

## CHAPTER 3: CULTURE

### CHAPTER SUMMARY

#### 1. What is culture, and what role does it play in society and in its members' lives?

Culture can be defined as the learned norms, values, knowledge, artifacts, language, and symbols that constantly circulate among people who share a way of life. The content of culture ranges from our beliefs about what is important in life to the common everyday habits that we take for granted. Culture is inherently social; that is, we create and express the elements of our culture and constantly communicate to each other our understanding of our social world.

#### 2. What are the elements of culture?

All human cultures have the same basic elements: knowledge, language, symbols, values, norms, and artifacts. Sociologists often distinguish between the material and the nonmaterial aspects of culture. *Material culture* includes all the physical objects, or artifacts, that people make and to which they attach meaning. *Nonmaterial culture* includes human creations that are not embodied in physical objects, such as values, norms, and knowledge and the like. A *value* is a general idea that people should care about what is good or bad. People's values affect their way of life. Competition, for example, is a core American value. Values often reinforce each other, such as efficiency and progress. Other values are in conflict, such as humanitarianism and individual success.

Values provide a framework for developing norms of behavior. A *norm* is a specific guideline for action; it is a rule that says how people should behave in a particular situation. Norms can be implicit or very explicit, and can vary greatly from society to society and from group to group. They also change over time. Generally they are situational—they apply to particular circumstances and settings. Norms vary in the importance that people assign to them and in the way people react to violators. *Folkways* are norms that are simply everyday habits and conventions; people follow them without even thinking about them. *Mores* are the norms that people consider vital to their well-being and to their most cherished values. Strong sanctions are applied to violators of mores. *Laws* are a special kind of norm that has been formalized or institutionalized; these rules have been written into a code of laws, and police and courts have been formally assigned the task of enforcement and punishment. Laws are rules that are enacted by a political body and are enforced by the power of the state.

### 3. Why are symbols, language and knowledge essential features of human societies?

Symbols, language, and knowledge are three other elements of culture. Each is essential to human societies because they allow us to create meaning and abstract ideas, to communicate them to others, and to record them for succeeding generations. *Symbols* are objects, gestures, sounds, or images that represent something other than themselves. They do not always look like, sound like, or otherwise resemble what they symbolize. The meanings attached to symbols are often very arbitrary, and are simply a matter of tradition and consensus.

*Language* is a system of verbal and (sometimes) written symbols with rules about how those symbols can be combined to convey complex meanings. Language permits the creation, communication, and preservation of abstract cultural ideas, and it lies at the root of the transmission of culture. Sociologists are interested both in the structure of language and in the role of language in social action (how people use language to coordinate their activities and to create and confirm social understandings). *Social markers* are behavior patterns that give clues to the meaning of a social situation by providing indications about who people are, to what groups they belong, and what their understanding of a situation is. That is, social markers help to identify where a person or group fits into a social structure.

*Knowledge* may be defined as the body of facts, beliefs, and practical skills that people accumulate over time. Some knowledge is simply procedural; other knowledge consists of information about people, places, and events. Ours is the "information society" because of the rapid accumulation of new knowledge and the fundamental importance of the growth of knowledge for economic, political, and social life.

### 4. What are the relationships among dominant cultures, subcultures and countercultures?

The elements of culture described above are woven together into a complex whole. *Cultural integration* is the degree to which the parts of a culture form a consistent and interrelated pattern. Cultures can be more or less integrated, but in all cases there is at least some interdependence among the set of beliefs, values, and artifacts. This interdependence is evident in situations where changes in one realm of culture force changes in other realms. Cultural integration can be enhanced by *assimilation*, the process by which newcomers to America (and other "outsiders") give up their culturally distinct beliefs, values, and customs and take on those of the dominant culture. The degree of cultural integration varies considerably across cultures and time. Cultures that are very heterogeneous and loosely integrated involve a certain amount of internal contradiction.

The *dominant culture* consists of those values, beliefs, traditions, and outlooks which members of certain groups impose on other members of society. American society includes many groups whose lifestyles and attitudes make them different from the mainstream dominant culture. If members of such groups identify themselves in terms of their distinctive norms and values, sociologists say that they belong to a *subculture*. Subcultures form around common ethnic or religious heritages, occupational traditions, or socioeconomic status.

One rapidly growing ethnic subculture in the United States is that of Hispanic-Americans, whose distinctive value system includes a strong emphasis on a person's inner worth and on the closeness of family and one-to-one friendship ties. These values lead to behavior patterns that differ from those in the dominant Anglo-American society. Hispanics have been among the least inclined to become assimilated into the dominant culture.

Tensions often develop between members of the dominant culture and those of one or more subcultures, particularly those subcultures which oppose dominant norms and values. *Countercultures* are subcultures that are not merely distinct from the dominant culture; they are oriented towards challenging that culture or deliberately trying to change it.

5. *How are the values and norms of another culture to be evaluated?*

Cultural ideas vary widely from society to society. People often view their own culture as correct and good, and those of others as strange or even immoral; this feeling is known as *ethnocentrism*. Ethnocentrism can be a source of unity within groups but can cause friction or conflict between groups with different cultures.

The *cultural relativist* position requires one to deliberately suspend judgment about the cultural ideas of other societies. Any element of culture is relative to a particular time, place, and set of circumstances. Unlike ethnocentrism, cultural relativism encourages understanding and tolerance between groups.

6. *How do new cultural patterns become part of social life?*

The production of cultural perspectives suggests that the elements of culture are not created all at once; rather, new patterns of ideas and beliefs take hold gradually as old ones gradually disappear. These changes in cultural elements are shaped by social structures in which new ideas and beliefs are created and nurtured. Cultural innovators--those who try to introduce new ideas or beliefs into a society--are embedded in social contexts that either facilitate or retard the creation and subsequent adoption of their innovations. The fate of a cultural innovation is determined in part by the degree to which it conforms to shared ideas and expectations that are part of the existing culture.

Cultural innovations can live or die at the hands of *cultural gatekeepers*, the people who regulate the flow of new cultural elements into society. These gatekeepers help to determine which cultural innovations will receive exposure through traditional channels of distribution. Public taste is also important for the acceptance or rejection of new elements of culture, although the importance of "consumer demand" is often exaggerated. Cultural gatekeepers can manipulate taste by flooding society with certain cultural products while keeping others out of sight.

7. *How have the modern electronic media changed the content and communication of culture?*

It is difficult to understand the profound changes in American culture without appreciating the role played by electronic inventions that enable people to collect, process, and exchange information: radio, the telephone, the tape recorder, television, the motion picture, the computer, the VCR, and the camcorder. The development of these technologies depended on the prior invention of language itself, and built on earlier advances in communication such as writing and printing.

The telephone, computer, and the Internet, as well as modern electronic media such as radio and television, have greatly accelerated the speed with which information can spread to large numbers of people located far apart. These media have made people more aware of their worldwide mutuality and interdependence.

The impact of television on cultural change has perhaps been the most profound of all. Both the content and the form of a message are shaped by the medium of communication. Because television is a visual as well as an auditory medium, material selected for broadcast on the nightly news must be visually exciting, sensational, and action-filled. TV news stories typically last one minute or less.

What are the effects of the growing dominance of television in communicating information? Some people suggest that TV causes people to blur the distinction between serious news items and entertainment; important public issues or personal tragedies are often handled by TV as if they were soap operas. Other people suggest that TV has blurred the distinction between face-to-face interaction and indirect communication at a distance. Television has also created new social situations: people realize that when the camera points at them, their behavior is being watched by millions. Finally, TV also can reinforce certain cultural stereotypes. The presentation of racial or ethnic groups is often idealized, thus leading to misleading or incomplete portrayals of their lives.

The growth of the mass media has resulted in the *internationalization* of culture. A single global culture has replaced distinctive local cultures. Although the internationalization of culture is not new, the process has become much more rapid than in the past. Large-scale immigration is another social force contributing to the internationalization of culture in recent times. Finally, the international culture has played a critical role in important world events.