Cultures

Elizabeth D. Hutchison and Linwood Cousins

Chapter Outline

Learning Objectives
Case Study 8.1: Rubina Living Across Cultures
What Is Culture?

Theories of Culture
  - Materialist Perspective
  - Mentalist Perspective
  - Other Theoretical Perspectives

Major Concepts in the Study of Culture
  - Values
  - Ideology
  - Symbols
  - Language
  - Norms
  - Subcultures and Countercultures
  - Ideal Culture Versus Real Culture

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism
  - Culture and Power
    - Race
    - Ethnicity
    - Gender
    - Sexuality
    - Social Class
    - Disability

Genes and Culture

Digital Culture

How Culture Changes

Implications for Social Work Practice

Key Terms

Active Learning

Web Resources

Learning Objectives

8.1 Analyze one’s own emotional and cognitive reactions to a case study.

8.2 Outline the elements that make up a comprehensive definition of culture.

8.3 Compare three theoretical perspectives on culture (materialist, mentalist, and practice orientation).

8.4 Apply a number of major concepts in the study of culture to a case study.

8.5 Analyze how the approaches of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism would benefit or be harmful to social work practice.

8.6 Give examples of how culture and power intersect in the social categorizations of race,
Rubina is a 22-year-old Pakistani American female who was recommended to an outpatient mental health clinic by her primary care doctor due to possible depression and anxiety. On the referral the doctor noted that Rubina has chronic headaches, shortness of breath, and chest pains. The doctor has completed thorough physical assessments with bloodwork and believes that Rubina's symptoms are likely psychosomatic.

At the intake appointment Rubina is very cooperative and open. She tells the social worker that she was born in the United States to parents from Pakistani origins. Her parents moved to the United States in their 20s, before she was born, for better economic opportunities. Rubina's parents currently work in the restaurant business and have struggled financially as long as she can remember. Despite their financial struggles, her parents have always emphasized the importance of education and pushed Rubina and her siblings to excel in school. Rubina graduated high school at the top of her class and is currently studying business at an Ivy League school.

Rubina tells the social worker that she is doing well at school and that most of the stress in her life comes from her parents. Rubina lives at home with her mother, father, and three younger siblings. She reports that although her parents have been in the United States for over 20 years they continue to live their day-to-day lives like “back home.” Rubina clarifies that Pakistan is not home for her—she has only been there a few times on vacation—but that her parents derive all their expectations, rules, and norms from that culture. Expectations that bother Rubina the most include her parents needing to know where she is at all times and that, as the eldest child in the family, she needs to take care of her siblings [by helping with homework every day and driving them around to extracurricular activities]. It also really bothers her that her parents expect her to listen to them unconditionally, although she is in her last semester of college.

Values of respecting one’s elders, honoring one’s parents, and helping family members are very strong within the family, and Rubina feels extremely guilty anytime she tries to put her needs before her family’s. It’s during these times that Rubina’s unexplained body aches and pains seem to flare up the most. When Rubina tries to assert herself she is met with a lot of resistance and told she is trying to act “American.” This causes a lot of cognitive dissonance for Rubina, for she was born in the United States and as a result often feels American. On some days, however, when Rubina hears about hate crimes toward minorities in the news she reports feeling more “Brown” and that perhaps her mother is right that she is not a real American. Because Rubina doesn’t relate to the Pakistani culture much, she feels cultural dysphoria and often feels out of place wherever she goes.

While trying to navigate through cultural identity issues, Rubina tells the social worker that she recently started practicing Islam after joining her university’s Muslim Student Association (MSA). She really likes how culturally diverse the MSA is and has become friends with many second-generation immigrants from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, like herself, as well as recent North, Central, and South American converts. Rubina feels that she can relate to her peers in the MSA about culture issues and young-adulthood issues in ways she had not before. Attending MSA lectures and interacting with other Muslims has helped her explore religion in ways she had not before. Rubina feels that religion gives her a stronger sense of identity and makes her feel more grounded.

Rubina tells the social worker that her new interest in Islam was not warmly received at home, although her
family identifies themselves as Muslim. When Rubina started to learn more about religion from sources outside her family, she came to realize that her parents misused religion to enforce their cultural values during her childhood. For example, if Rubina ever disagreed with her parents about an issue, even respectfully, her mother would tell her that Rubina was displeasing Allah (God). Rubina doesn’t know if her parents did this knowingly or out of ignorance but indicates she is resentful of her parents either way. Rubina has more recently become vocal at the dinner table about issues important to her, but her parents scoff at her ideas.

In the past two months Rubina began to experiment with the hijab (Islamic headscarf) for the first time, and this has further exacerbated conflict at home. Rubina says that when she wears her hijab she feels closer and more connected to God. Although Rubina’s parents are considered conservative by most standards, they told her to not wear the hijab because of the recent increase in anti-Muslim sentiment within their local community. Rubina feels that her parents’ views of the hijab only substantiate her claims that her parents pick and choose standards that are convenient for them.

Rubina appears to understand that difficult family dynamics are likely causing her physical ailments, but she tells the social worker she doesn’t know how to manage her stress in healthy ways. She is willing to try counseling and expresses some optimism that even if counseling doesn’t work, at least she will have someone to talk to who won’t judge her.

—Najwa Awad

**What Is Culture?**

Rubina, like many of us, moves back and forth across several different cultures in her daily life. That is why the title of this chapter is “Cultures” and not “Culture.” The world has always contained a rich array of cultures, and history is largely a tale of the conflicts that occurred when different cultures encountered each other in the same space. However, in past generations, in what has been called “traditional culture,” it was not unusual for people to live their lives in relatively unchanging cultural enclaves with clear norms and values, with little encounter with people from other cultures with different norms and values. In many places in the world today, this type of cultural segregation is no longer the way that humans live. In the contemporary world, in many but not all places, we come into contact with a variety of cultures through daily activities but also through the media, travel, reading, migration, and a global economic system. The first author is immersed or has been immersed in many different cultures, including “American” culture, university culture, family culture based on “back home” Pakistani culture, the peer culture of the Muslim Student Association that includes much cultural diversity, and the current culture of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. As her social worker gets to know Rubina better, she will probably learn of other cultures in which Rubina participates, perhaps a social media culture and a culture of business students.

In which cultures do you participate, and how do the different cultures shape your identity?

In the contemporary world, cultures interact with and influence each other. Almost all of us live at the intersection of several different cultures; sometimes these different cultures reinforce each other; sometimes they borrow from each other; and sometimes our cross-cultural experiences are fraught with the kind of conflicts that Rubina is experiencing. Human behavior must be understood in the context of multiple interacting cultures.

So what is culture? Contemporary social scientists suggest that culture is one of the most elusive social science terms to define. Researchers use many different definitions, reflecting different theories for understanding culture and focusing on different phenomena (Gardiner, 2018). More than 50 years ago, two anthropologists, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), developed a list of 164 definitions of the term culture found in the social science literature. They divided these definitions into the eight categories presented in Exhibit 8.1.
Anthropologists trace contemporary definitions of culture back to the definition offered by anthropologist E. B. Tylor in 1871: “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (p. 1). This definition of culture is a broad definition, and many of the definitions found in the anthropology, cultural psychology, cultural studies, and sociology literatures that came after Tylor’s time continued in this broad way of thinking about culture. For example, in 1969 sociologist Peter Berger provided an even broader definition, defining culture as “the totality of man’s products, both material and immaterial” (p. 6). Other scholars call for a narrower, more focused definition, but these scholars have a lot of variation in their thinking about what the narrower focus should be. Some focus on material culture, which includes physical objects, resources, and spaces that people use to define their culture. Examples include homes, places of religious worship, work spaces, tools, products, and technologies (see Tilley, Keane, Küchler, Rowlands, & Spyer, 2013). Other scholars focus on beliefs and values; some focus on norms and habits, and others focus on language, symbols, and meaning making (Inglis, 2016). Several disciplines are involved in the study of culture, and each discipline includes an array of definitions. There is no agreed-on definition of culture and probably never will be. Exhibit 8.2 provides some definitions of culture used in the contemporary disciplines of anthropology, cultural psychology, cultural studies, and sociology.

### Exhibit 8.2 Definitions of Culture Used in Contemporary Anthropology, Cultural Psychology, Cultural Studies, and Sociology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ballantine, Roberts, &amp; Korgen, 2018, p. 67</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>The ideas and “things” passed on from one generation to the next in a society, including knowledge, beliefs, values, rules and laws, language, customs, symbols, and material products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barker &amp; Jane, 2016, p. 9</td>
<td>Cultural studies</td>
<td>The actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages, and customs of any specific society . . . the contradictory forms of common sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardiner, 2018, p. 3</td>
<td>Cultural psychology</td>
<td>The cluster of learned and shared beliefs, values [achievement, individualism, collectivism, etc.], practices [rituals and ceremonies], behaviors [roles, customs, traditions, etc.], symbols [institutions, language, ideas, objects, artifacts, etc.], and attitudes [moral, political, religious, etc.] that are characteristic of a particular group of people and that are communicated from one generation to another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest, 2017, p. 35</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>A system of knowledge, beliefs, patterns of behavior, artifacts, and institutions that are created, learned, shared, and contested by a large group of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haviland, Prins, Walrath, &amp; McBride, 2017, p. 326</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>A society’s shared and socially transmitted ideas, values, and perceptions, which are used to make sense of experience and generate behavior and are reflected in that behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritzer, 2016, p. 54</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>The ideas, values, practices, and material objects that allow a group of people, even an entire society, to carry out their collective lives in relative order and harmony</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this chapter, *culture* is defined as a system of knowledge, beliefs, values, language, symbols, patterns of behavior, material objects, and institutions that are created, learned, shared, and contested by a group of people. As you can see, this definition is very similar to the definition proposed by anthropologist Guest (see Exhibit 8.2), with some additions. This definition indicates that culture is “inside our heads” as thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, and emotions (Cousins, 2015). It is also in the social and material worlds with patterns of behavior, material objects, and the social institutions we create to manage social life. It is created over time, shaped by human interactions. It is learned through a process called *enculturation*. The hallmark of culture is that it is shared by a group of people, but what we like most about Guest’s definition is that it recognizes that culture is both shared and contested. This notion that culture is contested as well as shared is very important to social work. As Ritzer’s definition of culture (as seen in Exhibit 8.2) points out, shared culture allows both small and large groups to carry out their collective lives in relative order and harmony. And yet social workers recognize that order and harmony too often favor elite participants in a culture while at the same time harming or oppressing other participants. Besides the conflicts between cultures, intense internal struggles often erupt over beliefs, values, symbols, and behaviors. Consider Rubina’s story. She navigates the conflicts between “American” culture and “back home” Pakistani culture, as well as the conflicts between her religious culture and the dominant religious culture in the United States. But she also lives with an intense internal struggle about the nature of her family culture. Now, think back to Amira in Case Study 6.7 in Chapter 6. Amira, like Rubina, is a 22-year-old Pakistani American. She also struggles with participation in multiple cultures, but her struggles are not identical to those of Rubina. This is an important reminder that we must avoid making assumptions about people based on their ethnicity or any other single identifier. We must allow people to tell their own stories of cultural conflict. Social workers are often called on to intervene in these internal struggles, whether they occur in a family, a small group, a community, an organization, or even a larger society.
Theories of Culture

The study of culture can be divided into two main streams: the humanities approach and the social science approach (Griswold, 2013). In the humanities approach, and in common usage, culture is associated with the fine and performing arts and with “serious” literature. Traditionally, societies and groups were evaluated on the basis of their art and literature products. Some cultures and some cultural works were, and still are in common usage, considered better than other cultures and cultural works. It is not unusual to hear someone head off to the art museum or a symphony performance saying, “I am going to get some culture.” The social science approach to culture began to be developed during the 19th century when the new disciplines of anthropology and sociology began to use the word culture in a different way than traditionally used in the humanities. In this new way of thinking, culture refers to a society’s total way of life. Social scientists say, “We are doing culture all the time” rather than “I am going to get some culture.” To begin to think about how we are all doing culture all the time, consider some of the cultural creations presented in Exhibit 8.3. Social scientists attempt to study cultures in terms of relativism instead of evaluation; one culture is not better than another, just different. They also think of culture as a force that stabilizes societies and allows them to persist over time.

EXHIBIT 8.3  ●  Cultural Creations

Ask yourself what judgments you make and meanings you attribute in the following areas:

Music:
Classical versus jazz
Rhythm and blues versus bluegrass
Celtic versus rock and roll

Food:
Hamburger versus eel
Ants versus hot dogs
Kangaroo tail versus squid
Pigs’ feet versus horse

Household/Domestic Activities:
Parents and children sleeping in separate beds and/or separate rooms versus sleeping in the open
Sexual intercourse in private versus public
Bathing in private versus public
Breast-feeding in private versus public
Families living, eating, and sleeping in one large room versus separate rooms
Eating with fingers and hands versus forks, spoons, and knives
As you might have guessed, we are using a social science approach to culture in this chapter and are not considering theories of culture found in the humanities. Over time, social scientists have developed almost as many theories of culture as definitions of culture. And books have been written on every social science theory of culture considered to be important to culture scholars. In this section, we use a simple classification of theories of culture presented by anthropologist Haviland and colleagues (2017): materialist perspectives, mentalist perspectives, and other perspectives. The intent is not to provide an exhaustive understanding of culture theory but to provide a window on some of the main themes in contemporary culture theory.

Before beginning that discussion, we call your attention to the discussion in Chapter 1 of this book about controversies surrounding assumptions undergirding social science theory, particularly the competing assumptions about whether human behavior is determined by forces beyond the control of the person (determinism) or people are free, proactive agents in the creation of their behavior (voluntarism). That controversy shows up in theorizing about culture in the form of questions about human agency in the creation, maintenance, and changing of cultures. Human agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. Some theories of culture assume that humans have agency in creating, maintaining, and changing culture, and other theories assume little to no human agency in relation to culture.

Materialist Perspective

The materialist perspective places primary emphasis on the role of the environment, technology, and economy in creating, maintaining, and changing culture. Ideas, values, beliefs, and cultural products are seen as adaptations to environmental, technological, and economic conditions. Still today, the best known theory in the materialist perspective is Marxism, which proposes that culture is driven by the economic organization of a society. Not only material things such as food, clothing, lodging, and communication technology but also consciousness—what we are aware of and how we think and feel about things—are cultural by-products of the economic system. For example, we might ask if Rubina’s parents’ views of the hijab are based, in some part, on their struggles in the economic system. In this perspective, cultural change is the result of growing conflict between economic classes. As noted in Chapter 2, neo-Marxist critical theory focuses on the culture industry that mass produces popular culture products such as movies, television shows, and social media, arguing that products of the culture industry manipulate humans into passivity (Scannell, 2007; Steinert, 2003). In the view of Marxism and critical theory, human agency is quite limited.

Whereas Marxism focuses on the economic institution and neo-Marxist critical theory on the culture industry as the driving force of culture, cultural ecology focuses on the impact of the physical environment on culture. Cultural ecologists are interested in how humans adapt their cultures to the natural environment and how humans modify nature to suit their needs and desires. They are particularly interested in the relationship of the physical environment to the cultures of marginalized and vulnerable groups of people. They are also concerned about threatened landscapes, and this has led many cultural ecologists into environmental activism. As you can see, unlike Marxism and neo-Marxist critical theory, cultural ecology is interested in human agency and the human capacity to manipulate the physical environment in the development of culture (Antoinette & WinklerPrins, 2010).

Mentalist Perspective

The mentalist perspective sees humans creating, maintaining, and changing culture on the basis of their beliefs, values, language, and symbolic representations. Culture is understood by understanding how participants think, feel, and speak. Interpretive anthropology views humans mostly as “symbolizing, conceptualizing, and meaning-seeking” creatures (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). Culture should be understood by peeling back layer upon layer of socially constructed meaning. In the case of Rubina, what does it mean to her to be Brown, and what does it mean to others? How did these meanings develop over time? Also, what does the hijab mean to Rubina, her parents, and the people she encounters on the street? How did these meanings develop over time? There is much room for human agency in this perspective. Culturalism emphasizes the day-to-day aspects of culture and the active, creative way that people participate in constructing shared meaning and shared meaningful practices. In this view, cultural meaning unfolds over time as people interact (Barker & Jane, 2016). This perspective puts strong emphasis on the role of human agency in constructing culture. Structuralism examines culture as a product of the human brain’s mental structure. More specifically, it proposes that the structure of human cognition leads us to conceptualize the world in terms of binary opposites (e.g., bad-good, black-white, day-night,
cold-hot, female-male, life-death, us-them). It suggests that we understand what we are in large part by thinking about what we are not (Layton, 2006). There is limited room for human agency from this perspective. 

*Semiotics* is the study of meaning making through signs and symbols. These theoreticians and researchers study the way language is used as code for values and ideas, but they also study other types of signs and symbols, such as war memorials, Internet memes, food, and clothing items such as the hijab (Barker & Jane, 2016; Layton, 2006). They are interested in what can be expressed and who can express it, leaving some room for human agency but more room for some culture participants than for others.

Poststructuralism and postmodernism have developed as critiques of structuralism but also serve as critiques of Marxism and neo-Marxism. *Poststructuralism* rejects the idea of an underlying stable structure of culture, particularly the idea of meaning making through fixed binary opposites. For example, it is in agreement with those who propose gender as a nonbinary attribute. These theorists see meaning as unstable and in process; attributes like Black identity or femininity are not fixed attributes but descriptions in language that have come to count as truth. They are productions of culture that developed in particular times and places (Barker & Jane, 2016).

*Postmodernism*, like poststructuralism, argues that truth and meaning are perspectival; the development of ideas, knowledge, symbols, and values take place from particular perspectives that come from living in particular times and places. There are always many possible conceptual schemes from which judgment of truth and value can be made. The human condition is fragmented, ambiguous, and uncertain (Barker & Jane, 2016). As we write this in June 2017, we are paying attention to discussions of “fake news” and “alternative facts.” These are postmodern ideas being presented by people who often argue that there are certainties and truth. Although poststructuralism and postmodernism seem to leave room for human agency, theorists in this tradition do not emphasize human agency.

It is important to note that many contemporary culture scholars suggest that three major types of cultures have been produced in recent centuries: traditional culture, modern culture, and postmodern culture (see Gotham, 2013; Griswold, 2013). Although the postmodernists do not see these different cultures as a historical development, *traditional culture* or *premodern culture* is the name generally given to preindustrial societies based on subsistence agriculture. *Modern culture* arose with the 18th-century Enlightenment and is characterized by rationality, industrialization, urbanization, and capitalism. *Postmodern culture* is the term many people use to describe contemporary societies driven by global communication technology, societies where people are exposed to media images that span place and time, allowing them to splice together cultural elements from these different times and places (Griswold, 2013). One of the earliest journals to be Internet based is titled *Postmodern Culture* and has become a leading electronic journal of interdisciplinary thought on contemporary cultures. Exhibit 8.4 presents the primary characteristics usually attributed to these three types of culture. Although these types of culture are often presented as a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXHIBIT 8.4</th>
<th>Characteristics of Traditional, Modern, and Postmodern Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Traditional Culture</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of rationality</td>
<td>Positive value for irrational aspects of life; religious traditions superior to reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Status based on bloodline; hierarchy as natural order; patriarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of authority</td>
<td>Religious authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability and change</td>
<td>Stability and order valued; order based on religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit of value</td>
<td>Communal values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life structure</td>
<td>Agrarian, subsistence agriculture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
historical timeline, traits of all three types of culture can in fact be found in technology-driven capitalist societies today and often become the source of contemporary culture wars within societies. Furthermore, many nonindustrial and newly industrializing societies can be characterized as either traditional or modern cultures.

Other Theoretical Perspectives

Some culture scholars (anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, economists, and social workers) have been particularly interested in finding a way of thinking about culture that allows for human agency while also recognizing the constraints that culture puts on it. They present a practice orientation (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979; Ortner, 1989, 1996, 2006) that seeks to explain what people do as thinking, intentionally acting persons who face the impact of history and the constraints of structures embedded in society and culture. It asks how social systems shape, guide, and direct people’s values, beliefs, and behavior. But it also asks how people, as human actors or agents, perpetuate or change the cultures of social systems.

History, social structure, and human agency are key elements in a practice orientation. History is made by people, but it is made within the constraints of the social, economic, political, physical, and biological systems in which people are living. To understand human diversity, especially as it relates to oppression, exploitation, and subjugation, we must listen to the memories of both powerful and marginalized observers. We must listen to clients as much as to social workers.

Structure refers to the ordered forms and systems of human behavior existing in public life (e.g., capitalism, family, public education). We carry forth meanings, values, and beliefs through social, economic, and political practices in our everyday personal lives and the institutions in which we participate. Social structure and social institutions are the focus of Chapter 9 in this book. We reproduce structures when we assume the rightness of the values, beliefs, and meaning that undergird them and see no need to change them.

As suggested earlier, human agency recognizes people as capable of exercising their will to shape their lives. Thus, although racism and religious bias are structured into society, they are not so completely dominant over Rubina that she has no room for meaningful self-expression about issues such as with whom she associates and what she wears. Human agency is a major source of hope and motivation for social workers who encounter people, organizations, and systems that seem unable to break away from the constraints of history and culture. However, no individual or group is a fully free agent. All are constrained by biology and by external factors such as the climate, natural resources, and existing social institutions—although we may be able to modify some of these constraints through technology (Kurzweil, 2012). Examples of technologies that modify constraints of biology and nature are medicines, agricultural breakthroughs, climate-controlled homes, telecommunications, and transportation.

Critical Thinking Questions 8.1

When you think of your day-to-day life, do you think you live in a traditional, modern, or postmodern culture? Explain. What do you see as the benefits and costs of each of these types of cultures? How much human agency do you think you have to take charge of your own life? How much human agency do you think Rubina has? What factors make a difference in how much human agency people have?

Major Concepts in the Study of Culture

As noted earlier, contemporary understandings of culture include numerous themes with different scholars focusing on different concepts. In this section, we consider some of the major concepts used in the study of culture across disciplines and theoretical perspectives. We have already taken a look at material culture, which includes physical objects, resources, and spaces that people use to define their culture. Other important concepts in the study of culture are values, ideology, symbols, language, norms, subculture, counterculture, and ideal culture versus real culture.

Values

Cultures promote and nurture a core set of values, beliefs about what is important or unimportant, desirable or undesirable, and right or wrong. They reflect the basic ideals and shared cultural standards of a group or society. One of the most frequently noted ways to compare and contrast the values of different cultures at the societal level is to think in terms of individualist culture versus collectivist culture. In this view, an individualist culture is made up of people who are responsible to
and for themselves and whose individual achievement is the overriding goal. The United States and western European countries are often used as examples of individualist societies, with the United States often considered to be the most individualistic society in the world. A collectivist culture is made up of people who consider the group to be most important, with an emphasis on traditions, cooperation, and a sharing of common goals. Societies that are typically noted to be collectivist cultures include most of Asia, Africa, and South America. Some researchers have noted that components of both individualist and collectivist values exist in most cultures, and even within individuals (Gardiner, 2018), but it is also probably true that most cultures tend to tilt one way or the other. We can see that Rubina’s parents value a collectivist approach, at least for the workings of their family, and Rubina, at least in this phase of her life, has been influenced by the individualist values of the wider U.S. culture.

Cultural values are not equally shared by all participants, and in any country in the world looking at a daily newspaper or reading comments on social media quickly demonstrates struggles over cultural values. For example, in the United States and around the world, there is a cultural debate about the proper prioritization of values of environmental protection versus economic growth. Often cultural life includes dualisms of competing values, two things that are both valued but in competition with each other—perhaps people value individualism and collectivism or environmental protection and economic growth. In the United States, we value both privacy and security, and since September 11, 2011, we have had lots of debates about the proper balance of these two values. Policies that were made to provide security—such as governmental surveillance of telephone and Internet communications—have been criticized for their invasion of privacy. Similarly, in social work we value both individual freedom and the common good. In individual practice situations, these two values are in competition when one person’s individual freedom is harmful to another individual or group of individuals, for example, parents’ right to parent as they choose versus the rights of a child to be protected from abusive or neglectful parenting. In the situation of competing values, we always have to consider how to balance them in specific situations.

**Ideology**

Ideology is akin to values but is used to mean a set of shared beliefs that explains the social world and guides people’s actions, especially in relation to economic and political theory and policy. Here is an example. In his book *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*, Colin Woodard (2011) argues that the United States has been a deeply divided country from the days the original colonies were settled by people from different regions of the British Isles, as well as from France, the Netherlands, and Spain. He proposes that this pattern of settlement resulted in 11 different regional cultures: “Some championed individualism, others utopian social reform. Some believed themselves guided by divine purpose, others championed freedom of conscience and inquiry. Some embraced an Anglo-Saxon Protestant identity, others ethnic and religious pluralism. Some valued equality and democratic participation, others deference to a traditional aristocratic order” (p. 2). Over time, some people migrated and new waves of immigration happened, but Woodard argues that strong traces of the 11 regional cultures persisted. The 11 cultures have formed shifting alliances from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War to the current time, always struggling to gain control of the ideology and institutions of the federal government.

Woodard proposes that since the Civil War, these 11 regional cultures have coalesced into two primary competing political ideologies: one side pushing for a large role for the federal government in securing social and economic justice at home and opposing military intervention abroad while the other side pushes for a small role for federal government in domestic policy and a large military presence abroad. Other issues get woven into these two ideologies from time to time, but their basic core has not changed since the Civil War. One issue woven into political ideologies in recent years is anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment. This is an ideology that causes pain to ideological ideologies in recent years. It can be verbal (language), an artefact (a flag), or non-verbal behavior (standing for the national anthem). We are often not aware that we are expressing ourselves symbolically, because “much symbolic communication

**Symbols**

Cultures include complex systems of symbols, and much of human behavior involves symbols. A symbol, simply stated, is something that stands for something else. It can be verbal (language), an artefact (a flag), or non-verbal behavior (standing for the national anthem). We are often not aware that we are expressing ourselves symbolically, because “much symbolic communication...
is nonverbal, action-based, and unconscious” (Guest, 2017, p. 39). Let’s consider Rubina’s recent use of the hijab. She says it symbolizes her relationship with God, but for her parents it is a symbol of danger. In recent years, researchers in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States have studied the meaning of the hijab among Muslim women, and as you might guess they have found that it carries different meanings for different women. For example, Ann McGinty (2014) studied the meaning of the hijab among five Palestinian American Muslim women living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. For some of the women, as for Rubina, wearing the hijab represents an internalization of their religious faith and their relationship with God. It serves as a reminder of their desire “to be good,” to live in accord with the tenets of their faith. To one woman, it is a part of a personal identity quest, a way to deal with her feelings of exclusion and a need to belong. To another woman, wearing the hijab is not a religious practice but a way to symbolize political solidarity and political protest against Islamophobia. Some women note a desire to be more visible to let other people know that “there are Muslims in Milwaukee” (McGinty, 2014, p. 694) and to diminish the stigma of being Muslim. These women see wearing the hijab as a form of activism and participate in community outreach while wearing the hijab to make the Muslim community more visible in the media in a positive way. One of the women chooses not to wear the hijab because she is highly critical of the local Muslim community’s pressure to wear it and feels that they stigmatize women who do not wear it. Rubina might find meaning in what Rafa reported to McGinty about a difference between herself and her parents. She was born in the United States, unlike her parents, and when talking about the difference that made in thinking about the hijab, she said that her parents do not see the United States as their country: “They always had the fear, while I feel like this is my place” (McGinty, 2014, p. 695). Perhaps this is an idea that Rubina’s social worker could explore with her.

Language

One important aspect of symbolic culture is language, the system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other. Language is found in three primary forms: spoken, written, and nonverbal. Human brains are wired at birth to learn any spoken language to which they are exposed, but as brain synapses are pruned over time to improve brain efficiency the capacity to learn new languages is diminished. Written language allows humans to store information and ideas and produce a cultural history; it also allows communication over wide distances. Nonverbal language consists of gestures; facial expressions; body postures; and vocal elements such as rate, volume, and intonation. One might imagine that even when Rubina does not challenge her parents’ expectations verbally, she might be communicating her dissatisfaction with a combination of facial expressions, body postures, and vocal elements. American Sign Language is an example of a complex language built entirely on gestures. It allows for people who are mute or hearing challenged to communicate in face-to-face interactions; text messaging technologies have also extended the ability for people who are mute or hearing challenged to communicate with the written language of their choice.

According to Ballantine and colleagues (2018), there are more than 7,100 spoken languages in the world, with 40% of the world’s population speaking one of the eight most common languages as their first language. The five most common first languages in the world are Chinese (1.2 billion speakers), Spanish (414 million speakers), English (335 million speakers), Hindi (260 million speakers), and Arabic (237 million speakers). English is the most common Internet language around the world. With so much variability in language in different places of the world, learning a new language becomes a major challenge for people migrating across national lines. This is especially challenging for people who migrate as adults; migrating adults are usually capable of thinking complexly but not able to communicate their complex thoughts in their new language. This can be very frustrating. It should be noted that a number of countries of the world have more than one official language, and people who live in countries in the European Union (EU) often learn several languages as they travel freely across the EU.

New words are added to a culture’s language as the culture evolves and new cultural products are developed. In February 2017, Merriam-Webster (2017b) announced that it had just added over 1,000 new words to its English online dictionary, “including terms from recent advances in science, borrowings from foreign languages, and words from tech, medicine, pop culture, sports, and everything in between” (para. 1). The new words include Seussian (suggestive of works of Dr. Seuss), conlang (an invented language), and facepalm (covering one’s face with embarrassment). Other new words relate to technological development: net neutrality, abandonware, botnet, binge-watch, and photobomb. Some are political terms: truther, SCOTUS, and FLOTUS. Still others involve combining words to provide new metaphors or imagery, such as train wreck, side-eye, walk...
back, and geek out. By the time you read this chapter, no doubt Merriam-Webster will have added more words, and you might want to check their website to see what the added words suggest about U.S. and world culture.

Norms

Sociologists have been particularly interested in norms, the culturally defined rules of behavior that guide people in what they are to do or not to do. Many norms are informal whereas others have been formalized in laws. The expectation that we stay to the right on the metro elevator is an informal norm whereas the expectation that we drive below a certain speed limit is a norm that has been codified into law. Sociologists make a distinction between norms that are folkways and norms that are mores. Folkways are norms about desirable behaviors that are relatively unimportant and not strictly enforced. Speaking quietly in the university library or wearing the latest fashion may be expected behavior, but the expectations are not usually enforced. Mores, on the other hand, are considered more important norms and often hold moral significance in the culture. Being unfaithful in a committed relationship or using your smartphone to cheat on an exam are examples of mores, both of which will usually carry punishment if discovered. Often it is not clear whether particular behaviors are folkways or mores, and that may vary from setting to setting. For example, wearing the hijab might be considered a folkway in some Muslim groups and a more in other Muslim groups. Likewise, some people in the United States consider standing with hand over heart when the national anthem is played to be a folkway whereas other people consider it to be a more.

Norms are reinforced through sanctions, rewards (positive sanctions) for compliance and punishment (negative sanctions) for noncompliance. Sanctions can be informal or formal. They can range from a smile to punish her resistance is to accuse her of trying to act American, an accusation that is unsettling to her because it reinforces her confusion about her cultural identity. Another way they try to punish her is to tell her that she is displeasing Allah.

Cultural norms are often derived from religion, but as Rubina is finding, not all members of a religious group draw the same norms from the religion.

Subcultures and Countercultures

Within most cultures, there are subcultures that involve groups of people who accept much of the dominant culture but distinguish themselves by one or more culturally significant characteristics. For example, the Muslim Student Association (MSA) to which Rubina belongs is a subculture of the larger culture of the university that she attends. The MSA members probably share many of the values and norms of the larger university culture but are distinguished by their adherence to the religious tenets of Islam and their desire to build a Muslim religious community on campus. No doubt, Rubina’s university has many other subcultures, such as other religious subcultures, a subculture of environmental activists, racial and ethnic subcultures, subcultures formed around particular music genres, a theater subculture, subcultures of different athletic activities, perhaps a deaf subculture, and many more. In the United States, social class groups often form subcultures; the super wealthy have networks, exclusive clubs, and a culture of opulence that differs a great deal from the cultures of the middle and lower classes. A give-and-take exists among subcultures and between subcultures and the larger culture, with subcultures contributing to and influencing each other and the larger culture. When conflict with the larger culture becomes serious, a subculture can become a counterculture.

A counterculture not only differs in significant ways from the dominant culture but also rejects the norms and values of the larger culture. It may openly act in opposition to the dominant culture, but there are several ways to do this. Like the Old Order of Amish of Pennsylvania and Ohio, who reject the dominant U.S. culture definition of success, countercultures may withdraw and establish their own cultural conclaves with their own rules. Another way to act in opposition to dominant culture is to engage in violent sabotage of it. For example, the Ku Klux Klan and other White supremacist groups reject the larger societal principles of democratic pluralism and may engage in violent behavior against it. In the past, they engaged in lynchings, but today they are more likely to engage in a variety of types of intimidation, including hanging nooses in prominent and symbolic places or belligerently challenging an immigrant’s right to live in the United States. Computer hackers are another contemporary example of a counterculture. Some hackers are simply having fun developing
technical skills, but others are engaged in hacking for the purpose of subverting authority, destroying the Internet, and even influencing national elections. Of course, assertive countercultures are not always a negative force, and some assertive countercultures challenge the unfair treatment of groups who are marginalized and denied power in society. If Rubina's university were to develop a strong anti-Muslim culture or policies that were repressive to Muslim students, it is possible that the MSA would transition from subculture to counterculture.

**Ideal Culture Versus Real Culture**

Arlene Skolnick (1997) wrote that “Americans have still not come to terms with the gap between the way we think our families ought to be and the complex, often messy realities of our lives” (p. 86). We could substitute the word culture for families and have a statement that reflects some of the tensions in cultural life. Sociologists make a distinction between ideal culture, which consists of the values and practices that are considered desirable, and real culture, which is what people actually think and do. For example, a major U.S. value is democracy, but average voter participation in the United States from 1950 to 2012 was 48.3%, compared to 92.5% in Italy and 89.5% in Iceland (Ballantine et al., 2018). Another important U.S. value is equal opportunity to quality education, and yet, in reality, the inequalities in our educational institutions are important drivers of growing social and economic inequalities.

**Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism**

As globalization intensifies, the world’s people are more and more likely to encounter the diversity of global cultures. How we respond to these cross-cultural experiences may well determine the survival of planet Earth. Culture is learned over time from people we care about, and most people tend to think their culture is the best. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own cultural way of life is normal, natural, and even superior to other cultural ways of life; other cultures are judged by the standards of one's own culture. Most societies instill some degree of ethnocentrism in their members as a way to hold the culture together. Belief in one's own culture provides a sense of pride and identity and promotes loyalty, unity, and conformity. Ethnocentrism can also be a barrier to cross-cultural understanding and lead to misunderstandings between people. It can encourage hostility, racism, war, and even genocide. Rubina worries about the anti-Muslim ethnocentrism in the United States and is concerned about what she reads about hate crimes against Muslims and Brown people in general.

Social scientists have challenged the strong human tendency toward ethnocentrism by suggesting an approach of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism calls for suspending judgment of other people's cultural values and practices in order to understand them in their own cultural context through the eyes of their own members, avoiding judging one culture by the standards of another culture. Cultural relativism does not require that we accept or agree with all beliefs and practices of a particular cultural group, but it allows us to try to understand beliefs and practices in the social and cultural contexts in which they developed and are maintained. It is a very important approach for social workers to learn to incorporate in practice at every system level. It requires us to approach our social work practice with cultural humility, recognizing that culture is an important part of human behavior, that people live within many different cultures, and that we will never understand other cultures as well as the people who live within them. It also requires that we be self-reflective about our own cultural experiences and interested in and open to how other people understand their own cultural identities. Whatever we may think of Muslim women wearing a hijab, we would want to approach Rubina by trying to understand what it means to her in her particular social and cultural context. One way to be helpful to Rubina in her current emotional struggles would be to open communications to help her and her parents to put each other in cultural context. Rubina could learn more about what her parents' life was like in Pakistan, why they decided to immigrate to the United States, and how they have tried to adapt to a very different culture than the one they left. Her parents could learn more about what it is like to grow up with one culture at home and another in her life outside the family.
For the past decade, neuroscientists have been studying the neural basis of prejudice (attitudes and emotional responses to the members of a social group) and stereotyping (generalized characteristics ascribed to a social group) (see Amodio, 2014; Cozolino, 2014). They have found that both prejudice and stereotyping are complex cognitive processes that are supported by a network of neural structures, but different networks are involved in these two cognitive processes. The amygdala appears to be the main brain structure involved in prejudice. The amygdala is the center for rapid appraisal of stimuli and mobilization of response to threat. It receives direct information from all sensory organs, allowing it to respond very rapidly to perceived social threat. The amygdala is so fast that it responds in advance of a conscious awareness of danger, and prejudice is mostly an unconscious process known as implicit bias. Perceived threat triggers a biochemical cascade of fight-or-flight response. Research indicates that the amygdala is conditioned to respond with fear to members of out-groups (groups to which we do not belong), especially if there is little or no history of interaction with those out-groups or if a person's prior history has resulted in seeing difference as threatening. Research also indicates that the amygdala can become conditioned to perceive threat in situations in which a person is engaged in interaction with members of out-groups and worries about appearing prejudiced in the eyes of others (Amodio, 2014). This perceived threat can inhibit motivation to become involved with groups of people who are different from us. Other neural structures that have been identified to play a role in prejudice include the orbital frontal cortex, insula, striatum, and medial prefrontal cortex. The neural structures found to be involved in stereotyping include the temporal lobe, medial prefrontal cortex, and lateral prefrontal cortex.

Neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky (2017) cites research that finds that our brains are especially sensitive to skin color, but there is tremendous variation in the strength of the reaction. The essence of this research is that fear conditioning occurs much faster for other-race faces than for same-race faces. People tend to judge neutral other-race faces as being angrier than neutral same-race faces. In addition, people tend to remember same-race faces better than other-race faces and to show more empathy for same-race than other-race faces when shown videos of people being poked with needles. People who show more implicit racial bias on implicit bias tests are more likely to show more amygdala activation when encountering other-race people.

Cozolino (2014) suggests that prejudice is an expression of social phobia, and indeed, xenophobia is a term used to describe fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign. Although researchers have had some success in reducing behavioral and physiological expressions of implicit bias in the laboratory, implicit bias is very difficult to change in a cultural milieu that constantly reinforces the bias. For example, it is very difficult to extinguish racial bias if the culture constantly presents racial prejudice and stereotypes. It is difficult to extinguish anti-Muslim sentiment if it is constantly expressed in the media, the family, or the political institution. Neuroscience research suggests that the best interventions for reducing prejudice include increasing people’s awareness of the human tendency for implicit bias, helping them to identify cues that a threat response is occurring in their cross-cultural interactions, and helping them to prepare preplanned ways of dealing with situations where implicit bias is aroused (for example, a plan such as “I will slow down and respond more carefully”). The idea of slowing down is important because the amygdala responds about a half second ahead of the conscious processes of attention and awareness that can put the brakes on amygdala activation and avoid what is often called an “amygdala hijack,” a quick reaction that has negative consequences (Soclof, 2015). Over time, activities to get cognitive control over prejudiced and stereotypical attitudes and behavior can become habitual. As social workers, we must engage in an ongoing process of recognizing and examining our implicit biases, because they can seriously inhibit our effectiveness. We can also help clients recognize their own implicit biases and find ways to minimize them.

Culture and Power

For several decades now, culture scholars have been interested in how the dynamics of power are embedded in culture (Griswold, 2013; Guest, 2017). Power can be thought of as the ability to act in a chosen way and to direct or influence the behavior of others. As suggested earlier, although we often think of culture as composed of similar people who equally share norms and values, in reality people in a given culture are usually diverse and their relationships are complicated by power dynamics within the culture. Some people are able to participate more fully in culture than other people. Some people are drawn into the center of the culture and granted resources and privileges. Other people are ignored or marginalized in the granting of resources and privileges. Some are even annihilated. The power arrangements of a
culture are supported by cultural values, ideologies, and norms. Culture defines what is “legitimate, proper, and normal... an all-but-unconscious understanding of how things are and should be” (Griswold, 2013, p. 165). Culturally instilled knowledge and attitudes lead people to accept some power arrangements and reject others.

Cultural understanding of who should be powerful and who should be powerless has deep historical roots. And history itself is usually told from the perspective of the people who have the power to construct it. In recent years, there has been an ongoing struggle in the United States over content in high school history textbooks. Some school board members have accused the textbooks of liberal bias whereas others have accused the textbooks of conservative bias. In 2014, the Texas State Board of Education accused history textbooks and the accompanying online resources of being “anti-American” because they included “negative aspects” of U.S. history—aspects such as treatment of Native Americans and Japanese internment camps (Speed, 2015). They specifically criticized textbooks that did not pay enough attention to the achievements of President Ronald Reagan, gave too little credit to the importance of Moses on the thinking of U.S. founders, were not sufficiently laudatory of the free market economic system, and were too sympathetic to Islam (Associated Press, 2014). Texas is such a large state that textbooks written for it will influence content in textbooks used across the country.

Sometimes coercion or physical force is used to ensure compliance with cultural norms. Most often, however, coercion or force is not necessary. Instead, cultural power is embedded in the media, schools, and religion to influence the understanding of what is natural, normal, and even possible. This creates a cultural condition called hegemony, the ability of a dominant group to obtain consent and agreement to cultural values and norms without the use or threat of force. With this hegemony of values and norms, some thoughts and actions become unthinkable. People discipline their own behavior to be in accord with what is considered normal, even when this runs counter to their own personal interests.

Cultures create social institutions to promote and maintain their core values. Chapter 9 examines how power is created and maintained in major social institutions in the United States and globally. In addition, in every culture, social identity groups get caught up in the dynamics of cultural power. Those dynamics vary somewhat from culture to culture, but some of the dynamics are almost universal. In this section, we take a look at how several social identities are embedded in cultural dynamics of power, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, and disability.

Race

Rubina says that when she hears about hate crimes toward minorities, she feels “Brown.” What does being Brown mean to her, and why does she associate it with hate crimes toward minorities? Her reaction is tied up in the concept of race, a category that has been used for centuries to divide the human population and to stratify it into superior and inferior groups. Race is a system of classification that uses certain physical characteristics to divide the human population into supposedly discrete groups. Contemporary social scientists agree that race is a flawed cultural classification system. Although the classification, historically, was presumed to rest on genetic differences between groups, contemporary studies of genetics reveal no biologically distinct human groups. And, indeed, they find that there is more genetic variation within racial groups than between racial groups (Healey & Stepnick, 2017). Although other physical features have sometimes been associated with racial categories, skin color is the prominent physical attribute used to distinguish race. And yet humans come in many hues that cannot be divided into discrete groups based on color. Over time, racial categorizing has used a complex mix of skin color and national origin. In regular interactions, humans use visible cues to make judgements about what they perceive to be another person’s racial classification.

Racial categorizing happens all over the world, but it takes on different meanings in different places. Social scientists trace the origins of contemporary racial classification to the 1400s when people of western Europe began to travel to Africa, Asia, and eventually North and South America. As they traveled to, conquered, and colonized new lands, they became more attentive to the physical differences they encountered, especially differences in skin color (Healey & Stepnick, 2017). From the beginning, the European understanding of race was linked to ideas about inferior (conquered) and superior (conquering). The western European conquerors/colonizers were of light hue, and although they encountered much variation in skin color hue, they thought of race in binary terms of White (conqueror, superior) and not White (conquered, inferior).

Although it takes different forms around the world, racialization—assigning racial character to groups of people—has continued to be a prominent method of classification in the postcolonial world. Unrelated
people are lumped together based on skin color and other attributes, in the context of social, economic, and political systems of inequality left in the wake of colonization. As workers migrate within and between countries, new forms of racialization occur, but the White/not White binary way of thinking about race continues to prevail in the United States and Europe (Guest, 2017).

The U.S. racial system developed in the context of conquest and seizure of land of an Indigenous people (not White), enslaved people from Africa (not White), and importation of indentured servants from Europe (White). An ideology of White supremacy prevailed, a belief that non-Whites were biologically different, intellectually inferior, and less than human in a spiritual sense (see Smedley, 2011, for a thorough discussion of the history of race in North America). White supremacy was more than ideology in the early history of the United States, however; it was also formalized in the political system. Anthropologist Pem Buck (2001) documents some of the ways that White economic elites formalized White privilege in early 1700s Virginia, and their motivation for doing so. The elites were confronted with a situation in which poor landless Whites were beginning to join with African slaves against the European economic elites. To combat this, the elites introduced a set of legal privileges that were reserved for Whites, such as the right to own a gun, livestock, and land; the right to obtain freedom at the end of indenture; the right to discipline Blacks; and eventually the right to vote. The intent of these legal privileges was to drive a wedge between the European and African laborers who had much in common.

The rule of hypodescent has been key to maintaining boundaries between the races in the United States since the time of slavery. Hypodescent is the tradition of assigning children of mixed-race unions to the subordinate group. This is sometimes called the “one drop of blood rule,” meaning that having any ancestor of a subordinate group (e.g., Black) classifies you as belonging to that race. The hypodescent rule was enacted into laws in many U.S. states and even backed by the U.S. Supreme Court as late as 1982 (Guest, 2017). It is no longer enforced by law but is still widely applied in U.S. culture. A notable contemporary example is the case of Barack Obama, son of a White woman and Black man from Kenya, raised by White grandparents, and considered to be the first Black president of the United States.

Long-established patterns of unequal treatment based on race persisted after the legal end of slavery. Jim Crow segregation laws legally enforced boundaries between Whites and Blacks in the South—in housing; education; property ownership; voting rights; and public services such as bathrooms, water fountains, and public transportation. Although much has changed since these earlier days, the basic outline of Black inequality and White dominance has persisted, even in the face of resistance, protest, and political activism. Perhaps no area of race relations is more explosive than the relationship between the Black community and the criminal justice system. In numerous studies, Blacks have reported being treated less fairly and respectfully in their contacts with the police than Whites (see Epp, Maynard-Moody, & Haider-Market, 2014). One research team of linguists recently used footage of body-worn cameras during routine traffic stops to investigate that complaint. They found that officers speak with consistently less respect when speaking with Black community members during routine traffic stops than when speaking with White community members (Voigt et al., 2017).

As groups other than western Europeans began to immigrate to the United States—groups from Asia and from eastern and southern Europe—new questions were raised about who was White and who was not. Nativists fought to preserve the racial purity of the nation’s Anglo-Saxon heritage, and immigration laws were used to this end. As they first entered the United States, groups as diverse as Chinese, Irish, Italians, Greeks, and eastern Europeans were considered non-White. In this way, racial classification began to include nationality as well as skin color. A 1790 U.S. law limited the right to naturalization (citizenship) to Whites only (Orleck, n.d.). Religion was important also, and nativists considered both Catholics and Jews to be non-White. As the immigration stream to the United States became more diverse, racial categories continued to be created and contested. When collecting information on race, the U.S. Census Bureau is required to adhere to the 1997 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) standards on race and ethnicity as presented in Exhibit 8.5. For the first time in 2000, individuals were presented with the option to self-identify with more than one race. As you can see, given this classification system, Rubina’s family, with Pakistani roots, would be classified as Asian. The OMB acknowledges that this classification of race is not scientific.

One question that has arisen in recent years is where people from the Middle East fit. Before September 11, 2011, they were not considered a separate race in the United States, and under current law, as reported in Exhibit 8.5, they are considered White. In October 2016, the OMB proposed that “Middle Eastern and North African” be added as a new racial category (Helmy, 2016). In some news reports, this was called a new race
category, and in other news reports, it was called a new ethnic category. And, indeed, the OMB classification system muddies the use of the terms *race* and *ethnicity*, as we will see in the discussion of ethnicity in the next section. Just as sometimes happened with groups from Central and South America in the past, people of Middle Eastern heritage are now sometimes thought of as neither Black nor White, but Brown. And Brown is a way that Rubina—along with other people with South Asian heritage—sometimes thinks of herself as she sorts out her cultural identity in a world where White supremacist ideology is still strong.

**Racism** is the belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others, justifying access to power, privilege, resources, and opportunities on the basis of race. It may be expressed as either individual or institutional. **Individual racism** is expressed through personal prejudiced beliefs and discriminatory actions based on race. **Institutional racism**, also called structural racism, includes the structuring of racial inequality into social institutions, policies, and systems. Police officers interacting with Black community members with less respect than that afforded to White community members is an example of institutional racism. The perpetuation of racial inequality rests on a long-standing **racial ideology** that one race (White) is superior to others.

It is important to note that Whiteness is also stratified along class lines, and not all people of European descent benefit equally from White privilege. Poor Whites are the target of hateful stereotypes, promulgated by more affluent Whites, and are often cut off from educational and work opportunities. In particular, many have been hurt by economic globalization, whereas affluent Whites have benefited. Their resentment has helped to fuel populist nationalist political movements in the United States and Europe. Woodard (2011) argues that elite Whites try to avoid having less affluent Whites protest their lower status by keeping them afraid of non-Whites.

**Ethnicity**

Rubina tells the social worker that she recently started practicing Islam while navigating through cultural identity issues. When speaking of cultural identity issues, she seems to be talking about what is commonly understood as ethnicity. In an essay titled “Who Am I? Who Are My People,” Kirk and Okazawa-Rey (2013) note some questions often pondered by people struggling with ethnic identity, including “Who am I? Who do I want to be? . . . Where/what/who am I? . . . Where/what/who are my ‘home’ and ‘community’?” **Ethnicity** is a word we hear a lot (e.g., ethnic food, ethnic music, ethnic community, ethnic conflict), and it can be used to emphasize different aspects of social life. **Ethnicity** is a sense of cultural, historical, and sometimes ancestral connection to a group of people that is considered to be distinct from people outside the group. In different times and places, ethnicity may include a common history and ancestors; association with a particular geographic territory; a shared language; a shared religion; a sense of shared physical characteristics; and shared

---

**EXHIBIT 8.5 Racial Categories and Descriptions Used by the U.S. Census Bureau**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017a.*
cultural practices such as food, clothing, music, and architecture. Rubina is currently finding religion to be helpful in navigating through cultural identity issues. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget focuses on a combination of language and national origin as the distinguishing traits of ethnicity. It considers ethnicity to be a separate identity from race and provides two ethnic categories: “Hispanic or Latino” and “Not Hispanic or Latino” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017b). Hispanic refers to coming from a country where Spanish is spoken, and Latino refers to a person with national origins in Mexico, Central America, or South America. As with race, the OMB acknowledges that this is not a scientific way to categorize ethnicity. It seems that our official ways of defining race and ethnicity are quite muddled at the moment.

**Ethnic identity** is that part of personal identity that derives from one’s sense of being a part of an ethnic group. Ethnicity is a more pressing issue in day-to-day life for some people than for others. Research indicates that in the United States people from ethnic minority and immigrant backgrounds are more likely to have a strong ethnic identity than are European American people or people who are from the third generation of an immigrant family (Tsai & Fuligni, 2012). (Note: Rubina’s parents are considered first-generation immigrants; Rubina, who was born in the United States of immigrant parents, is considered second generation; and any children Rubina might have would be considered third generation.) Many European Americans tend to see their ethnicity as the default position and think that it is only “others” who have ethnicity. Much of the research on ethnic identity has examined how ethnic identity develops in people from ethnic minorities, looking at how they navigate between the host culture and ethnic culture, focusing on a split between “mainstream identity” and “ethnic identity.” Some researchers have argued in recent years that this binary way of thinking about ethnic identity is too simplistic for the world we live in today. For example, van de Vijver and colleagues (van de Vijver, Blommaert, & Gkoumasi, 2015) suggest that many societies today have transitioned from being sites of diversity to become sites of superdiversity, experiencing a “dissification of diversity,” noting that “people from more places now migrate to more places” (p. 37). In large cities in Europe and the Americas, many people now live in neighborhoods that include a majority of people from the host country along with immigrants from many different countries. Social identities are becoming more complex. And, indeed, many families of the world have become multiethnic. In recent years, the political conversation in western Europe and the United States has raised the question of whether democratic, Western values are compatible with Islam. In a study of a highly diverse neighborhood in Antwerp, Belgium, one research team found that strong Muslim ethnic identity and Belgian identity were not at all incompatible and typically developed hand in hand (van de Vijver et al., 2015).

So how do societies deal with diversity, let alone superdiversity, of ethnic cultures? The United States has a complicated history of dealing with people of different national origins, religions, skin colors, and ethnic identities. And issues related to cultural diversity continue to be controversial. From the earliest days, the United States was ethnically diverse, with the mix that resulted from immigration from various regions in Europe, forced migration of Africans, and conquest of Indigenous people. With new waves of immigration, the path to incorporation into U.S. society typically followed color lines. In societies around the world, the approach to managing ethnic diversity can be divided into two opposing attitudes: assimilation versus multiculturalism (Ritzer, 2016). In the process of **assimilation**, minority groups and new immigrants are expected to adopt the patterns and norms of the mainstream culture and cease to exist as a separate group. In the process of **multiculturalism**, minority groups and new immigrants and their children enculturate to the mainstream culture while also retaining their ethnic culture. Both mainstream identities and ethnic identities are maintained. Multiculturalism is also called cultural pluralism. There are long-standing tensions in the United States about which model of managing ethnic diversity will be dominant, assimilation or multiculturalism.

Ethnic identity can be a source of belonging and can also be a source of great conflict within a society. In the 20th and 21st centuries, we have seen many instances of high-profile ethnic conflict around the world, such as the Turks and Armenians in Turkey, Nazi Germans and Jews in Germany, Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda and Burundi, Arabs and ethnic Africans in Darfur, and the conflict among various ethnic groups after the breakup in Yugoslavia. Sometimes religion is a major part of the ethnic conflict. For example, in Pakistan where Rubina’s parents grew up, ethnic conflict has included struggles over religion (Sunni versus Shia), language (Pashto, Sindi, Balochi, Punjabi, Urdu, and Siraiki), territory, and caste (Majeed, 2013). It would be helpful for Rubina and her social
worker to familiarize themselves with some of the themes of these struggles and to begin to understand where Rubina’s parents fit in these systems of ethnic conflict. It is always helpful for family members to put each other in this kind of historical and cultural context.

*Ethnic cleansing* is the term used to describe efforts of one ethnic or religious group to expel or destroy another group in a particular geographic area. We have seen ethnic cleansing in the examples of ethnic conflict noted in the last paragraph, but examples can also be found in the history of the United States. Indian removal was the name given to a U.S. 19th-century policy to forcibly remove Native Americans from their ancestral homelands in the eastern parts of the country to lands west of the Mississippi River. During World War II, Japanese American families living on the West Coast were forced to leave their homes and relocate to internment camps. Like other countries, the United States has also used its immigration policies to exclude some ethnic groups. For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882 and was not repealed until 1943, suspending the immigration of Chinese laborers. In 1888, the Scott Act extended this exclusion to disallow long-term legal Chinese American residents to reenter the United States after a visit to China. As I write this in June 2017, there is much political controversy in the United States about whether, and if so, how, to restrict immigration of people from many predominately Muslim countries.

**CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS 8.3**

As you think about Rubina’s story, what implicit biases do you think people might have about her in the classroom, on the street or at the shopping mall, and at home? What are your reactions to the racial categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau? What do you think of the proposal to add a racial category of “Middle Eastern and North African” to census data? How important are race and ethnicity in your own life? Explain.

**Gender**

Anthropologists consider gender to be a central element in every facet of human cultures (Guest, 2017). Sociologists consider gender to be a master status for many people—a social position more important than other social positions—because of its centrality to a person’s identity (Ritzer, 2016). Sociologist Judith Lorber (2016) proposes that gender is one of the major ways that human cultures organize their day-to-day lives. And yet gender is a highly contested concept in contemporary times.

Sex and gender are terms that are often used interchangeably, and their distinctions are often confused. As noted in Chapter 3, sex is a biological idea. It is typically thought of as a binary designation—female or male—based on chromosomes, gonads, genitalia, and hormones. At birth, individuals are usually proclaimed either male or female based on genitalia. Gender is a cultural creation, composed of the expectations about behaviors, attitudes, and personalities that each culture assigns to people of different sexes.

When a woman is pregnant these days, one of the first questions she is asked is “Do you know the sex?” It’s as if we can’t begin to think about a new human baby unless we know the sex. The question is asked with an assumption of a binary system of male and female. And once the sex is known, gendered assumptions are made about femininity or masculinity, assumptions that will guide social interactions in the family and beyond. But the evidence is clear that neither sex nor gender is so distinctly binary.

Some babies are born intersex, with bodies that are not clearly either female or male. Although we don’t have reliable data about the number of intersex people in the world’s population, a commonly reported statistic suggests that intersex genital variation occurs about once in 1,500 to 2,000 births (Davis & Preves, 2017). At the high end of world estimates, intersex happens at about the same rate as red hair (United Nations Human Rights, 2017). Sex wasn’t always thought of as binary nor has it always been assigned based on genitals. For example, in 1876 pathologist Theodore Klebs classified anatomical sex into five categories based on gonads (ovaries, testes, or a mix of ovarian and testicular tissue). Recently hormonal levels have been used to assign female sex by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF). They are looking for higher than “normal” levels of androgen in females that would indicate that one is “not female,” acknowledging that hormonal levels are on a continuum in both females and males. Even chromosomes are not always a clear way to assign gender; some people have XY chromosomes but have an outward appearance of being female, having both breasts and a vagina (Davis & Preves, 2017).
In some cases, intersex traits are obvious at birth, but in other situations, they are not obvious until puberty (United Nations Human Rights, 2017). In the past, doctors surgically altered the genitals of intersex babies to have them fit the genital binary and sometimes used hormonal treatments as well. Intersex advocates have pushed to abolish such surgeries at birth to allow intersex individuals to make their own decisions about such surgeries when they have the capacity to do so. In 2015, Malta was the first country to pass a law to prohibit surgery and treatment of sex characteristics of minors without informed consent (United Nations Human Rights, 2017).

Western understanding of gender has been based on the assumption that gender flows automatically from genitalia and reproductive organs—and that strong, clear gender differences exist, based on sex. It is grounded in an exaggerated understanding of biological differences, and it carries biological differences into spheres where biology is totally irrelevant. A set of stereotypes have been socially constructed for femininity and masculinity, and different behavioral norms have been established for females and males. As anthropologist Guest (2017) suggests, “Gender is taught, learned, performed, and policed” (p. 275). There is nothing biological about which clothes people should wear—who should wear dresses, who should wear pants, or who should wear high heels—and, indeed, the norms for clothing vary across place and time. No biological differences would indicate that women can’t drive, vote, work outside the home, fight in wars, or hold political office, and yet these norms have at different times and in different places been written into laws and carefully policed. Gender expectations about who can play particular sports, write poems, nurture children, or do math likewise are not based on biology. Margot Shetterly’s 2016 book *Hidden Figures*, which was made into a movie, tells the story of African American women who used their mathematics skills to help advance the space race in the United States. The book challenges both gender and racial stereotypes and demonstrates the sad reality that stories that counter these stereotypes don’t often get told. Cultural ideology can be so strong that gender expectations can be seen as natural and normal. Gender must be examined, however, as it intersects with race, social class, and sexuality, because different stereotypes have developed for different groups of males and females.

*Transgender* is a term used to identify people who have *gender identity* (internal sense of gender) and *gender expression* (external expression of gender) that is different from their assigned sex. It is also used as an umbrella term to identify all people who are gender nonconforming, including people who are gender fluid, identifying sometimes as male and sometimes as female, as well as people who do not identify with either of the two culturally dominant genders. There is no single trans path, and Exhibit 8.6 presents some common definitions of terms used by transgender

**EXHIBIT 8.6 Gender Identity Labels and Definitions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agender</td>
<td>A person who does not think they align with any gender, or feels a lack of gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bigender</td>
<td>A person who identifies as two genders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>A person whose gender assigned at birth aligns with their gender identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender fluid</td>
<td>A person who fits or uses many labels for their gender identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender nonconforming</td>
<td>A person who does not observe society's rules about dress and activities for a person based on their sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>A person who has identities outside of the male–female gender binary but may identify as a combination of both or neither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>A person who does not identify with male or female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonlabeling</td>
<td>A person who does not describe their gender identity with any particular label</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pangender</td>
<td>A person who identifies as all genders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>A person who is unsure of their current gender identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third gender</td>
<td>A person who categorizes themselves as neither man nor woman; a social category in societies that recognize three or more genders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>An umbrella term used for people whose sex assigned at birth does not align with their gender identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-spirit</td>
<td>Umbrella term used by some Indigenous North Americans to label &quot;gender-variant&quot; people in their communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>A person who has not aligned gender identity with a label</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Based on Oswalt, Evans, & Drott, 2016, Table 1, p. 504.*
people to describe their gender orientation. The list should not be thought of as exhaustive because we are living in a fluid time when people are renegotiating the labels they use to describe themselves. People who are transgender may or may not locate themselves in culturally established gender categories. They may or may not wish to use such medical treatments as hormone therapy or sex reassignment surgery for biological transition. Sometimes a distinction is made between *transgender* (gender as a cultural construction) and *transsexual* (based on biological sex and used to describe someone who has undergone biological transition). *Trans man* refers to someone who was assigned to the female gender at birth but who identifies as a male. *Trans woman* refers to someone who was assigned to the male gender at birth but who identifies as a female.

The general awareness of trans people has increased in recent years in the United States and other countries. In 2016, about 30% of U.S. adults reported knowing someone who is transgender, compared to 17% in 2014 (Halloran, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2016). Older adults are less likely than younger adults to say they know someone who is transgender. Although attitudes toward people who are transgender are improving, there is evidence from several databases that transgender people in the United States are physically and sexually assaulted at high rates both by people known to them and by strangers (Stotzer, 2009). These data remind us that many people lash out when confronted with any suggestion that gender is not binary, but cross-cultural research indicates that gender is not so rigidly defined as binary in all cultures. Many Native North American cultures have had traditions of gender diversity, including roles for *two-spirit* individuals who are socially defined as neither man nor woman but a combination of the two. In mountain villages in Afghanistan where male children are needed for family prestige, young girls are sometimes presented as boys, with the “appropriate” clothes, haircuts, and behaviors common to boys. At puberty, they are “changed” into girls (Nordberg, 2014).

Gender is not just a system of classification; it is also a system of stratification. It has been used to give dominance to men and a subordinate status to women. It is supported by *misogyny*, a cultural belief that “men are better, stronger, more rational, more capable, and more authoritative than women” (Kurian, 2011, para. 1). It can be manifested in numerous ways, including gender discrimination, belittling of women, harassment of women, violence against women, and sexual objectification of women. There are global differences, however, in the ways that societies deal with gender and create gender disparities and inequalities. For example, some Swedes have argued for gender-neutral pronouns as a way of promoting gender equality. Swedish preschools and elementary schools have begun to use the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, and this word was recently added to the official dictionary (Noack, 2015).

Since 2006, the World Economic Forum (2016) has presented an annual global gender gap report that quantifies the magnitude of gender-based disparities around the world and tracks their progress over time. Measurement of the gender gap is based on study of four areas of social life: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. In 2016, of the 144 countries studied, 68 countries increased their overall gender equality and 74 experienced a decrease in gender equality. This indicates that there is no clear trend toward universal improvement in the status of women. The best improvements in gender equality were in health and survival and in education, with lower improvement in economic participation and much lower improvement in political empowerment.

The scores are presented as female-to-male ratios. A score of 1 represents perfect gender equality, which no country has achieved, and the closer the score is to 1 the greater the gender equality. Exhibit 8.7 reports the scores for the 10 countries with the most gender equality and the 10 countries with the least gender equality in 2016. Of the 144 countries, the United States was ranked 45th in gender equality overall, down from 20th in 2014. It was 26th in gender equality in terms of economic participation and opportunity, 1st in educational attainment, 62nd in health and survival, and 73rd in political empowerment. These findings suggest that the strong educational attainment of women in the United States does not translate to improved status in other spheres of life. We should also note that Pakistan is next to the bottom in the world in terms of gender equality. You probably are familiar with the riveting story of Malala Yousafzai who was shot for going to school in Pakistan. And yet Rubina’s family has always encouraged Rubina to excel in school here in the United States. Perhaps her social worker could encourage her to explore with her parents what their experiences were with girls and schooling in Pakistan and how they came to put such high value on the education of their children, including their female children, here in the United States.
Sexuality

Sexuality is both a physiological process and a cultural construction. Physiologically, it involves a range of desires and behaviors related to erotic physical contact. Culturally, it involves debates about which kinds of physical desires and behaviors are moral, appropriate, and natural. In this chapter, we focus on those cultural debates and how they relate to power. All societies have cultural rules to regulate sexual relations—rules about the why, how, when, where, and with whom of sexuality, about who is allowed to do what with whom. People in all societies are enculturated to channel sexual desires into a limited number of acceptable sexual behaviors. Cultural norms regarding sexuality vary across time and place, and social scientists agree that, at least in Western cultures, cultural norms of sexuality are currently in flux.
There are cultural debates about the “when” of sexuality, but the biggest cultural debates about sexuality have centered on the “why” and “with whom” questions. In terms of “when,” all cultures have values and norms about the appropriate age for the sexual debut. There is growing international agreement that children should not be engaged in sexual interaction other than exploration of their own bodies, but child brides are still common in many parts of the world. Research in the United States indicates that child brides are at higher risk of intimate partner violence and are often unable to negotiate safe sex (McFarlane, Nava, Gilroy, & Maddoux, 2016). There is less agreement about sexuality during adolescence than about childhood sexuality, as seen in the debate about how much of the U.S. sex education curriculum should focus on abstinence.

The biggest “why” debate is whether procreation or pleasure is the purpose of sexuality. Anthropologists agree that in the social organization of early humans, sexual activity was basically oriented toward reproduction. They also agree, however, that sexuality began to lose its exclusive reproductive meaning early in human evolution. Religion has been a major force in the debate about the purpose of sexuality. Revolutions in reproductive technology have spurred new religious controversies about sexuality for pleasure. There are divisions within each of the three Abrahamic religious traditions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—on this question. In Christianity, the Catholic leadership has condemned sexual intercourse that occurs without the possible “natural” outcome of conception. Natural family planning but not use of artificial contraceptives is considered acceptable. Some Protestant groups share the Catholic view, but many Protestant denominations favor the use of contraceptives, with some arguing that sexual pleasure facilitates interpersonal bonding and that contraceptives are needed to prevent overpopulation (Benagiano & Mori, 2009). There are similar divisions on the issue of contraception within both Islam and Judaism. The use of contraception does not appear to be a major ethical issue in Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism.

Cultures have had a lot to say about with whom it is appropriate and moral to have sexual relations, but the answers have not been the same across time and place. Here are some examples. Cultures have varied over time about the acceptability of having sexual relations with anyone to whom you are not married. About 15% of countries today have rules requiring that sexual involvement only happens in marriage (Haviland et al., 2017), but many countries have very lax standards about this issue. Adultery has been criminalized in many societies, and some states in the United States continue to have laws against adultery. In the United States and many other countries, it is illegal to have sexual relations with a child, although the age of consent varies from country to country, and even state to state in the United States. There are incest taboos in all cultures, prohibiting sexual relations among certain close relatives, but the definition of close varies. During European colonization, White men were allowed to have sexual relations with non-White women, but sex was vehemently prohibited between White women and non-White men (Stoler, 2010). In the United States, antimiscegenation state laws were passed in the 18th century, outlawing marriage between members of different races and often including the criminalization of cohabitation and sex between Whites and non-Whites. These laws were ruled unconstitutional in the 1967 Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court ruling. In 1949, South Africa passed the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act that prohibited sexual relationships between White people and people of other race groups, a law that was not repealed until 1985 (Beningfield, 2006). Sodomy laws have existed for hundreds of years, originating from religious prohibitions against nonprocreative sexual acts. Sodomy has been defined in different ways, narrowly to prohibit anal sex between two men, but more broadly to include any sexual penetration other than vaginal intercourse, including oral and anal sex. Sodomy laws were declared unconstitutional in the United States in 2003 in the Lawrence v. Texas case, but sodomy remains technically illegal in the military, and some lawmakers continue to try to reban sodomy (Criminal Defense Lawyer, 2017). Sodomy laws are still operative in some places in the world and are even punishable by death.

In the dominant Western model, sexuality is binary: heterosexuality and homosexuality. But this binary approach is a relatively recent invention, typically traced to the late 19th century, and some societies of the world still lack terms to distinguish sexuality this way (Haviland et al., 2017). Recently, in Western cultures, the heterosexual–homosexual binary has been supplemented with a bisexual category and sometimes an asexual category. Sexology research indicates that human sexuality does not fit so neatly into a binary system. Researchers have found diversity, flexibility, and fluidity along a continuum of sexual desire and sexual behavior. Recent research has found that, in the United States, people under 30 years of age are more...
likely than others to identify as neither heterosexual nor gay/lesbian: 29% for this age group, compared to 24% in the 30–44 age group, and 8% in the 45–60 age group (Oswalt et al., 2016). The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985) studies eight components of sexual orientation (sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, lifestyle preference, sexual identity, and political identity) using a scale of 1 (heterosexual only) to 7 (gay/lesbian only) and checking for three time periods (past, present, and ideal). As researchers are recognizing that sexual orientation is more complex than once thought, people are developing new terms to describe their sexual desires and behaviors. Social workers should avoid making assumptions about how people think about and enact their sexuality.

And what is the intersection of sexuality and power? Let’s begin with the changing status of what has come to be called the LGBTQ community. The legal rights of this community have changed substantially in the United States and other Western countries since the first edition of this book was published in 1999. Although there has been a recent wave of acceptance for same-gender couples in many Western countries, they are still a very vulnerable group in many parts of the world. In 2016, same-gender sex was illegal in 65 countries and punished by death in 10 countries; same-gender marriage was legal in 22 countries (Cameron & Berkowitz, 2016). The United States has some of the most advanced LGBTQ rights in the world, but civil protections for this group still vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. As noted earlier, sodomy was decriminalized nationwide in 2003. A June 26, 2015, Supreme Court ruling, Obergefell v. Hodges, recognized the marriages of same-gender couples nationwide. As this chapter is written in June 2017, however, fewer than half of U.S. states offer protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In many states, employers may fire or refuse to hire a person based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and LGBTQ people have no protection against discrimination in public accommodations or housing. LGBTQ youth continue to encounter harassment and bullying in school, and LGBTQ youth and adults are frequent victims of violent hate crimes (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017).

Sexual assault, a sexual act in which a person is coerced or physically forced to engage against their will, is a clear example of sexuality interacting with power. It is difficult to measure, largely because it often goes unreported. RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the largest anti–sexual violence organization in the United States. They estimate that sexual violence has fallen by more than half since 1993; even so, it is estimated that someone in the United States is sexually assaulted every 98 seconds. It is estimated that each year 80,600 inmates are sexually assaulted; 60,000 children are victims of substantiated sexual abuse; 321,500 people 12 and older are sexually assaulted; and 18,900 members of the military experience unwanted sexual contact. Ninety percent of sexual assault victims are female and 10% are male (RAINN, 2017). Data suggest that 1 in 5 women and 1 in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college. In 8 out of 10 cases of sexual assault the victim knew the person who assaulted them (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2015). Rape culture is a term that has been used to describe the cultural norms that develop in some settings that allow rape and sexual assault to be “excused, legitimized and viewed as inevitable” (Dodge, 2016, p. 67). Alexa Dodge (2016) writes about how new social media are used to extend rape culture when photographic images of acts of sexual violence are disseminated online.

Sex trafficking, also called commercial sexual exploitation, refers to the sexual exploitation of human bodies for the social, political, economic, and/or sexual benefits of others. Victims of sex trafficking are often brutalized with physical, emotional, and sexual violence. Worldwide, it is estimated that 4.5 million people are victims of sex trafficking each year, and in the United States, the best estimate is that hundreds of thousands of domestic born children are at risk of being sex trafficked each year. Godoy, Sadwick, and Baca (2016) suggest that cultural expectations, norms, and values that support the sexual objectification of women, children, and adolescents contribute to sex trafficking. In the United States, women, children, members of the LGBTQ community, persons with mental and physical disabilities, Indigenous persons, and migrants are the people most vulnerable to sex trafficking. There is evidence, however, that sexually exploited boys and young men are less likely to be identified than sexually exploited girls and women (Godoy et al., 2016).

Social Class
Social class is a system of power based on wealth, income, and social position that produces unequal
access to society’s resources. Inequality exists in every contemporary culture, but it is organized in different ways in different places. That raises two questions: (1) Is inequality a natural part of human culture? (2) Is inequality based on culture or social structure? In this chapter, we consider briefly the relationship of social class to culture, and Chapter 9 focuses more completely on how inequality is created and maintained in major societal institutions.

Let’s take a look first at what anthropologists suggest about the history of the cultural production of social class. They report that until the development of agriculture about 10,000 years ago, human economic and social structure was organized around hunting and gathering, also known as food foraging. There are still some hunting and gathering societies in the world today. It is thought that these societies were and are egalitarian in nature (called egalitarian societies), sharing resources to ensure the success of the group. Food foraging societies are highly mobile, especially when on food-getting expeditions. Therefore, it makes little sense in these societies to accumulate luxuries or surplus goods, and this lack of accumulation serves to limit status differentials (Haviland et al., 2017).

Anthropologists also identify some societies as ranked societies, where wealth is not unequal, but the society is stratified based on prestige and social position. The positions of prestige—positions such as chief—are hereditary for the most part. People in prestigious positions usually do not accumulate great wealth; instead they typically distribute any accumulated societal wealth to the group members often through gift-giving rituals. The potlatch ceremony celebrated by the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest is an example of these gift-giving rituals. In this ceremony, the chief holds an elaborate feast and gives guests all his personal possessions. The more bountiful the gift giving, the more prestige the chief gains in the community (Guest, 2017).

Anthropologists characterize social class in the United States and many other countries today as a system of social status based on conspicuous consumption and the accumulation of surplus (Haviland et al., 2017). Some people gain status by giving away their accumulated surplus, as in the ranked societies, but many people prefer to gain prestige by simply accumulating as many luxuries as they can. In the contemporary world, social class is created by the dual mechanisms of market exchange and inheritance. Market exchange involves the buying and selling of goods and services with prices that are determined for the most part by rules of supply and demand. The greater the demand and/or the lower the supply, the higher the prices. In the global capitalist economy, people who live in technologically wired parts of the world buy and sell anything and everything without having face-to-face contact. This certainly changes the culture of exchange.

The study of the intersection of culture and social class has most often focused on people living in poverty. On March 3, 2014, under the leadership of Representative Paul Ryan, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Budget submitted a report titled *The War on Poverty: 50 Years.* In a section titled “The Causes of Poverty,” the report identified three causes: family, work, and education. Living in a single-parent household was proposed to be the single most important determinant of poverty, followed by the disinclination to work and the lack of desire or capacity to acquire the education needed for independent living as an adult. The report echoed the culture-of-poverty model for understanding poverty presented by Oscar Lewis (1959, 1966) and a report on the Negro family presented by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965). Both Lewis and Moynihan presented poverty as a cultural phenomenon created by pathology, the personal failings of individuals, families, and communities, rather than by structural economic arrangements. Lewis argued that sustained poverty produces a set of cultural beliefs, values, and behaviors that perpetuates the culture of poverty over time, even if economic conditions improve. Researchers have not found support for this proposition, however, finding instead that beliefs and behaviors change with changing economic opportunities (Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010). The culture-of-poverty approach has been recycled in U.S. federal government policy over and over and showed up again in the 2014 budget report that argued that governmental programs to assist poor families had made the problem worse by fostering dependency on the government (see Cousins, 2013).

The culture-of-poverty approach was originally intended to call attention to the way of life developed by poor people to cope with the difficult circumstances of their lives at the bottom of the social class structure. Lewis was an anthropologist who proposed the culture of poverty based on study of Mexican and Puerto Rican families, but the concept was soon racialized to refer primarily to African American families. It has seldom been used to describe the
situation of poor White families. It has been twisted to suggest that Black schools and Black communities remain poor because of the beliefs, values, morals, and traditions of Black families. Cousins (2015) points out just a few of the factors that get left out of this type of argument: racism and racial discrimination, redlining mortgage lending policies that denied loans to Black families or forced them to buy only in Black neighborhoods, employment discrimination that kept Black people working in low-paying jobs despite qualifications for better-paying ones, and refusal to admit qualified Black applicants to major colleges and universities. Cousins is suggesting that to understand poverty we must look not just to the culture of poverty but to the social, economic, and political culture that produces class advantage for some and class disadvantage for others.

Some contemporary anthropologists argue that it is appropriate to study social class and social inequality as cultural phenomena, but the focus should be on the top of the social class structure, not the bottom. They are particularly interested in studying cultures that value conspicuous consumption and accumulation of luxury. Gusterson (1997) refers to this as “studying up,” studying the culture of the powerful as well as the powerless. He notes that it is not easy to study the powerful because they have gates, guards, and security devices, and, consequently, remaining invisible is a part of their privilege. Anthropologist Karen Ho (2009) solved that problem by studying Wall Street banking while working in the business herself in the 1990s. She notes that this period of record corporate profits and soaring stock prices was also a period of rapid downsizing, layoffs, and dismantling of the governmental social safety net. She learned that when corporations lay off workers, stock prices go up as do the profits of the investment banks. She documents a relentless search for unending profits and for governmental deregulation of the financial services industry, all of which contributed to the severe recession of 2009. Since the recession, several books have explored the lives of corporate elites who helped to produce that crisis. In Fools Gold, Tett (2010) tells a story of how a revolution in banking methods coupled with Wall Street greed escalated wildly out of control and caused a financial meltdown. Lewis’s The Big Short (2010) tells the story of the financial crisis through the eyes of managers of three small hedge funds and a bond salesman at Deutsche Bank, four men who saw the vulnerability of the subprime mortgage industry and made a bundle by betting on the housing market’s collapse. Fraudulent and predatory practices in banking and corruption among governmental regulators were combined with a culture that condoned exploitation of people up and down the economic ladder, especially among those who were most economically vulnerable. The recession resulted in 3.6 million jobs being lost and 4 million home foreclosures, including a large number of Black and Latino victims of fraudulent, predatory mortgages (Greenbaum, 2016). The people who caused the recession have mostly been rewarded rather than punished, which suggests a need to study government elites as well as corporate elites.

To understand social class in any country, it is necessary to understand the political culture of the country. For example, we know that there is less inequality, less difference in the economic conditions between the top and bottom social classes, in the Nordic countries than in other countries, including the United States. There is much evidence that people in the Nordic countries are relatively egalitarian in their outlook and put a high value on government involvement to reduce economic inequality. There is high support for redistribution of resources to reduce inequality through tax policies and generous social programs (Chan, Birkeland, Aas, & Wiborg, 2010). The United States, in comparison, has the highest rate of inequality of any wealthy country. Individual initiative and responsibility are highly valued, and government involvement in the capitalist system for the purpose of redistribution of resources is expected to be kept to a minimum. These different political cultures related to the role of government in the economic system make for very different social class systems.

Disability

We may think that physical, emotional, or cognitive disabilities are purely biological or psychological, but the experience of disability is strongly shaped by the cultural context. Disability is a universal phenomenon, and sooner or later most people will have some experience with disability in their lives, but that is not always acknowledged as cultures create beliefs and norms about disability. Cultures differ greatly regarding which specific conditions are recognized as a disability, the way the causes of disability are understood, the positions people with disabilities hold in society, and norms and laws regarding the rights
of people with disabilities (Meyer, 2010). Disability is a vast category and may include people whose impairments are as varied as hearing, vision, cognitive, learning, mobility, or psychiatric. At least three cultural models of disability have been presented in recent history: the traditional model, the medical model, and the social model. In the traditional model, people with impairments are seen as unfortunate, different, blighted, and maybe even nonhuman, and isolation or segregation is a common solution. In the medical model, people with impairments have medical conditions, and the solution is to fix them medically so that they may adapt better to the environment. In the social model, impairment is not considered as significant as the disability that is constructed by physical structures, social attitudes, and cultural mores. The environment disables, and the solution is to change the physical and/or social environment (Peters, 2014).

What disabilities mean to persons possessing them as well as to those with whom they come in contact is influenced by cultural beliefs and norms. Those meanings also play out in social institutions that determine the distribution of resources and generate social and economic inequality. Historically, disability has been used to justify processes of dominance over and exclusion of people with disabilities. The notion of normality was used to categorize people with disabilities as “not normal,” or somehow not legitimate (Baynton, 2016). Think about how this categorization might lead President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to avoid being seen in his wheelchair in public. The idea that people with disabilities are not normal has led to harsh, even violent treatment of them at various points in time. Babies with physical disabilities have been killed, and disabled children have been abandoned to live on the streets. Adults with disabilities have been placed in jails or asylums. By the 18th century, people with disabilities were often called freaks and monsters and were presented in freak shows at carnivals. In the early 19th century, people with developmental disabilities were targeted by the eugenics movement, and people with some types of disabilities were terminated in Nazi Germany. Some eugenics movement came into vogue in the United States and other countries when large numbers of veterans returned from World War II with disabilities (Castañeda, Hopkins, & Peters, 2013).

In the 1960s and 1970s, a social movement among people with disabilities and their allies began to emerge in a number of countries, leading to policies such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, which asserted disability rights not previously recognized. Much has been accomplished in the activist movement for dignity and independence for people with disabilities, but much is left to do. For example, in the United States, people with disabilities are 3 times as likely as the general population to be victims of serious violence. Their rate for victimization by sexual assault is nearly 4 times that of the general population (Ballantine et al., 2018). As this book goes to press, the U.S. Congress is trying to roll back protections for people with disabilities outlined in the ADA.

Here is another example of what is left to do. In an earlier section, we looked at questions related to sexuality, including questions about who is allowed to do what with whom. In all the recent attention to the rights for people with disabilities, little attention has been paid to the constraints on and possibilities for sexual desire and sexual behavior among people with disabilities. Anthropologists Don Kulick and Jens Rydstrom (2015) explored how state power intersects with sexuality for people with disabilities living in group homes in Denmark and Sweden. These two countries are both liberal welfare states with similar cultural histories; they are both considered to be sexually progressive and have been at the forefront of disability rights. However, they take very different approaches to the sexuality of people with severe disabilities. In Sweden, like most countries of the world, the sexual lives of people with severe disabilities are denied and repressed. The staff in group homes are trained to discourage any signs of sexual desire. In contrast, Denmark supports the rights of people with severe disabilities to express their sexuality. Group homes for people with disabilities are supported by a network of advocates, sexual advisors, social workers, medical professionals, counselors, and educators who are committed to recognizing and facilitating the sexual desires of people with disabilities. Sexual advisors undergo an 18-month training course and work under an elaborate set of national guidelines. People with severe disabilities are supported to engage in such sexual activities as masturbation, having sex with a partner, or purchasing sexual services from a sex worker. Kulick and Rydstrom consider this to be a social justice issue that extends the rights of people with disabilities.
What do you think about the changing ideas about the binary nature of gender and sexuality? What examples have you seen of this cultural change? How important are gender and sexuality labels in your own life? Explain. How important has social class been in your own life in the past 2 days? Explain. What role does ability and disability play in your life? What factors can make a difference in how important gender, sexuality, social class, and disability are in people’s lives?

**Genes and Culture**

These days, the common answer to the old question of whether it is nature or nurture that drives human behavior goes like this: “Human characteristics are the product of gene-culture coevolution,” a long-term process involving the interaction of genes and culture over long periods of time (Gintis, 2011, p. 878). Scholars across such diverse disciplines as anthropology, biology, economics, genetics, and psychology agree that humans have two inheritance systems—genetic inheritance and cultural inheritance—occupying the same physical body. The two systems cannot always be treated independently (O’Brien & Laland, 2012; Richerson, Boyd, & Henrich, 2010). Although there are still disagreements about which came first in human history, biological change or cultural change (Fisher & Ridley, 2013), there is general agreement that human history involves extensive gene–culture coevolution.

In his 2002 book *The Dawn of Human Culture*, Richard Klein argued that human culture emerged about 200,000 years ago when a single genetic change gave humans the capacity to adapt to a remarkable range of natural and social environments. Fisher and Ridley (2013) argue that it is quite possible that cultural innovation produced the genetic change, noting that there is historical evidence of culture-driven gene evolution. They provide three examples. First, they argue that gene mutations that allowed humans to remain lactase-persistent into adulthood, meaning that, unlike other species, they continue to have the enzyme to digest the lactose in milk after weaning, did not trigger dairy farming. Rather, the genetic mutation occurred in response to dairy consumption. Second, they argue that the higher alcohol tolerance of Europeans in comparison to Asians was the consequence of greater alcohol consumption in Europe. Third, the invention of fire and cooking 2 million years ago altered the human gut size; again, genetic change followed cultural innovation. Fisher and Ridley (2013) argue that the smallest, most trivial new cultural habit can lead to genetic changes that sharpen the habit, whether it is related to creativity, technological skill, or intensified empathy. Economist Gintis (2011) provides an example. He suggests that as humans developed cultures that involved living near other humans, they began to develop the abilities for cooperating and empathic communication. This led to genetic changes that encoded the capacity for cooperation and empathy into the human genome and sharpened the capacity.

Gene–culture coevolutionary theory (GCT) is a branch of theoretical population genetics that explores how cultural and genetic processes interact over evolutionary time (Laland, Odling-Smee, & Myles, 2010; O’Brien & Laland, 2012). It is generally agreed that cultural innovations tend to spread more quickly than genetic mutations, creating novel cultural environments that may stimulate genetic change. Culture usually accelerates human evolution, but sometimes culture can slow down the evolutionary process. GCT argues that the interactions of genes and culture offer a faster and stronger mode of human evolution than either could produce by itself. GCT scholars propose that cultural evolution happens by some of the same types of mechanisms as occur in genetic evolution (mutation, diffusion, and drift), but some critics of GCT challenge this analogy, arguing that culture is ill-defined and overlapping whereas the gene is well-defined and discrete. Proponents of GCT argue that this is an outdated view of the gene, noting that it is now known that genes are overlapping, movable, and nested, with the same fluidity as culture. You may recall this newer approach to understanding the gene as presented in Chapter 3, The Biological Person. The human genome provides a large brain, capable of adapting and innovating, always entangled with ongoing genetic evolution.

**Digital Culture**

Development of new technologies is a major way that cultures innovate. Throughout human history, key shifts in information and communication technologies have
changed the way people relate to each other and the world around them. Today many of us live in a digital world of electronic technology, a world where everything is computerized. Lindgren (2017) divides the history of digital culture into four stages, characterized by the introduction and diffusion of four technologies:

1. Widespread diffusion of the use of personal computers among ordinary people
2. Introduction of the Internet to a wide, global population
3. Evolution of web 2.0 technology, user-created content, and social media networking
4. Introduction of portable devices—laptops, tablets, mobile phones—with ever-present access to wireless networks

The technological development of the course of these four stages happened rapidly. Not all people have the same access to the new technologies, however, and the digital divide is discussed in Chapter 9, Social Structure and Social Institutions.

Mobile phones have changed our day-to-day lives in many ways. Now we live in a mobile world as well as a digital world. We have one device that fits into a pocket, some pockets anyway, on which we can do many things: talk, text, listen to music, take photos, post the photos on various platforms, make video calls, access the World Wide Web, get directions, find a restaurant or other business, play games, watch videos, and much more. This means we can communicate with each other without having to be in a fixed physical place. New questions have come up about the cultural norms for privacy and intimacy and about how to protect the security of our communications. The Internet allows cross-cultural communication, but it is still used in different ways in different cultures.

Today, online and offline are mingled, and we are often in two or more places at once. Many people are now online all the time, looking up information and communicating with other people on several platforms. We take phone calls at any time and place in front of small or large groups of eavesdroppers and onlookers. We are still negotiating what the new cultural norms will be for doing this, but it is small wonder that texting has become a preferred way to communicate for many, because it is silent and unobtrusive. It avoids the problems of eavesdroppers and onlookers. Mobile phones allow us to coordinate activities with great efficiency, and we often wonder how we coordinated our social lives without them.

Our mobile devices are a great boon for staying connected to others and have great potential for building a strong sense of community. They also allow us to form subcultures that are very cut off from other subcultures, and we can end up living in a bubble of folks with similar beliefs and norms. After the 2016 national elections in the United States, social analysts began to discuss how social media is contributing to subcultures that are becoming increasingly polarized and distrustful of each other (see Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). Social media is used to spread rumors and misinformation, which we have come to call fake news. Bots and algorithms dominate online search for information and may lead us into echo chambers where we only hear what confirms our biases.

Here is an example from the 2016 national elections in the United States. Just after the election, Edgar Welch, a 28-year-old from North Carolina, drove to Washington, DC, carrying a rifle and handgun. He entered Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria, a pizza place I often frequented when I lived around the corner from it, with the purpose of freeing children being held in the restaurant as part of a sex operation run by Hillary Clinton and aides. He found no children there and was arrested. What became known as Pizzagate started as rumors among a large online group, and the story was expanded and spread to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube during the final weeks of the campaign period. It was not until the mainstream media began to investigate the story that people not included in the subculture where the story originated became aware of it. This incident and many others are leading social critics to suggest that we are using our digital devices to become more and more polarized, not just in the United States but around the world. The technology is a result of cultural innovation, but it no doubt is also shaping the culture.

How Culture Changes

Culture generally works to maintain stability, but environmental, demographic, economic, technological, political, and other changes challenge cultures to adapt. Sometimes cultural change is quite voluntary with people welcoming new ideas, tools, and methods. Often, however, cultural change is forced on people by outsiders. In recent times, some cultures have been
changing faster than others, and in those cultures the pace of cultural change seems to have intensified. Anthropologists ask the question whether recent developments in information and communication technology are causing as monumental a cultural revolution as the industrial revolution. Among those who have the power to drive and direct cultural change in their own favor, change is seen as progress, but change is not usually seen as progress by people who do not benefit from it. Globalization is a good example. For those who have the power to manipulate global markets to amass great wealth, globalization is seen as progress, but, increasingly, globalization is seen as the enemy to people who have lost ground as profits are maximized at the expense of workplace safety, worker compensation, and environmental conservation.

Anthropologists identify innovation, diffusion, and cultural loss as some of the most important mechanisms of cultural change (Haviland et al., 2017). Innovation is any new idea, tool, or method. A primary innovation is the creation, invention, or chance discovery of an entirely new idea, tool, or method. A secondary innovation is a new application or modification of an existing idea, tool, or method. Force of habit tends to block ready acceptance of the new and unfamiliar, but cultural beliefs may encourage some innovations more than others. Religious ideology can be a major force against cultural innovation, as happened when Galileo was tried for heresy for declaring that the Earth revolves around the sun, an idea that ran counter to Roman Catholic dogma at the time.

Ideas, tools, and methods also spread from one culture to another, a process of cultural change known as diffusion. The rapid spread of information and communication technologies is a recent example of the diffusion of cultural tools. Anthropologists suggest that cultural borrowing accounts for a very large part of any culture's content (Haviland et al., 2017). But cultures are selective about what they borrow, and they use new cultural ideas, tools, and methods in a way consistent with other features of the local culture.

Sometimes acceptance of a new innovation results in cultural loss, when an existing idea, tool, or method is abandoned. Plant and animal extinctions as a result of human action on the natural environment is one example of cultural loss. Loss of knowledge of nature in highly urbanized cultures is another example. A third example is the loss of spoken languages. Anthony Woodbury (2017) reports that 5,000 to 6,000 languages (others say more) are spoken in the world today, but it is projected that a century from now, the number may fall to the hundreds, as more and more communities that were once self-sufficient are pressured to integrate with more powerful cultures.

In multicultural societies, cultural change can be understood in terms of four processes: assimilation, accommodation, acculturation, and bicultural socialization. These terms are used to describe the minority individual's or group's response to the dominant culture and may have implications for clients' well-being.

- **Assimilation** is the process in which the cultural uniqueness of the minority is abandoned and its members try to blend invisibly into the dominant cultures. Historically, an assimilation ideology that asserts the ideal of Anglo conformity has prevailed in the United States. Immigration laws were based on beliefs about which groups of immigrants could most easily assimilate. Many minorities, especially first-generation immigrants, often resist giving up parts of their ethnic identity in order to protect their sense of meaning and purpose in life. Rubina will face assimilation pressure to forgo wearing the hijab, but she seems prepared to resist that pressure.

- **Accommodation** is the process of partial or selective cultural change. Nondominant groups follow the norms, rules, and standards of the dominant culture only in specific circumstances and contexts. This process is more common than assimilation in the multicultural, multiethnic society of the United States. Rubina follows the university rules and shares most of the norms of the dominant U.S. culture, but she will not remove her hijab, and her family does not live by many U.S. cultural standards at home.

- **Acculturation** is a mutual sharing of culture. It involves cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture, a merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact. Cultural groups remain distinct, but certain elements of culture change, and they exchange and blend preferences in foods, music, dance, clothing, and the like.

- **Bicultural socialization** involves a nonmajority group or its members mastering both the dominant culture and their own. It is
necessary for people like Rubina who are the children of first-generation immigrants. Rubina seems to have mastered both cultures well enough to move back and forth between school and home during childhood and adolescence, but in her current life stage, she struggles to resolve the conflict between the culture of her parents and the culture of her peers regarding young-adult independence. The struggle has been so great that it is now affecting her health. Depending on how large the differences are between two cultures, bicultural people may see their bicultural identities as incompatible or as relatively conflict-free (Repke & Benet-Martinez, 2017).

Social workers who conduct multidimensional cultural analyses should seek to understand the processes by which culture is being maintained, adapted, and changed in the lives of the individuals, families, groups, and communities with whom they work. We must also be alert to the fact that the process of cultural change is not always voluntary. We must pay attention to the political, social, and economic practices that undergird institutional norms and values. If these processes are harmful and oppressive for some people, we have a professional obligation, through our code of ethics, to facilitate change. And we have a role to play in helping families like Rubina’s to negotiate cultural conflicts within the family.

**CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS 8.5**

- How do you see genes and culture interacting in the production of your own behavior? What do you see as the benefits of digital culture to your own life? What are the benefits for society? What are the harms of digital culture in your own life? What are the harms for society? What one cultural change would you most like to see? What do you see as the forces that might support that cultural change? What do you see as the forces that would oppose such a cultural change?

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

As a social worker, you will want to recognize the powerful role that culture plays in the lives of the individuals, families, small groups, organizations, communities, and social movements with which you come in contact. Here are a few principles to guide your social work assessment and intervention.

- Engage in an ongoing process of identifying and examining your own implicit biases and the impact they have on your professional activities.
- Recognize the multiple interacting cultures involved in the stories you hear.
- Pay attention to material culture in the communities in which you work.
- Assist individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and social movements to exercise human agency in the ongoing creation, maintenance, and change of the cultures in which they participate.
- Recognize how culture has been created, maintained, and changed over time in the families, small groups, organizations, communities, and social movements with which you work.
- Assist client systems to examine cultural values, ideology, symbols, language, and norms—and any conflicts about those—involving in their situations.
- Recognize how power and culture interact to create privilege and disadvantage for client systems, particularly as they relate to major identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, and disability.
- Support individuals and collectivities who resist cultural marginalization, recognizing their strengths, creativity, and hope as well as their pain.
- Advocate for social work interventions and policy practices that improve the life chances for identity groups who have been marginalized by cultural ideology and norms.
- Be mindful of how digital culture affects your social work practice and the client systems with which you work.
- Work to ensure that nondominant groups have a significant say in how cultural change proceeds.
Active Learning

1. Compare the cultural experiences that Rubina is having as a young adult with your own young-adult experiences, considering the following themes: cultural values, cultural ideology, cultural symbols, language, cultural norms, subcultures, and countercultures. Now imagine that you and Rubina change places for a day. How do you think you might react to the values, symbols, and norms of Rubina’s life situation? How do you think she might react to the values, symbols, and norms of your life situation?

2. Consider where you fit in the social categories related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, and disability. For each category, consider whether you carry cultural privilege or cultural disadvantage. Sociologists describe master identities as those that are most important for our sense of self. Of the social categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, and disability, would you consider your identity in any of these social categories to be your master identity? If so, which one or ones, and for what reasons? If not, is there another social category that would constitute a master identity for you?

3. Think about a cultural change that you have seen in your lifetime. Perhaps it is a technological innovation, a fashion change, a change in political culture, a change in the cultural attitudes about gender and sexuality, or some other type of cultural change. What do you think were the forces behind the cultural change? How has that cultural change affected your own life? What are the advantages and disadvantages of that cultural change for society as a whole? For your family? For you personally?

Web Resources

Critical Multicultural Pavilion: www.edchange.org/multicultural

Site maintained by Paul C. Gorski contains resources, research, awareness activities, and links to multicultural topics.
Diversity Toolkit: www.ucalgary.ca/dtoolkit/
Site maintained by Darren Lund at the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary contains a glossary and bibliography for issues of diversity and social justice.

An open-access e-journal committed to promoting educational equity, cross-cultural understanding, and global awareness in all levels of education.