from 46% in 1972 to 36% in 1993.

It is important, as you study these figures, to begin to acquire an appreciation for the idea of *variation*, that elements of culture, such as beliefs and values, change over time and differ from one social grouping to another. Variation is a source of diversity and conflict.

Although we might pursue what we want, values powerfully influence what it is we want in the first place. As the German philosopher Schopenhauer put it, "We want what we will, but we don't will what we want." We might *think* that we freely choose to compete with others rather than cooperate, but we are largely unaware that in a different culture we would place different values on such behavior and make very different choices. The Zuni Indians of the U.S. Southwest, for example, value cooperation more than competition:

> Personal authority is perhaps the most vigorously disparaged trait in Zuni. A man who thirsts for power or knowledge, who wishes to be as they scornfully phrase it, "a leader of his people," receives nothing but censure and will very likely be persecuted for sorcery. . . . The ideal man in Zuni is a person of dignity and affability who has never tried to lead, and who has never called forth comment from his neighbors. . . . Even in contests of skill like their foot races, if a man wins

habitually he is debarred from running. They are interested in a game that a number can play with even chances, and an outstanding runner spoils the game: they will have none of him. (Benedict 1934, p. 95)

Values are important because they influence our choices. They not only predispose us to strive in competition, to be honest and loyal, but they can also be used to manipulate our decisions. The advertising industry, for example, regularly uses established values to sell merchandise. The interior of a car might be described as sexy; spark plugs might be displayed next to a picture of a beautiful woman. In both cases, the masculine values placed on attracting, possessing, or having power over a woman are paired with the idea of buying something that has no inherent connection to these things. If men accept the pairing, they are more likely to buy the product, not because they value it but because they value what the advertisement associates with it.

The value systems of most societies are complex, changing, and often contradictory. Williams (1970), for example, identified fifteen core values that he believed have an enduring place in U.S. culture. Americans, he pointed out, tend to value achievement and success; competition and hard work; doing what is morally right; looking out for the underdog and those less fortunate; being efficient and practical; facing the future optimistically; having material comforts; equal opportunity and treating everyone as equals; freedom; conformity; solving problems rationally and scientifically; being proud of the "American way of life"; guaranteeing democratic rights; individual autonomy, responsibility, and self-respect; and the use of characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age to value some people more than others.

As with any complex society, these values are not shared equally by everyone and vary in their authority from one social situation to another. In addition, they are often a source of contradiction and conflict: the value placed on being white, for example, conflicts with the value of equal treatment and opportunity, just as the value of conformity conflicts with the value of individualism. Although such conflicts are important on the level of entire societies—as ongoing struggles such as the civil rights movement make clear—they also exist on the individual level as we each try to resolve our own value conflicts.

We often hold values that produce conflict. Suppose you see a friend cheating on an exam. On the one hand, you value truth and honesty; on the other hand, you value loyalty to friends. No matter what you choose to do—to tell on your friend or not—you will violate a value. Values produce conflict because they make up a loose "grammar" of thought about the importance of different alternatives, and because we occupy many positions in different social systems, each with its own values. The values placed on honesty and loyalty are *general* guidelines that do not tell us what to do in specific situations.

Kohlberg (1963) argues that we learn to apply values in the same way we learn grammatical rules that allow us to construct and interpret sentences we have never encountered before. We learn only general rules—such as "It's wrong to steal" and "Put family first"—which we then apply to specific situations. Just as no one ever taught you the meaning of the preceding sentence, no one teaches us what to do if someone in our family needs something that we cannot afford to buy. To solve such dilemmas, then, we participate in a system of values, interpreting and choosing in search of what Roger Brown (1965) called "some reasonable consistency among judgment, feeling, and action" (p. 414). In doing so, we also learn to interpret and apply the abstract principles contained in values in light of our concern and caring for the actual human consequences that might result from choosing one alternative or another (see Gilligan 1982).

PUZZLE

IS HONESTY ALWAYS THE BEST POLICY?

How do you know when to lie and when to tell the truth? Have you ever been in a situation in which you were expected to lie and would be punished if you told the truth?

As you will see in the section on norms, both lying and telling the truth are forms of social behavior, and whether or not we are expected to do one or the other depends very much on the social situation.

PUZZLE

MAKING MORAL DECISIONS

Before reading on, imagine that you are a pediatrician and one of your newborn infant patients suffers from a serious condition that will most likely leave it both paralyzed and severely brain damaged. The parents insist that you take no extreme measures to keep the baby alive. One of your colleagues vehemently disagrees, arguing that it is your duty as a doctor to do everything you can to keep every patient alive. What would you do? How would you go about making your decision?

As you read on, think about moral decisions and how we make them.

Norms: Rules and Expectations

While values provide us with general guidelines for behavior, norms are specific rules. A **norm** defines punishments or rewards (called **sanctions**) for various forms of behavior or appearance, according to people's positions in social relationships. All actions have objective consequences, but norms specify *social* consequences for the person performing the action.

If I kill a man, he dies; if I smack my lips at the dinner table, a noise results. The death and the noise are objective consequences. If I kill a man identified as the enemy in a war, however, his death is not the only consequence, for I might be rewarded with a medal. If I kill a man because I disagree with his politics, however, I risk being punished. If I smack my lips over dinner in the United States, people may show disapproval by frowning, but if I smack them in India, people are more likely to smile at me.

In each case, the link between the act and the consequences for the actor is artificial; it is not inherent in the act itself. The statements "If you kill an enemy, you will get a medal" and "If you kill a man because you don't like him you will be punished" are norms that link specific acts to social consequences. When we are punished for violating a norm (or rewarded for obeying one), it is not because of what we did, it is because of the *rule;* if the rule changes, the same behavior no longer brings with it the same sanctions (Durkheim [1924] 1974).

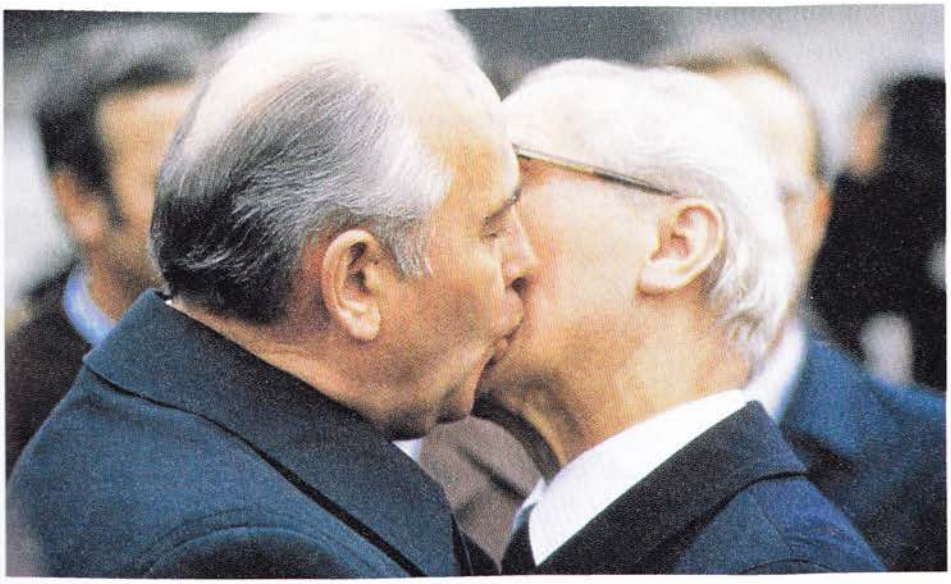
There are several types of norms; the most important are *folkways* and *mores* (pronounced "morayz"), each of which can take the form of a *law.*

Folkways In a classic work, William Graham Sumner (1906) defined a society's **folkways** as the set of manners and customary acts that characterize everyday life in a society. As a set of norms, folkways regulate behavior that produces relatively trivial consequences and results in sanctions that are relatively mild. We are expected to face front in elevators, replace caps on toothpaste tubes, and return library books on time.

Folkways are a particularly fluid form of norm, subject to rapid change, inconsistent application, and enormous variation among the world's cultures. It was not very long ago that men were expected to open doors for women, but now expectations have changed considerably. As with all norms, folkways not only change but depend on the situation (see Edgerton 1985). Staring at a stranger on a bus violates a folkway, for example, but we are expected to stare at performers in a theater. Folkways also vary from one culture to another. In Latin cultures people are expected to stand close to each other when talking; to North Americans and Europeans this proximity would feel uncomfortable. Compared with the British upper class, Americans are more likely to assume familiarity by calling people by their first name. In Japan, people are expected to remove their shoes whenever they enter a house.

A society's folkways describe the fine texture of everyday life, the manners and customs that its members take for granted as "the way we do things." Only when we encounter the folkways of different cultures do we become aware of ours as peculiar rather than as the only way of going about life.

Mores and Morality **Mores** are norms that reflect deeply held cultural ideals about how people should behave (Sumner 1906). While folkways make relatively unimportant distinctions—between polite and impolite, clean and dirty, sophisticated and vulgar—mores make more important distinctions, such as those between good and evil, virtuous and sinful, laudable and repugnant. A society's mores define standards of behavior that are more serious than those defined by folkways, and punishment for their violation tends to be both more certain and more severe.



Folkways include customs that govern how people greet each other when they meet. Former Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev would never greet Bill Clinton as he would one of his own countrymen.

Mores focus on what most of us think of as morality, and several social characteristics distinguish moral acts from immoral ones. First, moral acts never have the actor's self-interest as their only goal. This is what distinguishes Robin Hood's acts of stealing from similar acts by someone who steals for personal gain. This does not imply that an act is immoral if done purely for personal reasons: to run into a burning house to save people's lives is a moral act, but to stay outside out of concern for our own lives usually will be excused. A moral act thus differs from other acts in that it is performed in the interests of other people.

The second social characteristic of moral acts is that they have a quality of command. We do them because we feel a sense of obligation not simply to another individual, but to the values embodied in the act (the value of honesty or of a human life). We refrain from some acts simply because they are forbidden in our culture. If a cashier in a store gives us too much change and we knowingly take it, we do not simply hurt the cashier or the company; we violate one of the terms of our participation in social life. If we return the money, we affirm our place in society and might, as a result, feel the pleasure of belonging.

Third, moral acts have an element of social desirability. They are "good," just as immoral acts are "bad," and we feel genuine pleasure simply from doing "the right thing" (or guilt from doing "the wrong thing"), whether or not we tell other people and bask in the glow of their approval.

Finally, ideas about morality are sacred. Because they reflect the deepest collective feelings about who we are and should be, we attach strong feelings to them. While specific laws may allow some people to do things forbidden to others, the idea that "no one is above the law" is a moral one that applies to us all, even, as Richard Nixon discovered, someone who is the president of the United States.

As with folkways, the application of mores often depends on the situation. Although dishonesty violates general cultural mores, there are situations in which it is permitted or expected. As Bok (1979) pointed out, for example, mores permit us to lie in order to save a life or mislead an enemy during wartime. There is also cross-cultural variation in the definition of moral behavior. Cannibal tribes in Oceania do not consider it immoral to eat human flesh, and the Nayar of India do not define adultery as immoral. Eating pork violates the mores of Orthodox Jews, but in other cultures the consumption of pork is part of an annual celebration of great importance.

Mores extend beyond the rightness or wrongness of certain acts to the most profound ideas about what life in a society is supposed to be about. As such, mores have been used throughout history to justify everything from self-sacrifice and charity to outrageous cruelty. The murder of over eleven million people, including six million Jews, during the Holocaust was seen by the Nazis as "the final solution" to the "Jewish problem" that, they believed, stood between them and the realization of the "supremacy of the Aryan race." To many Nazis, the execution of millions of people was part of a crusade for racial "purity," full of moral self-righteousness; to those who did not share their vision, the Holocaust was a crime of unimaginable immorality and horror (see Dawidowicz 1975).

Laws As norms, both folkways and mores involve sanctions, which can be either informal or formal. **Informal sanctions** are not clearly defined, and anyone has the right to impose them. If we display bad manners in the company of others, anyone has the right to impose a variety of sanctions, ranging from a slight frown to an angry outburst.

Formal sanctions, on the other hand, are clearly defined, and people in specialized positions have the power and responsibility to impose them. If I steal your radio, it is not up to you to enforce the sanctions attached to the norm prohibiting theft. The sanctions, as well as the procedures for deciding if and how to apply them, are clearly specified; and specific people are authorized to apprehend me, determine my guilt or innocence, and impose punishment. Norms with formal sanctions are called **laws.**

Formal and informal sanctions are used to enforce both folkways and mores. Mores usually involve formal sanctions (as in the case of murder), but in some cases (such as lying to a friend) the sanctions are informal. Spitting on a sidewalk violates a folkway, but the sanctions are formal (it is against the law); but if we spit on the floor at a party, the sanctions are informal (the host cannot have us arrested). Note, however, that although specific laws might or might not have a moral content (double-parking is not immoral, but murder is), the *idea* of "the law" is a profoundly moral one.

Keep in mind that although folkways and mores may be the most sociologically significant types of norms, there are many norms that fall into neither category. Much of what we include under the general term *ethics,* for example, concerns behavior that is serious but not immoral. The same can be said of behaviors that violate a variety of laws—such as those against speeding while driving a car: each is far more serious than failing to display proper table manners, but neither is generally considered to be immoral.

Attitudes: Evaluation and Feeling

Unlike beliefs, values, and norms, attitudes focus on emotions. **Attitudes** are positive or negative evaluations of objects, people, or situations that predispose us to feel and behave toward them in positive or negative ways (Allport 1935; Hill 1981; Kiecolt 1988). Although they involve beliefs and values, what set attitudes apart are the feelings connected to these ideas, feelings such as hatred, reverence, awe, disgust, affection, contempt, and pity. This means that the key to identifying an attitude is to see what emotions it involves.

We have the ability to experience and display many emotions, but to understand their ebb and flow, we must go beyond the psychology of individual motives to the cultures that produce patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior (see Thoits 1989). The shared love of a country—patriotism—is an attitude that encompasses beliefs ("our country is the best there is") and emotions (pride, excitement, love), and might make people more likely to

As a cultural attitude, racial prejudice often includes deep feelings of contempt, hostility, and fear. In this Pulitzer Prize–winning picture, whites, who have just recited the pledge of allegiance, attack a black businessman as he walks near a rally against a court-ordered busing plan to integrate schools. The incident took place during the bicentennial year in Boston, a city considered by many to be the "cradle of liberty."

behave aggressively toward anyone who threatens their positive national image. Guilt, pride, shame, sympathy, love, and gratitude are attitudes that exist only in a social context (Gordon 1981; Kemper 1987). Without culture, there is no occasion for such emotions, for they rest on beliefs and values used to interpret and judge behavior. Fear exists as a primary emotion in many animal species, but only in a cultural context do we find the concept of cowardice and the shame that goes with it.

All attitudes are connected to beliefs, but people can share an attitude without sharing a particular belief, just as they might share a belief without sharing a related attitude. Attitudes of racial hatred are often justified by a variety of beliefs, such as a belief in the genetic inferiority of a hated group. Others, however, might feel just as strongly but justify their attitude with a different belief—such as "they're dangerous and dishonest."

In all their forms, cultural ideas influence what we think, feel, and do. Just as gravity pulls our bodies toward the center of the earth, cultural ideas "pull" us toward centers of meaning, value, and expectation. We resist—even defy—gravity in many ways; in the simplest act of standing up, an individual resists gravity's pull. We also resist, and sometimes defy, the constraining force of culture, as when we violate norms. In this sense, culture does not determine what we feel, think, or do. Nor do we act in a vacuum, free of the limitations imposed by social environments. The character of our lives and our relationships with one another are, rather, the result of an *interaction* between ourselves and our environments.

Cultural Relativism, Subcultures, and Ethnocentrism

Some aspects of culture—such as dancing, games, and language—are found in every known society and are thus referred to as **cultural universals** (see table 2.1). In general, however, symbols and ideas vary enormously among societies: What is regarded as truth in one might be unrecognized or regarded as nonsense in others. Ideas that exist in one culture might not exist in others or, if

Overview

Elements of Nonmaterial Culture

Symbols

Beliefs (ideas about reality)
Values (ideas about what is important or desirable)
Norms (rules about appearance or behavior, with sanctions)
  Folkways
  Mores
Attitudes (emotional predispositions)

TABLE 2.1 Some Aspects of Culture Found in All Known Societies

Beliefs about death	Folklore	Numerals
Bodily adornment	Games	Personal names
Calendar	Gift giving	Population policy
Cleanliness training	Hairstyles	Property rights
Cooking	Hospitality	Puberty customs
Cosmology	Hygiene	Religious ritual
Courtship	Incest taboos	Sexual restrictions
Dance	Inheritance rules	Soul concepts
Decorative art	Interpretation of dreams	Sports
Divination	Joking	Superstition
Education	Language	Surgery
Ethics	Law	Toolmaking
Etiquette	Magic	Trade
Faith healing	Medicine	Weaning
Feasting	Mourning	Weather control
Fire making		

they do, they might be considered less important. This phenomenon is called **cultural relativism.** Most Westerners experience kissing as a very pleasurable activity, but when the Thonga of Africa first encountered the practice among visiting Europeans, they were horrified by what they regarded as "eating each other's saliva and dirt" (Hyde 1979, p. 18). This means that to a Thonga the Western practice of touching lips would make no sense at all *unless* viewed in the context of Western cultures rather than the Thonga culture. Thus the central insight of cultural relativism is that the meaning of human behavior can be understood only *relative to* the culture in which it takes place.

Cultural variation also occurs within societies. A **subculture** is a distinctive set of ideas and symbols that set a group of people apart from the culture of the surrounding community or society. Many ethnic groups, for example, retain their native languages and celebrate holidays associated with their countries of origin, in addition to, if not instead of, those of their adopted cultures. Subcultures can also exist on a much smaller scale. In schools, for example, students often form their own subcultures, with distinctive words, values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes. Student subcultures can differ sharply from those of adult teachers and school administrators.

Because cultural ideas provide basic definitions of reality, members of a particular culture tend to be unaware that other cultures exist, assuming that all cultures are like their own. Even when we are aware of cultural differences, there is a tendency to use our own culture as the standard against which others are to be measured and evaluated, with the inevitable judgment that ours is superior. This tendency is a cultural attitude known as **ethnocentrism** (Sumner 1906), a predisposition to be so focused on our own culture that we either do not see others at all or see them in highly distorted ways. The people of most societies have, at one time or another, regarded outsiders as barbarians whose cultures were crude and uncivilized simply because they were different (see Peyrefitte 1992). "How could they live that way?" we might ask, not realizing that people in other cultures are probably asking the same question about us.

An important element of U.S. culture, for example, is the belief that romantic love is essential for marriage, and for those who have known no other culture than this, it is tempting to believe that the connection between romantic love and marriage is natural rather than cultural. If we study history, however, we find that in Western cultures the idea of romantic love is quite recent, dating back only to the fourteenth century, and in our own time there are many cultures, such as China's, in which the importance of romantic love in marriage is considerably less than in our own.

Ethnocentrism distorts perceptions by encouraging us to think of the world only from our own point of view. People of European ancestry like to think that European explorers, like Columbus, "discovered" the "Dark Continent" of Africa and the "New World" of North and South America. This would come as a great surprise to the peoples of many cultures who lived and thrived throughout those areas for centuries before any Europeans set sail. To these peoples, what were mysteries to the Europeans were simply part of their everyday environment. It is only through the narrow eye of ethnocentrism that we in the United States can believe that before whites set foot in North America it was an "undiscovered" place (see Braudel 1981).

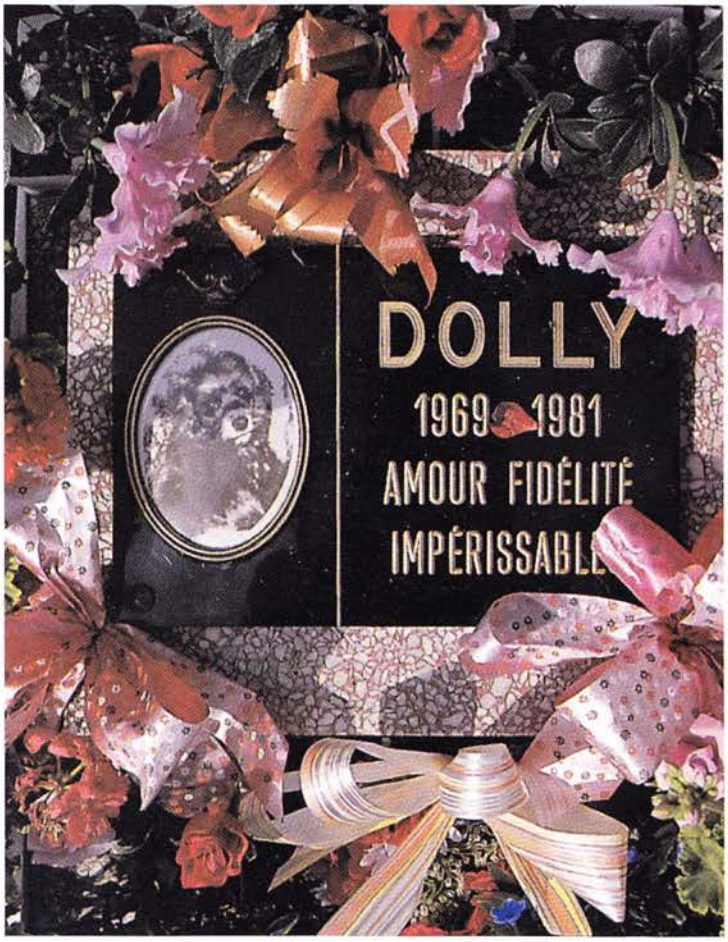
The opposite of ethnocentrism is **xenocentrism,** the tendency to see other cultures as superior to our own. People in the United States, for example, often assume that goods made in Europe are better or more desirable than the same goods made at home. We might assume that French and German wines or European cheeses are superior, for example, or that a product whose name is simply in a foreign language is more exotic and, hence, valuable. Like ethnocentrism, xenocentrism is a common cultural phenomenon—many people in Third World countries assume that Western cultures are superior and might devalue their own as a result. In the Philippines, for example, most popular music is derived from U.S. rock and not traditional Philippine musical forms. Even folk festivals sometimes exclude the rich Filipino folk heritage.

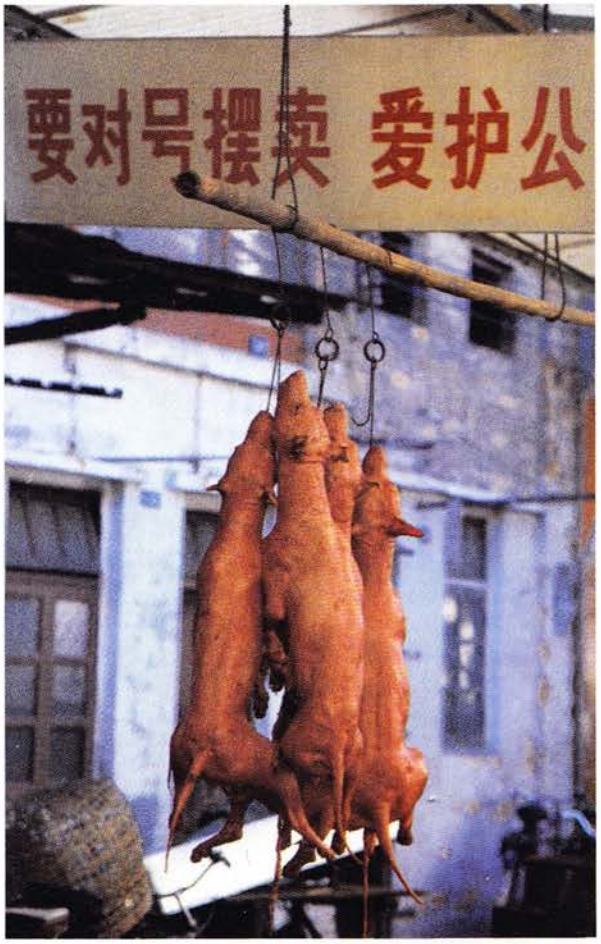
MATERIAL CULTURE

The production of material goods lies at the core of human existence, and the development of **material culture** takes place only through social relationships. We produce not only to satisfy our needs, but also because productive life is an important aspect of what makes us human (Marx, in Schaff 1970).

Throughout the course of history, people have developed an astonishing variety of objects that affect human life. The invention of the plow and wheel around six thousand years ago revolutionized the ability to travel, produce food, and conduct trade. The development of printing, first by the Chinese in the fifth century A.D. and then with Gutenberg's invention of movable type in the fifteenth century, stimulated a rapid spread of literacy and new ideas. The Industrial Revolution began in the middle of the eighteenth century with the invention of machines and the use of new sources of power (such as steam), which, when applied to transportation in the mid-1800s, vastly expanded the markets for goods. The last hundred years have seen the rapid development of mass production, new materials such as plastic, and revolutions in communications and computer technology.

Such objects are cultural in that they arise from the human ability to think in symbolic terms, to share the resulting knowledge, and to build on





In some cultures, such as in France, dogs are cherished as pets who, when they die, are accorded the kind of treatment usually reserved for humans. In others, such as in China, dogs are valued in quite a different way. How do these pictures make you feel, and how do you explain your feelings?

previous inventions in the creation of others. They also reflect values and beliefs: the rapid development of industrial technology, for example, reflects not only possessions as a value, but, in capitalist societies, the value of profit, which is increased by mechanization and more efficient production.

The development of material culture is often a social response to the pressures of population and ecological conditions. Growing populations require new methods for satisfying subsistence needs. Those methods, in turn, often create the need for further innovation. When coal was first used as a source of power in the United States, it was easy to obtain; in Pennsylvania, it lay on the surface of the earth. As we consumed it in greater and greater quantities, it became necessary to go underground, and this required more sophisticated machines to drill and haul the coal.

Material culture, however, is not merely a way of adapting to a changing physical environment, for as we will see in chapter 4 and elsewhere, it is also a major way for social systems to affect their environments, sometimes with disastrous consequences. Many of the most pressing social problems of the 1990s, such as pollution and the shortage of energy, are closely connected with material culture. Without the technology that made industrialization possible,

for example, there would be no voracious demand for oil and other nonrenewable resources; nor would there be the mountains of waste that outstrip our ability to dispose of it.

Material culture affects not only the physical environment, but social systems as well. Without the medical technology to extend life, for example, we would not be struggling with questions of whether a family has the right to withdraw life-support systems when there seems to be no hope of recovery. Technology has transformed the experience of dying—both for those who die and for those involved with them—and in the process has raised profoundly troubling social and moral issues. In similar ways, reproductive technology has created dilemmas that were unforeseen when they were developed. The ability to identify the sex of a fetus, for example, has been used in some countries to choose abortion as a method of sex selection by parents. In India, this has already resulted in a decline in female births due to the cultural bias in favor of male infants (see Corea et al. 1987).

Material culture affects social systems in countless other ways that shape everyday life. From the kinds of dwellings we live in to the food we eat and the clothes we wear, from how we learn to how we travel, from the conduct of warfare to saving a life—in all of these, material culture plays a prominent role. The development of reliable contraceptive technology, for example, has had widespread and varied consequences. Not only has it contributed to dramatic declines in birth rates (see chapter 4), but it has given women unprecedented control over their bodies and has for the first time in history made it possible to separate human sexual expression from reproduction.

Material and nonmaterial culture are related in complex ways. The explosive growth in electronics and computer technology, for example, raises new threats to privacy rights. There is now a growing alarm over the relative ease with which the operators of personal computers can gain access to records stored in computers in hospitals, universities, banks, military research laboratories, and other institutions. When this was first discovered, there were no laws that defined it as a crime, because the spread of computer technology was so rapid that such invasions had not come up as a serious possibility. As new laws are passed to protect the right to privacy, new technology must be invented to secure computers against unauthorized access.

An even more important aspect of material culture is that objects, once created, become independent parts of culture. Computers do only what people tell them to do, yet we often blame computers for everything from errors on telephone bills to junk mail. With the blame often goes the belief that computers have control over our lives beyond how people choose to use them. As machines increase in importance, we might "begin to feel ourselves as things that are parts of the surrounding world of things" (Schaff 1970, p. 106).

THE PRODUCTION OF CULTURE

Mainstream sociology typically views culture as a set of symbols and ideas that underlie social life and that are taken-for-granted assumptions shaping how we perceive, feel, think, interpret, and act. A growing number of sociologists,

however, also pay attention to culture as something actively produced by social systems—books and magazines, music, art, architectural styles, plays, radio and television programs, comic books, stories, legends and fables, political propaganda, science, technical knowledge, religious ritual. These sociologists raise questions about both how culture is produced and how it affects social life (see Becker 1982; Peterson 1990; Wuthnow 1987; Wuthnow and Witten 1988).

Art, for example, emerges from complex relationships among artists, gallery owners, private and public funding agencies, museums, and audiences. Controversial works by artists supported by government grants provoked such a storm of outrage that some congressional leaders tried to pressure the National Endowment for the Arts to withhold support from any artist who refused to promise not to produce "offensive" works. This raised deep concerns within the artistic community, because many artists depend on financial support from government and corporate sponsors and yet regard their freedom to create as fundamental to the work that they do. The debate that followed raised questions about the social importance of free artistic expression, the place of art in community life, and whether artists have a right to some share of public resources in order to produce art (see Pankratz and Morris 1990; Wyszomirski 1988). The related issue of censorship in music was raised in 1990 when two members of the rap group 2 Live Crew were arrested in Florida for performing songs that local authorities, later backed up by a federal judge, had declared obscene.

If we look at culture as something that is produced, rather than take it for granted, we can ask questions about the social conditions from which it emerges. Where did rap music come from, for example, and how does it reflect the conditions of social life? How do families as social systems produce elements of their culture, such as shared stories about childhood or special ways of celebrating holidays? How do political ideologies develop, such as the pro-choice and pro-life sides of the abortion controversy, positions so polarized that there is no shared common ground on which they can meet to communicate? Such questions are important because they remind us that culture is not a static background in social life, but always in the process of being created, shaped, and reproduced.

CONNECTIONS

Because sociology focuses on social life in relation to social systems, we need to see how one system differs from another. As we have seen in this chapter, every social system has cultural characteristics of various kinds, which means that in order to describe a system, whether a college classroom or a nation, we have to identify the material and nonmaterial elements included in its culture. These, in turn, are connected to the structural and population/ecological characteristics of social systems, which we turn to in the next two chapters.

As you deepen your grasp of the different aspects of culture, keep in mind the kinds of sociological questions we need to ask about them. How, for example, are cultural ideas such as those reflected in racism, sexism, or homophobia used to organize life in a society, and what kinds of consequences does this produce? How do we participate in this as individuals? How can societies change so that prejudice becomes a thing of the past? As you will see later on, the answers to such questions involve far more than culture alone, for each aspect of social life is connected to many others.

SUMMARY

1. Although culture includes both material and nonmaterial elements, its essence consists of beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms. These are expressed through symbols: objects, characteristics of objects, gestures, or words that represent more than themselves.
2. Language is a collection of symbols and rules for their use shared by those who make up a speech community. It is a creative medium through which we construct what we experience as reality. It also allows people to express experience, to store records of it, and to assume that others know what they mean when they write or talk; and it allows members of a speech community to distinguish between themselves and outsiders. In addition, performative language is used to create or alter relationships.
3. Beliefs are statements about reality, and are cultural only if their authority lies outside of individuals in the shared assumption that other people support them. Values rank behavior and social arrangements in terms of relative importance or desirability. Values often conflict because they provide only loose guidelines, and because we occupy positions in many different relationships.
4. Norms are rules that prescribe sanctions—punishments or rewards—for appearance and behavior, according to positions in social relationships. Sanctions can be either informal (loosely defined, with no specific people authorized to impose them) or formal (clearly defined, with specific people empowered to deliver them).
5. There are three main kinds of norms. Folkways regulate relatively trivial behaviors in everyday social interactions, and mores reflect deeply held ideas about how people should behave. Norms with formal sanctions are called laws.
6. Attitudes are predispositions to feel positive or negative emotions toward people and to behave toward them in positive or negative ways. Attitudes include the feelings people have toward themselves, such as pride or shame.
7. *Cultural relativism* refers to the fact that the meaning and importance of a particular cultural element depends on its cultural context. Ethnocentrism is the tendency of people to ignore other cultures or assume them to be inferior. The concepts of cultural relativism and ethnocentrism can also apply within a society in relation to subcultures.
8. Material culture consists of objects people make as they interact with each other and the physical world. Material and nonmaterial culture are related. Ideas often lead to the creation of objects, but objects can become so important a part of the environment that they affect the cultural ideas that shape life.

KEY TERMS

attitudes 30
beliefs 24
cultural relativism 32
cultural universal 31
culture 20
ethnocentrism 32
folkways 28
formal sanction 30
gesture 20
informal sanction 30
language 21
law 30
material culture 33
mores 28
nonmaterial culture 20
norm 28
performative language 24
sanction 28
speech community 23
subculture 32
symbols 20
value 25
xenocentrism 33

LOOKING ELSEWHERE

Although you will be reading about culture throughout *Human Arrangements*, having studied this chapter you may want to look at some discussions with a particularly strong cultural focus, which include

- the importance of language in socialization (chapter 7, pp. 131–32)
- language and gender roles (chapter 14, pp. 319–20)
- the controversy over English as the official language of the United States (chapter 13, pp. 290–91)
- technology and material culture (chapter 4, pp. 73–75)

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Barlow, W. B. 1989. *"Looking up at Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press. An insightful history of the blues as a musical form, from its rural beginnings to its development in major U.S. cities.

Benedict, R. [1934] 1960. *Patterns of Culture.* New York: New American Library (paperback). A classic analysis of cultural relativism with a special emphasis on Native American tribes.

Conklin, N. F., and M. A. Lourie. 1983. *A Host of Tongues: Language Communities in the United States.* New York: Free Press. A study of linguistic assimilation through which the diverse cultural origins of the American people are dominated by a single language.

Harris, M. 1985. *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture.* New York: Simon & Schuster. Anthropologist Marvin Harris offers a rich and fascinating look at the cultural basis of what people like (and don't like) to eat.

Kephart, W. M., and W. W. Zellner. 1993. *Extraordinary Groups: An Examination of Unconventional Life-styles.* 5th ed. New York: St. Martin's Press. A fascinating analysis of past and present subcultures in the United States, including the Amish, Oneida, Shakers, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Slater, P. 1976. *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (rev. ed.). Boston: Beacon Press. A passionate and articulate analysis in which a sociologist shows how cultural values can promote social isolation and loneliness.

Zborowski, M. 1953. Cultural components in responses to pain. *Journal of Social Issues* 8, 16–31. A fascinating exploration into ethnic differences in the ways people experience and respond to pain in a hospital setting.