CULTURE AND MASS MEDIA
WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Is the decision to cheat—whether in school, in a relationship, or otherwise—solely an individual choice, or should it be understood in the context of the culture in which a person lives?

2. What is the relationship between popular culture and violence? Do cultural representations of violence in films, television, music, and video games have an effect on attitudes and behaviors?

3. Does a shared “global culture” exist? If so, what are its components? How is it spread?
In October 2013, more than 16 million viewers tuned in to watch the first episode of season 4 of the television program *The Walking Dead*. The program follows a small band of human survivors trying to evade flesh-eating zombies who have taken over. The main character, Rick, and his compatriots fight for survival against the fearsome “walkers,” who relentlessly hunt human and beast. The undead have not only overrun the planet on this TV show, however; they also appear to have made some headway in taking over U.S. popular culture in recent years. Along with following the adventures of *The Walking Dead*, consumers of horror can read zombie books (such as *World War Z*, which was also made into a movie, and *The Zombie Survival Guide*), play zombie video games (for instance, *Resident Evil* and *House of the Dead*), and watch zombie films (like the popular *I Am Legend* and *28 Days Later*). In 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention even used the public interest in zombies to launch a disaster preparedness campaign, offering the U.S. public tips for surviving an onslaught of the undead. According to Dr. Ali Khan, the architect of the campaign “If you are generally well equipped to deal with a zombie apocalypse you will be prepared for a hurricane, pandemic, earthquake, or terrorist attack” (www.cdc.gov/phpr/zombies.htm).

Why have zombies become a cultural phenomenon in the 21st-century United States? Some writers suggest that films, television, and other cultural forms are a mirror of social anxieties: As sociologist Robert Wuthnow (1989) has written, “If cultural products do not articulate closely enough with their social settings, they are likely to be regarded . . . as irrelevant, unrealistic, artificial, and overly abstract” (p. 3). In the post–World War II period of the 1940s and 1950s, Americans were dogged by fears of technology run amok (particularly nuclear fears after the first use of an atomic weapon) and the threat of communist infiltration or invasion (Booker, 2001). Popular science fiction films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) captured paranoia about alien beings...
who possessed powerful weapons and could arrive at any moment to destroy society and the state. The fear of communism and the concern about proliferation of destructive technology were embodied in otherworldly creatures who could enter a community undetected and crush resistance with deadly force.

Today, some writers suggest that the cultural proliferation of zombies is a window into contemporary fears. Kyle W. Bishop (2010) argues that the rise of zombie popularity after traumatic societal events like the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, the disease fears generated by deadly outbreaks of viruses like SARS, and even Hurricane Katrina is not a coincidence. Rather, zombie stories resonate with a public that is anxious about the threat of societal calamity, whether natural or human-made. Zombies evoke, Bishop (2009) suggests, a fear response, though the object of fear is not necessarily the zombie itself: “Because the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios of zombie cinema . . . [these films have] all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded by more traditional horror films” (p. 18).

In a recent entertainment publication article on The Walking Dead, the highest-rated cable program on television, a journalist observes: “There’s a fascinating question critics should be answering: What is it about a show that is so relentlessly bleak that allows it to still resonate at such unexpected scale? What does it say about America? . . . it’s the polar opposite of escapist fare that typically serves as popular entertainment, a dystopian nightmare if there ever was one” (Wallenstein, 2014). If critics don’t have an answer, then sociologists might. Cultural products are more than just entertainment—they are a mirror of society. Popular culture in the form of films or television may capture our utopian dreams, but it is also a net that catches and reflects pervasive societal fears and anxieties.

In this chapter, we will consider the multitude of functions of both culture and media, which constitute a key vehicle of culture, and we will seek to understand how culture both constructs and reflects society in the United States and around the globe. We begin our discussion with an examination of the basic concept of culture, taking a look at material and nonmaterial culture as well as ideal and real culture in the United States. We then explore contemporary issues of language and its social functions in a changing world. The chapter also addresses issues of culture and media, asking how media messages may reflect and affect behaviors and attitudes. We then turn to the topic of culture and class and the sociological question of whether culture and taste are linked to class identity and social reproduction. Finally, we examine the evolving relationship between global and local cultures, in particular the influence of U.S. mass media on the world.

**CULTURE: CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS**

What is culture? The word culture might evoke images of song, dance, and literature—the beat of Latin salsa, Polish folk dances performed by girls with red ribbons braided into their hair, or the latest in a popular series of fantasy novels. It might remind you of a dish from the Old Country made by a beloved grandmother, or a spicy Indian meal you ate with friends from New Delhi.

Culture, from a sociological perspective, is composed of the beliefs, norms, behaviors, and products common to the members of a particular group. Culture is integral to our social experience of the world. It offers diversion and entertainment, but it also helps form our identities and gives meaning to the artifacts and experiences of our lives. Culture shapes and permeates material objects like folk costumes, rituals like nuptial and burial ceremonies, and language as expressed in conversation, poetry, stories, and music. As social beings we make culture, but culture also makes us, in ways that are both apparent and subtle.

**MATERIAL AND NONMATERIAL CULTURE**

Every culture has both material and nonmaterial aspects. We can broadly define material culture as the physical objects created, embraced, or consumed by society that help shape people’s lives. Material culture includes television programs, computer games, software, and other artifacts of human creation. It also emerges from the physical environment inhabited by the community. For example, in the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea, including Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, amber—a substance created when the resin of fallen seaside pines is hardened and smoothed by decades or centuries in the salty waters—is an important part of local cultures. It is valued
both for its decorative properties in jewelry and for its therapeutic properties; it is said to relieve pain. Amber has become a part of the material culture in these countries rather than elsewhere because it is a product of the physical environment in which these communities dwell.

Material culture also includes the types of shelters that characterize a community. For instance, in seaside communities, homes are often built on stilts to protect against flooding. The materials used to construct homes have historically been those available in the immediate environment—wood, thatch, or mud, for instance—although the global trade in timber, marble and granite, and other components of modern housing has transformed the relationship between place and shelter in many countries.

**Nonmaterial culture** is composed of the abstract creations of human cultures, including ideas about behavior and living. Nonmaterial culture encompasses aspects of the social experience, such as behavioral norms, values, language, family forms, and institutions. It also reflects the natural environment in which a culture has evolved.

While material culture is concrete and nonmaterial culture is abstract, the two are intertwined. Nonmaterial culture may attach particular meanings to the objects of material culture. For example, people will go to great lengths to protect an object of material culture such as a national flag, not because of what it is—imprinted cloth—but because of the nonmaterial culture it represents, including ideals about freedom and patriotic pride. In order to grasp the full extent of nonmaterial culture, you must first understand three of the sociological concepts that shape it: **beliefs**, **norms**, and **values** (Table 3.1).

**TABLE 3.1 Values, Norms, Folkways, Mores, Taboos, Laws, and Beliefs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>General ideas about what is good, right, or just in a culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms</td>
<td>Culturally shared rules governing social behavior (&quot;oughts&quot; and &quot;shoulds&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folkways</td>
<td>Conventions (or weak norms), the violation of which is not very serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mores</td>
<td>Strongly held norms, the violation of which is very offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taboos</td>
<td>Very strongly held norms, the violation of which is highly offensive and even unthinkable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laws</td>
<td>Norms that have been codified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>Particular ideas that people accept as true</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BELIEFS** We broadly define **beliefs** as particular ideas that people accept as true. We can believe based on faith, superstition, science, tradition, or experience. To paraphrase the words of sociologists W. I. Thomas and D. S. Thomas (1928), beliefs may be understood as real when they are real in their consequences. They need not be objectively true. For example, during the witch hunts in early colonial America, rituals of accusation, persecution, and execution could be sustained in communities such as Salem, Massachusetts, because there was a shared belief in the existence of witches and diabolical power. From 1692 through 1693, more than 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft; of these, 20 were executed, 19 by hanging and 1 by being pressed to death between heavy stones. Beliefs, like other aspects of culture, are dynamic rather than static: When belief in the existence of witchcraft waned, so did the witch hunts. In 1711, a bill was passed that restored “the rights and good names” of those who had been accused, and in 1957, the state of Massachusetts issued a formal apology for the events of the past (Blumberg, 2007).

**NORMS** In any culture, there exists a set of ideas about what is right, just, and good, as well as what is wrong and unjust. Norms, as we noted in Chapter 1, are accepted social behaviors and beliefs, or the common rules of a culture that govern the behavior of people belonging to that culture.

Sociologist Robert Nisbet (1970) writes, “The moral order of society is a kind of tissue of ‘oughts’: negative ones which forbid certain actions and positive ones which [require certain] actions” (p. 226). We can think of norms as representing a set of “oughts” and “ought nots” that guide behavioral choices such as where to stand relative to others in an elevator, how long to...
hold someone’s gaze in conversation, how to conduct the rites of passage that mark different stages of life, and how to resolve disagreements or conflicts. Some norms are enshrined in legal statutes; others are inscribed in our psyches and consciences. Weddings bring together elements of both.

The wedding ceremony is a central ritual of adult life with powerful social, legal, and cultural implications. It is also significant economically. The term wedding industrial complex (Ingraham, 1999) has been used to describe a massive industry that in 2011, for instance, generated more than $53 billion in revenues. This comes as little surprise when we consider that in 2011, the estimated average amount spent on a wedding was just over $25,000 (Wedding Report, 2012). The wedding as a key cultural image and icon is cultivated in families, religions, and the media. Wedding images are used to sell products ranging from cosmetics to furniture, and weddings constitute an important theme in popular movies, including My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002), Wedding Crashers (2005), Bridesmaids (2011), and The Big Wedding (2013). Popular television series such as The Office and Sex and the City have used weddings as narratives for highly anticipated season finales. Today, the reality program Say Yes to the Dress enthralles viewers with the drama of choosing a wedding gown and Four Weddings pits four brides against one another to pull off the “perfect wedding,” while Bridezillas follows the adventures of brides behaving badly. Clearly, the wedding ritual is a powerful artifact of our culture. In light of this, a sociologist might ask, “What are the cultural components of the ritual of entering matrimony, the wedding ceremony?”

Sociologist William Graham Sumner (1906/1959) distinguished among several different kinds of norms, each of which can be applied to weddings. Folkways are fairly weak norms that are passed down from the past, the violation of which is generally not considered serious within a particular culture. A folkway that has become part of many U.S. wedding rituals is the “giving away” of the bride: The father of the bride symbolically gives his daughter to the groom, signaling a change in the woman’s identity from daughter to wife. Some couples today reject this ritual as patriarchal because it recalls earlier historical periods when a woman was treated as chattel given—literally—to her new husband by her previous keeper, her father.

Mores strongly held norms, the violation of which seriously offends the standards of acceptable conduct of most people within a particular culture. In a typical American wedding, the person conducting the ceremony plays an important role in directing the events, and the parties enacting the ritual are expected to respond in conventional ways. For instance, when the officiant asks the guests whether anyone objects to the union, the convention is for no one to object. When an objector surfaces (more often in television programs than in real life), the response of the guests is shock and dismay: The ritual has been disrupted and the scene violated.

Taboos are powerful mores, the violation of which is considered serious and even unthinkable within a particular culture. The label of taboo is commonly reserved for behavior that is extremely offensive: Incest, for example, is a nearly universal taboo. There may not be any taboos associated with the wedding ritual itself in the United States, but there are some relating to marital relationships. For instance, while in some U.S. states it is not illegal to marry a first cousin, in most modern communities doing so violates a basic taboo against intermarriage in families.

Laws are codified norms or rules of behavior. Laws formalize and institutionalize society’s norms. There are laws that govern marriage in general: For instance, in some U.S. states, marriage
is legally open only to heterosexual adults who are not already married to other people. As of March 2014, 17 states (Hawaii, Washington, California, New Mexico, Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine) and the District of Columbia were permitting same-sex marriage, 10 states recognized some type of civil union or domestic partnership, and 33 states explicitly limited marriage to opposite-sex couples (Ahuja, Barnes, Chow, & Rivero, 2014).

Marriage equality groups and their supporters continue to fight prohibitions against same-sex marriage. A poll conducted in 2011 by the Pew Research Center (2012a) found that 47% of U.S. adults agreed same-sex marriage should be recognized as legally valid—43% disagreed. Just 3 years earlier, in a similar poll, 39% of adults agreed while 51% disagreed. This shift in poll results suggests that norms codified in laws are dynamic, too, and are not necessarily shared by all.

VALUES Like norms, values are components of nonmaterial culture in every society. Values are the abstract and general standards in society that define ideal principles, like those governing notions of right and wrong. Sets of values attach to the institutions of society at multiple levels. You may have heard about national or patriotic values, community values, and family values. These can all coexist harmoniously within a single society. Because we use values to legitimate and justify our behavior as members of a country or community, or as individuals, we tend to staunchly defend the values we embrace (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961).

Is there a specific set of values we can define as “American”? According to a classic study by Robin M. Williams Jr. (1970), “American values” include personal achievement, hard work, material comfort, and individuality. U.S. adults value science and technology, efficiency and practicality, morality and humanitarianism, equality, and “the American way of life.” A joint 1998 study on American values by Harvard University, the Washington Post, and the Kaiser Family Foundation identified similar points—hard work, self-reliance, tolerance, and the embrace of equal rights (though respondents also voiced important disagreements about such issues as the ideal size of the U.S. government and the degree to which the government should promote economic equality (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1998).

A 2010 study found an interesting split between those who agreed they would like to see “the federal government provide more services, even if it costs more in taxes” (49%) and those who agreed they would like to see “the federal government cost less in taxes,” even if it meant the provision of fewer services (47%). In 2010, the proportion of survey respondents in favor of more services (even with higher taxes) rose by 10 percentage points (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010b). What we value, then, varies across time and communities and may even be contradictory. Do these differences matter? Can we still speak of a unified body of “American values”? What do you think?

Structural functionalists including Talcott Parsons (1951) have proposed that values play a critical role in the social integration of a society. However, values do not play this role by themselves. They are abstract—vessels into which any generation or era pours its meanings in a process that can be both dynamic and contentious. For instance, equality is a value that has been strongly supported in the United States since
the country’s founding. The pursuit of equality was a powerful force in the American Revolution, and the Declaration of Independence declares that “all men are created equal” (Wood, 1993). However, equality has been defined quite differently across various eras of U.S. history. In the first half of the country’s existence, “equality” did not include women or African Americans, who were by law excluded from its benefits. Over the course of the 20th century, equality became more equal, as the rights of all citizens of the United States, regardless of race, gender, or class status, were formally recognized as equal before the law.

**IDEAL AND REAL CULTURE IN U.S. SOCIETY**

*Beauty is only skin deep. Don’t judge a book by its cover. All that glitters is not gold. These bits of common wisdom are part of U.S. culture. We rarely recall where we first heard them; we simply know them, because they are part of the cultural framework of our lives. These three statements represent a commitment of sorts that society will value our inner qualities more than our outward appearances. They are also examples of ideal culture, the values, norms, and behaviors that people in a given society profess to embrace, even though the actions of the society may often contradict them.*

Real culture consists of the values, norms, and behaviors that people in a given society actually embrace and exhibit. In the United States, for instance, empirical research shows that conventional attractiveness offers consistent advantages (Hamermesh, 2011). From childhood onward, the stories our parents, teachers, and the media tell us seem to sell the importance of beauty. Stories such as *Snow White, Cinderella,* and *Sleeping Beauty* connect beauty with morality and goodness, and unattractiveness with malice, jealousy, and other negative traits. The link between unattractive (or unconventional) appearance and unattractive behavior is unmistakable, especially in female figures. Think of other characters many American children are exposed to early in life, such as nasty Cruella de Vil in *101 Dalmatians,* the dastardly Queen of Hearts of *Alice in Wonderland,* and the angry octopod Ursula in *The Little Mermaid.*

On television, another medium that disseminates important cultural stories, physical beauty and social status are powerfully linked. Overweight or average-looking characters populate shows featuring working- or lower-middle-class people, for example *Family Guy,* *The Office,* and *New Girl.* Programs such as *Modern Family* and *Mike & Molly* offer leading characters who are pleasant and attractive—and often overweight. In the latter, for instance, Mike is a police officer and Molly, for the first three seasons, is an elementary school teacher (she later becomes an author). They have not broken the glass ceiling of high-status jobs that remain largely reserved for their thinner prime-time peers. Characters such as those we encounter on *Scandal, Mad Men,* *House of Cards,* and *Sex and the City* are almost invariably svelte and stylish—and occupy higher rungs on the status hierarchy.

There is a clear cultural inconsistency, a contradiction between the goals of ideal culture and the practices of real culture, in our society’s treatment of conventional attractiveness. Do we “judge a book by its cover”? Studies suggest this is precisely what many of us do in a variety of social settings:

- In the workplace, conventionally attractive job applicants appear to have an advantage in securing jobs (Hamermesh, 2011; Marlowe, Schneider, & Nelson, 1996; Shahani-Denning, 2003; Tews, Stafford, & Zhu, 2009). A significant earnings penalty has been associated with shortness and unattractiveness (Harper, 2000).
- Women in one study who were an average of 65 pounds heavier than the norm of the study group earned about 7% less than their slimmer counterparts did, an effect equivalent to losing about one year of education or two years of experience. The link between obesity and a “pay penalty” has been confirmed by other studies (Harper, 2000; Lempert, 2007). Interestingly, some research has not found strong evidence that weight affects the wages of African American or Hispanic female workers (Cawley, 2000; DeBeaumont, 2009).
- In the courtroom, some defendants who do not meet conventional standards of attractiveness are disadvantaged (DeSantis & Kayson, 1997; Gunnell & Ceci, 2010; Taylor & Butcher, 2007). Mazzella and Feingold (1994)

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**Ideal culture:** The values, norms, and behaviors that people in a given society profess to embrace.

**Real culture:** The values, norms, and behaviors that people in a given society actually embrace and exhibit.

**Cultural inconsistency:** A contradiction between the goals of ideal culture and the practices of real culture.
note that defendants charged with certain crimes, such as rape and robbery, benefit from being attractive. This is consistent with the “beautiful is good” hypothesis (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), which attributes a tendency toward leniency to the belief that attractive people have more socially desirable characteristics. Ahola, Christianson, and Hellstrom (2009) suggest that female defendants in particular are advantaged by attractive appearance.

- Studies of college students have found that they are likely to perceive attractive people as more intelligent than unattractive people (Chia, Allred, Grossnickle, & Lee, 1998; Poteet, 2007). This bias has also been detected in students’ evaluations of their instructors: A pair of economists recently found that the independent influence of attractiveness gives some instructors an advantage on undergraduate teaching evaluations (Hamermesh & Parker, 2005).

Another example of cultural inconsistency can be seen in our purported commitment to the ideal that “honesty is the best policy.” We find an unambiguous embrace of honesty in the stories of our childhood. Think of Pinocchio: Were you warned as a child not to lie because it might cause your nose to grow? Did you ever promise a friend that you would not reveal his or her secret with a pinky swear and the words “Cross my heart and hope to die; stick a needle in my eye”? Yet most people do lie.

Why is this so? We may lie to protect or project a certain image of ourselves. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959), a symbolic interactionist, called this misrepresentation. Goffman argued that all of us, as social actors, engage in this practice because we are concerned with “defining a situation”—whether it be a date or a job interview or a meeting with a professor or boss—in a manner favorable to ourselves. It is not uncommon for job seekers to pad their résumés, for instance, in order to leave the impression on potential employers that they are qualified or worthy. According to an overview of this issue posted on the website of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM; 2008), almost half of 3,100 hiring managers surveyed by CareerBuilder indicated that they had detected lying on a job candidate’s résumé. Common lies included misrepresentations of educational credentials, salary levels, and even criminal records. About 43% of hiring managers also said they spent less than a minute looking at a single résumé during the initial screening process, suggesting that some dishonesty probably goes unnoticed.

Studies also suggest that cheating and plagiarism are common among high school students (Table 3.2). In one study of 23,000 high school students, about half reported that they had cheated on a test in the past year. Just under a third also responded that they had used the Internet to plagiarize assigned work (Josephson Institute Center for Youth Ethics, 2012). Interestingly, a 2009 study suggests that about half of teens age 17 and younger believe cheating is necessary for success (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2009).
MEDIA, MARKETS, AND THE CULTURE OF THINNESS IN AMERICA

Whether you are male or female, you may sometimes experience feelings of inadequacy as you leaf through magazines like *Cosmopolitan, GQ, Vogue,* and *Maxim.* You may get a sense that, in this media-constructed universe, your face, hair, body, and clothing do not fit the masculine or feminine ideal. You may wish that you had the “right look” or that you were thinner. You would not be alone.

One survey of college-age women found that 83% desired to lose weight. Among these, 44% of women of normal weight intentionally ate less than they wanted, and most of the women did not have healthy dieting habits (Malinauskas, Raedeke, Aeby, Smith, & Dallas, 2006). According to a Canadian study, chronic dieters’ sense of identity is often frail and reflects others’ perceptions of them (Polivy & Herman, 2007). Indeed, a recent study examining body weight perceptions among college students found that women with exaggerated body weight perceptions were more likely to engage in unhealthy weight management strategies and were more depressed than those women with accurate perceptions of their weight (Harring, Montgomery, & Hardin, 2011).

Using our sociological imagination, we can deduce that the weight concerns many people experience as personal troubles are in fact linked to public issues: Worrying about (and even obsessing over) weight is a widely shared phenomenon. Millions of women diet regularly, and some manifest extreme attention to weight in the form of eating disorders. By one estimate, fully 9 million people in the United States are afflicted with eating disorders over the courses of their lives (Hudson, Hiripi, Pope, & Kessler, 2007), most of them women. The National Institute of Mental Health (2010) has reported that “women are three times as likely to experience anorexia (0.9 percent of women vs. 0.3 percent of men) and bulimia (1.5 percent of women vs. 0.5 percent of men) during their life. They are also 75 percent more likely to have a binge eating disorder (3.5 percent of women vs. 2.0 percent of men).”

The diet industry in the United States is extremely profitable—by some estimates worth $60.9 billion a year (LaRosa, 2011). The fashion industry (among others) primarily employs models who are abnormally thin and whose images are airbrushed or digitally altered to “perfection.” Psychologist Sarah Grogan (2008) asserts that the dieting, fashion, cosmetic surgery, and advertising industries are fueled by the successful manipulation and oppression of women. That is, manufacturers and marketers create a beauty culture based on total but artificial perfection and then sell products to “help” women achieve a look that is unachievable.

As individuals, we experience the consequences of this artificially created ideal as a personal trouble—unhappiness about our appearance—but the deliberate construction and dissemination of an unattainable ideal for the purpose of generating profits is surely a public issue. Reflecting a conflict perspective, psychologist Sharlene Hesse-Biber (1997) has suggested that to understand the eating disorders and disordered eating so common among U.S. women, we ought to ask not “What can women do to meet the ideal?” but “Who benefits from women’s excessive concern with thinness?” (p. 32). This is the sociological imagination at work.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

- How would you summarize the key factors that explain the broad gap between ideal culture, which entreats us not to judge a book by its cover, and real culture, which pushes women and men to pursue unattainable physical perfection?
### TABLE 3.2 Ethical and Unethical Behavior Among High School Students in 2012 (in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once</th>
<th>Two or More Times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copied an Internet</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>document for a class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assignment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheated on a test</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lied to a teacher</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about something</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>significant</td>
<td></td>
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Why do you think there is such a big gap between what we say and what we do? Do you think most people are culturally inconsistent? What about you?

**ETHNOCENTRISM**

Much of the time, a community's or society's cultural norms, values, and practices are internalized to the point where they become part of the natural order. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) describes these internalized beliefs as doxic: To a member of a given community or cultural group, common norms and practices appear as a part of the social order—just the way things are. But the social organization of our lives is not natural, though it comes to appear that way. Instead, norms, values, and practices are socially constructed. That is, they are the products of decisions and directions chosen by groups and individuals (often, a conflict theorist would argue, those with the most power). And though all human societies share certain similarities, different societies construct different norms, values, and practices and then embrace them as “just the way things are.”

Because we tend to perceive our own culture as “natural” and “normal,” it emerges as the standard by which we tend to judge everything else. This is indicative of ethnocentrism, which, as noted in Chapter 1, is a worldview whereby we judge other cultures by the standards of our own. That which deviates from our own “normal,” social order can appear exotic, even shocking. Other societies’ rituals of death, for example, can look astonishingly different from those to which we are accustomed. This description of an ancient burial practice from the North Caucasus provides an illustration:

Scythian-Sarmatian burials were horrible but spectacular. A royal would be buried in a kurgan [burial mound] alongside piles of gold, weapons, horses, and, Herodotus writes, “various members of his household: one of his concubines, his butler, his cook, his groom, his steward, and his chamberlain—all of them strangled.” A year later, 50 fine horses and 50 young men would be strangled, gutted, stuffed with chaff, sewn up, then impaled and stuck around the kurgan to mount a ghoulish guard for their departed king. (Smith, 2001, pp. 33–34)

Let us interpret this historical fragment using two different cultural perspectives. From an etic perspective—that is, the perspective of the outside observer—the burial ritual looks bizarre and shockingly cruel. However, in order to understand it fully and avoid a potentially ethnocentric perspective, we need to call upon an emic perspective, the perspective of the insider, and ask, “What did people in this period believe about the royals? What did they believe about the departed and the experience of death itself? What did they believe about the utility of material riches in the afterlife and the rewards the afterlife would confer on the royals and those loyal to them?”

Are there death rituals in the U.S. cultural repertoire that might appear exotic or strange to outsiders even though we see them as “normal”?

Putting aside the ethnocentric perspective allows us to embrace cultural relativism, a worldview whereby we understand the practices of another society sociologically, in terms of that society’s own norms and values and not our own. In this way we can come closer to an understanding of cultural beliefs and practices such as those that surround the end of life. Whether the body of the departed is viewed or hidden, buried or burned, feasted with or feasted for, danced around or sung about, a culturally relativist perspective allows the sociologist to conduct his or her examination of the roots of these practices most rigorously.

We may also call on cultural relativism to help us understand the rituals of another people, the Nacirema, described here by anthropologist Herbert Miner (1956):

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people’s time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity

**Doxic:** Taken for granted as “natural” or “normal” in society.

**Etic perspective:** The perspective of the outside observer.

**Emic perspective:** The perspective of the insider, the one belonging to the cultural group in question.

**Cultural relativism:** A worldview whereby the practices of a society are understood sociologically in terms of that society’s norms and values, and not the norms and values of another society.
is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people. . . .

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man’s only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of powerful influences of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in this society have several shrines in their houses. . . .

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. . . . However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm. (pp. 503–504)

What looks strange here, and why? Did you already figure out that Nacirema is American spelled backward? Miner invites his readers to see American rituals linked to the body and health not as natural but as part of a culture. Can you think of other norms or practices in the United States that we could view from this perspective? What about the all-American game of baseball, the high school graduation ceremony, the youth language of texting, or the cultural obsession with celebrities or automobiles?
SUBCULTURES

When sociologists study culture, they do not presume that in any given country—or even community—there is a single culture. They may identify a dominant culture within any group, but significant cultural identities exist in addition to, or sometimes in opposition to, the dominant one. These are subcultures, cultures that exist together with a dominant culture but differ from it in some important respects.

Some subcultures, including ethnic subcultures, may embrace most of the values and norms of the dominant culture while simultaneously choosing to preserve the values, rituals, and languages of their (or their parents’ or grandparents’) cultures of origin. Members of ethnic subcultures such as Armenian Americans and Cuban Americans may follow political events in their heritage countries or prefer their children to marry within their groups. It is comfort in the subculture rather than rejection of the dominant culture that supports the vitality of many ethnic subcultures.

In a few cases, however, ethnic and other subcultures do reject the dominant culture surrounding them. The Amish choose to elevate tradition over modernity in areas such as transportation (many still use horse-drawn buggies), occupations (they rely on simple farming), and family life (women are seen as subordinate to men), and they lead a retreatist lifestyle in which their community is intentionally separated from the dominant culture.

Sociologists sometimes also use the term counterculture to designate subcultural groups whose norms, values, and practices deviate from those of the dominant culture. The hippies of the 1960s, for example, are commonly cited as a counterculture to mainstream “middle America,” though many of those who participated in hippie culture aged into fairly conventional middle-class lives.

Though there are exceptions, the vast majority of subcultures in the United States are permeated by the dominant culture, and the influence runs both ways. What, for example, is an “all-American” meal? Your answer may be a hamburger and fries. But what about other U.S. staples, such as Chinese takeout and Mexican burritos? Mainstream culture has also absorbed the influence of the United States’ multicultural heritage: Salsa music, created by Cuban and Puerto Rican American musicians in 1960s New York, is widely popular, and world music, a genre that reflects a range of influences from the African continent to Brazil, has a broad U.S. following. Some contemporary pop music, as performed by artists such as Lady Gaga, incorporates elements of British glam, U.S. hip-hop, and central European dance. The influence is apparent in sports as well: Soccer, now often the youth game of choice in U.S. suburbs, was popularized by players and fans from South America and Europe. Mixed martial arts, a combat sport popularized by the U.S. organization Ultimate Fighting Championship, incorporates elements of Greco-Roman wrestling, Japanese karate, Brazilian jujitsu, and muay Thai (from Thailand).

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Well over a billion people on our planet speak a dialect of Chinese as their first language. English and Spanish are the first languages of another 300 million people each. More than 182 million people speak Hindi, the primary official language of India, as a first language. In contrast, the world’s 3,500 least widely spoken languages share just 8.25 million speakers. Aka, another language of India, has between 1,000 and 2,000 native speakers. The Mexican language of Seri has between 650 and 1,000. Euchee, a Native American language, has four fluent speakers left. According to a recent article in National Geographic, “one language dies every 14 days,” and we can expect to lose about half the 7,000 languages spoken around the world by the end of the 21st century (Rymer, 2012). What is the significance of language loss for human culture?

Symbols, like the names we assign to the objects around us, are cultural representations of social realities, or, as we put it in Chapter 1, representations of things that are not immediately present to our senses. They may take the form of letters or words, images, rituals, or actions. When we use language, we imbue these symbols with meaning. Language is a particular kind of symbolic system, composed of verbal, nonverbal, and sometimes written representations that are vehicles for conveying meaning. Language is thus a key vehicle of culture.

In the 1930s, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf developed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits that our understandings and actions emerge from language—that is, the words and concepts of our own languages structure our perceptions of the social world. Language is also closely tied to cultural objects and practices. Consider that the Aka language has more than 26 words to describe beads, a rich vocabulary suited for a culture in which beads not only are decorative objects but also convey status and facilitate market transactions. In the Seri language, to inquire where someone is from you ask, “Where is your placenta buried?” This question references a historical cultural practice of burying a newborn’s afterbirth by covering it with sand, rocks, and ashes (Rymer, 2012).

As languages like Aka and Seri die out, usually replaced by dominant tongues like Spanish, English, Chinese, Arabic, and Russian, we lose the opportunity to more fully understand the historical and contemporary human experience and the natural world. For instance, the fact that some small languages have no words linked to specific numbers and instead use only relative designations like “few” or “many” opens the possibility

Subcultures: Cultures that exist together with a dominant culture but differ in some important respects from that dominant culture.

Language: A system of symbolic verbal, nonverbal, and written representations rooted within a particular culture.
Culture and Language

that our number system may be a product of culture rather
than of innate cognition as many believe. Or consider that the
Seri culture, based in the Sonoran Desert, has names for ani-
mal species that describe behaviors that natural scientists are
only beginning to document (Rymer, 2012). Language is a cul-
tural vehicle that enables communication, illuminates beliefs
and practices, roots a community in its environment, and con-
tributes to the cultural richness of our world. Each language
lost represents the erasure of cultural history, knowledge, and
human diversity (Living Tongues Institute for Endangered
Languages, n.d.).

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Conflict theorists focus on disintegrative forces in society,
while functionalists study integrative forces. Where social con-

flict theorists see culture as serving the interests of the elite,
functionalists argue that shared values and norms maintain
social bonds both between individuals and between people and
society (Parsons & Smelser, 1956). By serving as a vehicle for
the dissemination of these values and norms, culture func-
tions to keep society stable and harmonious and gives people a
sense of belonging in a complex, even alienating, social world
(Smelser, 1962). To illustrate, consider the issue of language
use in the United States.

In part as a response to the increased use of Spanish and
other languages spoken by members of the nation’s large
immigrant population, an English-only movement has arisen
that supports the passage of legislation to make English the
only official language of the United States and its govern-
ment. Proponents argue that they want to “restore the great
American melting pot,” though the movement has roots in
the early 20th century, when President Theodore Roosevelt
wrote, “We have room for but one language in this country,
and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the
crucible turns our people out as Americans . . . and not as
dwellers in a polyglot boarding house.” Like today, Roosevelt’s
era was characterized by high rates of immigration to the
United States.

How would a functionalist analyze the English-only move-
ment? He or she might highlight language as a vehicle of social
integration and a form of social glue. Indeed, the English-only
movement focuses on the function of language as an integra-
tive mechanism. For example, the organization ProEnglish
states on its website (www.proenglish.org), “We work through
the courts and in the court of public opinion to defend English’s
historic role as America’s common, unifying language, and to
persuade lawmakers to adopt English as the official language
at all levels of government.” The organization points out that
31 U.S. states have legislation declaring English the official
language. From this perspective, the use of different primary
languages in a single country is dysfunctional to the extent
that it undermines the common socialization that comes from
a shared language and culture.

A substantial proportion of U.S. residents support legisla-
tion making English the official language: a 2014 Huffington

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Post/YouGov survey found that 70% of respondents agreed with this position (Swanson, 2014). At the same time, most homes and residents are already active users of English, even if one-fifth also use another home language. Census data suggest that about 80% of U.S. residents 5 years of age and older use only English at home. Just under 20% use a language other than English. Of this 20%, the majority of respondents (about 56%) indicate that they speak English “very well,” though there is variation by age and primary language (Shin & Kominski, 2010).

Many people embrace cultural diversity and emphasize the value of multiculturalism, a commitment to respecting cultural differences rather than submerging them into a larger, dominant culture. Multiculturalism recognizes that the country is as likely to be enriched by its differences as it is to be divided by them. In a globalizing world, knowledge of other cultures and proficiency in languages other than English is important. In fact, a functionalist might also regard the U.S. Census data cited above as indicative of both the common language that proponents of official English see as crucial to national unity and the cultural diversity that enriches the country and allows it to incorporate a variety of languages in its national and global political, cultural, and economic dealings—which is also positively functional for the country (Figure 3.2).

CULTURE AND MASS MEDIA

From the sociological perspective, we are all cultured because we all participate in and identify with a culture or cultures. In one conventional use of the term, however, some classes of people are considered more cultured than others. We refer to people who attend the symphony, are knowledgeable about classic literature and fine wines, and possess a set of distinctive manners as cultured, and we often assume a value judgment in believing that being cultured is better than being uncultured.

We commonly distinguish between high culture and popular culture. **High culture** consists of music, theater, literature, and other cultural products that are held in particularly high esteem in society. It can also encompass a particular body of literature or a set of distinctive tastes. High culture is usually associated with the wealthier, more educated classes in society, but this association can shift over time. William Shakespeare’s plays were popular with the English masses when they were staged in open public theaters during his lifetime. Lobster was a meal of the poor in colonial America. This suggests that high culture’s association with educated and upper-income elites may be more a function of accessibility—the prohibitive cost of theater tickets and lobster meat today, for instance—than with “good taste” as such.

**Popular culture** encompasses the entertainment, culinary, and athletic tastes shared by the masses. It is more accessible than high culture because it is widely available and less costly.
This chapter raises the problem of language loss—that is, the persistent and expanding extinction of small languages across our planet. In a few places, however, little-used languages are being revived for reasons that range from cultural to economic to political. In some instances, as in the case of Northern Ireland, language revival fits into all three categories.

The dominant language in the country of Northern Ireland has long been English, but there is a growing campaign to revive the Irish language, a tongue with little in common with English (consider the Irish word for independence: neamhspleáchas). The Irish language (also known as Irish Gaelic or Gaeilge) is a minority language in Northern Ireland. As of the country’s 2001 census, 167,487 people (10.4% of the population) had “some knowledge of Irish” (Zenker, 2010). The use of Irish in Northern Ireland had nearly died out by the middle of the 20th century, but today efforts are under way to bring the language back to education, commerce, and political life (“In the Trenches,” 2013).

Northern Ireland has a history of violent conflict with its British neighbor. Early in the 20th century, Ireland was shaken by conflict between the Irish Catholic majority and the Protestant minority, who supported British rule and feared the rule of the Catholic majority. In 1920, the British Parliament passed the Government of Ireland Act, which sought to pacify the parties with the separation of Ireland into a free state of southern counties. In 1922, the larger part of Ireland seceded from the United Kingdom to become the independent Irish Free State (after 1937, this became the current state of Ireland). The six northeastern counties, together known as Northern Ireland, remained within the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has since been the site of sporadic conflict between (mainly Catholic) nationalists and (mainly Protestant) unionists (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). The area remained largely peaceful until the late 1960s, when violence broke out in Londonderry and Belfast, foreshadowing three decades of armed conflict between British troops stationed in Northern Ireland and the rebellious Irish Republican Army (IRA), which represented primarily the interests of the Irish Catholic population. The violent conflicts over home versus British rule, which included terrorism committed by the IRA against British interests and populations, resulted in more than 3,000 deaths in this period (BBC, 2014b). A U.S.-brokered agreement helped to quell the violence in 1998, though sporadic problems remained. Nearly a decade later, in 2007, key parties to the conflict, including leaders of the Catholic and Protestant factions, took the reins of the country in a power-sharing agreement.

The interest in revival of the language dates back to the period of conflict, known locally as “the Troubles.” In the 1960s, a small number of language enthusiasts set up a tiny Irish-speaking community in a Belfast neighborhood. By the 1970s, with the conflict in progress, Irish nationalist prisoners being held by the British in Maze Prison also began learning Irish, calling out words between cells and scrawling their words on the prison walls (Feldman, 1991). The effort spread to neighborhoods where families of the prisoners resided and, according to author Feargal Mac Ionnrachtaigh (2013), it became part of an “anti-colonial struggle.”

Today, Irish nationalists, some of them veterans of the war against British rule, have taken up the mantle of Irish language revival, and
The language is now the medium of instruction for about 5,000 schoolchildren in the country. While this is just a tiny fraction of the total school population, supporters of language revival occupy some key governmental positions in Northern Ireland, and there has been an effort to enact the Irish Language Act, which would establish new rights to the use of the language in official business, thus creating new job opportunities for fluent speakers (“In the Trenches,” 2013).

Today Northern Ireland is peaceful. The Irish language, a part of the local heritage, is being revived. It remains to be seen, however, whether this will serve to draw together two communities with a long history of conflict (the country is about evenly split between the Catholic and Protestant communities) or will deepen the divide as the nationalist Catholic population embraces Irish while the pro-British Protestants resist.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

Why does language matter to communities large and small? What does the Irish language revival movement share with movements like the official English movement in the United States, which supports a powerful and widespread language? How is it different?

to consume. Popular culture can include music that gets broad airplay on the radio, television shows and characters that draw masses of viewers (for example, *The Walking Dead, Game of Thrones, Dance Moms, Orange Is the New Black*), blockbuster films such as the *Hunger Games* or *X-Men* series, Oprah’s Book Club, and spectator sports such as professional wrestling and baseball. Because it is an object of mass consumption, popular culture plays a key role in shaping values, attitudes, and consumption in society. It is an optimal topic of sociological study because, as we noted in our opening story about zombies, it not only shapes but is shaped by society.

**Mass media** are media of public communication intended to reach and influence a mass audience. The mass media constitute a vehicle that brings us culture, in particular—though certainly not exclusively—popular culture. While mass media permeate our lives today, their rise is more recent than we may realize. Theorist Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989) points out that the public sphere as a fundamental part of social life emerged only with the rise of industrial society; that is, prior to the development of printing presses and the spread of literacy, most communication was oral and local. The appearance of mass-circulation newspapers in the 1700s and the growth of literate populations spurred the growth of a public sphere in which information could be widely circulated and, as Habermas points out, public attitudes shaped. In the 20th century, mass media gained influence through the adoption of electronic means of communication ranging from the radio to television to the Internet.

Marshall McLuhan (1964) sought to understand the influence of mass media on society, suggesting that “the medium is the message”—that is, the medium itself has an influence on how the message is received and perceived. Television, for instance, is fundamentally different from print in how it communicates information. In looking at only a particular message, in other words, we may miss the power of the messenger itself and how that transforms social life. McLuhan also asserted that electronic media like television were constructing a global village in which people around the world, who did not and never would know one another, could be engaged with the same news event. For example, it was reported in the summer of 2010 that more than 3 billion people (nearly half of the world’s population) watched some part of the World Cup soccer tournament in South Africa (Lipka, 2014).

From a sociological perspective, the function of the mass media can be paradoxical. On one hand, mass media are powerful and effective means for conveying information and contributing to the development of an informed citizenry: Mass-circulation newspapers, television networks like CNN and BBC, and radio news programs inform us about and help us to understand important issues. On the other hand, some sociologists argue that such media promote not active engagement in society but rather disengagement and distraction. Habermas (1962/1989), for instance, writes of the salons and coffeehouses of major European cities, where the exchange of informed opinions formed a foundation for later public political debates. However, he suggests, the potential for the development of an active public sphere has been largely quashed by the rise of media that have substituted mass entertainment for meaningful debate, elevating sound bites over sound arguments. (See the *Technology and Society* box for discussion of the ideas of other sociologists on this topic.) Do the mass media contribute to or diminish active engagement in the public sphere? Do they help to construct citizens, or do they create consumers? What do you think?

The mass media bring us the key forms of modern entertainment that constitute popular culture. While some researchers theorize the effects of mass media on the public sphere, others

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**Mass media:** Media of public communication intended to reach and influence a mass audience.
Most conflict theorists, following the lead of Karl Marx, maintain that capitalism is a system characterized by oppression and rife with inequality. If this is so, why do working people, victimized by an economic order that enriches the upper socioeconomic classes at their expense, not rise up in protest? Sociologists Herbert Marcuse and Douglas Kellner have offered a few ideas.

Marcuse, writing in 1964, described technology in modern capitalist society as paving the road to a “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom” (p. 1). He believed that modern technology, employed in the service of capitalist interests, would lead to ever more effective—and even pleasant—methods of exerting external control over individuals. After all, spending the evening immersed in a reality TV program or an action film is much easier than rising up in protest or revolution. And we may not like the conditions of our work, but we are willing to work hard so we can get our hands on the newest iPhone. From this perspective, mass media (for instance, television) serve to socialize and pacify populations and are thus instruments of domination. Marcuse (1964) argued that the freedom of individuals had been “invaded and whittled down” by modern technology, and that the result was a “one-dimensional” society in which the ability to think negatively and critically about the social order was progressively crushed (p. 10).

Kellner (1990) expanded the argument that modern technology and media—and television in particular—constitute a threat to human freedom of thought and action in the realm of social change. Kellner suggested that the television industry “has the crucial ideological functions of legitimating the capitalist mode of production and delegitimating its opponents” (p. 9). That is, mainstream television appears to offer a broad spectrum of opinions, but in fact it systematically excludes opinions that seem to question the fundamental values of capitalism (for example, the right to accumulate unlimited wealth and power) or to critique not individual politicians, parties, and policies but the system within which they operate. Because television is such a pervasive force in our lives, the boundaries it draws around debates on capitalism, social change, and genuine democracy are significant.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

► Karl Marx wrote that the ruling ideas of any society are those of the ruling class. Arguably, many of those ideas are conveyed through the vehicle of TV. Does television, which delivers images and messages to our homes as we watch for an average of 7 hours a day, foster passivity and make us vulnerable to manipulation? What about the Internet? How does it expand human action, creativity, and freedom? How does it limit them?

look at how these media shape attitudes and practices—sometimes in negative ways. In the section that follows, we turn our attention to another dimension of culture: the controversial relationships among culture, mass media, and the negative but pervasive phenomenon of sexual violence against women.

**CULTURE, MEDIA, AND VIOLENCE**

Recent statistics suggest that rape and sexual assault devastate the lives of thousands of U.S. women every year. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), in 2012 there were 346,830 rapes, attempted rapes, or sexual assaults
in the United States (Truman, Langton, & Plany, 2013). Men and boys also fall prey to these crimes, but women are the most commonly victimized.

One explanation for this number might be that sexual assaults are perpetrated by thousands of deviant individuals and are the outcomes of particular and individual circumstances. Applying the sociological imagination, however, means recognizing the magnitude of the problem and considering the idea that examination of individual cases alone is inadequate for fully understanding the phenomenon of rape and sexual assault in the United States. To paraphrase C. Wright Mills, it is clearly a personal trouble and a public issue.

Some researchers have posited the existence of a rape culture, a social culture that provides an environment conducive to rape (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005; Sanday, 1990). According to some scholars, rape culture has been pervasive in the U.S. legal system. Feminist theorist and legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon (1989) argues that legislative and judicial processes regarding rape utilize a male viewpoint. Consider, for instance, that until the late 1970s most states did not treat spousal rape as a crime. This conclusion was based, at least in part, on the notion that a woman could not be raped by her husband because sexual consent was taken as implied in the marital contract.

Some researchers argue that the legal culture takes rape less seriously than other crimes of violence (Taslitz, 1999). Legal scholar Stephen J. Schulhofer (2000) has written that the law punishes takings by force (robbery), by coercive threats (extortion), by theft (larceny), by breach of trust (embezzlement), and by deception (fraud and false pretenses). . . . Yet sexual autonomy, almost alone among our important personal rights, is not fully protected. The law of rape, as if it were only a law against the “robbery” of sex, remains focused almost exclusively on preventing interference by force. (pp. 100–101)

Schulhofer notes that this problem is linked to a culture that treats male sexual aggression as “natural.” Taslitz (1999) asserts that the cultural stories brought into courtrooms render proceedings around rape problematic by situating them in myths, such as the idea that a female victim was “asking for it.”

Some research in the fields of sociology and communications suggests that popular culture promotes rape culture by normalizing violence. This is not to argue that culture is a direct cause of sexual violence, but rather to suggest that popular culture renders violence part of the social scenery by making its appearance so common in films, video games, and music videos that it evolves from being shocking to being utterly ordinary (Katz & Jhally, 2000a, 2000b). How does this process occur?

Some scholars argue that popular media embrace violent masculinity, a form of masculinity that associates “being a man” with being aggressive and merciless. As well, the messages of popular culture may serve to normalize violence against women in particular. Tyler, The Creator, winner of the 2011 MTV Video Music Award for Best New Artist, has come under fire from parents, media outlets, and fellow musicians for his violently misogynistic and homophbic lyrics. Hip-hop has long been associated with the use of misogynistic lyrics (Morgan, 1999; Pough, 2004; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Many commercial films and music videos also feature rough—even very violent—treatment of women, offered as entertainment. The most gratuitous violence in films such as The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo (2011), The Killer Inside Me (2010), The Last Exorcism (2010), and Final Destination 5 (2011) is reserved for female victims. In early 2010, citizens in Japan and around the world expressed dismay and disgust when reports emerged about the popular dissemination of the video game RapeLay, in which a player stalks a young woman, her mother, and her sister on a train. In the game, the player uses the mouse to grope—and eventually rape—his victims.

Popular culture’s most predictable normalization of violence against women occurs in pornography, a multibillion-dollar-a-year industry in the United States. Fictionalized portrayals of sexual activity range from coercion of a compliant and always willing female to violent rape simulations in which consent is clearly refused.

While researchers do not propose that lyrics or images disseminated by mass media cause sexual violence directly, some suggest that popular culture’s persistent use of sex-starved, compliant, and easily victimized female characters sends messages that forced sex is no big deal, that women really want to be raped, and that some invite rape by their appearance. In a study of 400 male and female high school students, Cassidy and Hurrell (1995, cited in Workman & Freeburg, 1999) determined that respondents who heard a vignette about a rape scenario and then viewed a picture of the “victim” (in reality a model for the research) dressed in provocative clothing were more likely than those who saw her dressed in conservative clothing, or who saw no picture at all, to judge her responsible for her assailant’s behavior, and to say his behavior was justified and not really rape. More recent studies have reproduced findings that rape myths are widely used to explain and even justify sexual violence (Hammond, Berry, & Rodriguez, 2011).

A 2003 study found that victims’ attire is not a significant factor in sexual assault. Instead, rapists look for signs of passivity and submissiveness (Beiner, 2007). Why, with evidence to the contrary, do such rape myths, common but rarely true beliefs about rapists and rape victims, exist? Recent studies link regular exposure to popular print, television, film, and Internet media with acceptance of rape myths among college-age men and women (Kahlor & Morrison, 2007; Katz, 2006, cited in Lonsway et al., 2009; Reinders, 2006). Is this indicative of the

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Rape culture: A social culture that provides an environment conducive to rape.
existence of a rape culture? Is culture, particularly culture that includes vehicles like music and movies that give a platform to expressions of violence against women, a sociological antecedent of real sexual violence? What do you think?

CULTURE, CLASS, AND INEQUALITY

In their studies of culture and class, sociologists consider whether the musical and artistic tastes of different socioeconomic classes vary and, if so, why. While the answer may be interesting in itself, researchers are also likely to go a step farther and examine the links among culture, power, and class inequality. Particularly when using a social conflict lens, sociologists have long sought to show how elites use culture to gain or maintain power over other groups.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has used culture to help explain the phenomenon of social class reproduction, the way in which class status is reproduced from generation to generation. Bourdieu (1984) discusses the concept of cultural capital, wealth in the form of knowledge, ideas, verbal skills, and ways of thinking and behaving. Karl Marx argued that the key to power in a capitalist system is economic capital, particularly possession of the means of production. Bourdieu extends this idea by suggesting that cultural capital can also be a source of power. Children from privileged backgrounds have access to markedly different stores of cultural capital than do children from working-class backgrounds.

Children of the upper and middle classes come into the education system—the key path to success in modern industrial societies—with a set of language and academic skills, beliefs, and models of success and failure that fit into and are validated by mainstream schools. Children from less privileged backgrounds enter with a smaller amount of validated cultural capital; their skills, knowledge base, and styles of speaking are not those that schools conventionally recognize and reward. For example, while a child from a working-class immigrant family may know how to care for her younger siblings, prepare a good meal, and translate for non-English-fluent parents, her parents (like many first-generation immigrants) may have worked multiple jobs and may not have had the skills to read to her or the time or money to expose her to enriching activities. By contrast, her middle-class peers are more likely to have grown up with parents who regularly read to them, took them to shows and museums, and quizzed them on multiplication problems. While both children come to school with knowledge and skills, the cultural capital of the middle-class child can be more readily “traded” for academic success—and eventual economic gains.

In short, schools serve as locations where the cultural capital of the better-off classes is exchanged for educational success and credentials. This difference in scholastic achievement then translates into economic capital, as high achievers assume prestigious, well-paid positions in the workplace. Those who do not have the cultural capital to trade for academic success are
often tracked into jobs in society’s lower tiers. Class is reproduced as cultural capital begets academic achievement, which begets economic capital, which again begets cultural capital for the next generation.

Clearly, however, the structure of institutional opportunities, while unequal, cannot alone account for broad reproduction of social class across generations. Individuals, after all, make choices about education, occupations, and the like. They have free will—or, as sociologists put it, agency, which is understood as the capacity of individuals to make choices and to act independently. Bourdieu (1977) argues that agency must be understood in the context of structure. To this end, he introduces the concept of *habitus*, the internalization of objective probabilities and the expression of those probabilities as choice.

Put another way, people come to want that which their own experiences and those of the people who surround them suggest they can realistically have—and they act accordingly.

Consider the following hypothetical example of habitus in action. In a poor rural community where few people go to college, fewer can afford it, and the payoff of higher education is not obvious because there are no immediate role models with such experience, Bourdieu would argue that an individual’s “choice” not to prioritize getting into college reflects both agency and structure. That is, she makes the choice not to prepare herself for college or to apply to college, but going to college would likely not have been possible for her anyway due to her economic circumstances and perhaps due to an inadequate education in an underfunded school. By contrast, the habitus of a young upper-middle-class person makes the choice of going to college almost unquestionable. Nearly everyone around her has gone or is going to college, the benefits of a college education are broadly discussed, and she is socialized from her early years to understand that college will follow high school—alternatives are rarely considered. Further, a college education is accessible—she is prepared for college work in a well-funded public school or a private school, and family income, loans, or scholarships will contribute to making higher education a reality. Bourdieu thus suggests that social class reproduction appears on its face to be grounded in individual choices and merit, but fundamental structural inequalities that underlie class reproduction often go unrecognized (or, as Bourdieu puts it, “misrecognized”), a fact that benefits the well-off.

**Culture and Globalization**

There is a pervasive sense around the world that globalization is creating a homogenized culture—a landscape dotted in every corner of the globe with the Golden Arches and the face of Colonel Sanders beckoning the masses to consume hamburgers and fried chicken. The familiar songs of Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, and Beyoncé are broadcast on radio stations from Bangladesh to Bulgaria to Belize, while rebroadcasts of such popular U.S. soap operas as *The Bold and the Beautiful* provide a picture of ostensibly “average” U.S. lives on the world’s television screens.

We see the effects of globalization—and of Americanization in particular—in cultural representations like McDonald’s restaurants, U.S. pop music and videos, and bottles of Coca-Cola spreading around the world. According to press reports, even in the Taliban era in Afghanistan, a time when a deeply conservative Islamist ideology was enforced throughout society, the culture of global Hollywood seeped in through the cracks of fundamentalism’s wall. In January 2001, the Taliban rounded up dozens of barbers in the capital city of Kabul because they had been cutting men’s hair in a style known locally as the “Titanic”: “At the time, Kabul’s cooler young men wanted that Leonardo DiCaprio look, the one he sported in the movie. It was an interesting moment because under the Taliban’s moral regime, movies were illegal. . . . Yet thanks to enterprising video smugglers who dragged cassettes over mountain trails by mule, urban Afghans knew perfectly well who DiCaprio was and what he looked like” (Freund, 2002, p. 24).

How should a sociologist evaluate the spread of a globalized culture? Is globalization, on balance, positive or negative for countries, communities, and corporate entities? Is it just business, or does it also have political implications? The conflict and functionalist perspectives offer us different ways of seeing contemporary *global culture*, a culture that draws heavily, though by no means exclusively, on U.S. trends and tastes.

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**Habitus**: The internalization of objective probabilities and subsequent expression of those probabilities as choice.

**Global culture**: A type of culture—some would say U.S. culture—that has spread across the world in the form of Hollywood films, fast-food restaurants, and popular music heard in virtually every country.
A functionalist examining the development and spread of a broad global culture might begin by asking, “What is its function?” He or she could deduce that globalization spreads not only material culture in the form of food and music but also nonmaterial culture in the form of values and norms. Globalized norms and values can strengthen social solidarity and consequently serve to reduce conflict between states and societies. Therefore, globalization serves the integrative function of creating some semblance of a common culture that can foster mutual understanding and a foundation for dialogue.

Recall from Chapter 1 that functionalism assumes the social world’s many parts are interdependent. Indeed, globalization highlights both the cultural and the economic interdependence of countries and communities. The book Global Hollywood (Miller, Govil, McMurria, & Maxwell, 2002) describes what its authors call a new international division of cultural labor, a system of cultural production that crosses the globe, making the creation of culture an international rather than a national phenomenon (though profits still flow primarily into the core of the filmmaking industry in Hollywood).

The blockbuster film Slumdog Millionaire (2008) offers an example of the international division of cultural labor. The film was directed by Englishman Danny Boyle and codirected by New Delhi native Loveleen Tandan from a screenplay by Boyle’s countryman Simon Beaufoy that was based on the 2005 novel Q & A by Indian writer Vikas Swarup. In 2009, the film, distributed in the United States by Warner Independent Pictures but shown internationally, received nine Academy Awards, including Best Picture. The Indian cast of Slumdog Millionaire includes both established local actors and young Mumbai slum dwellers, some of whom were later found to have earned very little from their efforts. Boyle has argued, however, that the filmmakers worked to ensure future educational opportunities and shelter for the young actors. The film’s global appeal was huge, and it generated almost $378 million in box office returns, leading the Wall Street Journal to label it “the film world’s first globalized masterpiece” (Morgenstern, 2008).

From the social conflict perspective, we can view the globalized culture as a force with the potential to perpetuate economic inequality—particularly because globalization is a product of the developed world. While a functionalist would highlight the creative global collaboration and productive interdependence of a film like Slumdog Millionaire, a conflict theorist would ask, “Who benefits from such a production?” While Western film companies, producers, and directors walk away with huge profits, the slum dwellers used as actors or extras garner far less sustained global interest or financial gain.

A conflict theorist might also describe how the globalization of cheap fast food can cripple small independent eateries that serve indigenous (and arguably healthier) cuisine. An influx of global corporations inhibits some local people from owning their own means of production and providing employment to others. The demise of local restaurants, cafés, and food stalls represents a loss of the cuisines and thus the unique cultures of indigenous peoples. It also forces working people to depend on large corporations for their livelihoods, depriving them of economic independence.

While functionalism and conflict theory offer different interpretations of globalization, both offer valuable insights. Globalization may bring people together through common entertainment, eating experiences, and communication technologies, and, at the same time, it may represent a threat—real or perceived—to local cultures and economies as indigenous producers are marginalized and the sounds and styles of different cultures are replaced by a single mold set by Western entertainment marketers.

Journalist Thomas Friedman has suggested that while most countries cannot resist the forces of globalization, it is not inevitably homogenizing. In The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization, Friedman (2000) writes that “the most important filter is the ability to ‘glocalize.’ I define healthy glocalization as the ability of a culture, when it encounters other strong cultures, to absorb influences that naturally fit into and can enrich that culture, to resist those things that are truly alien and to compartmentalize those things that, while different, can nevertheless be enjoyed and celebrated as different” (p. 295). The concept of glocalization highlights the idea of cultural hybrids born of a pastiche of both local and global influences.

In The Globalization of Nothing (2007), sociologist George Ritzer proposes a view of globalization that integrates what he calls “glocalization,” the product of “the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and the like and their desire . . . to impose themselves on various geographic areas” (p. 15). Ritzer adds that the
The main interest of the entities involved in globalization is in seeing their power, influence, and in many cases profits grow (hence the term globalization) throughout the world (p. 16). The concept of globalization draws from classical sociological theorists like Karl Marx and Max Weber. For instance, where Marx theorized capitalism’s imperative of economic imperialism, Ritzer offers contemporary examples of globalization’s economic and cultural imperialism, exporting not only brand-name products but also the values of consumerism and the practical vehicles of mass consumption, such as credit cards.

How will the world’s cultures shift in the decades to come? Will they globalize or remain localized? Will they glocalize or grobalize? Clearly, the material culture of the West, particularly of the United States, is powerful: It is pushed into other parts of the world by markets and merchants, but it is also pulled in by people eager to hitch their stars to the modern Western world. Local identities and cultures continue to shape people’s views and actions, but there is little reason to believe that McDonald’s, KFC, and Coca-Cola will drop out of the global marketplace. The dominance of U.S. films, music, and other cultural products is also likely to remain a feature of the world cultural stage.

WHY STUDY CULTURE AND MEDIA THROUGH A SOCIOLOGICAL LENS?

Culture is a vital component of a community’s identity through language, objects, and practices, culture embodies a community and its environment. Culture is powerful and complex. As we have seen in this chapter, cultural products, including those disseminated by the mass media, both reflect and shape our societal hopes and fears, norms and beliefs, and rituals and practices. From flesh-eating zombies and classical music to folk dances and folklaws, culture is at the core of the human experience. We are all profoundly “cultured.”

Culture can be a source of integration and harmony, as functionalists assert, or it can be a vehicle of manipulation and oppression, as conflict theorists often see it. There is compelling evidence for both perspectives, and context is critical for recognizing which perspective better captures the character of a given cultural scenario.

The study of culture is much more than just an intellectual exercise. In this chapter, you encountered several key cultural questions that are important objects of public discussion today. Do the mass media foster viewer engagement in public life, or do they distract and disengage us from the pressing problems of our times? Is violence in the media just entertainment, or does it contribute, even indirectly, to violence in relationships and society? Will the evolution of a more global culture play an integrative role between societies, or will smaller cultures resist homogenization and assert their own power, bringing about conflict rather than harmony? These are questions of profound importance in a media-saturated and multicultural world—a sociological perspective can help us to make sense of them.
Explore and Target Careers and Job Options

When you have completed an initial career identity assessment, reflect on your career options. Enlist the support of friends, family, and career professionals as you review career options. You can start by using online tools and library resources. Review general information about occupational fields and industries to identify a wide spectrum of career options. Examine specific aspects of careers and occupations, including types of employers, job skills and titles, responsibilities, entry-level educational requirements, advancement potential, work environments, salaries and benefits, and employment trends.

Use your research results to identify potential employers and link to their websites. Compare results for a variety of employers. Your career and occupational exploration and your employer research are the best ways to support and validate your career aspirations. Online career exploration and employer resources include the following:

- www.careerinfonet.org/Occupations/select_occupation.aspx (CareerOneStop)
- www.vault.com (Vault Career Intelligence)
- www.onetonline.org (O*Net OnLine)

In addition to researching career trends and data, learn about career options firsthand through informational interviews. An informational interview is similar to any interview, except that you interview the individual working in your career field of interest to learn about his or her profession, career skills, education, current position, and/or employer. To request informational interviews, make contact through family members, friends, or school faculty and alumni and their networks.

Other options for exploring careers include internships, field studies, and part-time jobs. Internships offer opportunities for you to learn about career options in real-world settings, to test your career skills and interests, and to meet professionals in your field.

Make Career Decisions and Set Career Goals

Making career decisions is a key aspect of the career development process. Evaluate your alternatives and identify the advantages and disadvantages of each career. From here, you can begin to make a career choice, which will influence your career goals.

Career goals are important milestones that provide a structure enabling you to evaluate progress on your career path. Goals are not absolute, and you may update and change them as you continue to move ahead. Long-term goals are generally accomplished in 1, 5, or 10 years and incorporate your dreams and aspirations. Short-term goals (or objectives) are completed on a daily, weekly, monthly, or annual basis and identify specific tasks associated with your career plan.

THINK ABOUT CAREERS

- Explore some sample employer websites to gather information. What are the career and employment options in each organization? What information is highlighted and what do you learn about the employer? What can you conclude about the industry?
- Create three goals that you hope to accomplish in the next 5 years, then add short-term goals that support the completion of the long-term goal.
SUMMARY

- **Culture** consists of the beliefs, norms, behaviors, and products common to members of a particular social group. **Language** is an important component of cultures. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis points to language’s role in structuring perceptions and actions. Culture is a key topic of sociological study because as human beings we have the capacity to develop it through the creation of artifacts such as songs, foods, and values. Culture also influences our social development: We are products of our cultural beliefs, behaviors, and biases.

- Sociologists and others who study culture generally distinguish between material and nonmaterial culture. **Material culture** encompasses physical artifacts—the objects created, embraced, and consumed by a given society. **Nonmaterial culture** is generally abstract and includes culturally accepted ideas about living and behaving. The two are intertwined, because nonmaterial culture often gives particular meanings to the objects of material culture.

- Norms are the common rules of a culture that govern people’s actions. **Folkways** are fairly weak norms, the violation of which is tolerable. **Mores** are strongly held norms; violating them is subject to social or legal sanction. **Taboos** are the most closely held mores; violating them is socially unthinkable. **Laws** codify some, though not all, of society’s norms.

- **Beliefs** are particular ideas that people accept as true, though they need not be objectively true. Beliefs can be based on faith, superstition, science, tradition, or experience.

- **Values** are the general, abstract standards of a society and define basic, often idealized principles. We identify national values, community values, institutional values, and individual values. Values may be sources of cohesion or of conflict.

- **Ideal culture** consists of the norms and values that the people of a society profess to embrace. **Real culture** consists of the real values, norms, and practices of people in a society.

- Ethnocentrism is the habit of judging other cultures by the standards of one’s own.

- Sociologists entreat us to embrace **cultural relativism**, a perspective that allows us to understand the practices of other societies in terms of those societies’ norms and values rather than our own.

- Multiple cultures may exist and thrive within any country or community. Some of these are **subcultures**, which exist together with the dominant culture but differ in some important respects from it.

- **High culture** is an exclusive culture often limited in its accessibility and audience. High culture is widely associated with the upper class, which both defines and embraces its content. **Popular culture** encompasses entertainment, culinary, and athletic tastes that are broadly shared. As “mass culture,” popular culture is more fully associated with the middle and working classes.

- **Rape culture** is a social culture that provides an environment conducive to rape. Some sociologists argue that we can best understand the high number of rapes and attempted rapes in the United States by considering both individual circumstances and the larger social context, which contains messages that marginalize and normalize the problem of sexual assault.

- **Global culture**—some would say U.S. culture—has spread across the world in the form of Hollywood films, fast-food restaurants, and popular music heard in virtually every country.

KEY TERMS

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. This chapter discusses tensions between ideal and real culture in attitudes and practices linked to conventional attractiveness and honesty. Can you think of other cases where ideal and real cultures appear to collide?

2. The chapter suggests that mass media may play a paradoxical role in society, offering both the information needed to bring about an informed citizenry and disseminating mass entertainment that distracts and disengages individuals from debates of importance. Which of these functions do you think is more powerful?

3. What is cultural capital? What, according to Bourdieu, is its significance in society? How is it accrued and how is it linked to the reproduction of social class?

4. The chapter presents an argument on the relationships among culture, mass media, and sexual violence with a discussion of the concept of a rape culture. Describe the argument. Do you agree or disagree with the argument? Explain your position.

5. Sociologist George Ritzer sees within globalization two processes—“glocalization” and “grobalization.” What is the difference between the two? Which is, in your opinion, the more powerful process, and why do you believe this? Support your point with evidence.

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