What Is Culture?
What Is Culture?

- **Culture** - the values, beliefs, behavior, and material objects that, together, form a people’s way of life
  - Influences:
    - What we think, how we act, and what we own.
    - Our goals, sense of justice, and personal feelings.

- **Material Culture** - the tangible, physical things created by members of a society
  - Ex: Books, Cell Phones, *Others*?

- **Nonmaterial Culture** - the ideas created by members of a society
  - Ex: Religion, *Others*?

- **Society** – people who interact in a defined territory and share a culture
Culture Shock & Operationalizing Culture

- **Culture Shock** – personal disorientation when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life
  - *Examples?*

- **How many cultures are there? How could we operationalize culture?**
  - **Language**
    - 200 in the U.S.
    - 7,000 Globally
Culture & Human Intelligence

- 3M Years Ago: Instinct ➔ Culture
- 250K Years Ago: Rapidly Developing Culture
  - Evidence: Tools & Cave Art
- 12k Years Ago: Birth of Civilization
  - Permanent Settlements
  - Creation of Specialized Occupations
  - Fashioned the natural environment for themselves.
- Ever since…
  - Humans have made and remade their world in countless ways, resulting in our current cultural diversity.
Elements of Culture
Symbols

- **Symbol** – anything that carries a particular meaning recognized by people who share a *culture*
  - *Examples?*
  - Human beings are unique because we sense our surrounding world but also give it meaning by transforming the elements of the world into symbols.
  - We can create and manipulate symbols.
    - Example: Winking – Interest, Understanding, Insult
  - New symbols are created all the time.
    - Example: Emoticons
  - We usually take our culture’s symbols for granted.
    - Example: Flag
  - Symbolic meanings can vary both between and within cultures.
    - Example: Confederate Flag
Language

- **Language** – a system of symbols that allows people to communicate with one another
- Key to **cultural transmission**, the process by which one generation passes culture to the next.
- Language is what sets us apart from other creatures.
  - Self-Conscious
  - Aware of Our Limitations
  - Aware of Our Mortality
  - Able to Dream & Hope
Human Languages: A Variety of Symbols
Here the single English word “Read” is written in twelve of the hundreds of languages humans use to communicate with one another.
Does language shape reality? Does someone who speaks Cherokee experience the world differently from those who think in English?

**Sapir-Whorf Thesis:** people see and understand the world through the cultural lens of language.

- Each language has its own distinctive symbols that serve as building blocks of reality.
- Each language has words or expressions not found in any other symbolic system.
- All languages fuse symbols with distinctive emotions so that a single idea may “feel” different in different languages.

Current thinking is that we **fashion** reality from our symbols, but evidence does not support the notion that language **determines** reality.
Values & Beliefs

- **Values** – culturally defined standards that people use to decide what is desirable, good, and beautiful
  - Serve as broad guidelines for social living.
  - What people use to make choices about how to live.
  - Abstract standards of goodness.
  - Underlie beliefs.
  - Example: Equal Opportunity; Others?

- **Beliefs** – specific ideas that people hold to be true
  - Particular matters that people consider true or false.
  - Example: Woman Could be President; Others?

- Few cultural values and beliefs are shared by everyone.
Values & Beliefs

- Key Values of US Culture — *What are they?*
  - Robin Williams (1970) — Central to Our Way of Life
    - Equal Opportunity (vs. Equality)
    - Achievement & Success
    - Material Comfort
    - Activity & Work
    - Practicality & Efficiency
    - Progress
    - Science
    - Democracy & Free Enterprise
    - Freedom
    - Racism & Group Superiority

- *What are some key cultural values elsewhere?*
Cultural Values of Selected Countries

A general global pattern is that higher-income countries tend to be secular-rational and favor self-expression. By contrast, the cultures of lower-income countries tend to be more traditional and concerned with economic survival. Each region of the world, however, has distinctive cultural patterns, including religious traditions, that affect values. Looking at the figure, what patterns can you see?

Values & Beliefs

- **Values: Sometimes in Conflict**
  - Reflects cultural diversity.
  - Sparks cultural change.
  - Causes strain and often leads to awkward balancing acts in our beliefs.
    - We usually learn to live with the contradictions.

- **Emerging Values**
  - Values change over time.

- **Values: A Global Perspective**
  - Values differ in high and low-income countries. **How?**
    - Lower-Income: Survival, Tradition
    - Higher-Income: Individual, Expression, Secular-Rational
Life Objectives of First-Year College Students, 1969-2007

Researchers have surveyed first-year college students every year since 1969. While attitudes about some things such as the importance of family have stayed about the same, attitudes about other life goals have changed dramatically.

Sources: Astin et al. (2002) and Pryor et al. (2005).

Compared to college students 40 years ago, today's students are less interested in developing a philosophy of life and more interested in making money.
Norms

- **Norms** – rules and expectations by which a society guides the behavior of its members
  - Basic rules of everyday life.
  - Make our dealings with others more orderly and predictable.
- The most important norms in a culture apply everywhere and at all times.
  - Example: Obedience from Young Children; *Others?*
- Other norms depend on the situation.
  - Example: Applaud After a Performance; *Others?*
- Why are some norms more important than others? *Who decides?*
- **Sanctions** – rewards or punishments that encourage conformity to cultural norms
Norms: Two Categorizations

- **Proscriptive vs. Prescriptive**
  - **Proscriptive** – states what we **should not** do
    - Example: Avoid Casual Sex; *Others?*
  - **Prescriptive** – states what we **should** do
    - Example: Practice Safe Sex; *Others?*

- **Mores vs. Folkways**
  - **Mores** – norms that are widely observed and have great moral significance
    - Right vs. Wrong
    - Example: Adults should not have sex with children.
  - **Folkways** – norms for routine or casual interaction
    - Right vs. Rude
    - Example: Men should wear ties to formal events.
Ideal & Real Culture

- **IMPORTANT!** → Values and norms do not describe actual behavior so much as they suggest how we should behave.

- **Ideal culture** (values and norms) always differs from **real culture** (what actually occurs).

- **Examples?**
  - Faithfulness in Marriage
    - We SHOULd be faithful to our spouse (ideal culture).
    - But many people cheat on their spouses (real culture).
Technology & Culture
Material Culture & Technology

- **Artifacts** – a wide range of physical human creations; part of material culture
  - Partly reflect underlying cultural values.
  - Partly reflect a society’s level of technology.
  - Examples: Chopsticks vs. Cutlery; Automobiles in America

- **Technology** – knowledge that people use to make a way of life in their surroundings
  - The more complex a society’s technology, the more its members are able to shape the world for themselves.
    - Ex: Superhighways; *Others?*
  - Both a blessing and a curse.
    - Ex: Medicine vs. Violence; *Others?*
  - Not equally distributed.
    - Ex: The Digital Divide
Gerhard Lenski

- Gerhard Lenski – described how societies changed over the past 10k years; focused on technology and how it shapes society; helps us understand the major differences among societies
  - Sociocultural Evolution – changes that occur as a society gains new technology
    - Simple Technology – little control over nature; can support just a small number of people
    - Complex Technology – support hundreds of millions of people in far more affluent ways of life
    - Inventing or Adopting New Technology → Societal Change
    - ↑ Technology → Faster Change
  - Do you agree or disagree? Examples?
- 5 Types of Societies: H&G, H&P, A, I, P-I
Gerhard Lenski

- **Hunting & Gathering – 3M-200 Years Ago;** use simple tools to hunt animals and gather vegetation
  - Everyone spends most of their time searching for game & plants.
    - Men Hunt & Women Gather - But both of the tasks were seen as equally important so the sexes had roughly the same social importance.
  - Small societies comprised of several dozen people living in a nomadic, family-like group.
  - No formal leaders.
  - Egalitarian way of life.
  - Vulnerable to the forces of nature due to limited technology.
Gerhard Lenski

- **Horticultural & Pastoral** — Began ~10k Years Ago
  - **H** — the use of *hand tools* to raise crops
    - Formed Settlements
  - **P** — the *domestication* of animals
    - Nomadic, searching for grazing land.
  - Populations expanded from dozens to hundreds.
  - Greater Specialization Of Labor ➔ More Socially Diverse ➔ More Inequality
    - Due to material surplus that required only certain members of society to be focused on getting food.
Gerhard Lenski

- **Agrarian** – began ~5k years ago; large-scale cultivation using plows harnessed to animals or more powerful energy sources
  - “Dawn of Civilization”
  - Resided in *permanent* settlements.
  - *Expanded in size and population.*
  - *Even greater specialization* of labor.
    - People had a greater range of life choices.
  - Exhibit *extreme social inequality* (even more than present).
Gerhard Lenski

- **Industrial** – started around 1775; the production of goods using advanced sources of energy to drive large machinery (steam engine)
  - Drew people away from the home and reduced importance of family and tradition.
  - Made the world seem smaller.
  - Higher living standards for all.
  - Greater Individualism and Personal Freedom
• Postindustrial – term was coined in 1973; the production of information using computer technology
  ○ Rather than producing things, produces ideas and information.
  ○ Changes the skills that define a way of life.
  ○ We now create symbolic culture on an unprecedented scale: new words, music, and images.
○ Do all 5 still exist somewhere in the world today? Examples?
Gerhard Lenski

- *Limits of Technology?*
  - Provides no quick-fix for social problems.
  - Creates its own new problems.
  - Gives us more personal freedom, but destroys our sense of community.
    - Social Networking Sites?
  - Can be used for both good and evil.
  - Threatens the physical environment.
High Culture & Popular Culture

- **High Culture** – cultural patterns that distinguish a society’s elite
  - Examples?

- **Popular Culture** – cultural patterns that are widespread among a society’s population
  - Mass media and celebrities have great importance in its spread.
  - Examples?

- Which is superior?
  - Neither elites nor ordinaries share all the same tastes and interests.
  - Does high culture receive praise because it is inherently better or because its supporters have more money, power, and prestige?
    - Ex: Violin vs. Fiddle
Subcultures & Countercultures

- **Subculture** – cultural patterns that set apart some segment of a society’s population
  - Ex: Korean Americans, Yankees, *Others*?
  - We participate in many subcultures without having much commitment to any of them.
  - Involve both *difference* and *hierarchy*.
    - Dominant or Mainstream? ➔ Favored by powerful segments of the population.
  - Source of variety, but also tension and sometimes violence.
    - Ex: Religious Wars, Ethnic Cleansing

- **Counterculture** – cultural patterns that strongly oppose those widely accepted within a society; specific type of subculture
  - Ex: Hippies in the 1960s; *Others*?
What seems right and natural in one society can be seen as puzzling and even immoral in others.

**Ethnocentrism** – the practice of judging another culture by the standards of one’s own culture
- Necessary to be attached to your own way of life.
- But can generate misunderstanding and conflict.

**Cultural Relativism** – the practice of judging a culture by its own standards
- Requires openness.
- Gives rise to questions…
  - If almost any kind of behavior is the norm somewhere, does that mean everything is equally right?
  - How can we avoid imposing our own standards on others?

**Multiculturalism** – a perspective recognizing the cultural diversity of the US and promoting equal standing for all cultural traditions
The View from “Down Under”
North America should be “up” and South America “down,” or so we think. But because we live on a globe, “up” and “down” have no meaning at all. The reason this map of the Western Hemisphere looks wrong to us is not that it is geographically inaccurate; it simply violates our ethnocentric assumption that the United States should be “above” the rest of the Americas.
Cultural Change

- **Cultural Integration** – the close relationships among various elements of a cultural system
  - Change in one part of a culture usually sparks change in others.
  - Example: Working Women → Delays Marriage Age & Raises Divorces

- **Cultural Lag** – the fact that some cultural elements change more quickly than others, disrupting a cultural system
  - Example: Genetic Advances → Law & Medicine

- Three Causes of Cultural Change:
  - **Invention** – continual process of creating new cultural elements
    - Ex: Telephone, Airplane, Others?
  - **Discovery** – recognizing and better understanding more fully something already in existence
    - Ex: Planets, Herbs & Plants, Others?
  - **Diffusion** – spread of cultural traits from 1 society to another; impact of globalization?
    - Ex: Coins, Food, Others?
A Global Culture?

- Today, more than ever, we can observe many of the same cultural practices the world over.
  - Ex: Blue Jeans, Products & Brands, Others?
- Why?
  - Societies now have more contact with one another than ever before due to globalization.
    - Global Economy $\rightarrow$ Flow of Goods
    - Global Communication $\rightarrow$ Flow of Information
    - Global Migration $\rightarrow$ Flow of People
- These links make the cultures of the world more similar.
- Limitations to this global-culture thesis:
  - Flow is uneven with urban areas having many ties, rural areas having few ties, and world super powers (like the USA) having more influence.
  - Assumes people everywhere can afford these goods, which is not the case.
  - Cultural elements may be similar, but their meanings are not.
    - Ex: Harry Potter Books in Tokyo vs. London; British Comedy; Foreign Films
Theoretical Analysis of Culture

Sociologists try to understand how culture helps us make sense of ourselves and the surrounding world.
Structural-Functional Analysis

- Explains culture as a complex strategy for meeting human needs.
- Values are the core of culture because they:
  - Direct our lives.
  - Give meaning to what we do.
  - Bind people together (solidarity).
- All cultural traits have functions that support the operation of society.
- Seeks cultural universals, traits that are part of every known culture.
  - Murdock (1945) identified dozens. Like what?
    - Family – controls sexual reproduction and oversees the care of children
    - Funeral Rites – to cope with the reality of death
    - Jokes – safe means of releasing social tensions
- Critical Review
  - Largely ignores cultural diversity.
  - Downplays the importance of change.
Social-Conflict Analysis

- Stresses the link between culture and **inequality**.
- Any cultural trait benefits some members of society at the expense of others.
- Culture is shaped by a society’s system of economic production (*Marx*).
  - **Ties** our cultural **values** of competitiveness and material success to our country’s **capitalist economy**, which benefits the wealthy elite.
    - This is encourages us to view capitalism as “natural.”
- Hope that eventually the strains of inequality will erupt into **movements for social change**.
  - Ex: Civil Rights Movement, Women’s Movement

**Critical Review**
- Understates the ways that cultural patterns integrate members of society.
Symbolic-Interactionist Analysis

- What do you think symbolic-interactionists say about culture?
Evolution & Culture: Sociobiology

- **Sociobiology** – a theoretical approach that explores ways in which human biology affects how we create culture

- Rests on Darwin’s Theory of Evolution and 4 Principles of **Natural Selection**
  - Survival of the Fittest
    - All living things live to reproduce themselves.
    - The blueprint for reproduction is in the genes.
    - Some random variation in genes allows a species to “try out” new life patterns in a particular environment. The variation allows some organisms to survive better than others and pass on their advantageous genes to offspring.
    - Over thousands of generations, the genetic patterns that promote reproduction survive and become dominant.

- **Bio-Logic**: Sociobiologists claim that the large number of cultural universals reflects the fact that humans are members of a single biological species.

- **Critical Review**
  - Could revive biological arguments that claim genetic superiority.
  - Minimal empirical support.
## Applying Theory

### Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the level of analysis?</th>
<th>Structural-Functional Approach</th>
<th>Social-Conflict Approach</th>
<th>Sociobiology Approach</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Macro-level</td>
<td>Macro-level</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>What is culture?</th>
<th>Structural-Functional Approach</th>
<th>Social-Conflict Approach</th>
<th>Sociobiology Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Culture is a system of behavior by which members of societies cooperate to meet their needs.</td>
<td>Culture is a system that benefits some people and disadvantages others.</td>
<td>Culture is a system of behavior that is partly shaped by human biology.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the foundation of culture?</th>
<th>Structural-Functional Approach</th>
<th>Social-Conflict Approach</th>
<th>Sociobiology Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural patterns are rooted in a society’s core values and beliefs.</td>
<td>Cultural patterns are rooted in a society’s system of economic production.</td>
<td>Cultural patterns are rooted in humanity’s biological evolution.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What core questions does the approach ask?</th>
<th>Structural-Functional Approach</th>
<th>Social-Conflict Approach</th>
<th>Sociobiology Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does a cultural pattern help society operate?</td>
<td>How does a cultural pattern benefit some people and harm others?</td>
<td>How does a cultural pattern help a species adapt to its environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What cultural patterns are found in all societies?</td>
<td>How does a cultural pattern support social inequality?</td>
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Culture & Human Freedom

Read page 65 in your textbook.
Culture: Constraint or Freedom?

- As symbolic creatures, humans cannot live without culture.
- But the capacity for culture does have some drawbacks.
  - We are the only creatures that experience alienation.
  - Culture is largely a matter of habit, which limits our choices and drives us to repeat troubling patterns. (Ex: Prejudice & Discrimination)
  - Our society’s emphasis on competitive achievement isolates us from one another.
  - Material things divert us from the security and satisfaction that come from close relationships and spiritual strength (false consciousness).
- But culture also forces us to choose as we make and remake a world for ourselves.
- Cultural Diversity
Culturgram for the 90s

- Customs & Courtesies
  - Greetings
  - Visiting
  - Eating
  - Gestures
- The People
  - General Attitudes
  - Personal Appearance
  - Population
  - Language
  - Religion
- Lifestyle
  - The Family
  - Dating & Marriage
  - Diet
  - Business
  - Recreation

**Activity:**
Can you fill these in for various cultures?
Discussion Questions

• Do you think you can learn more about a people by studying their material or their nonmaterial culture? Why?
• Why is culture a more effective strategy for survival than reliance on instinct?
• How are core American values other than achievement and success reflected in childhood games?
• How has the virtual culture impacted you?
• What are the primary means by which society attempts to exert social control over its members?
• Is a technologically more advanced society necessarily a superior one?
• Do you think that teenagers constitute a distinct American subculture? Why?
• Is cultural relativism always good? Under what circumstances do you feel that it is appropriate to condemn the practices of a culture other than your own?
Conclusion

- Culture is made up of a variety of material and non-material elements.
- Lenski identified the process of sociocultural evolution by which societies and cultures evolve as a result of technological innovation.
- There are distinct groups within each culture known as subcultures and countercultures.
- Cultures can and do change frequently.
- The various sociological paradigms view culture quite differently.
- Visual Summary on Pages 67-68
- Review Questions on Page 69
- Any questions?