



Members of the All Blacks, New Zealand's National Rugby Union team, give a haka after winning an important match in South Africa. Among the Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, the haka is a dance or challenge with stylized gestures and facial expressions. Historically, haka were often associated with Maori warfare. However, they are also used to mark special occasions and achievements.

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CULTURE COUNTS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. List the major characteristics of culture.
2. Describe the role of learned behavior in culture.
3. Explain the ways in which people use symbols and classification to create meaning in the world.
4. Identify the ways in which culture can be considered a system and the ways in which it is not like a system.
5. Tell some of the ways in which culture is and is not shared, and describe the roles of norms and values in the cultural process.
6. Compare and contrast cultural and biological adaptation.
7. Give examples of the ways in which culture changes, and describe the role of conflict and consensus in culture change.

FERAL CHILDREN

EUROPEANS, as well as members of many other cultures, have often been fascinated by tales of feral or wild children. These are human children who are alleged to have grown up by themselves in the wild, apart from human civilization. Accounts of such children date to antiquity, and a website that appeared in the early 2000s claimed to document more than 80 cases between 250 and 2002 CE (Benzaquen 2006). Frequently, feral children are popularly supposed to have been raised by members of other animal species, often wolves or bears.

There is no reliable evidence that any human child has ever actually been raised by members of another species. Some of the many accounts of feral children seem to be outright fraud, but many others are probably stories about children who were abandoned because of a physical or mental disability and who survived by scavenging and begging around the edges of human settlements. Many of the best known of these children would, if they were alive today, probably be diagnosed with autism.

Because feral children are understood to grow up with little contact with other humans, they give us a way to consider popular understandings of human society and culture. Mary-Ann Ochota, an anthropologist and journalist, points out that stories of feral children almost always describe them as making animal sounds, being covered with hair, having claw-like nails and other animal features, and unable to eat cooked food (Ochota 2017). Other than making animal sounds, it is extremely unlikely that any children have these traits. However, these characteristics position such children as close to animals; their lack of culture renders them nonhuman.

Two of the most famous feral children were Peter the Wild Boy and Victor the Wild Boy of Aveyron (Photo 2.1) (Newton 2002). Peter was found in 1725, in what is today northern

Germany.¹ Brought to the court of King George I in England, he was a well-known curiosity for the rest of his long life. Given to the care of court physician John Arbuthnot, who tried to educate him, Peter acquired the ability to use some simple words and perform a few tasks but made little progress beyond that. He disappeared for more than three months in the summer of 1751 and, after he was found, was forced to wear a brass collar engraved with his name and address.

Victor lived in the forests around Aveyron in southern France in the last years of the 1790s. Like Peter, Victor was unable to speak, which, along with his bizarre behavior, garnered much attention, first in Aveyron and later in Paris. Like Peter, Victor was given to the care of a physician, Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard, who attempted to teach him to speak and to perform rudimentary tasks. And like Arbuthnot's, Itard's attempts at instruction were largely ineffective.

Peter and Victor were famous in their day. Some of the most important intellectuals of the era wrote about Peter, including Jonathan Swift (author of *Gulliver's Travels*), Daniel Defoe (author of *Robinson Crusoe* and many other works), and the Scottish jurist and early evolutionist James Burnett, Lord Monboddo. Victor was also the subject of extensive commentary during his lifetime, and his fame has continued into modern times. His life in both realistic and fictionalized form appears in many novels and films, particularly French director Francois Truffaut's 1970 film *L'Enfant Sauvage* (*The Wild Child*).

So, what is it about feral children that fascinated people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and continues to fascinate today? Swift, Defoe, and Monboddo provided different answers: Swift's work is a critique of the culture of his era. Swift imagined Peter, who in reality was mute, trying to comprehend the alien social customs of the British aristocracy. Thus, through Peter, the culture of his era was made visible and shown to be corrupt and absurd.

Defoe (1726) approached Peter from a more challenging angle. He wondered about the degree to which Peter really was a human being. Did he have a soul? Peter was human in form, but he could neither speak nor participate in human society in any meaningful way. Unable to speak, he was perhaps unable to think as well. Because Peter lacked these abilities, his existence was a horrible lonely burden.

For Monboddo, Peter and other wild children proved that little or nothing was natural to humanity: Speech, upright posture, walking on two feet are all capacities that people had to be taught through a process of civilization. Monboddo used this idea to argue that

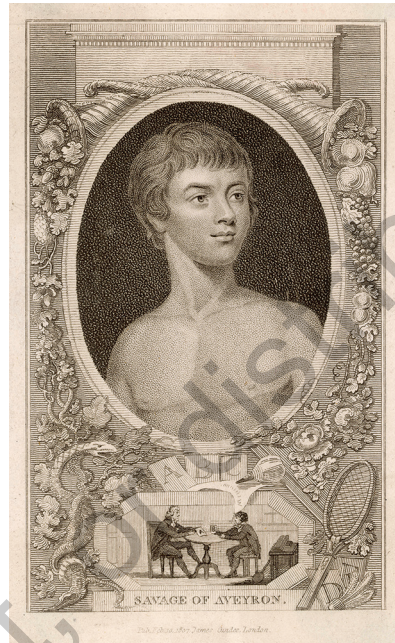


PHOTO 2.1 Victor, the wild child of Aveyron is shown in an etching from about 1800. The smaller picture at the bottom shows the physician J.-M. G. Itard's largely unsuccessful attempt to educate Victor.

Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo

¹ Like other "wild" children, Peter was not wild at all. He was a mentally handicapped individual who had been beaten and thrown out of his house when his father remarried and his new stepmother did not want to take care of him (Wrangham 2019, 52). Victor most likely had autism (Wing 2013).

orangutans were humans too; they had the capacities for human characteristics but had not learned to use them (Benzaquen 2006, 131).

Victor was captured and displayed in the era immediately following the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, the period after the revolution in which thousands were put to death by guillotine. In this context, he too raised important questions. The philosophers of the French Revolution wanted to make humanity over. Many, following the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, believed that humans, in their natural form, free of the constraints of (European) culture, lacked morals but were essentially noble. Was Victor a “noble savage” without culture? Could proper education make him into a new and better type of person? Did Itard’s failure to educate Victor mean that humans without society were so degraded that they could not be brought into society?

DEFINING CULTURE

Because Peter and Victor were almost certainly individuals with profound autism (and in Peter’s case, perhaps a rare chromosomal disorder as well [Kennedy 2011]), observations of them could not have answered questions about humanity without culture. However, the writings and questions that surrounded them and the continued interest in cases of feral children today draw our attention to the nature of culture and the relationship between culture and human nature. The persistence of stories about wild children seems to make clear that, without the constraints, assumptions, and patterns imposed by culture, it is extraordinarily difficult to express our human qualities and abilities. But what is culture?

Although coming up with a useful, brief definition of culture is difficult, an anthropologist from Mars observing the many different human cultures might discover six characteristics shared by all cultures:

1. Cultures are made up of learned behaviors. People are not born knowing their culture. They learn it through a process called enculturation.
2. Cultures all involve classification systems and symbols.
3. Cultures are patterned and integrated. Thus, changes in one aspect of culture affect other aspects. However, elements of culture do not necessarily work smoothly with one another.
4. Cultures are shared. Although there may be disagreement about many aspects of a culture, there must be considerable consensus as well.
5. Cultures are adaptive and include information about how to survive in the world, but cultures can contain much that is maladaptive.
6. Cultures are subject to change. Whether propelled by their internal dynamics or acted upon by outside forces, cultures are always in flux.

Based on this list, we might define culture as the learned, symbolic, at least partially adaptive, and ever-changing patterns of behavior and meaning shared by members of a group.

Although anthropologists agree on the basic characteristics of culture, they disagree on their relative importance, how to study them, and, indeed, on the goals of anthropology itself. For example, some anthropologists are deeply concerned with observable behavior. Other anthropologists wish to comprehend the ways in which other people understand their world. Some anthropologists hope to find general laws of human culture. Others are more concerned with describing specific aspects of particular cultures. These disagreements reflect different theoretical positions within anthropology. For our purposes, an **anthropological theory** is a set of propositions about which aspects of culture are critical, how they should be studied, and what the goal of studying them should be. Although those who hold different theoretical perspectives may insist that there is a right way and a wrong way to do anthropology, we suggest that theoretical perspectives are more like different windows through which one may view culture. Just as two windows may have views that overlap or views that show different scenes, perspectives on culture may overlap or reveal different aspects. Some of the major theoretical perspectives in anthropology are summarized in Table 2.1.

In this chapter, we examine each element of our definition of culture. Each is a common characteristic of all human groups. However, each also raises questions, problems, and contradictions. Through examining these elements, we come to a keener appreciation of the nature of culture and, ultimately, what it means to be human.

CULTURE IS MADE UP OF LEARNED BEHAVIORS

Just about everything that is animate learns. Your dog, your cat, even your fish show some learned behavior. But, as far as we know, no other creature has as much learned behavior as human beings. Almost every aspect of our lives is layered with learning. Our heart beats, our eyes blink, and our knees respond reflexively to a doctor's rubber mallet, but to get much beyond that, we need learning. Food is a good example. Humans must eat; that much is determined biologically. However, we do not just eat; our culture teaches us what is edible and what is not. We decline many things that are nutritious as not being food. Many insects, for example, are perfectly edible. The philosopher Aristotle was particularly fond of eating cicadas, and northern Europeans ate some species of beetles well into the nineteenth century. Yet most Americans have learned that insects are not food, and they will go hungry, to the point of starvation, before knowingly eating them (although we are perfectly willing to eat them if we are unaware we are doing so; for example, Natural Red #4, a common food dye, is made from cochineal, a type of beetle). Further, we eat particular things at particular times, in particular places, and with particular people. For example, although it is acceptable to eat popcorn at the movies, you would be unlikely to have lamb chops and asparagus or a nice stir-fry at most movie theaters.

We sometimes think of learning as an aspect of childhood, but in every society, human beings learn their culture continuously. We are socialized from the moment of our births to the time of our deaths. Although large demands for labor and responsible behavior may be placed

TABLE 2.1 ■ Major Theoretical Perspectives in Anthropology		
Theory Name	Understanding of Culture	Some Critical Thinkers
Nineteenth-Century Evolutionism	All societies progress, sharing a single universal culture that they possess in different amounts.	E. B. Tylor (1832–1917) L. H. Morgan (1818–1881)
Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Sociology	Groups of people share sets of symbols and practices that bind them into societies.	Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) Max Weber (1864–1920)
The American Boasian Tradition	Cultures are the results of shared histories and must be described holistically.	Franz Boas (1858–1942) Margaret Mead (1901–1978)
Functionalism	Social practices support societies' structure or fill the needs of its members.	A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942)
Culture and Personality	Culture is personality writ large. It is shaped by psychological forces.	Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) Edward Sapir (1884–1939)
Cultural Ecology and Neo-evolutionism	Culture is the way in which human beings adapt to the environment and make their lives secure.	Julian Steward (1902–1972) Leslie White (1900–1975)
Ecological Materialism	Physical and economic causes give rise to cultures and explain changes within them.	Morton Fried (1923–1986) Marvin Harris (1927–2001)
Cognitive Anthropology	Culture is a mental template that determines how members of a society understand their worlds.	Ward Goodenough (1919–2013) James Spradley (1933–1982)
Structural Anthropology	Universal patterns in human cultures can be discovered through the analysis of myths. These patterns continue to be active in current culture.	Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) Rodney Needham (1923–2006)
Evolutionary Anthropology	Culture is the visible expression of an underlying evolved and adaptive genetic code.	E. O. Wilson (1929–) John Tooby (1952–)
Anthropology and Gender	The ways in which societies understand sexuality are central to understanding culture.	Michelle Rosaldo (1944–1981) Don Kullick (1960–)

Theory Name	Understanding of Culture	Some Critical Thinkers
Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology	Culture is the way in which members of a society understand who they are and give meaning to life.	Mary Douglas (1921–2007) Clifford Geertz (1926–2006)
Practice Theory	Culture emerges from the dynamic relationship between social constraints and individual choices.	Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) Sherry Ortner (1941–)
Postmodernism	The constraints of observation and writing play a critical role in our attempts to analyze culture.	Renato Rosaldo (1941–) James Clifford (1945–)
Globalization	Culture is best analyzed as the global flow of identity, symbolism, money, and information, within a context of inequality.	Arjun Appadurai (1949–) David Harvey (1935–)

Please note that theories in anthropology are complex and cannot be summed accurately in a single line. There are many outstanding books about anthropological theory including McGee and Warms, *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*.

on children in many societies, all humans remain physically, emotionally, and intellectually immature well into their teen years and perhaps into their early twenties. This lengthy period of immaturity has profound implications. First, it allows time for an enormous amount of childhood learning. This means that very few specific behaviors need to be under direct genetic or biological control. Second, it demands human cultures be designed to provide relatively stable environments that allow time for this learning to take place.

Infants grow into children and later into adults not simply as humans but as humans with particular kinds of identities—Tlingit, Trobriand Islanders, Britons, or Canadians and so on. Every society has both formal and informal means of transmitting its typical attitudes, motivations, values, perceptions, and beliefs so that children grow up to be cultural insiders and so that the society is reproduced socially as well as biologically. The process of learning to be a member of a particular cultural group is called **enculturation**.

As an example, consider child-rearing among the Inuit, a hunting people of the Arctic (Map 2.1). The Inuit teach their children to deal with a world that is a dangerously problematic place, in which making wrong decisions might well mean death (Briggs 1991). To survive in this harsh environment, Inuit must learn to maintain a “constant state of alertness” and an “experimental way of living.” Therefore, developing skills for solving problems quickly and spontaneously is central to Inuit child-rearing. Children are brought up to constantly test their physical skills to extend them and to learn their capacity for pain and endurance. The goal of Inuit child-rearing is to create adults who have *silatuniq*, literally have “a big world” (Annahatak 2014, 28). People who have achieved *silatuniq* understand the interconnections among things and are respectful in their ways and interactions.

MAP 2.1 ■ Location of the Inuit



Source: Nanda, *Cultural Anthropology*, 12th edition, page 58. SAGE Publishing, 2020.

Play is a critical part of Inuit child-rearing. Inuit games prepare children for the rigors of the arctic environment by stressing hand-eye coordination, problem solving, and physical strength and endurance. Some games involve learning by taking objects apart and trying to put them back together. This process develops careful attention to details and relationships, patient trial and error, and the mental recording of results for future reference. Many games stress the body and test the limits of the individual's psychological and physical endurance (Nelson 1899). For example, in the ear pull game (Photo 2.2), a thin loop of leather is positioned behind the ears of each of two competitors, who then pull away from each other until one gives up in pain (World Eskimo-Indian Olympics 2016).

In addition to being physically adept and independent, Inuit children must learn to be cooperative and emotionally restrained. Living in closely knit and often isolated camps, the Inuit avoid expressions of anger or aggression. They prize reason, judgment, and emotional control, and believe that these characteristics grow naturally as children grow.

The Inuit believe that children have both the ability and the wish to learn. Thus, educating a child consists of providing the necessary information, which the child will remember sooner or later. Scolding is seen as futile. Children will learn when they are ready; there is no point in

Inuit children learn largely by observing their elders. Children are discouraged from asking questions. Rather, when confronted with a problem situation, they are expected to observe closely, to reason, and to find solutions independently. They watch, practice, and then they are tested, frequently by adults asking them questions based on the idea of *isummaksaiyuq*, a northern Baffin Island Inuit term meaning to “cause (or cause to increase) thought” (Briggs 1998, 5). Some questions are very practical. For example, as they travel on the featureless, snow-covered tundra, an adult may ask a child, “Where are we?” or “Have you ever been here before?” Others are existentially challenging. Adults may ask children “Why don’t you kill your baby brother?” or “Your mother’s going to die—look, she’s cut her finger—do you want to come live with *me*?” Such questions are not considered cruel. Rather, they force children to grapple with issues of grave consequence (Briggs 2000, 161).



PHOTO 2.2 The Inuit ear pull game is a harsh test of physical endurance. Contestants pull against each other until one can no longer endure the pain. Here George Brown, age 12, competes in the 2007 World Eskimo-Indian Olympics in Anchorage, Alaska.

AP Photo/Al Grillo

forcing children to learn something before they are ready to remember it. Inuit elders believe that frequent scolding makes children hostile, rebellious, and impervious to the opinions of others.

The study of enculturation has a central place in the history of anthropology and gave rise to some of its classic works. Margaret Mead's 1928 book *Coming of Age in Samoa* was a best seller and a landmark work that changed how Americans looked at childhood and culture. Mead and others who studied childhood learning are known as **culture and personality** theorists. Culture and personality theorists held that cultures could best be understood by examining the patterns of child-rearing and considering their relation to adult lives and social institutions. Culture and personality theory was extremely influential from the 1920s until the 1950s. Today, the process of learning culture remains critical to many anthropologists, especially gender researchers, those who approach culture from a psychological perspective, and those who focus on practice theory. Some recent work in enculturation includes *A World of Babies* (DeLoache and Gottlieb 2000), a series of essays in which anthropologists describe the advice that might be given to new parents in seven different cultures. *Play and the Human Condition* (2015), Thomas Henricks's examination of the way play allows the social meanings behind play, and Kathleen Barlow and Bambi Chapin's (2010) collection of essays about mothering.

CULTURE IS THE WAY HUMANS USE SYMBOLS TO CLASSIFY THEIR WORLD AND GIVE IT MEANING

Consider this: Can you really see your environment? For example, when you walk into a classroom, you notice some things but not others. You see your friends and other students, the professor, the video equipment, and so on. You might spend an entire semester without ever seeing the cracks in the ceiling, the pattern of the carpeting, or the color of the walls. Yet these things are as physically present as the chairs and your friends.

You see certain things in the classroom and overlook others because you mentally organize the contents of the classroom with respect to your role as a student. In that context, some of the things in the room, such as the professor and your friends, are relevant; other things, such as the color of the walls are much less so. It is virtually impossible to see things without organizing and evaluating them in some manner. If you paid as much attention to the cracks in the wall, the patterns on the floor, and the humming of the ventilation system as you did to the professor's lecture, you would not only likely fail the class but also live in a world that was overwhelming and impossibly confusing. We can only comprehend the world and act in it by fitting our perceptions and experiences into systems of organization and classification. A human without this ability would be paralyzed, frozen by an overwhelming bombardment of sensations.

Methods of organizing and classifying are typical of groups. You are not the only one who thinks that the students and professors in a classroom are more important than the ceiling tiles; all students and professors probably share that perception. Anthropologists have long proposed that culture is a shared mental model that people use to organize, to classify, and ultimately to understand their world. A key way in which this model is expressed is through language, a symbolic system.

Different cultures have different models for understanding and speaking about the world. For instance, in English, the verb *smoke* describes the action of ingesting a cigarette, and the verb *drink* describes the action of consuming a liquid. However, in the Bamana language (also known as Bambara), spoken by the Bambara of Mali, the verb *min* is used both for smoking and for drinking. Americans classify rainbows as objects of beauty and frequently point them out to one another. However, Lacandon Maya in southern Mexico classify rainbows as dangerous and frightening. Pointing them out to other people is highly inappropriate. For them, rainbows are unlucky because they hold back the rain. Snakes, rather than pots of gold, are found under them, and they are associated with particular types of ghosts.

Anthropologists who are particularly interested in describing the systems of organization and classification different cultures use often use a theoretical perspective called ethnoscience. Generally, these anthropologists are interested in capturing the understanding of members of a culture. Ethnoscience is one position or technique within a broader perspective called **cognitive anthropology**, which focuses on the relationship between the mind and society. Other anthropologists believe that although the details of a system of classification may be unique to an individual culture, there are grand overall patterns that are common to all humanity. The study of this aspect of culture is called structural anthropology.

USING ANTHROPOLOGY: CULTURALLY SPECIFIC DISEASES—THE CASE OF LIA LEE

Because all human beings are extremely similar biologically, all are subject to the same biologically based diseases. However, the ways in which people classify, experience, and understand health and illness differ dramatically among cultures. Anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1988) differentiates between “disease,” a patient’s biological problem, and “illness,” the social and cultural context in which the disease is experienced and the ways in which it is classified.

Anthropologists have identified many culturally bound syndromes, illnesses that are identified in only one or a small number of cultures. Fan death, the commonly held Korean belief that running a fan overnight in a room with the windows and doors closed can lead to the death of those sleeping in the room, is one example (Jennings 2013). *Bangungot*, the name for another culturally specific syndrome, is a term originating from the Tagalog word for “bad dream” and is found in the Philippines and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. *Bangungot* is diagnosed when young people, particularly adolescents and young adult men, die suddenly in their sleep. Eating disorders such as *anorexia nervosa* are culturally bound syndromes particular to rapidly industrializing societies, particularly in Western Europe, the United States, and Asia.

Different ways of classifying and understanding illness and of treating disease present enormous challenges to health care around the world, particularly in multicultural societies such as the United States. The case of Lia Lee, described in Anne Fadiman’s now-classic 1997 *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, presents a powerful example and a cautionary tale. Lia Lee (Photo 2.3) was the fourteenth child born to Foua Yang and Nao Kao Lee, Hmong refugees from Laos living in California. When she was three months old, she began to experience seizures. However, the Lees were unable to explain Lia’s condition to health care workers who spoke no Hmong and had no experience of Hmong culture. For the Lees, the seizures were evidence that Lia’s soul was being touched or taken by something from a different realm. Health care workers could not understand this, and it took a long time to diagnose Lia with epilepsy. However, this was the beginning of the problem, not the end. For the doctors, epilepsy was a disease to be treated with medicines, and they demanded that the Lees comply with their prescriptions,



PHOTO 2.3 Foua Yang, Lia Lee’s mother, holds Lia Lee’s picture in 2012.

Manny Crisostomo/Sacramento Bee/Tribune News Service via Getty Images

some of which were quite difficult and unpleasant to administer to a toddler. For the Lees, Lia's symptoms showed that she had *qaug dab peg*, an illness caused when a person's soul becomes separated from her body. Though Lia's condition needed a cure, it also meant that she could have spiritual powers and might become a shaman.

Doctors, social workers, and the Lee family fought bitterly over Lia's treatment. At one point, she was placed in foster care for a year because her parents refused to administer her medications, treating her instead with herbs and shamanic ritual. In 1986, when she was four years old, Lia suffered a profound seizure, followed by an infection. She lost most brain function and was expected to die, but didn't. Although doctors and medical personnel at hospitals that treated her often spoke of her as if she were dead, she lived for another 26 years, never regaining consciousness but both cared for by her family and central to their lives. Though Fadiman (2012) acknowledges that it's not a medical explanation, she feels that Lia was kept alive by the constant love of her family.

Fadiman's account of Lia's story and the role of different cultural understandings in health care is required reading in many medical and social work programs. It was one of many cases that led to greater sensitivity regarding issues of language and culture in health care delivery in the United States. In an interview after Lia's death in the summer of 2012, Fadiman said that one of the key lessons of Lia's case was that Western medical personnel must try to understand illness from their patients' points of view, particularly when they have patients from cultures that have different conceptions of health and illness. Doctors must understand that treatment is not something they can dictate but something that must be created through collaboration between patients and health care providers (Fadiman 2012; Fox 2012).

Symbols and Meaning

Human beings not only classify the world, but they also fill it with meaning. A key way that they do this is through the use of symbols. The simplest definition of a **symbol** is something that stands for something else. Words, both spoken and written; objects; and ideas can all be symbols. Symbols enable us to store information. For example, the book you are currently holding contains a huge amount of information all stored symbolically. Nonhuman animals must learn through experience or imitation, and, therefore, the amount they can learn is relatively small. Humans can store information symbolically, as stories and teachings passed from generation to generation or as written words; thus human cultures can be endlessly large.

Symbols can also condense meaning. People may take a single symbol and make it stand for an entire constellation of ideas and emotions. Religious symbols and national symbols often have this characteristic. The meaning of a national flag or a symbol such as the cross cannot be summed up in a word or two. These symbols stand for vast complexes of history, ideas, and emotions (Photo 2.4). People are often literally willing to fight and die for them.

Symbolic anthropologists try to understand a culture by discovering and analyzing the symbols that are most important to its members. These often reflect the deep concerns that are difficult for culture members to articulate. For example, according to Victor Turner (1967), among the Ndembu of East Africa, the *mudyi* tree is a central symbol and plays an important



PHOTO 2.4 Symbols do not have a single meaning but stand for many different ideas and feelings. For many people in the United States, patriotic symbols such as the flag have deep intellectual and emotional content.

iStock.com/Wavebreakmedia

role in girls' puberty rites. The tree has a white, milky sap that symbolizes breastfeeding, the relationship between mother and child, the inheritance through the mother's family line, and, at the most abstract level, the unity and continuity of Ndembu society itself. It is unlikely that all Ndembu think deeply about all of these meanings during the puberty rites of their girls. However, Turner argues that this complex symbolism helps hold Ndembu society together by reaffirming its central tenets. For anthropologists, to understand the meaning of the *mudyi* tree and the role it plays in Ndembu society is to have penetrated deeply into the Ndembu view of the world.

Culture can also be investigated using the tools of literary analysis, and this is the job of **interpretive anthropology**. Clifford Geertz, one of the best-known interpretive anthropologists, said that, in a sense, culture is like a novel. It is an "ensemble of texts . . . which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz [1973], 2008, 531). He meant that culture is a story people tell themselves about themselves. Like all good stories, culture engrosses us and helps us understand the nature and meaning of life. It comments on who we are and how we should act in the world. Interpretive anthropologists often find these cultural texts in public events, celebrations, and rituals. Analyzing such events gives us clues and insights into the meaning of culture for its participants.

Consider the American fascination with football. American football has little appeal outside the United States, but here it draws more fans than any other sport. To explain its popularity, analysts have studied the key themes of the game. They point out that the game is heavily laden with sexuality. Dundes (1980) notes that the vocabulary of football has many sexual

overtone. Expressions such as penetration, hitting the hole, making a touchdown in the end zone, scoring, going all the way, and so on are common. Football uniforms accentuate the male physique: enlarged head and shoulders, narrow waist, and a lower torso “poured into skintight pants accentuated only by a metal codpiece” (Arens 1975, 77). Dressed this way, men tackle each other, hold hands, hug each other, and pat each other’s bottoms.

But sexuality is not the only important aspect of the sport. Football is, in Geertz’s terms, “playing with fire” (1973, 432). It attracts us because, more than other sports, it displays and manipulates topics such as the violence and sexuality underlying competition between men, the social role of women, the relationship of the individual to the group, rules and their infringement, gaining and surrendering territory, and racial character (Oriard 1993, 18). As we watch football, we see these issues displayed and manipulated or implied. Football is just a game, but so is checkers. Millions watch football because it is meaningful in ways that checkers is not. For interpretive anthropologists, football’s meaning derives from the ways in which it explores and comments on critical themes in American culture. It is a text that we read, and those who would understand Americans must learn to read it as well.

Interpretive and symbolic anthropologists use methods drawn from the humanities rather than from the sciences to uncover and interpret the deep emotional and psychological structure of societies. Their goal is to understand the experience of being a member of a culture and to make that experience available to their readers (Marcus and Fischer 1986).

CULTURE IS AN INTEGRATED SYSTEM—OR IS IT?

Consider a biological organism. The digestive system supplies the food. The circulatory system brings nutrients to the different areas of the body. The nervous system controls the functioning of both digestive and circulatory systems, and so on. The various organs work together to create a properly functioning whole. Anthropologists have often considered the usefulness of comparing societies to organisms. There is a clear analogy. The subsistence system provides food, the economic system moves food and goods to different parts of society, and the political system controls how food is produced and distributed. Seen this way, societies, like bodies, are integrated systems.

This **organic analogy** has strengths and weaknesses. It allows us to think about society as being composed of different elements such as subsistence, economics, and politics, and it implies that anthropologists should describe the shape and role of such elements as well as the ways in which changes in one affect the others. For example, subsistence and social structure are two identifiable social elements and are related to each other. Foraging for food is a subsistence activity most often done in small groups. It requires little direction or coordination. People who forage for their food will probably have relatively loosely defined social groups with changing membership. Farming requires more coordination than foraging; therefore, people who farm will likely have a society with a more rigid structure and a more stable membership. If a group were to move from foraging to farming, we would expect it to develop an increasingly well-defined social structure.

However, the organic analogy also implies that there is a right way for societies to be organized and that properly functioning societies should be stable and conflict free. The parts of a biological organism work together to keep the entire being alive and well. The lungs do not declare war on the liver. The result of conflict between the parts of a living thing is usually sickness or death. If such conflict occurs (an autoimmune disease, for example), we understand that the organism is not functioning properly, and steps should be taken to restore the system. Thinking of cultures as systems may similarly suggest that their parts should work in harmony and that conflict and struggle are deviations from normality. But are cultures like that? Do their elements really fit well together?

Consider, for example, whether the American family system fits well with the demands made by most American jobs. Most Americans want to maintain long-term marriage commitments, raise families, and live middle-class lifestyles. Most jobs in the United States provide inadequate income for this purpose. Many require mobility, long hours, and flexibility, which come at the expense of time spent with family. Americans must negotiate the contradictions between the lifestyles they desire, the demands of their families, and the requirements of their jobs.

Consider that, in socially stratified societies, different groups have different interests, and this creates conflict. For example, in capitalist societies, both workers and owners want their companies to do well, but within this context, the owners hope to maximize their profit and the workers want to maximize their pay. However, increases in workers' pay come at some expense to owners' profits. Therefore, there is a structural conflict between the owners and the workers. This conflict does not occur because society is not working properly. Rather, it is a fundamental condition of a capitalist society.

There is nothing uniquely American or modern about contradiction and conflict within culture. People in nonindustrial societies must also handle conflicting commitments to their families and other social groups, such as secret societies or religious associations. Even in societies that lack social groups beyond the family, the interests of men and women, or those of the old and the young, may differ. Thus, in all societies, social life is characterized by conflict as well as concord. Although culture certainly is patterned and surely is a system, often the parts may rub, chafe, and grind against each other.

Anthropologists who are drawn to the study of the relationships among different aspects of culture have often sought to find laws of cultural behavior. In the first half of the twentieth century, **functionalists** such as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski searched for such laws in the mutually supportive relationships among kinship, religion, and politics. For example, Radcliffe-Brown ([1965] 1952, 176) argued that religion supports social structure by giving individuals a sense of dependence on their society.

More recently, **ecological functionalists** have focused on the relationship between environment and society. These anthropologists view social institutions and practices as elements in broader ecological systems. They are particularly concerned with ways in which cultural practices both alter and are altered by the ecosystem in which they occur. For example, Marvin Harris's (1966) classic explanation of the Hindu taboo on eating beef focused on the



PHOTO 2.5 A Hindu devotee offers prayers to a cow at the festival of Gopastami, a festival that celebrates the day that Lord Krishna's father gave him the responsibility for taking care of cows.

Dinesh Gupta/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images

effect of cattle in the Indian environment rather than on the Hindu belief system (Photo 2.5). Harris noted that despite widespread poverty and periodic famine in India, Hindus refuse to eat their cattle. Although superficially this seems unreasonable, it makes good ecological sense. Cows are important in India because they provide dung for fertilizer and cooking fuel, and they give birth to bullocks, the draft animals that pull the plows and carts essential to agriculture. If a family ate its cows during a famine, it would deprive itself of the source of bullocks and could not continue farming. Thus, the Hindu religious taboo on eating beef is part of a larger ecological pattern that includes the subsistence system.

Many anthropologists today choose to focus on conflicts within cultural systems. This often reflects the deep influence of the work of Karl Marx and the early twentieth-century sociologist Max Weber. Both Marx and Weber saw conflict in society as a key factor driving social change.

CULTURE IS A SHARED SYSTEM OF NORMS AND VALUES—OR IS IT?

What would a person with his own private culture be like? Perhaps he would be like Peter or Victor in the introduction to this chapter, unable to participate meaningfully in the society around him. Alternatively, such a person might live in a world in which everything has one set of meanings to her but different meanings to everyone else. People with certain forms of schizophrenia seem to have just this problem; they live in a world rich in symbols that have meaning only to them. In

either case, it would be very difficult for such people to interact with others; they would probably be isolated and, in some cases, considered insane. Clearly, at some level, members of a culture must share ways of thinking and behaving. Often, we refer to these as norms and values.

Norms are shared ideas about the way things ought to be done—rules of behavior that reflect and enforce culture. **Values** are shared ideas about what is true, right, and beautiful. For example, shaking hands rather than bowing when introduced to a stranger is an American norm. The notion that advances in technology are good is an American value.

Human behavior is not always consistent with cultural norms or values. People do not necessarily do what they say they should do. Norms may be contradictory and manipulated for personal and group ends. For example, people in India believe that women should stay in their homes rather than go out with their friends. They also believe that women should spend a lot of time doing religious activities. Modern Indian women use the second of these ideals to get around the first. By forming clubs whose activities are religious, they have an excuse to get out of the house, to which their elders cannot object too strongly.

This example raises important questions. How do we determine the norms and values of a society? Do all people in society agree on these things? How many people must agree on something before it is considered a norm or a value? Research shows that, even in small societies, norms are not always followed, and values are not universal. Individuals differ in their knowledge, understanding, and beliefs. For example, one might expect that all members in a small fishing society would agree on the proper names for different kinds of fish, but on Pukapuka, the small Pacific atoll Robert Borofsky (1994) studied, even experienced fishermen disagreed much of the time.



PHOTO 2.6 The Amish are members of an American subculture. Some of their customs, language, and values are different from those of most Americans. However, not all. . . . In the picture, Amish kids play on a trampoline.

Dennis MacDonald/Alamy Stock Photo

The degree to which members of the same society have different norms and values is even more obvious in large societies. Sometimes, the term **subculture** is used to designate groups within a single society that share norms and values significantly different from those of the group that controls most of the wealth and power within the society (Photo 2.6). This latter is often called the **dominant culture**. The terms dominant culture and subculture do not refer to superior and inferior but rather to the idea that the dominant culture is more able to impose its understanding of the world on subcultures than the reverse.

Dominant cultures retain their power partly through controlling institutions, like the legal system, criminalizing practices that conflict with their own (Norgren and Nanda 1996). In contemporary society, public schools help maintain the values of the dominant culture, and the media play an important role in encouraging people to perceive subcultures in stereotypical (and usually negative) ways. For example, in a study that focused on television news and reality shows, Oliver (2003) found that images of race and crime systematically overrepresented African Americans as criminals. Furthermore, such shows tended to portray Black men as particularly dangerous and presented information about Black suspects that assumed their guilt. A 2011 study by the Tides Center found that Black men were underrepresented in the media in general. However, when they did appear, they were often presented with exaggerated negative associations, particularly criminality, unemployment, and poverty. When they were presented with positive associations, it was usually in connection with sports. Even sympathetic discussions of Black men tended to be framed in terms of intractable problems. However, issues of historical injustice and persistent bias were generally ignored by the media. The presentation of Black men in the media has implications for the way these individuals are treated by the police. Michael Oshiro and Pamela Valera (2019), in a study examining court testimony and newspaper coverage of the death of Michael Brown, a young Black man shot by policeman Darren Wilson in 2014, argue that such stereotypes increase the rate at which Black men are stopped by police officers and may have played a critical role in the fatal interaction between Wilson and Brown (Oshiro and Valera 2019, 208).

Although domination of one group by another is sometimes extreme, rarely is it complete. People contest their subjugation and protect their subcultures through political, economic, and military means. Sometimes, when domination is intense, minorities can protect themselves only through religious faith or by building cultural tales in which they hold positions of power and their oppressors are weak (Scott 1992).

The result of struggles between groups in society is that ideas we sometimes think of as timeless and consensual are constantly changing and being renegotiated. This renegotiation involves conflict and subjugation as well as consensus. Which norms and values are promoted and which are rejected is particularly important because such cultural ideas influence and are influenced by wealth, power, and status. For example, what are American norms and values about using drugs to alter one's state of consciousness? Should the use of such drugs be legal? Clearly, these are difficult questions. In the past, Americans considered alcohol to be a dangerous mind-altering substance. Its manufacture, sale, and transport were prohibited in the United States between 1920 and 1933. Even today, substantial numbers of Americans oppose alcohol. In 2006, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which represents about 16 million church

members, passed a resolution expressing “total opposition to the manufacturing, advertising, distributing, and consuming of alcoholic beverages” (SBC 2006).

Marijuana, on the other hand, has been illegal in the United States since 1937, but a Pew Research Center poll in 2018 showed that about 62 percent of Americans now support legalization—up from 51 percent in a Quinnipiac University poll in December 2012 and double the 30 percent favoring legalization in the early 2000s (Carroll 2005; Quinnipiac University 2018; Wise 2018). This norm is changing rapidly. The second edition of this book noted that 14 states had legalized medical marijuana. By the time the third edition came out, 16 states and the District of Columbia had legalized medical marijuana and two states, Colorado and Washington, had legalized recreational marijuana as well. By 2016, 23 states and Washington, DC, had legalized medical marijuana; 4 had legalized recreational marijuana. In 2020, medical marijuana was legal in 36 states, and 15 of these, along with the District of Columbia and three territories, had legalized recreational marijuana as well (NCSL 2020a, 2020b). Believing that people should consume or not consume either alcohol or marijuana does not make one more or less “American.” However, which of these notions is held by those in power is critical. It influences the laws and social policies that shape our lives and history.

The focus on culture as a shared set of norms and values is often associated with the American anthropologists of the first half of the twentieth century, particularly Franz Boas and his students. These anthropologists were interested in presenting objective descriptions of cultures within their historical and environmental context. Their emphasis on norms and values was designed to show that, although other cultures were very different from our own, they were coherent, rational, and indeed often beautiful. In contrast to the logical coherence seen by the Boasians, some contemporary anthropologists, including many neo-Marxist, postmodern, and feminist anthropologists, believe that culture is a context in which norms and values are contested and negotiated. Rather than assuming a cultural core of shared beliefs and values, these anthropologists try to describe the processes through which norms and values are both subverted and maintained. They often focus on the role of governments and other institutions in that process. This issue is examined in more detail in Chapters 7 and 8.

CULTURE IS THE WAY HUMAN BEINGS ADAPT TO THE WORLD

All animals, including human beings, have biologically based needs. All need habitat and food, and each species must reproduce. All creatures are adapted to meet these needs. **Adaptation** is a change in the biological structure or lifeways of an individual or population by which it becomes better fitted to survive and reproduce in its environment. Nonhuman animals fill their needs primarily through biological adaptation. Lions, for example, have a series of biologically based adaptations that are superbly designed to enable them to feed themselves and their mates. They have large muscles for speed, as well as sharp teeth and claws to capture and eat their prey.

Humans are different. We lack offensive biological weaponry, and, if left to get our food like the lion, we would surely starve. There is little evidence that we have an instinct to hunt or consume any particular kind of food, to build any particular sort of structure, or to have a single fixed social arrangement. Instead, human beings, in groups, develop forms of knowledge and

technologies that enable them to feed themselves and to survive in their environments. They pass this knowledge from generation to generation and from group to group. In other words, human beings develop and use culture to adapt to the world.

Most of a lion's adaptation to the world is set biologically. The growth of its teeth and claws, its instinct to hunt, and the social arrangement of a pride are largely expressions of the lion's genetic code. Humans have a biological adaptation to the world: our brains are designed to learn culture. All humans, except those with profound biologically based differences, automatically learn the culture of their social group. This strongly suggests that such learning is a manifestation of our genetic code. Thus, our biology compels us to learn culture. But it does not compel us to learn a particular culture. The range of human beliefs and practices is enormous. However, people everywhere learn to fill their basic needs, such as food and shelter, through cultural practices. Culture everywhere must, to some extent, be adaptive (Photo 2.7).

Cultural adaptation has some distinct advantages over biological adaptation. Because humans adapt through learned behavior, they can change their approach to solving problems quickly and more easily than creatures whose adaptations are primarily biological. Lions hunt and eat today in much the same way as they have for tens of thousands of years. Most human beings today do not live like humans of even three or four generations ago, let alone like our distant ancestors. Our means of feeding ourselves, our cultures, have changed. **Plasticity**—the ability to change behavior—has allowed human beings to thrive under a wide variety of social and ecological conditions.

Cultural adaptation has some disadvantages too. Misinformation, leading to cultural practices that hinder rather than aid survival, may creep into human behavior. Cultural practices,



PHOTO 2.7 In Djenné, Mali, people adapt to the hot mostly dry climate by building houses in adobe. The picture shows the inner courtyard of a Djenné house. Thick walls keep rooms relatively cool in the hot season and warm when it's cold. Flat roofs create more living space and can be used for sleeping during hot weather.

FRANCOIS XAVIER MARIT/AFP/Getty Images

such as unrestrained logging, mining, or fishing, that encourage the destruction of the environment may lead to short-term success but long-term disaster. Furthermore, many human practices are not adaptive, even in the short run. Political policies of ethnic cleansing and genocide that urge people to murder their neighbors may benefit the leaders of a society, but it is hard to see any meaningful way in which these practices are adaptive. A normal lion will always inherit the muscle, tooth, and claw that, given a relatively stable environment, let it survive. Normal humans, on the other hand, may inherit a great deal of cultural misinformation that hinders their survival.

Historically, a focus on the adaptive aspect of culture is associated with a theoretical position called **cultural ecology**, first proposed in the 1930s. Although many of our ideas have changed since then, investigating the adaptive (and maladaptive) aspects of culture continues to be an important aspect of anthropology. Anthropologists who view culture as an adaptation tend to be concerned with people's behavior, particularly as it relates to their physical well-being, or with the relationship of cultural practices to ecosystems. They investigate how cultures adapt to specific environments and the ways in which cultures have changed in response to new physical and social conditions. In addition to cultural ecology, they may belong to theoretical schools such as cultural materialism, neo-evolutionism, neo-Marxism, evolutionary psychology, or human behavioral ecology.

CULTURE IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING

Did you ever want to visit a culture where people were untouched by the outside world and were living just the same way they had been living for thousands of years? Well, you are out of luck. One of the most romantic notions of anthropology presented in the media is that there are “Stone Age” cultures waiting to be discovered. For example, about 50 films have been made about the Kombai, a purportedly Stone Age tribe living in Western New Guinea (Stasch 2015, 68). But no culture, including the Kombai, has ever been stuck in time or isolated from others for very long. Cultures are constantly changing. They change because of conflict among different elements within them. They change because of contact with outsiders. Population growth, disease, climate change, and natural disaster all drive culture change. However, cultures do not always change at the same speed. Cultural change may happen in small increments, or it may happen in revolutionary bursts. Historically, in most places and at most times, culture change has been a relatively slow process. However, the pace of change has been increasing for the past several hundred years and has become extremely rapid in the past century.

Since the sixteenth century, the most important source of culture change has been the development of a world economic system based primarily in the wealthy nations of Europe and Asia. This has involved invasions, revolutions, and epidemic diseases. These historic processes and the resultant global economic system are the primary foci of Chapters 14 and 15. Here, we focus on some of the more traditional ways in which anthropologists have examined culture change.

Anthropologists sometimes discuss cultural change in terms of innovation and diffusion. An **innovation** is an object, a way of thinking, or a way of behaving that is new because it is qualitatively different from existing forms (Barnett 1953, 7). Although we often think of innovations as technological, they are not limited to the material aspects of culture. New art forms and new ideas are also innovations (Photo 2.8).



PHOTO 2.8 Innovation often involves repurposing materials to create something new. Here, a child in Transkei, South Africa, shows off toy cars he has made from discarded tins and cartons.

Susan Winters Cook/Getty Images

New practices, tools, or principles may emerge from within a society and gain wide acceptance. Anthropologists sometimes call these *primary innovations*, and they are frequently chance discoveries and accidents. In our own society, some examples of accidental discovery include penicillin, found when British researcher Alexander Fleming noticed that bacteria samples he had left by a window were contaminated by mold spores, and Teflon, discovered by Roy Plunkett, who was trying to find new substances to use in refrigeration. All such innovations are based on building blocks provided by culture. For example, although Fleming is justly famous for the discovery of penicillin, this innovation also illustrates the importance of context and incremental discovery. Fleming was not a random person who woke up one morning thinking about mold and bacteria. He was a trained bacteriologist who had been looking for a substance to fight infection for more than a decade. He was very aware of the work of other scientists studying the problem of infection. It does not diminish his achievement to point out that he, like every other inventor or discoverer, did not create something totally new. He realized the critical importance of new combinations of things that already existed. His culture provided him with the training, tools, and context in which his discovery could be made.

Recently, composer Anthony Brandt and neuroscientist David Eagleman (2017) have described creativity as a process of bending, breaking, and blending. We bend things when we take something that already exists and provide a new variation or twist: like a jazz musician creating a new interpretation of a classic tune. We break when we take things apart to create something new. For example, in a cubist painting, solid objects are broken into their parts and placed in new perspectives. In genetic engineering, strands of DNA are broken apart and reassembled. Blending is bringing two or more different ideas together. The smartphones that most of us carry are examples of blending. A phone was once an instrument used for the sole purpose

of talking to other people in real time. We now use our phones for everything from entertainment to finance to finding romantic partners.

Innovations tend to move from one culture to another, a process known as **diffusion**. Diffusion can happen in many ways; trade, travel, and warfare all promote it. Direct contact among cultures results in the most far-reaching changes, and cultures located on major trade routes tend to change more rapidly than do those in more isolated places. However, because no human society has ever been isolated for a long time, diffusion has always been an important factor in culture. This implies that “pure” cultures, free from outside influences, have never existed.

Innovation and diffusion are not simple processes. People do not “naturally” realize that one way of doing things is better than another or that one style of dress, religion, or behavior is superior. For innovation and diffusion to occur, new ideas must be accepted, and even when the desirability of an innovation seems clear, its integration into a culture is often a complex process. Again, the discovery of penicillin provides a good example. Although Fleming understood some of the importance of his discovery in 1928, human trials did not take place until World War II, and the drug was not widely prescribed until the mid to late 1950s (Sheehan 1982; Williams 1984).

People may not accept an idea because they do not fully understand it, but other factors are usually involved as well. For psychological reasons, individuals may vary in their willingness to adopt change. Far more important, changes rarely provide equal benefits to everyone. For example, new agricultural techniques were introduced in Latin America and Asia from the 1940s to the 1960s (an era known as the “green revolution”). The new techniques did radically improve crop yields, but large landowners received the greater part of the benefit. Laborers, many of whom were landless, were often impoverished by the change and, as a result, were very resistant to it (Das 1998). Norman Borlaug (2000), one of the architects of the green revolution, noted that despite increases in the food supply, millions go hungry because they lack resources to purchase food. The same processes that increased the total quantity of food impoverished some people, making them unable to produce or purchase it. Change is often promoted or resisted by powerful interests. Innovations that have strong political, economic, or moral forces behind them may be rapidly accepted. But, when those forces are arrayed against an innovation, acceptance can be delayed. New technologies may face resistance from those who have invested heavily in older ones. For example, FM radio broadcasting is superior to AM broadcasting; it has greater fidelity and is much less susceptible to static and interference. Although it was invented in 1933, the opposition of CBS, NBC, and RCA, powerful corporations heavily invested in AM technology, prevented FM from gaining popularity until the late 1960s (Lewis 1991).

Like innovation, diffusion is often accompanied by conflict. People who are colonized or captured by others are often forced to assume new cultural practices. New rulers may require that older traditions be abandoned. Economic demands by governments or creditors often compel the adoption of new technologies and practices. Although these processes happen in most places where cultures have confronted one another, they have been particularly important in the past 500 years. During this time, cultures have been increasingly tied together in an economic system controlled largely in northern Europe, North America, and Japan, a process we explore further in Chapters 13 and 14.

The rapid pace of cultural change and diffusion, particularly in the past hundred years, raises the question of cultural homogenization. Are cultural differences being erased? Are we all

being submerged in a single global culture? There are no simple answers to these questions. On the one hand, modern technological culture now penetrates virtually every place on earth. On the other hand, this penetration is uneven. The wealthy have much greater access to and control over technology than the poor. The world dominance of industrialized nations has affected cultures everywhere, but rather than annihilating local culture, the cultural traits of these nations are transformed as they are adopted, and new cultural forms result. Radio, television, and cell phones are good examples. Developed by industrialized societies, these technologies have spread around the world. However, they do not necessarily promote the values and practices of the societies that created them. Insurgents and revolutionaries around the world use cell phones, Twitter accounts, and other technologies to pursue political and social goals vastly different than those of most members of the societies that created these products.

Anthropology began in the nineteenth century, an era of great social change, so even though anthropologists sometimes imagined societies as static, they were always interested in change. As the pace of change has accelerated, so too has anthropological interest in it. Today, large numbers of anthropologists are engaged in studying change in a variety of ways. Some are directly involved in change: promoting and defending the interests of the people they study, working for governments and private agencies that promote social change, and sometimes working for corporations as well. They bring many different theoretical tools to the study of change. Some might describe themselves as globalization theorists, combining ideas from postmodernist and interpretivist anthropology with ideas from economics, Marxist anthropology, and ecology to create new complex analyses that help us understand our dynamic and changing world.

CONCLUSION: CULTURE COUNTS

Culture is many different things. It is learning, symbolism and meaning, patterns of thought and behavior, the things we share with those around us and the ways we argue about them, the ways in which we survive in our world, and dynamism and change. It is both consensus and conflict. Culture makes us human and ties us to others everywhere. Ultimately, because all societies are based on fundamental patterns of culture, no society can be utterly incomprehensible to members of another. On the other hand, enormous variability is built into these patterns. The fact that human lifeways are shared, learned, and symbolic—the fact that we don't simply adapt to our environment but fill it with meaning—results in extraordinary differences in human cultures.

Naked mole rats are a highly social species found in the Horn of Africa. Their behavior is extremely complex, but they lack culture in a human sense. Each colony is more or less identical to every other. Imaginary mole rat explorers visiting each colony would understand everything they saw or heard. Humans have the opposite experience. Because each human culture is different, the history of human exploration is one of miscomprehension. Because cultures are so different and count for so much in human life, we need special tools and ways of thought to help us understand them. One job of anthropology is to provide these. In Chapter 3, we examine the methods anthropologists have used to investigate culture.

BRINGING IT BACK HOME: IS THERE AN AMERICAN CULTURE?

Throughout this chapter, we have identified culture as something shared by a group of people. And this is a necessary aspect of culture. However, it is also problematic. We often think of groups as neat, bounded collections of individuals or families. But think for a moment: How many groups do you belong to? You almost certainly have a nationality, a place where you grew up, a school (or perhaps more than one), an ethnic identity, and perhaps a religious identity. Maybe you are a member of a group like the military, and, of course, you certainly have some kind of family identity. These identities overlap but are different. All of them have characteristics of culture, such as processes of enculturation and symbolism. Now, which of them is your culture? No one on the planet shares precisely your cultural experience. Even identical twins don't end up with identical lives. So are you then a culture of one?

The problem of culture is particularly acute when we talk about very large and complex groups. The United States is a nation of more than 330 million people. Its citizens have different geographical origins, ethnicities, beliefs, sexualities, and so on. New immigrants and visitors from other cultures may have a very different view of American culture too. Further, over the past several decades, Americans have tended to move to areas where people share their political views and often their ethnicity or race. For example, the presidential election of 1976 pitted the Democrat Jimmy Carter against Republican Gerald Ford. Then, about 27 percent of Americans lived in "landslide counties": places where Carter either won or lost by at least 20 percent. In the 2016 presidential election, 60 percent of Americans lived in counties that voted for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton by more than 20 percent. In the 2020 race between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, these numbers seem to have been even higher.

The phenomenon of Americans choosing to live in places where people share their views (and often other characteristics) is sometimes called "the big sort" (Bishop 2009). In a vast, diverse country where divisions among people seem to be increasing, can there really be anything such as American culture?

If the question is "Are there things upon which 100 percent of Americans agree?" then the answer is almost certainly no. It's difficult if not impossible to find that kind of consensus even in a very small community. However, as we have seen in this chapter, discord, argument, even violence are not aberrations; they are common parts of all cultures. To have a culture, we don't need to agree, but we do need to share some things, not in the sense that we all partake of them equally but rather that, overwhelmingly, we have some significant connection with them.

So what kinds of things do Americans share? There's no definitive list, but here are some ideas. We share and are shaped to some degree by the critical institutions of our society: the federal government, court system, and education system. Although many languages are spoken in the United States, we are overwhelmingly an English-speaking nation. Slightly over 20 percent of U.S. residents speak a language other than English at home, but over 90 percent of residents speak English very well (Ingraham 2018; U.S. Census 2015). Except for those living in communities on the border, the vast majority of grandchildren of non-English-speaking immigrants are monolingual English speakers (Alba 2004; Carter 2018).

Anthropologists and other social scientists have proposed a variety of other American characteristics. Anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn described American culture as characterized by "effort optimism": the belief that if a person tries hard enough at anything, they

will succeed (Kluckhohn and Kluckhohn 1947). Sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985) say that the dominant elements of American culture are utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. Utilitarian individualism is the claim that humans have a right to behave in their self-interest, pursuing the satisfaction of their goals, appetites, and fears. Bellah sees this as countered and moderated by expressive individualism: the belief that each person has the right to express a unique core of creativity and individuality. Bellah and others have also noted that ideas such as utilitarianism and expressive individualism are reinforced constantly in schools, films, and television. They also work well with American capitalism.

Numerous other attributes have been proposed. A typical list includes things such as the belief that the environment can and should be controlled for the benefit of people, the belief that progress is good and that things in the future will probably be better, a strong sense of good and bad (combined with a belief that we can know what is morally good and should act upon it), the notion that there should be a schedule and that people should stick rigorously to it, a fundamental belief in human equality (often combined with a deep prejudice toward particular groups of people), and the idea that people should be friendly and open. However, we're sure that you can think of many times when you and the people you know do not behave in ways that are consistent with this list. Does this mean that American culture is a fiction, or that American culture contains much friction?

You Decide

1. Do you believe there is such a thing as American culture? Support your position with at least three examples.
2. Briefly explain the connections between values such as effort optimism, utilitarian individualism, and the American economic system.
3. In the future, do you think that Americans will be increasingly united by their culture or increasingly divided by it?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. Define culture. Culture can be defined as the learned, symbolic, at least partially adaptive, and ever-changing patterns of behavior and meaning shared by members of a group. Humans are vitally dependent on culture for their existence.
2. Describe the importance of learning in culture. Almost all human behavior is learned. Humans learn throughout their entire life span. The example of the Inuit shows how children are taught to survive in a harsh environment.
3. Describe the importance of symbols in culture. Humans understand the world by classifying it and using symbols to give it meaning. Different cultures use different systems of classification. People use symbols to give meaning to their lives. Anthropologists analyze and interpret symbols and rituals to understand cultural meanings.

4. How does the case of Lia Lee illustrate differences in cultural classification systems? Doctors understood Lia Lee as having epilepsy; members of her family believed her soul had separated from her body. The results of this difference in understanding were tragic.
5. In what ways are cultures like biological organisms, and what are the problems with this organic analogy? Like biological organisms, cultures are systems of related elements working together. However, unlike biological organisms, cultural systems include contradictions that lead to conflict.
6. What are norms and values? Do people within a culture agree on them? Norms are shared ideas about the way things ought to be done. Values are shared ideas about what is true, right, and beautiful. Typically, people within a culture do not fully agree on norms and values. Some amount of conflict is the rule, not the exception.
7. How is culture similar to the biological adaptations of nonhuman animals? Culture is the way that humans adapt to their world. Unlike other species, humans adapt primarily through cultural learning. Culture enables people to respond to change rapidly but can, in some cases, also be maladaptive.
8. Are cultures typically static, or do they change? All cultures change. Innovation and diffusion are two sources of change. Many factors determine the acceptance or rejection of a culture change.
9. What role does anthropology play in coping with cultural differences? Culture makes humans unique, but the vast differences between human cultures make cultural understanding a challenge. Anthropology supplies tools to meet that challenge.
10. Is there such a thing as American culture? Although every individual's experience is different, Americans are bound together by legal and institutional frameworks. Anthropologists have proposed many characteristics of American culture. However, these are not necessarily shared by all Americans.

KEY TERMS

<p>adaptation (p. 41)</p> <p>anthropological theory (p. 27)</p> <p>cognitive anthropology (p. 32)</p> <p>cultural ecology (p. 43)</p> <p>culture and personality (p. 31)</p> <p>diffusion (p. 45)</p> <p>dominant culture (p. 40)</p> <p>ecological functionalism (functionalists) (p. 37)</p> <p>enculturation (p. 29)</p> <p>functionalism (functionalists) (p. 37)</p>	<p>innovation (p. 43)</p> <p>interpretive anthropology (p. 35)</p> <p>norms (p. 39)</p> <p>organic analogy (p. 36)</p> <p>plasticity (p. 42)</p> <p>subculture (p. 40)</p> <p>symbol (p. 34)</p> <p>symbolic anthropology (anthropologists) (p. 34)</p> <p>values (p. 39)</p>
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