

Chapter 6

Culture, Media, and Communication

by Eric Klinenberg*

More people live alone now than at any other time in history. In prosperous American cities—Atlanta, Denver, Seattle, San Francisco, and Minneapolis—40 percent or more of all households contain a single occupant. In Manhattan and in Washington, D.C., nearly one in two households is occupied by a single person. In Paris, the city of lovers, more than half of all households contain single people, and in Stockholm, Sweden, the rate tops 60 percent. The decision to live alone is increasingly common in diverse cultures whenever it is economically feasible.

The mere thought of living alone once sparked anxiety, dread, and visions of loneliness. But those images are dated. Now the most privileged people on earth use their resources to separate from one another, to buy privacy and personal space.

How has this happened? At first glance, living alone by choice seems to contradict entrenched cultural values—so long defined by groups and by the nuclear family. But after interviewing more than 300 “singletons” (my term for people who live alone) during nearly a decade of research, it appears that living alone fits well with modern values (Klinenberg 2012). It promotes freedom, personal control, and self-realization—all prized aspects of contemporary life. It is less feared, too, than it once might have been, for the crucial reason that living alone no longer suggests an isolated or less-social life.

Our species has been able to embark on this experiment in solo living because global societies have become so interdependent. Dynamic markets, flourishing cities, and open communications systems make modern autonomy more appealing; they give us the capacity to live alone but to engage with others when and how we want and

on our own terms. In fact, living alone can make it easier to be social because single people have more free time,

My Sociological Imagination

ERIC KLINENBERG




I grew up in the center of Chicago, and my interest in the sociology of culture and cities grew out of my experiences there. I lived in a bohemian but rapidly gentrifying neighborhood called Old Town, a place that was long famous for its vibrant street life

and for its blues clubs, jazz bars, cafés, and counterculture scenes. Chicago is a segregated city, and Old Town is wedged between two of the city’s most affluent areas, the Gold Coast and Lincoln Park, and Cabrini Green, a housing project (recently demolished) where most of the residents were African American and poor. I was always puzzled by this arrangement, and trying to understand it as a child was the beginning of my sociology career.

My research examines cities, culture, climate, and communications. My first book, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, explores two questions: Why did so many people die during a short heat spell in 1995? And why was this disastrous event so easy to deny, overlook, and forget? My second book, *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America’s Media*, examines how media consolidation has affected newspapers, radio stations, television news, and the Internet and tracks the emergence of the global media reform movement. My latest book, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*, analyzes the incredible social experiment in solo living that began in the 1950s and is now ubiquitous in developed nations throughout the world.

*An earlier version of this chapter was co-authored by David Wachsmuth.



Despite the stereotype that living alone is an isolating experience, more and more Americans are choosing to live alone.

The Big Questions

1. **What is culture?** When sociologists talk about culture, they refer to a shared system of beliefs and knowledge, more commonly called a system of meaning and symbols; a set of values, beliefs, and practices; and shared forms of communication.
2. **How does culture shape our collective identity?** Cultural practices both reflect and define group identities, whether the group is a small subculture or a nation.
3. **How do our cultural practices relate to class and status?** People's cultural habits help define and reproduce the boundaries between high status and low status, upper class and lower class.
4. **Who produces culture, and why?** The cultural field is the place for creativity and meaning making. But it is also a battlefield: Who controls the media and popular culture, and what messages they communicate, are central to how social life is organized and how power operates.
5. **What is the relationship between media and democracy?** The media are arguably the most important form of cultural production in our society. The news is vital to democracy, and new ways of participating in the media are changing how democracy works.

absent family obligations, to engage in social and cultural activities.

Compared with their married counterparts, single people are more likely to spend time with friends and neighbors, go to restaurants, and attend art classes and lectures. Surveys, some by market research companies that study behavior for clients developing products and services, also indicate that married people with children are more likely than single people to hunker down at home. Those in large suburban homes often splinter into private rooms to be alone. The image of a modern family in a room together, each plugged into a separate reality—be it a smartphone, computer, video game, or TV show—has become a cultural cliché. New communications technologies make living alone a social experience, so being home alone does not feel involuntary or like solitary confinement. The person alone at home can digitally navigate through a world of people, information, and

ideas. Internet use does not seem to cut people off from real friendships and connections.

All signs suggest that living alone will become even more common in the future, at every stage of adulthood and in every place where people can afford a place of their own. Modern culture has shifted in ways that have made this dramatic change in the way we live possible. In this chapter, we will explore the sociology of culture and look more carefully at how these changes in culture and communication are changing the way we live our lives. One important part of the sociology of culture involves studying people's daily routines and practices. Another involves examining the values, social norms, and collective beliefs that make some behaviors acceptable and others suspect. Fortunately, the search for this kind of information is as rewarding as its discovery, which explains why the sociology of culture is one of the fastest-growing parts of the field today.



6.1 What Is Culture?

THE MANY MEANINGS OF CULTURE

The latest song by Beyoncé, a performance of the opera, our assumptions about monogamy, a series of posts on Twitter, a headline in the newspaper, the reason one person sleeps in and another wakes up early: These are all examples of culture. People use the word *culture* to refer to all sorts of things, from art to traditions to individual learned behavior. In everyday language, culture is often a synonym for art or artistic activities, as indicated by the expression “getting some culture,” or a synonym for refined taste, as when we call a person “cultured.” These are certainly two of the ways that sociologists use the word, but there are a number of others. In fact, as one writer puts it, “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams 1976:87).

The modern Western history of the concept of culture begins with the rise of world travel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when merchants from Europe came into contact with non-Europeans for the first time. These merchants were struck not only by the physical differences between themselves and the non-Europeans but also by the differences in how they behaved. This included everything from how they dressed to the way their families were organized. In an attempt to make sense of these differences, scientists in the nineteenth century connected the physical differences with the behavioral differences, arguing that people’s biology—and particularly their race—determined how their societies were organized.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, anthropologists began to criticize this idea and instead argued that it was not race that was responsible for these differences but something else—something that was not hereditary but rather learned, something that was not natural and biological but rather

socially produced. That something was culture. These days, the argument that the differences between groups of people are more than just biological, and that we learn how to behave, seems obvious. But at the time, it was an important discovery.

From this early research came some basic conclusions about culture. First, culture is a characteristic not of individuals but of groups. Second, culture is a way of understanding differences between groups and similarities within groups. Last, culture is an aspect of social life that is different from nature or biology. Indeed, what makes culture a social phenomenon is precisely that it is not natural. While it’s difficult in practice to draw a line between nature and culture, sociologists now recognize that certain biological things about humans are relatively constant throughout history (for example, everyone gets hungry), while cultural things are not (for example, the kind of food we eat and how we eat it).

Defining Culture

6.1.1 Define culture from a sociological perspective.

In the early twentieth century, sociologists and anthropologists generally defined culture as the entire way of life of a people. If you were transported back to ancient Rome, what kinds of things would you need to fit in? You would certainly need language and information about art, customs, and traditions. But you would also need all sorts of material objects, including clothing, tools, and a house. This was all considered part of a society’s culture: both material and nonmaterial aspects.

Today, when sociologists talk about **culture**, they are usually referring to three things: a shared system of beliefs and knowledge, more commonly called a system of meaning and symbols; a set of values, beliefs, and practices; and shared forms of communication (Sewell 2005). We will explore each of these components of culture in the next three sections.

Culture as a System of Meaning and Symbols

6.1.2 Explain how a group's symbols can be considered its culture, and give examples of collective symbols of contemporary U.S. culture.

Every society is full of **symbols** that communicate an idea while being distinct from the idea itself. Some are straightforward: For example, in contemporary American society, a red heart implies love and a green traffic light tells you that you are allowed to drive. Other symbols are less obvious: When a car commercial shows a car driving off-road at high speeds, it is likely that the advertiser is trying to make you think about freedom and excitement and associate those ideas with the car. A national flag might have a number of different meanings for different people. Symbols, whether simple or complex, are things that communicate implicit meaning about an idea. Taken together, a group's symbols are an important part of its culture.

We can analyze and interpret collective symbols to learn about particular cultures. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz demonstrated the idea that culture is a system of collective meaning by analyzing a Balinese cockfight in 1950s Indonesia (Geertz 1972). Cockfights—boxing matches between roosters—were outlawed by the national government but were still important events in local communities. Multiple pairs of birds would fight over the course of an afternoon, and hundreds of residents would watch, cheer, and place bets. Geertz studied the cockfight the way a student of literature might study a novel, as an object full of symbols needing to be interpreted. For example, Geertz found that participants in the cockfights often gambled far more money than seemed to be rational from an economic

perspective. He concluded that the betting wasn't just about winning or losing money; it was a way of indicating and reworking status hierarchies (those who bet aggressively and were successful were simultaneously securing and displaying high status in the eyes of other participants). The cockfights allowed the Balinese to collectively interpret their own status hierarchies: “a story they tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz 1972:26).

Symbols always exist in specific social contexts—a green traffic light would be mysterious to someone raised in a society without cars, for example, while most of us would find the rituals of a Balinese cockfight equally mysterious. For this reason, studying symbols helps us understand things about society that are not often discussed, such as distinctions of honor, inequality, and competition. For instance, if Geertz had asked them directly, the Balinese cockfighters would not have told him that betting was more a status issue than a financial one. That was something that he could only perceive through careful observation of a place where he had moved and a group that he had gotten to know well. This research method, based on lengthy and intimate observation of a group, is called *ethnography*.

How could we use Geertz's insights to interpret the collective symbols of the contemporary United States? In the place of a cockfight, we could study the Super Bowl—the most-watched cultural event in the country, which features familiar rituals and symbols such as betting on the outcome, Super Bowl parties with friends and family, an elaborate half-time show, and blockbuster television ads. But collective symbols don't have to be massive spectacles to be meaningful. Nowadays we might focus on different cultural events, such as trending video clips on YouTube, which would uncover a different America. From music videos to people filming their

cats to back-and-forth video debates about politics or technology, sites such as YouTube display our new collective symbols by allowing people to share and interpret culture together (Burgess and Green 2009).



The collective rituals we display in our cultural events, such as this cockfight in modern Indonesia, can demonstrate shared values. What cultural events could reveal shared American values?

Culture as a Set of Values, Beliefs, and Practices

6.1.3 Describe how our values and beliefs influence how we live our lives.

Consider again the Super Bowl. The rituals we described above are more than cultural symbols; rather they also demonstrate common **values**—judgments about what is intrinsically important or meaningful—such as

patriotism, competitiveness, and consumerism. But how does such collective meaning and its expression help to shape our social behavior? Is culture just a set of values and beliefs, or does it actually influence how we live our lives? In other words, how is culture actually practiced? The answer is that culture influences the kinds of decisions we make in our lives, whether or not we are aware of it.

The influential work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu developed an analysis of how culture works in this way. Bourdieu argued that we all develop certain sets of assumptions about the world and our place in it: our tastes, preferences, and skills. We also develop habits—what Bourdieu called **habitus**—in the course of growing up and socializing with others that become so routine we don't even realize we are following them (Bourdieu 1992).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain how our future choices and opinions are always guided by our past experiences. Someone raised in a wealthy family on the Upper West Side of Manhattan will have no trouble fitting in at a fancy dinner party but perhaps quite a bit of trouble fitting in on a farm, while someone raised on a farm will have the opposite experience. But people are exposed to all sorts of different cultural systems and forms of meaning, after all. So how is it that you choose to act one way at one time and a different way at another? One way to answer this question is to think of culture as a **tool kit**—a set of ideas and skills that we learn through the cultural environment we live in and apply to practical situations in our own lives (Swidler 1986).



The way we eat is an example of the kind of habitus we develop. In particular, think about how you hold a fork and a knife. Some people hold a fork upside down in the left hand, with the tines facing downward. Others hold a fork in the right hand and use the tines in a scooping fashion. People often label these behaviors with class distinctions as well.

If a friend introduces you to someone, how do you behave? If you're single and interested in flirting, you'll draw on one set of cultural tools you've developed; if you're just trying to be polite, you'll draw on a different set of tools. Just as a car mechanic has a box of tools at her disposal for fixing a variety of problems, people have a kind of tool kit of behaviors and opinions that they apply to different situations they find themselves in. Some people will have better tools for certain situations, and some people will have better tools for others. What's more, even though people immersed in the same cultural environments will tend to have similar cultural tools in their tool kit, they probably will have quite different levels of expertise and familiarity with the tools. So two people who hang out in similar social circles might have the same basic set of conversational tools in their cultural tool kits, but the one who keeps to himself will be less comfortable using them than the one who frequently chats with people she doesn't know very well.

One researcher studying love in contemporary America found that the two most important cultural tools are the idea of love as a voluntary choice and the idea of love as creating a set of commitments to another person (Swidler 2003). Most Americans have both of these tools, or ways of understanding love, available to them. But their personal backgrounds will affect which one they tend to rely on and which one they are more competent with. Your own past experiences with love might make you leery of thinking of it in terms of commitment, so this will change how you navigate future romantic encounters. Or you may not have had much experience with commitment, such that when you try to use that cultural tool you don't do a good job of it. From this perspective, culture does not just establish differences in how we interpret the world and give it meaning but rather influences what kinds of strategies and actions are practically available to us.

Culture as a Form of Communication

6.1.4 Explain the ways in which culture is a form of communication.

Both culture as a system of meaning and symbols and culture as values, beliefs, and practices describe forms of *communication*, which is the sharing of meaningful information between people. One important way this occurs is through language. **Language** refers to any comprehensive system of words or symbols representing concepts, and it does not necessarily need to be spoken, as the hundreds of different sign languages in use around the world suggest. Culture and language are closely related. The ancient Greeks called the supposedly uncultured peoples they encountered "barbarians," which literally means people who babble—who have no language.

Researchers have disagreed over the years as to the importance of language for culture. At a basic level, language

is a **cultural universal**, a cultural trait common to all humans: As far as we know, all human societies throughout history have used language to communicate with each other. Some linguists have even argued that language is the fundamental building block of thought—that if you don't have a word for something, you literally can't think it. The implication of this view is that a group's language is directly responsible for many of its cultural symbols and practices. A simple example is the distinction between two different words for "you" in French: an informal *tu* and a more formal *vous*. English used to have a similar distinction (*thou* versus *you*), but it died out over time. As a result, English speakers would possibly place less emphasis on formality in their communication with each other and hence in their group culture. But just because people speak the same language does not mean they share the same culture. Canadians and Americans both speak English, but of course there are many cultural differences between (and within) the two countries. Now most linguists and cultural sociologists believe that language *influences* culture without completely determining it. So while English no longer has an informal *you* and a formal *you*, this doesn't mean that all our conversations are informal. Instead, we have developed different ways of communicating those concepts, such as the frequent use in the South of *ma'am* and *sir* when speaking to an elder.

Communication can occur between individuals, or it can occur at large within society—what is normally called **mass communication**. In recent history, mass communication has occurred primarily through the mass media: television, radio, and newspapers. At their peak, tens of millions of Americans watched the same nightly news broadcasts, and millions read the same daily newspaper in large metropolitan areas. To be sure, even prior to the emergence of the mass media, meaning was still communicated on a large scale, just not quite as large or as quickly; the Balinese cockfight could be considered a form of mass communication at a smaller scale, for example, as could a minister giving a sermon to a large congregation.

The Internet has emerged as the main medium for mass communication today. People increasingly access traditional media sources online via newspaper websites or video sources such as Hulu and YouTube. In so doing, they also transform formerly passive media consumption (as represented by a printed newspaper or television news) into something they can participate in by writing comments, reposting stories, and creating their own mashups. Old media and new media now blur together (Jenkins

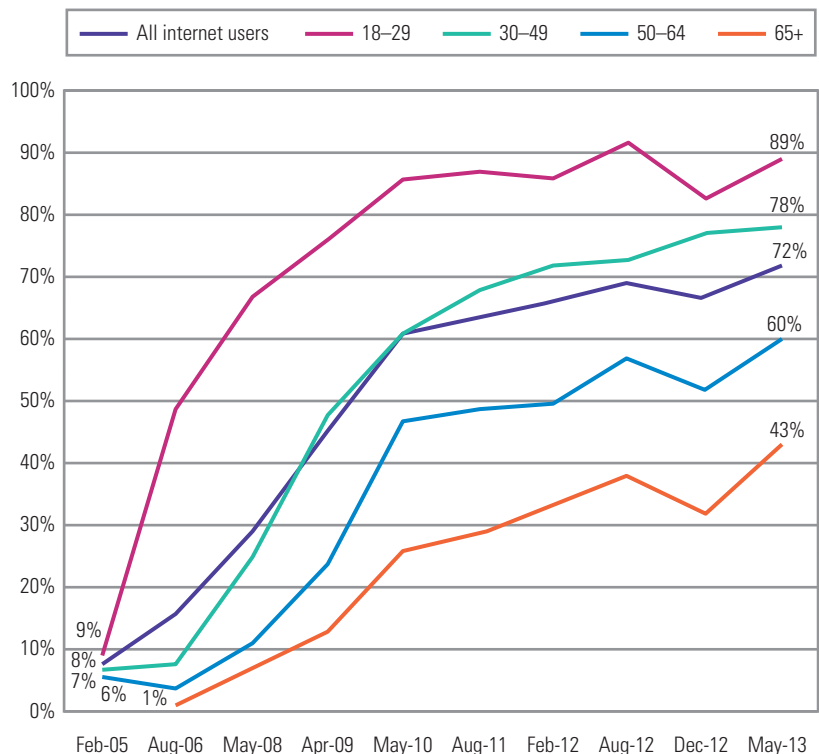
2006). But the Internet has also created a whole new set of communication possibilities only loosely tied to previous forms of mass communication, most notably through social networks and instant messaging.

Social media have altered the way children, adults, and (increasingly) the elderly engage with each other, both online and in person and at distances near and far. They have changed the ways corporations as well as anticorporate activists operate, the ways that charitable organizations raise funds (especially after a catastrophe), the ways that political officials campaign and govern, and the ways that social movements organize. They have affected the ways we get, and sometimes even make, news and entertainment. Cultural sociologists are curious about how and to what extent social media have transformed everyday life for people at different ages and in different places, as well as about how the rising use of social media will affect our interest in other kinds of media, from newspapers to telephones and radios to books.

The social theorist Manuel Castells argues that we are participating in a new form of Internet-centered communication that he calls mass self-communication because it can potentially reach a global audience, but its content is often self-generated and self-directed (Castells 2009:58). In other words, the Internet offers both the large-scale and ever-present nature of the mass media and the individualized content of interpersonal communication. As Figure 6.1

Figure 6.1 The Social Media Explosion

This graph shows the percentage of Internet users in each age group using social networking sites, from 2005 through 2013.



Source: Based on Dan Frommer (Feb 3, 2012), http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/facebook_ipo_filing_charts.php.

illustrates, the use of social media has exploded over the past decade, such that it rivals the scope of the traditional media.

How are the Internet and mass self-communication changing cultural systems and practices? If the constant flow of communications, information, and entertainment online makes it difficult to focus, does this also mean that our work and our relationships will suffer? Will our accumulation of Facebook friends be offset by a loss in deep friendships, or does connecting through social media make us more likely to spend time with others offline? Will our ideas become more superficial because we'll lack the attention span necessary to develop them? Will we lose interest in certain cultural genres—traditional news reporting, literary novels, nonfiction books—in favor of others—news briefs, pulp fiction, video games—that either require less of our minds or deliver more immediate rewards?

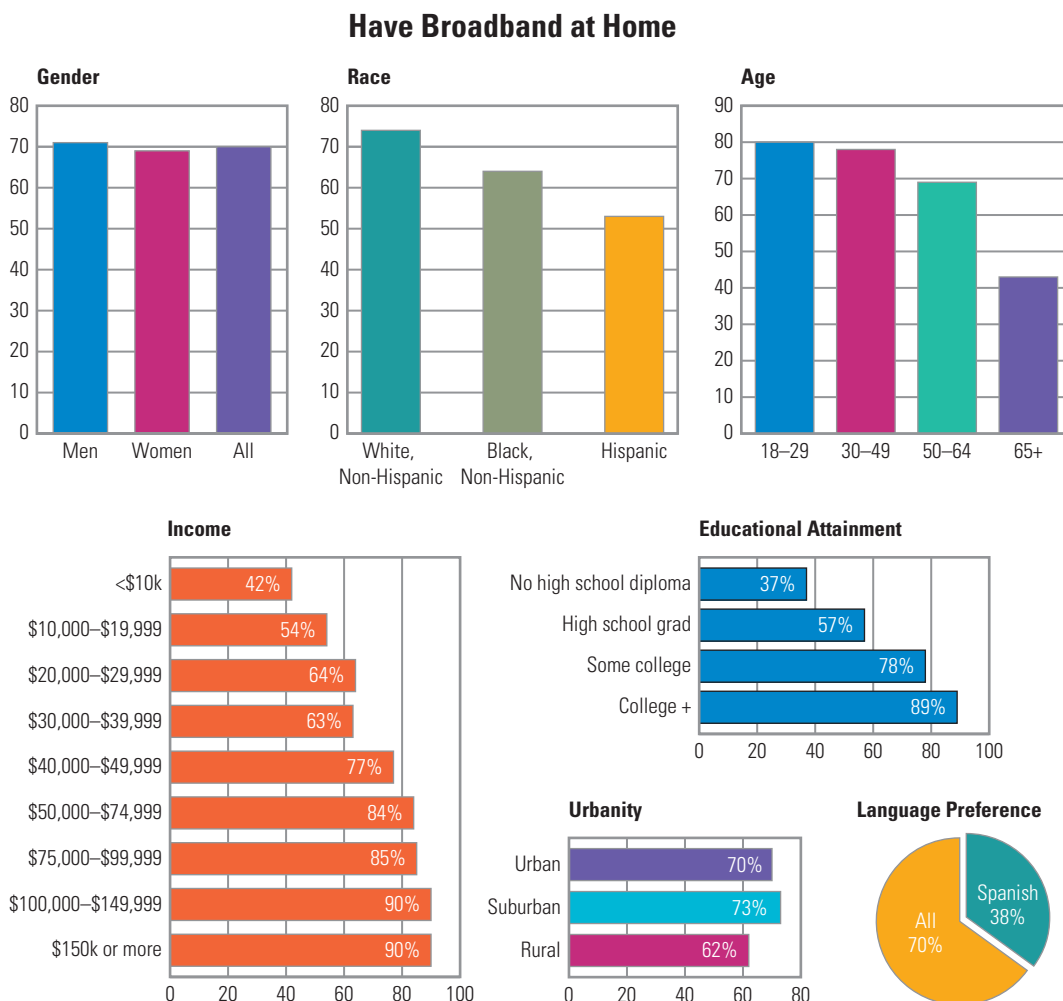
It's hard to know for sure: When it comes to information and communication, the last few decades have probably

been the most rapid period of transformation in history. And access to technology is creating new types of divisions of haves and have-nots, in the form of the social, economic, and cultural gap between those with effective access to information technology and those without such access, known as the **digital divide** (see Figure 6.2). This is the divide between those who are connected and those who are not; between those with high-speed access and those in the slow lane; between those with the education and media literacy to navigate around the more innovative and independent sites and those who mainly visit the big commercial sites (Klinenberg 2007); between “digital natives” born into the age of the Internet and older “digital immigrants” who have to try to keep up with the changes (Palfrey and Gasser 2008).

As computers and the Internet become more important to everyday life around the world, understanding the causes and effects of the digital divide (Norris 2001) will be one of the most important tasks for sociologists of culture and communication.

Figure 6.2 The Digital Divide

Take a look at how variables such as gender, race, age, income, educational attainment, urbanity, and language preference impact who has Internet access at home.



SOURCE: Rainie, Lee. (2013). The State of Digital Divides [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/11/05/the-state-of-digital-divides-video-slides/>



6.2 How Does Culture Shape Our Collective Identity?

CULTURE AND GROUP IDENTITY

We all think of ourselves as belonging to numerous different groups. Some of these groups are relatively easy to define—for example, nationality or religion—but others are less clear. Are football fans a group? What about university students? If so, how can you tell? More fundamentally, what makes up group identity, and how do sociologists study it? It turns out that culture is central to group identity—both in defining a group and in maintaining it. Some scholars even suggest that we should only use the word *culture* to refer to differences and similarities that form the basis for groups coming together or clashing with each other (Appadurai 1996:13).

Mainstream Culture, Subcultures, and Countercultures

6.2.1 Discuss the role that culture plays in establishing group style, and explain what distinguishes a subculture from the mainstream.

In the absence of clear ways to define where one group ends and another begins, we need to take our cues from shared behaviors. One way of thinking about identity in cultural terms is through the concept of **group style**, or the set of norms and practices that distinguishes one group from another (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Different groups have different *norms*, or shared assumptions about correct behavior. And because most of us belong to many groups (for example, our school, our national identity, and our gender), we learn to adopt the right style for the right occasion. Adopting the right style is not always a simple matter, though—think of how difficult it would be to fit in if you were suddenly transported to a different time or place. Group style is thus a way for people to communicate belonging or not belonging. According to

this account of identity formation, culture is a practice of communication.

Mainstream culture—the most widely shared systems of meaning and cultural tool kits in a society—is expressed in the activities and norms of many groups. The Chamber of Commerce, established religious groups, alumni associations, sports teams, civic organizations, and many other such groups accept and embrace the mainstream culture in one or another aspect of their activities. But some groups deliberately set themselves off from mainstream culture. In the United States, well-known examples include hippies in the 1960s and online gamers in the 2000s. Contemporary sociologists refer to such groups as **subcultures**, or relatively small groups of people whose affiliation is based on shared beliefs, preferences, and practices that exist under the mainstream (literally *subcultures*) and distinguish them from the mainstream. Other examples might include rock climbers, hunters, ballroom dancers, and chess players. Sociologist Claude Fischer (1975) claimed that subcultures are most likely to emerge in cities, where—unlike in small towns and traditional villages—the large, concentrated population allows many such groups to flourish. Some subcultures may have a clearly articulated sense of common purpose or definition, while others may be only loosely connected by mutual interests.

While subcultures often exist in harmony with mainstream culture—there’s nothing socially threatening about rock climbers, for example—cultural-studies scholars in the United Kingdom argued that some subcultures express differences in political and economic power and that setting yourself apart from the cultural mainstream is often an act of “resistance through rituals” (Hall and Jefferson 1975). This type of subculture is usually called a **counterculture**—a group whose ideas, attitudes, and behaviors are in direct conflict with mainstream culture and who actively contest the dominant cultural practices in the societies of which they are a part. Some recent or



Countercultures such as punks use their appearance and behaviors to deliberately set themselves off from mainstream culture. What are other examples of contemporary “resistance through rituals”?

current countercultural groups would include antigovernment militias, the Tea Party, and the Occupy movement. Sociologists consider culture an arena of struggle within which different mainstream cultures, subcultures, and countercultures are unequally ranked and often stand in opposition to another, each fighting for supremacy in determining what counts as culture and seeking to reap the rewards that come from it (Clarke et al. 1975:11).

Is There a Dominant Culture in the United States Today?

6.2.2 Discuss the concept of “culture wars” and explain the importance of practicing cultural relativism in the multicultural United States.

It only makes sense to speak of subcultures and countercultures when there is a dominant mainstream culture that they can challenge. Is there a single mainstream culture in the United States in the twenty-first century?

The Italian revolutionary and Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci famously argued in the 1930s that the dominant economic classes in any society attempt to maintain their power by encouraging certain moral and cultural understandings that are favorable to them. The process by which powerful groups gain legitimacy and hold power based on establishing or reinforcing widely shared beliefs about what is right or wrong, proper or improper, valuable or not, is called **hegemony**. When these views become taken for granted, they can help to reinforce the dominant group’s authority. For example, in America today, it’s common sense to think that people should work in order to earn enough money to live, that those who work harder or better will get ahead, and that people who choose not to work should only be entitled to the bare minimum of financial support. But such commonsense notions could easily be said to serve the interests of wealthy business owners, who need to find hard workers for their businesses to

succeed. Gramsci argued that movements seeking to radically transform a society needed not just to win political power but to overthrow cultural hegemony—to fight common sense with good sense. Culture, in other words, is not just entertainment; it’s an arena of perpetual conflict.

These days, such cultural conflicts in the United States usually refer to arguments over the proper role of family and religious values in certain questions of state policy: abortion rights, immigration rights, and gay rights are three of the most important. The sociologist James Davison Hunter argued in the early 1990s that people tended to line up on the same sides

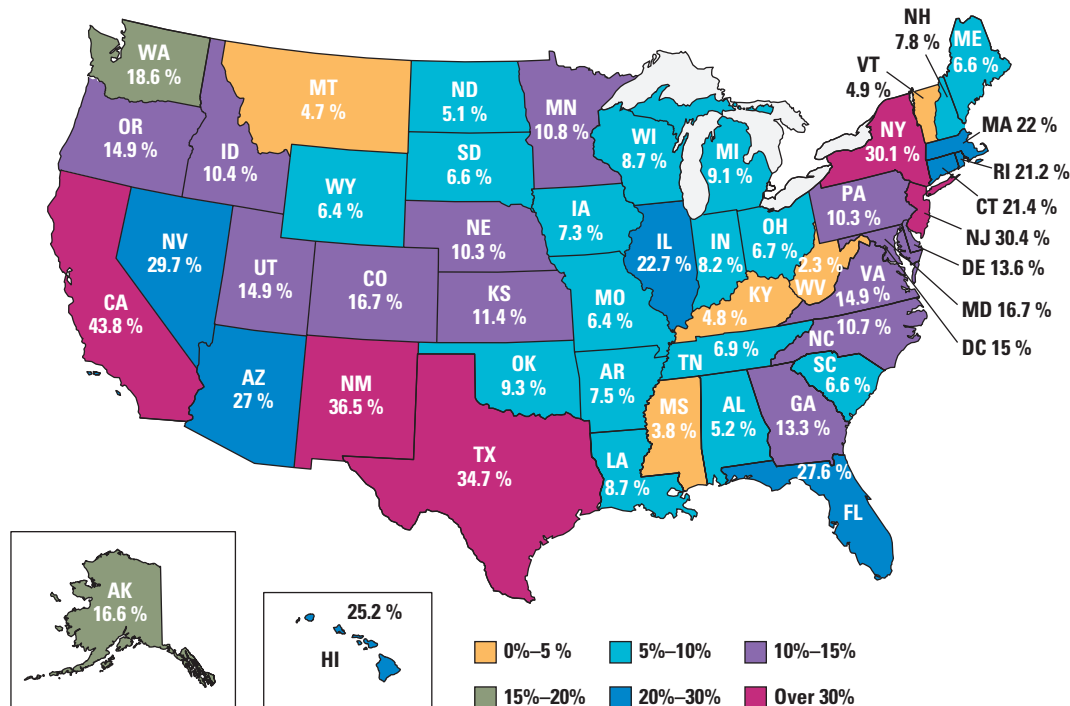
on many of these issues—positions he labeled “progressive” and “orthodox”—and that being progressive or orthodox didn’t necessarily correspond to social class or political affiliation. The main battle lines of American electoral politics, he concluded, were shifting from economic questions to moral questions, and he even claimed that these conflicts over family and religious values were so intense as to constitute **culture wars** (Hunter 1991). The journalist Thomas Frank made a related argument in his book *What’s the Matter with Kansas* about the defection of white working-class voters from the Democratic Party. On the basis of an increasing turn away from economic issues and toward moral issues, these voters have come to identify with the Republicans and to see the Democrats as a party of the elite, even though Republican economic policies are clearly more favorable to the economic interests of elites than those of the Democrats (Frank 2004).

Although the idea of culture wars may seem to be a useful way of capturing conflicts that often become very heated, it assumes that there are two dominant cultures squaring off against each other: a liberal culture and a conservative culture. This is at odds with another important way to describe the contemporary group-identity landscape of the United States: multiculturalism. **Multiculturalism** refers to beliefs or policies promoting the equal accommodation of different ethnic or cultural groups within a society. Societies with large immigrant populations, such as the United States, will contain people of different cultural backgrounds, creating new and more varied types of culture conflicts than the culture wars theory suggests. Indeed, in a country where 40 percent of Americans are nonwhite and 30 percent do not speak English in their home, it is increasingly complicated to define what exactly it means to be American today. For this reason, it is increasingly difficult to identify what, exactly, is the mainstream culture. Explore just how multilingual the United States is in Figure 6.3.

For some observers, the current challenge of immigrant cultures and multiculturalism will eventually go

Figure 6.3 The Multilingual United States

America has always had a history of multilingualism, and with every new wave of immigration the linguistic diversity of the United States continues to grow. This map shows the wide variance in the percentage of Americans that speak a language other than English at home.



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau (2012). Data found at: <https://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acs-22.pdf>.

away as soon as immigrant groups properly assimilate themselves into the mainstream. Historically, the standard metaphor for this process was the *melting pot*, the idea that although immigrants come from all sorts of diverse cultural backgrounds, they will eventually become assimilated into American society until they become, at some point, genuinely American. The history of white immigrant groups from Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seems to confirm this idea. But the melting pot idea is a controversial one today; it is often seen as an example of **ethnocentrism**—an inability to understand or accept cultural practices different from one's own. The idea that every immigrant group must become "American" is no longer widely accepted.

The problem with ethnocentrism is that it leads us to make incorrect assumptions about others on the basis of our own experience. If Clifford Geertz had observed the Balinese cockfight from an ethnocentric point of view, he simply would have concluded that many Balinese made risky and irresponsible bets. Or imagine if you went to a Chinese restaurant and concluded that the owners must not have heard about forks and knives because they brought you chopsticks. Although we have all been raised in specific cultural contexts that will influence our thinking in unacknowledged ways—and so we can never escape ethnocentrism entirely—these kinds of assumptions make

it difficult to understand other cultures with any kind of depth. We will misinterpret shared meanings or fail to grasp what is important in a given situation. For this reason **cultural relativism**—evaluating cultural meanings and practices in their own social contexts—is central to the sociological imagination. For example, Geertz didn't try to discover the cultural significance of the Balinese cockfight in general but rather its significance *for the Balinese*. When we travel to foreign lands, we will have a much more enriching experience trying to understand what we observe if we try not to compare it to our own world but rather try to understand it on its own terms. Thus, cultural relativism is the opposite of ethnocentrism.

National Cultures

6.2.3 Explain what produces and reproduces national cultures, and what effects they have.

Even in the era of globalization, the most important group identity in the modern world is surely the nation. The entire world is divided into nation-states, and most people are citizens or subjects of a single one of them. So it is not surprising that **national culture**, the set of shared cultural practices and beliefs within a given nation-state, is an important principle for sociology. Are there

differences between cultural norms, assumptions, and identities between different nations? If so, what are they, what produces and reproduces them, and what effects do they have? These are the questions that sociologists try to answer about national cultures.

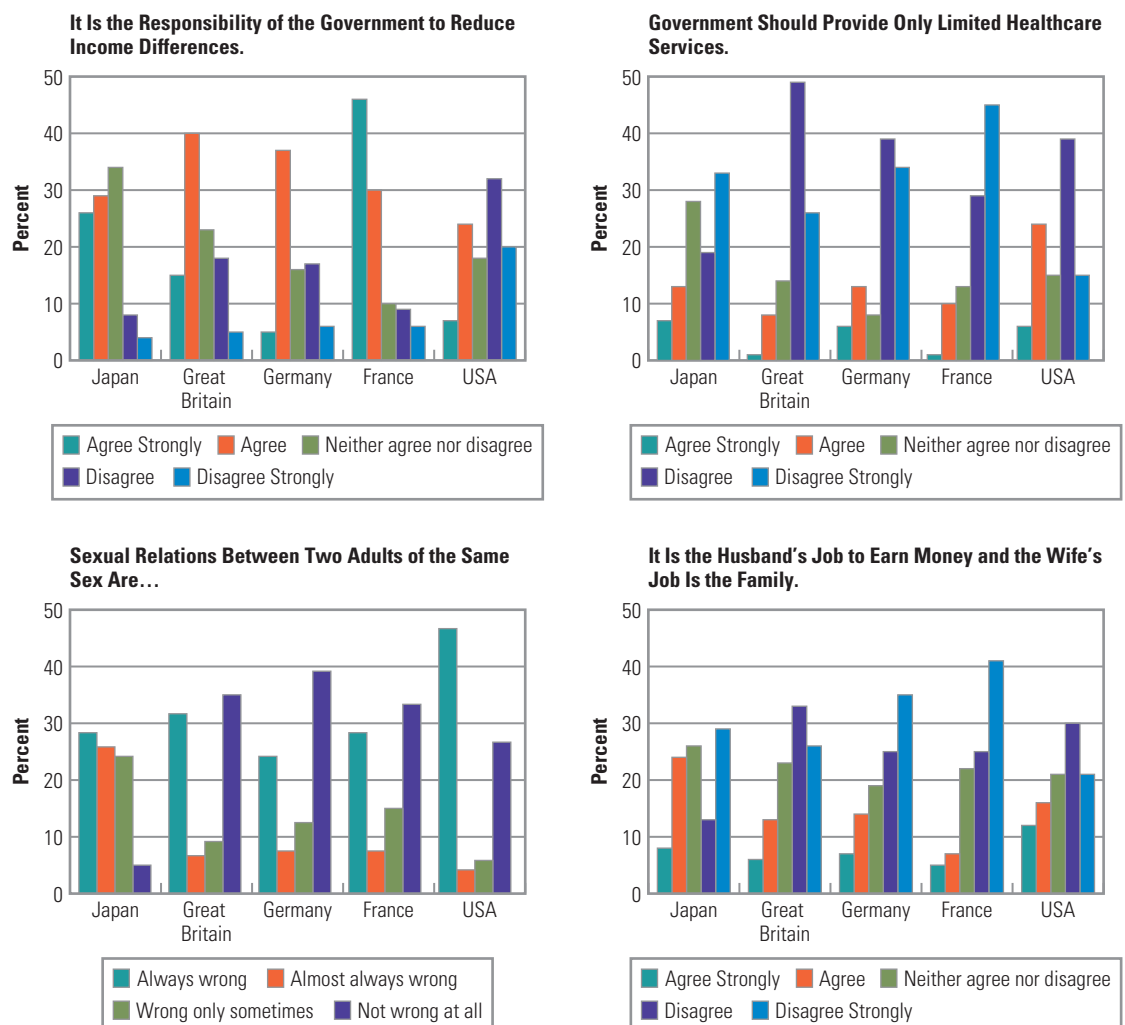
Today it seems obvious that the world should be divided into nations and that people should think of themselves in these terms: I'm American and you're Canadian, she's British and he's Chinese. But it wasn't always so. The rise of **nationalism**—the fact that people think of themselves as inherently members of a nation and often take pride in that identity—is a relatively recent phenomena in world history. National communities only became possible with the origination of *print capitalism*—the mass production of books and then newspapers written in local languages for simultaneous mass consumption by an increasingly literate public (Anderson 1991). When French people read

French newspapers and German people read German newspapers, they not only learn what's happening in their respective countries; they also confirm their membership in a shared national culture. Even today, when newspaper readership is on the decline, other forms of shared media consumption follow the same pattern. A study of the geography of Twitter, for example, found that people's networks are generally national and unilingual—although in theory your experience of Twitter could be truly global, in practice it is likely to reinforce your sense of belonging to a certain nation (Takhteyev, Gruzdt, and Wellman 2012).

Members of nations share an assumption of commonality with each other, even though they come from diverse class and ethnic backgrounds, and most will never meet. In a country like the United Kingdom, with a strong national government and a common language, this is a plausible enough assumption. But what about Indonesia,

Figure 6.4 Measures of Differences Between Nations

As these graphs illustrate, there are notable differences between people of different nations on some basic cultural attitudes.



SOURCE: Based on data from Nielsen. 2011. Television Audience Report 2010-2011. <http://research.ticker.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/2010-2011-nielsen-television-audience-report.pdf>.

composed of 13,000 islands and home to over 700 languages? With the notable exception of some separatist regions at the periphery, Indonesians generally also imagine themselves to be a single national community. And importantly, they view their community as limited, as one among many. A national community is not like a religious community, whose practitioners may hope to convert the entire world to their faith. Indonesians don't want to make all Italians Indonesians.

In contemporary life, cultural sociologists generally take nations for granted, the same way we all do, and many of them study the differences between national cultures: What makes national cultures different from one another, and what are the implications of the differences? Before we turn to a discussion of the complexities, examine the data in Figure 6.4 about the large differences between people of different nations on some basic cultural attitudes.

To take one of the most widely believed differences as an example, Americans are thought to be more individualistic than people in other countries. Compared to people in other rich countries, Americans are more likely to believe that individuals should take care of themselves rather than looking to the government to support them (Brooks and Manza 2007). But the importance of individualism is complicated. Consider the cultural shift we noted in the beginning of the chapter—the rise of people who choose to live by themselves. In spite of their apparent individualism, Americans are actually far less likely to live alone than are residents of apparently less individualistic nations, such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark (Klinenberg 2012). Why might this be? It can't be because of genetics or different types of human nature: There isn't anything fundamentally different about people in these countries. It turns out that a combination of different factors—including economic prosperity, the rising status of women, the communications revolution, mass urbanization, and the longevity revolution—all influence whether people want to and are able to live alone, not just the degree to which people have individualist views.

Indeed, many important social, political, economic, and cultural institutions are organized along national lines, and these have systematic effects on the way people live their lives and the kinds of attitudes and worldviews they develop. These different worldviews can in turn have a big impact on other features of national life. In Japan, CEOs are paid on average 16 times more than



Preschools follow very different educational approaches in different countries. Why is preschool an important place to study national cultural differences?

their workers; in the United States, it is over 400 times more. Researchers have struggled to explain this enormous and persistent difference between the two countries on the basis of economic considerations alone, suggesting that there are likely cultural factors at work (such as the willingness of Japanese and American citizens to accept income disparities).

One important area of research is early childhood, because it is when we are children that many of our cultural assumptions are formed. One study of preschools in Japan, China, and the United States revealed the very different roles that preschools play in forming cultural identities in these three countries (Tobin, Wu, and Davidson 1989). By recording classroom activities and then discussing the videos with teachers and parents, the researchers found that U.S. preschools put heavy emphasis on creativity and respect for the children as individuals. In China the emphasis was on instilling order and discipline in the children, an understandable objective in the context of China's single-child families where "little emperors" are often seen as spoiled by their parents and grandparents. In Japan, meanwhile, educators left children to their own devices to a much greater degree than in the other two cases, forcing them to learn to get along respectfully with others.

These might seem like stereotypes, but that's exactly the point. If there are durable differences in cultural norms between different countries, we would expect to find evidence of them in institutions such as preschool. As the authors of the preschool study indicate, preschool both *reflects* national culture—because teachers and parents are influenced by certain ideas and try to pass them along—and helps *reproduce* it—because children inherit these same ideas.



6.3 How Do Our Cultural Practices Relate to Class and Status?

CLASS, STATUS, AND CULTURE

How do you know whether people are wealthy or powerful? You can't see their bank accounts or know who is in their phone address books. The chances are that you can make an educated guess because of cultural signs: the way they dress, how they speak, the sports they play, the music they like, the kinds of things they like to do, in short, their **taste**—their cultural preferences. Although we normally think about social class in mainly economic terms, taste—and culture more broadly—plays a crucial role in setting and maintaining class distinctions.

Cultural Capital

6.3.1 Define cultural capital and discuss ways American elites have become cultural omnivores.

Contrary to popular assumption that it is the land of opportunity, the United States is an intensely class-bound society. Someone who is born into the working class is very likely to stay working class for her entire life, and the same is true for someone born into the upper class. One way of understanding why that is the case is to think about the kinds of resources people can bring to bear in their lives. One kind of resource is money and other economic assets; another is social connections and networks of friends and acquaintances. Bourdieu referred to these as *economic capital* and *social capital*, respectively. He also suggested that there is a third type of resource important for determining class position: In addition to the money you have and the people you know, your success in life is also influenced by your **cultural capital**. This is your education, tastes, and cultural knowledge and your ability to display sophistication (or a lack thereof) in your speech, manners, and other everyday acts. Bourdieu argued that your cultural capital, as much as

your wealth or connections, confers on you higher or lower status in the eyes of others (Bourdieu 1984).

We use our cultural capital all the time in interactions with others and often don't even realize we are doing so. Others size us up the moment we open our mouths and start offering opinions or thoughts about the world around us. Bourdieu did not consider public or over-the-top displays of status symbols to be an important form of cultural capital; instead, he emphasized the various ways that people display taste in everyday life. Discussing why you enjoyed the Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar's latest film, for example, signals to others that you have good taste in movies. Taste also implies distaste; if the person you are talking to doesn't know who Almodóvar is, you are likely to make negative judgments about his or her own tastes and status. Even if you don't *consciously* judge other people on their tastes, the chances are that tastes will influence the kinds of people you want to spend time with or avoid. Tastes, therefore, help maintain status boundaries between different groups (Holt 1997).

Cultural capital requires scarcity: Cultural experiences that everyone can share cannot serve as the basis for status distinctions. Before the Swedish home-products company IKEA began to sell its inexpensive furniture, the aesthetic it applied (minimalist Scandinavian modernism) was considered a sign of high status. But because the middle class can afford IKEA furniture and shops there extensively, this aesthetic is no longer an embodiment of significant cultural capital. The issue is not money but difficulty: In order to provide a basis for signaling distinction, high-status cultural consumption must not be easy to participate in, and if it becomes easy it will stop being high status.

How does this notion of cultural capital apply to contemporary life in the United States? In his study of



Cultural capital is only valuable if it is rare or hard to obtain. Now that the middle class can easily buy modernist furniture at Ikea, that kind of furniture is no longer an important status symbol.

cultural capital in France, Bourdieu emphasized that upper-class groups tend to appreciate high culture and arts in ways that ordinary working people cannot appreciate. But the United States has a more pervasive mass culture than many other countries, one in which people of many different classes may listen to similar music or enjoy similar kinds of music or television. Recent research has suggested that American elites are less snobbish than those in other countries and are increasingly behaving as **cultural omnivores** who demonstrate their high status through a broad range of cultural consumption, including low-status culture. Highly educated Americans today are more likely than average to consume not only high culture but popular culture as well. It is a sign of distinction to have wide-ranging tastes, such as an appreciation for sports and modern dance, hip-hop as well as classical music, and so forth (Peterson and Kern 1996; Kahn 2009). Yet we shouldn't overstate the inclusive nature of elite tastes. While, for instance, some cultural elites show a fondness for country music (a low-status genre more associated with the working class), the type of country music elites generally enjoy is not the commercial country of Garth Brooks or Tim McGraw but rather more alternative country acts such as Wilco or Blue Mountain (Holt 1997).

How Culture Reproduces Class

6.3.2 Analyze how money and culture reproduce status over the long term.

An important topic for sociologists concerned with power and inequality is the process that causes class boundaries and distinctions to be maintained over time, known as

class reproduction. There are lots of reasons why some people are rich and others poor, but how do those boundaries get maintained in the short term, as well as over the longer term? Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital examines how, in countless everyday interactions, we remind ourselves and others about our relative statuses, and this helps to ensure that our status differences persist. But what explains class and status reproduction over the long term and across generations? For example, why are middle-class children likely to grow up into middle-class adults and working-class children likely to grow up into working-class adults?

One obvious answer is money: Wealthier families will have an easier time affording private schools, ACT or SAT preparation courses, college tuition, and personal tutors, for example, and they will also likely leave sizeable inheri-

tainances to their children. But money only explains part of the story: Sociologists have shown that people make meaningful choices about how to live that are limited but not solely determined by their economic circumstances. The question of how and why we make the choices we do is what culture helps to explain.

For example, in one famous study the sociologist and ethnographer Paul Willis (1977) followed a set of boys from working-class homes in a British industrial town in the 1970s. They frequently behaved badly in school, were rebellious, and didn't seem to care much about their futures. A standard opinion at the time was that such cases were simply people failing to make the right choices to get ahead in life. But Willis found it was quite the opposite: The boys' apparently unproductive behavior in school was in fact their way of adapting to their class circumstances. The same attitudes that got them in trouble with their teachers turned out to serve them very well in factory work a few years later, where standing up to authority and not working hard on command helped workers gain collective leverage against their bosses. The rebellious boys were learning how to be working-class men.

A more recent study by sociologist Annette Lareau compared middle-class and working-class families in the United States to see how different class positions affect parents' approaches to childrearing and what the implications of the differences are for children's futures. During the study, it became clear that there were two quite different approaches. Middle-class parents followed an approach of *concerted cultivation*, actively fostering their child's talents and intervening

on their behalf, thereby instilling a sense of entitlement. Working-class parents, by contrast, followed an approach of *accomplishment of natural growth*, caring for their children but leaving them to fend for themselves socially, thereby instilling a sense of constraint (Lareau 2003). The middle-class children's sense of entitlement will make it more likely that they push to succeed socioeconomically when they are older,

while the reverse is true of the working-class children's sense of constraint, making it more likely that as they get older the children will stay in the class they were born into.

The implication of both of these classical studies is that class is reproduced not only through the money you (or your family) have but through the culture you learn and practice growing up.



6.4 Who Produces Culture, and Why?

THE CONDITIONS OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

In 1845, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued that the people who have the most wealth and power in a society generally also have the greatest ability to produce and distribute their own ideas and culture (Marx and Engels [1845] 1972). In nineteenth-century Europe, these people were capitalists, such as factory owners and bankers, who valued their rights to own private property and their freedom to run their businesses as they saw fit. By using their influence with newspaper owners, politicians, and some intellectuals, they were able to make liberty and freedom the dominant ideas of the age.

Marx and Engels's argument suggests that cultural production is a historical phenomenon. Ideas and fashions don't just change randomly over time; they respond to other changes in a society's political and economic circumstances. At the same time, in the nineteenth century it was much more difficult to spread ideas than it is today. Printing presses were expensive, and much of the population was illiterate. Today, with the Internet and social media, do powerful people and classes still have control over the production of culture? Does Gramsci's notion of hegemony adequately characterize the cultural environment of the twenty-first century? Sociologists of culture are paying increasingly careful attention to the changing *conditions of cultural production*: Who controls the production of ideas in society, and to what ends?

The Public Sphere

6.4.1 Analyze how the concept of the public sphere explains how culture is produced in society.

A basic premise of public life in a democracy such as the United States is that everyone is allowed to participate in the discussions, debates, and elections that decide who shall govern. In theory, everyone over 18 can vote, can run for public office (usually if you are over 25, or 35 to run for president), or can start a political organization to try to convince other people of their point of view. This vision of equal participation in political life is a powerful one, and it centers on the idea that there exists what German sociologist Jurgen Habermas described as the **public sphere** (Habermas [1962] 1989). According to Habermas, when private citizens assemble in groups (wherever that might be) to confer about matters of general interest, they are engaging in critical activities for democratic life. In an ideal public sphere, citizens set aside their own interests, as well as their wealth and status, and meet as equals to collectively debate and generate ideas about how to govern collectively. And individuals have influence only because of the power and value of their ideas.

In eighteenth-century Europe, when the public sphere began to emerge, it was centered in a range of institutions such as newspapers, pubs, social clubs, and coffee shops—in short, any location where people could gather and discuss the news of the day. The public sphere stood

apart from the state and offered citizens a way to criticize and influence the government, which was a novel idea in an age of absolute monarchies. In modern welfare states such as the United States, the public sphere is where different social groups organize to become political actors and compete for influence. Activists such as the Tea Party or Occupy movements, and lobby groups such as the National Rifle Association or the AARP, are examples of the kinds of groups that are prominent in today's public sphere. An important way they compete is by trying to shape public opinion through the production of ideas, for example in newspapers, on television, and with advertising. In contemporary society such as the United States, the public sphere today is increasingly becoming organized online, and in particular through social media.

However appealing the image of the ideal public sphere may be, in practice public participation is massively unequal. Many people choose not to have any interest in politics or to vote in elections. Further, it is very hard to attract an audience for your ideas if you don't have a fair amount of money backing you. For example, the Tea Party movement has received many millions of dollars in funding from a small number of wealthy conservatives, while Occupy had to rely on much smaller amounts of money, generally from small donations. As a result, the Tea Party has been able to spend more money on advertising and promotion, on bankrolling their preferred political candidates, and on other activities that give its members influence in the public sphere, while Occupy disappeared fairly quickly. In general, sociologists argue that the same things that give some people power over others in private life—such as race, gender, class, and education—will give some people more influence in the public sphere (Fraser 1992).

Another problem with the ideal image of the public sphere is that there has never been one overarching public sphere; rather, various social groups—and subcultures—have frequently constituted their own **counterpublics**, alternative public spheres through which they produce and circulate their own values, beliefs, and ideas. Factories and unions produced one kind of counterpublic in the first half of the twentieth century, and the networks of black churches that formed the backbone of the civil rights movement and the bars and clubs where the gay liberation movement began are all examples of American counterpublics over the years.

Fragmented publics do not necessarily need to be subordinate, either: The concept can apply to any subculture. One researcher describes the users of social networking sites such as Facebook as constituting a **networked public**, or online public sphere. Networked publics attract participation from teenagers in particular because of things they offer that face-to-face public settings cannot. Social networking allows

for persistence (you can browse through your friends' profiles and message histories years after initial friend requests and conversations), searchability (you can seek out other people with similar interests and connect with existing friends regardless of geographical proximity), replicability (it is hard to distinguish the "original" from the "copy" when copy-and-paste is ubiquitous), and invisible audiences (much of our activity on social networks is potentially being observed by people we don't know, and perhaps at totally different times), and these features make networked publics distinct public spheres (Boyd 2008). Regardless of whether there is one public sphere or many, the concept of the networked public forces us to think broadly about how ideas and culture are produced and how people participate in that production.

The Culture Industry Versus Cultural Democracy

6.4.2 Compare and contrast the cultural industry and the cultural democracy perspectives.

Who controls popular culture today, and who benefits from it? Is it the corporations that produce it at a profit, or the public who consumes it, shares it, and enjoys it? If record labels, movie studios, and advertising agencies heavily push the latest songs and movies on us, when we enjoy them are we dupes or are we exercising cultural free will? Sociologists have been largely split on these questions between two perspectives: one that sees popular culture as an industry and one that sees popular culture as a democratic arena—a cultural public sphere.

Writing after World War II, the German sociologist and philosopher Theodor Adorno argued that the popular culture that dominates the public sphere encourages a passive, conservative public. He was referring to popular music, movies, and other types of mass culture, all of which he labeled the **culture industry** (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002). His chief complaint was that popular culture encourages audiences to passively consume what they are watching, reading, or listening to rather than participating or engaging creatively with the work. The kind of culture that the culture industry produces is standardized, commoditized, and does not challenge the status quo; at the end of the day, it is advertising rather than art.

Other sociologists have argued that Adorno's critique of popular culture (along with others like it) was too pessimistic. They instead believe that popular culture provides an arena through which we all debate the meaning of the good life and the conditions for attaining it—an explicitly cultural version of Habermas's public sphere. One response, for example, to Adorno's

claim that most people passively receive the culture that is offered to them is that popular culture is user driven. Cultural producers want to attract an audience, so they tailor their art to reflect popular preferences (Gans 1999). Movie studios wouldn't keep releasing the same kind of movies if people didn't want to watch them, and when people vote with their time and money by choosing not to watch a certain kind of movie, studios will probably stop making that kind of movie. According to this perspective, popular culture is an element of *cultural democracy*. In the cultural marketplace, lots of different tastes—including those of subcultures, such as hip-hop, that elites disapprove of—are accommodated. Different cultural styles exist “because they satisfy the needs and wishes of some people, even if they dissatisfy those of other people” (Gans 1999:91).

The Medium Is the Message

6.4.3 Discuss the ways in which communication changes with the form or medium.

Debates over whether popular culture is an industry, a democracy, or something else focus not only on the content of popular culture but just as often on its form. If the same content is broadcast on cable TV and on Twitter, will it communicate the same thing? The answer from communications theory is that it won't. As the media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously declared, the medium is the message (McLuhan 1964). By this, McLuhan meant that different media encourage different ways of communicating, of organizing power, and of centralizing or decentralizing social activity.

Compare listening to a news bulletin on the radio with reading the same news on a website. There are some obvious differences: For example, when you hear the news on the radio, you hear only what the announcer says, while on a website you have the opportunity to follow hyperlinks and look up unfamiliar things on Wikipedia. In this respect, the web offers a richer experience than the radio. But there are some other differences that may not be as obvious. On the radio you can't follow hyperlinks, but you also have a harder time skimming the material the way you can on a website. Radio dominates one of your senses—hearing—and prompts you to devote most of your attention to receiving and processing the information you are hearing. A website, by contrast, provides you with a more ambiguous sensory experience. There might be sound and video on the webpage, but there might be just text. You might be listening to music in the background, or you might have an instant messaging window open simultaneously. Reading news on a website requires more of your direct engagement than listening to the radio does.

Different forms of communication can thus provide very different experiences even when communicating the exact same content.

Cultural production in the United States is increasingly occurring online. But an arguably greater transition was from the age of typography to the *age of television* (Postman 1985). From the sixteenth century until midway through the twentieth century, discussions of public issues in the West were primarily based in the written word and in this sense biased toward careful and considered thought. Personal communication, for example, largely occurred via letters, which took a long time to write and be delivered, encouraging people to thoughtfully consider what they wanted to say. Similarly, large-scale communication occurred through books and pamphlets, which also encouraged thoughtfulness. Beginning in the 1950s, however, public communication increasingly shifted toward television. TV became the primary way in which people got their news about the world. According to some communications scholars, this age of television led to a decline in the quality of public discourse. How much of what we see on the news has any actual relevance for our lives in the sense that it will cause us to make different decisions? Endless reporting of distant natural disasters, for example, is irrelevant to our daily lives, and this helps promote a loop of impotence because we become used to passively receiving information without expecting to be able to act on it in any meaningful way. What's more, the information we receive through television tends to arrive in a series of short, disconnected sound bites, which make it difficult for us to put them in any coherent context. Ultimately, the bias of television as a medium is toward stimulation and entertainment, possibly at the expense of understanding.

Do we still live in the age of television? Things have changed since the 1980s, when the Internet only existed in a few laboratories, and no one had cell phones. Our media consumption habits have changed as well. Today, no single medium of communication dominates the way television did for most of the second half of the twentieth century. One particularly striking change in media consumption is the increase in cultural multitasking—for example, when you watch TV, how often are you also checking Instagram, browsing the Internet, or texting with a friend? The contemporary media environment is a “torrent”: a nonstop flow of information that we rarely if ever disengage from. The torrent doesn't so much command our active attention as it forms a sensory background for our lives (Gitlin 2007). As we all live our lives in an increasingly online and interconnected fashion, just how cultural production continues to change in the years ahead will be a crucial question for both sociologists and the public at large.



6.5 What Is the Relationship Between Media and Democracy?

MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY: A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

It has long been obvious that how the news is presented is vital to how citizens develop their social and political views about the world. In this sense, the news media are a key element of the larger impact of culture in society. Writing nearly 100 years ago, the famous journalist Walter Lippmann was skeptical of the media's ability to provide the public with the information necessary for a democracy. He argued that "news and truth are not the same thing." Democracy requires truth, but the news can only describe and discuss events from day to day. Lippmann believed that democracy required a collective intelligence, which could only be had with extensive social organization, and that here the press could only play a small part, although a necessary one (Lippmann 1922:358). The media are arguably the most important form of cultural production in our society, and if we want to understand the broader impact of culture in society, it is important to consider how the media relates to democracy (a topic we broached in the previous section when we introduced the concept of the public sphere). In this section, we consider that relationship.

Making the News: The Media as a Cultural System

6.5.1 Explain the role that the media play in making the news.

Journalism—the production and dissemination of information of general public interest—is above all else a form of cultural communication. But sociologists of the media are in broad agreement that the news does a lot more than just pass along facts to the public. By deciding what to cover and how to cover it, journalists don't simply report

on the news, they actually help to create and change it (Schudson 2003:11).

How does the news have this kind of power, and is it a good thing? There are plenty of concerns about the power of the media. Common liberal critiques suggest that the mass media support corporate power, militarism, and the interests of the wealthiest. Common conservative critiques suggest that the media make the culture more liberal and spread feminism, environmentalism, and the acceptance of homosexuality. Political insiders on all sides believe the media exert a kind of *agenda-setting* power that can change the course of political events.

The problem with these debates is that it is difficult to prove that the media actually have this influence. There are anecdotes on both sides. For example, one famous example of apparent media influence was during the Vietnam War. Up until 1968, TV news coverage was favorable to the war, sanitizing violence and especially U.S. casualties. That changed in 1968, most famously with CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite's February editorial calling for negotiations with the Viet Cong, and the popular narrative is that media criticism of the war prompted a turning point in galvanizing opposition to the war. An example of the opposite situation occurred in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when relentless media coverage of the bombings led to overwhelming public support for going to war against the perceived perpetrators, in Afghanistan and later in Iraq (even though there was no evidence that the Iraqi government had any involvement). These examples suggest that when it comes to even the most important decisions the government makes—those concerning wars—the media can exert considerable influence.

Yet such dramatic examples may overstate things. People get their information about the world not just from what they hear in the media but also from talking to other people, from the views expressed in groups they may be a

member of (most notably their church), and from ideas they may have learned in school or through their own personal experiences. Because the media are so visible and audible, they are presumed to be important forces in society. But if the public doesn't passively receive whatever the media tell it, how do the media have their influence? According to media scholar Michael Schudson, the media act as a cultural system: They set the context for making events in the world intelligible. They do this by helping construct a community and a public conversation. Regardless of your opinions on a given issue, when you hear about it in the news you are more likely to treat it as an event of importance. This is why public relations experts say, "There's no such thing as bad press." The news amplifies issues and makes them publicly legitimate.

Corporate Media Concentration

6.5.2 Identify three trends in the U.S. media landscape that have put commercial pressure on journalism.

One of the premises of the free press in a democracy is that citizens will be exposed to a variety of perspectives and sources of information in order to participate meaningfully in public life. But just six corporations own most of the media in the country. How much choice do U.S. media consumers actually have?

Three trends in the U.S. media landscape have put commercial pressure on journalism. The first is consolidation: Fewer and fewer corporations own more and more of the media outlets in a given market. Consolidation limits consumer choice—in an extreme case, the corporation Clear Channel once owned all the commercial radio stations in the city of Minot, North Dakota. This is a monopoly and is still comparatively rare, but oligopolies (markets controlled by a handful of firms) are now the norm in the media. Consolidation also makes it difficult for new entrants to break into the market, increasing the likelihood that the media market will stay dominated by the same players.



An example of hypercommercialism is sponsored programming, such as the corporate naming of nearly all professional sports venues.

A second trend is conglomeration, which describes a firm controlling multiple types of media functions. For example, the Walt Disney Company, one of the big six U.S. media corporations, owns ABC, ESPN, hundreds of radio stations, and various print media operations. When Disney has a new movie to release, it can rely on its subsidiaries to promote the movie on its stations and television programs and to ensure that the coverage is positive. This is called *synergy*, and Disney is the master of synergy.

The final trend is hypercommercialism. It has long been standard for movies to feature some sort of product placement—advertising where shots or mentions of a product are integrated into the movie itself as opposed to a separate ad. But product placement has soared to new heights in recent years and shows no sign of abating. The 2010 romantic comedy *Valentine's Day*, for instance, featured product placements for 60 different products—one every 125 seconds! This is an example of hypercommercialism, and it is a defining feature of today's corporate media—blurred lines between advertising and editorial content in newspapers; the ubiquity of outdoor advertising; the spread of media companies into retail businesses, such as the ESPN Store; and sponsored programming, such as the corporate naming of nearly all professional sports venues.

These three trends have put enormous commercial pressure on journalism (McChesney 1999). Within the bounds of profitability and corporate acceptability, the media produces a wide range of content; outside of these bounds, however, very little is likely to appear.

Media, Democracy, and the Internet

6.5.3 Discuss the ways the Internet has created new opportunities and dangers for the free media and for democracy.

The notion that the press is vital to democracy is an old one. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, famously said that "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." Many First Amendment scholars believe that the media are necessary to provide a forum for debate (to help constitute the public sphere, in other words), give a voice to public opinion, serve as citizens' eyes and ears in politics, and serve as a public watchdog over government and business (Graber 2003).

But the relationship between the media and democracy looks different in the age of corporate media consolidation and digital technologies. Corporate consolidation inevitably means that media are less responsive to the local communities that they serve, and the quality of democratic politics and cultural life suffers as a result (Klinenberg 2007:26). Less local staffing, less local news gathering, and less interaction

with the local community means less ability to play the democratic role that many observers would like to see.

At the same time, people are fighting back, and they're increasingly doing so online. Citizen journalism has exploded in the last decade, in large part because barriers to entry are so low. In the mid-1990s, a group called Radio Mutiny set up an unsanctioned pirate radio station in West Philadelphia as a challenge to corporate media, but doing so took nine months of hard work to build the transmitter (Klinenberg 2007). Setting up a blog, by contrast, takes only a minute or so. The Internet has lowered the bar for entering into the public sphere, allowing the people formerly known as the audience to assert their own voices, if not nearly as forcefully as the conglomerates such as Clear Channel, Disney, and even Google.

The most spectacular incidence of Internet activism and democracy of recent years is the 2011 Arab Spring uprising in the Middle East, and particularly the mass Tahrir Square demonstrations in Egypt that overthrew the government of dictator Hosni Mubarak. Across the region, people protested against their governments, most visibly by gathering in large numbers in public squares. Within a few months, four national governments were forced from power, and a number more only narrowly avoided that fate. Here social networks, and in particular Twitter, were often held to be crucial to activists' organizing efforts by allowing people to coordinate

their protests and get up-to-the-minute information on what was happening elsewhere. At the same time, governments in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East also used social media in their attempts to repress the civilian uprising.

Despite the ongoing development of grassroots and citizen-led media activism, it would be a mistake to view the Internet as the remedy for the troubles of the contemporary media landscape. Although it empowers people to easily post and share content with each other, setting up a blog is of course no guarantee that anyone will read it. There is evidence that readership online follows roughly the same pattern as readership offline—a large majority of people get their news from a tiny number of sites, while most sites get virtually no traffic at all (Hindman 2008). Moreover, the Internet has not necessarily made it any easier to monitor the activities of the powerful—a key traditional role of journalism. And corporations are increasingly finding ways to subvert the apparently democratic nature of social media by hiring people to post and monitor content. Finally, the actual efficacy of online activism, for example in the Arab Spring, has yet to be proven. There is no doubt that activists are using Twitter as a key tool for communication and mobilization, but we don't yet know if this actually makes a difference to the outcomes. It is more realistic to say that the Internet has created both new opportunities and new dangers for the free media and for democracy.

Conclusion

It is the nature of culture that it changes dramatically over time and across locations. The collective meaning and shared rituals of the Balinese cockfight from 50 years ago would probably be scarcely recognizable to contemporary Indonesians, and no doubt the culture of early twenty-first century America will seem equally strange to Americans in 50 or 100 years. What would be truly shocking is if culture stayed the same.

But even compared to a baseline of ongoing cultural change, it is fair to say that a dramatic cultural transformation has been occurring in recent decades in the United States and throughout the world with the rise of the Internet and global cultural flows. Many of the most pressing questions for the sociological study of culture in coming

years will likely be concerned with the implications of the Internet and other new forms of interconnectivity that social media in all its forms has begun to deliver.

We shouldn't make the mistake, though, of assuming that the increasing prominence of the Internet in society means that all of our important cultural questions will be online ones. The persistence of offline forms of social life—street life, public performances, print media, poorer communities that do not have easy access to the necessary technology, and more—in an online world will be an increasingly urgent focus of research and public policy. Will the digital divide get wider or narrower in years to come, and what will be the implications for cultural production, communications, and democracy?

The Big Questions Revisited 6

6.1 What Is Culture? This section explored how sociologists talk about culture as a shared system of meaning and symbols; a set of values, beliefs, and practices; and shared forms of communication.

Defining Culture

Learning Objective 6.1.1: Define culture from a sociological perspective.

Culture as a System of Meaning and Symbols

Learning Objective 6.1.2: Explain how a group's symbols can be considered its culture, and give examples of collective symbols of contemporary U.S. culture.

Culture as a Set of Values, Beliefs, and Practices

Learning Objective 6.1.3: Describe how our values and beliefs influence how we live our lives.

Culture as a Form of Communication

Learning Objective 6.1.4: Explain the ways in which culture is a form of communication.

Key Terms

culture (p. 121) symbol (p. 122) value (p. 122)
habitus (p. 123) tool kit (p. 123) language (p. 123)
cultural universal (p. 124) mass communication
(p. 124) digital divide (p. 125)

- 6.2 How Does Culture Shape Our Collective Identity?** This section explored how cultural practices both reflect and define group identities, whether the group is a small subculture or a nation.

Mainstream Culture, Subcultures, and Countercultures

Learning Objective 6.2.1: Discuss the role that culture plays in establishing group style, and explain what distinguishes a subculture from the mainstream.

Is There a Dominant Culture in the United States Today?

Learning Objective 6.2.2: Discuss the concept of "culture wars" and explain the importance of practicing cultural relativism in the multicultural United States.

National Cultures

Learning Objective 6.2.3: Explain what produces and reproduces national cultures, and what effects they have.

Key Terms

group style (p. 126) mainstream culture (p. 126)
subculture (p. 126) counterculture (p. 126)
hegemony (p. 127) culture wars (p. 127)
multiculturalism (p. 127) ethnocentrism (p. 128)
cultural relativism (p. 128) national culture (p. 128)
nationalism (p. 129)

- 6.3 How Do Our Cultural Practices Relate to Class and Status?** In this section, we discussed how people's cultural habits help define and reproduce the boundaries between high status and low status, upper class and lower class.

Cultural Capital

Learning Objective 6.3.1: Define cultural capital and discuss ways American elites have become cultural omnivores.

How Culture Reproduces Class

Learning Objective 6.3.2: Analyze how money and culture reproduce status over the long term.

Key Terms

taste (p. 131) cultural capital (p. 131) cultural omnivore (p. 132) class reproduction (p. 132)

- 6.4 Who Produces Culture, and Why?** The cultural field is the place for creativity and meaning making. But it is also a battlefield. In this section, we explored who controls the media and popular culture and what messages they communicate.

The Public Sphere

Learning Objective 6.4.1: Analyze how the concept of the public sphere explains how culture is produced in society.

The Culture Industry Versus Cultural Democracy

Learning Objective 6.4.2: Compare and contrast the cultural industry and the cultural democracy perspectives.

The Medium Is the Message

Learning Objective 6.4.3: Discuss the ways in which communication changes with the form or medium.

Key Terms

public sphere (p. 133) counterpublic (p. 134)
networked public (p. 134) culture industry (p. 134)

- 6.5 What Is the Relationship Between Media and Democracy?** The media are arguably the most important form of cultural production in our society. This section examined the media's relationship to democracy and the new ways in which it is changing how democracy works.

Making the News: The Media as a Cultural System

Learning Objective 6.5.1: Explain the role that the media play in making the news.

Corporate Media Concentration

Learning Objective 6.5.2: Identify three trends in the U.S. media landscape that have put commercial pressure on journalism.

Media, Democracy, and the Internet

Learning Objective 6.5.3: Discuss the ways the Internet has created new opportunities and dangers for the free media and for democracy.

Key Terms

journalism (p. 136)