

CHAPTER 2

CULTURE: ALL THE SHARED PRODUCTS OF SOCIETY



Photo by Gary Payne, Guyana, 2008

Her African ancestors believed in spirits. Captured as slaves and shipped to South America's Guyana, they were forced by their masters to become Christians. After Guyana won its freedom from Britain, her grandparents - who lived in a community dominated by enslaved Muslims from Pakistan - converted her to Islam. Her religious beliefs were determined by changing cultural factors that surrounded her family. Where did your beliefs originate?

One of the reasons we humans do not fully understand ourselves is that we do not recognize the powerful effect of the unique culture that surrounds us. Most of us have not spent enough time in another culture to learn to question much about our own. Our culture has always been around us, so we tend to accept the "reality" it creates.

You, for example. Evidence leads me to suggest that whatever you are doing right now, thinking right now, wearing, eating, or even wishing for was largely determined before you were born. It is the same for me. We would like to think these *choices* were ours to make, but then we would have to explain how people from culture-to-culture act and believe very differently *between* cultures, but so similarly *within* any given culture.

The “individual choice” explanation for our behavior, or anyone’s behavior, falls apart fast when we take this global view. The fact is, we wear blue jeans, eat hamburgers and are presently writing or reading this book primarily because these activities fit into a somewhat narrow range of expected behaviors that were established before we took our first breath. Unconsciously, we conform to an enormous list of particular behaviors, just as people do in other cultures in different ways but for similar reasons.

The cultural expectations regarding our thoughts and behavior do change over time, but it is *usually* a very slow process. This is especially true for ideas that are held to be sacred. For example, as we read in Chapter 1, the religious groups that conquered vast sections of Earth’s continents have resisted change for at least twenty centuries. Our economic and political institutions also portray themselves as *sacred* in some way and resist major changes. We, the people surrounded by these institutions, go about our lives rarely questioning (in a truly fundamental way) their core beliefs, traditions or established authority.

There is no doubt that we owe our existence to these cultural institutions, for no one lives without them, anywhere on Earth. Each culture functions as a survival system for the humanity it surrounds. Through the transmission of wisdom collected over centuries, and technology developed along the way, culture enables each new generation of humans to access the planet’s natural resources to make a living. Culture maintains order; its institutions provide explanations for why we are here and what we are supposed to be doing, wanting, thinking, loving and even...hating.

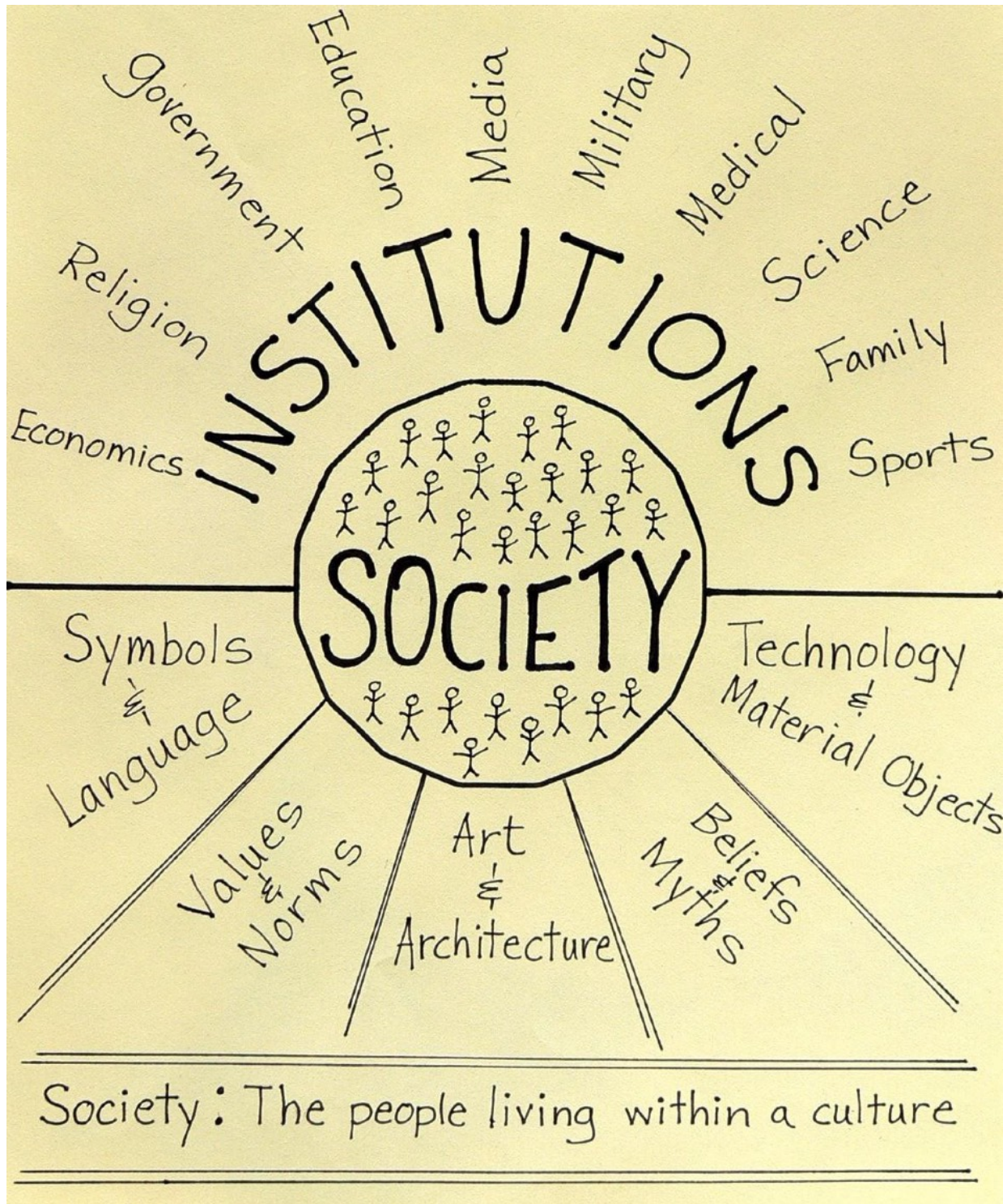
That is a lot of influence over us. It is therefore all the more amazing that we take culture for granted, that only a small percent of humans spends any time contemplating their own culture in a systematic way, as you are now in this chapter.

So, what is culture? **Culture is all the shared *products* of society, whether material or non-material.**

OK, that might not mean much to you. So..read this as you look at Figure 2.1 below.

Think of yourself as one of the humans (symbolized by the stick figures) inside the circle of culture. They (we) are the *living* society. Note, however, that culture is everything *surrounding* the society. It is *not living*; it is the *way* we live, our material creations and our beliefs. But most controlling are the institutional structures hovering above us in the diagram. They made us *who we are*, for better or worse. This cultural shell was gradually constructed in the centuries before us, and most of it will be here in some form after you and I rejoin the eternal stardust. We humans are just passing through a cultural machine that is shaping us.

FIGURE 2.1: ELEMENTS OF THE CIRCLE OF CULTURE



Sketch by Mary Rosenberg

We are surrounded, eh? Yes. Just like the bacteria you may have experimented with in your biology class Petri dish. And rest assured that we humans are as dependent on that cultural circle for our survival as the bacteria are on their dish. **No human individual or group has ever existed without a culture to organize her or his existence.**

But we do not merely survive as a result. We humans have basically conquered the Earth, and all meanings of 'conquered' apply to this statement. Through culture, humans learn to access the planet's resources, for better and sometimes for worse. Sociologists argue that it is primarily the presence of a highly developed culture that has allowed us what the Bible refers to as "dominion" (dominance) over all other living things.

Some creatures have larger brains than humans, or better eyesight, sharper hearing, superior stamina, or finer muscular coordination. But humans have learned to store and transmit knowledge much more efficiently. Upon our birth, the schools, the maps, the roads and bridges, the energy, the technology and the wisdom await us. We hit the ground running with a multi-generational information advantage over all other forms of life. We can thank culture for this - or blame it - depending on which of our historical accomplishments we are discussing at the time.

Let's take a look at the elements of culture that made you and me what we are today.

INSTITUTIONS

Taking up a lot of space in Figure 2.1 are the **institutions: socially-constructed mechanisms for getting things done for a society**. Institutions are the backbone of every culture. Over centuries, humans *very gradually* create and fine tune these institutions. But once constructed, these institutions turn the tables and create a strong set of boundaries for human behavior that funnels us into its own creation, a unique society operating inside the culture. It is a process which focuses very closely on shaping the minds of young people. For example, in our first 12 years of life, family and educational institutions even control what we see or do, when we can speak, walk, or go to the bathroom. By the time we emerge as young adults, our behavior is so shaped into **cultural norms (rules of behavior based on cultural values)**, that we have become our culture's ambassadors, blind to the forces that created "our" personalities.

It is true that young adults can act or feel very rebellious within their family or school institutions, but even the rebels among us usually end up conforming to the important social norms by the end point of the process. Green-dyed hair, pot smoking, nose rings, branding, joyriding, vandalism, truancy, shoplifting, tattoos and some intentional cutting on body parts really do not threaten the institutions in a serious way. These behaviors allow young citizens to blow off steam for a few years while the process of shaping their behavior continues. The few of us that really will not - or cannot - play by the important cultural norms that protect the social order may spend our lives in some form of social isolation, like mental hospitals, prisons or homeless shelters. The ever-present threat of such creepy isolation becomes a powerful reminder of the benefits of conformity for anyone who would question the legitimacy of their cultural institutions.

Culture acts like a funnel. If you are reading this, you are more than midway through the pipe already. If you still have enough courage and curiosity to question your cultural boundaries you have entered what sociologist C. Wright Mills called, "the sociological

imagination.” It is a mission of intellectual liberation. Thus, the subtitle of this text: Rethinking Civilization.



These young North Korean women escaped the dictatorial brutality of their homeland (and thus their entire culture) by sneaking across the border at night. They now live in the USA. Here, Veterans for Peace was shuttling them across Minnesota to raise awareness of the consequences of living in uber-controlling dictatorships. My wife and I hosted them overnight at our home. Even now we cannot give their names which would endanger their families.

SOCIAL CHANGE

In Figure 2.1, the most powerful social institutions are listed in order from left to right. They hover above society like the roof and walls on a factory. We could debate whether economics or religion is the most powerful element of culture, as sociologists Marx and Weber did. But one thing is certain: **the most powerful institutions - economic, religious, governmental - act as a giant brake pedal on social change.**

Institutions discourage rapid changes, in particular. That is partly because people who lead these institutions hold a controlling power and wealth advantage over others in the social system. So – consciously or unconsciously – institutional leaders are encouraged by their own self interest to keep social reality as it has existed for many centuries.

This institutional resistance to change is not a conspiracy; it is just a social fact.

And there is a legitimate *function* for this resistance. It can be protective of society, because – as Emile Durkheim pointed out - rapid social change may destroy social ties, especially if the change is in a dangerous direction. Gradual and well-thought-out change is generally seen by sociologists as insuring social stability and order.

Sometimes however, rapid change is needed for the sake of social justice or even for the survival of the society. Institutions may block or postpone even these changes out of habit, ignorance or arrogance. **Over time, cultures tend to become self-destructive or may even collapse because of poor decision making by their rulers.** There is every reason to believe it could happen to our culture, but unlike ancient societies, we do have the advantage of learning from the mistakes of the past. That is one of sociology's goals: learning from past mistakes so they aren't repeated.

Cultural institutions *always* see themselves (and portray themselves to us) as necessary, legitimate and good, even if they are deeply involved in slavery, wars of plunder, genocide, or environmental destruction. There is little doubt that the institutional leaders on both sides of any war are certain of the general righteousness of *their own* cause.

At times it may be an illusion. An example is the Nazi war machine. Hitler's Germany was probably the most educated society in the history of the world at that time. But it was influenced by political and religious institutions that had lost their grip on reality. The Holocaust was an *institutional* madness, not merely the madness of one crazy leader. As author Daniel Goldhagen noted in his book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, the individuals under this institutional control went along with few complaints, and in fact, continued the Holocaust after the war was clearly a lost cause for Germany.[1]

Once we recognize the awesome influence of culture on its citizens, we can begin to see how the Holocaust could have occurred. The institutions of all cultures invent **rituals: formal stylized repeated patterns of intense human behavior**, like parades, pledges, prayers, rallies, slogans, holidays, dances, chants and national anthems to funnel citizens' behavior. Rituals are a powerful tool to whip up institutional loyalty among the citizenry. Ritual can be used by institutions for good or for evil, but it is rarely – if ever - used for purposes that do not put a positive spin on the institutions.

The institutions of any culture often operate as a unit to create and cement a sense of social reality. Institutions uphold each other's values, reputations and goals to present an almost impenetrable common front of mutual support. There are endless examples of the intertwining of institutions. In the USA, many high schools harbor military ROTC units or allow recruiters special access to their students while universities perform weapons research in graduate schools. In turn, the military rewards enlistees with post- service educational benefits. Chaplains, pastors, Muslim clerics, rabbis, medicine men and priests routinely bless the military missions of their cultures. In the USA, leaders of government and economic institutions go back and forth in private and public occupational positions so often that the phenomenon is called, "the revolving door." It often becomes difficult to tell sometimes where one institution's role stops and another begins.



Photo by Gary Payne, 2011, Panama

These Ngobe-Bugle Indian children in western Panama don't normally dress this way. They are learning a dance ritual that helps to cement Spanish cultural influences into their individual minds. By the time they are adults, many of these children may have forgotten their traditional tribal rituals and beliefs. Wealthy Latinos of Spanish descent are just a fraction of the local population, but they dominate this region economically and are able to determine which rituals will be performed at local festivals.

On occasion, certain individuals within a culture may find that their self interest does not mesh with the expectations of the institutions surrounding them. But the power of a single individual or two is usually no threat to a huge institution with ancient roots. Thus, most individuals find it easier not to question institutional goals, and tend to go along with the majority view, against their conscience or will or even their own self interest. By doing so, they avoid **stigma – a mark of social disgrace** - of being labeled in a negative way. But, of course, there is a significant downside to engaging in mindless conformity too.

SYMBOLS AND LANGUAGE

Looking again at Figure 2.1 we see that “symbols and language” are part of our culture dish. These two cultural elements are grouped together in the diagram because they are almost identical concepts. Words and language are symbols, verbal noises, gestures or stylized marks on a page that we interpret according to our education. These meaningful symbols have surrounded us since before our earliest memory, so we take them for granted as well. Since it is largely through language that cultural wisdom is transmitted to the young, **language is the key to culture.**

Sociologists and anthropologists have discovered that languages differ in more ways than one might first think. Of course, everyone knows that written symbols and sounds are different from nation to nation. And it may not stress our imaginations much to learn that northern Africans write from right to left on a page and eastern Asians from top to bottom.

But there are often words and gestures in some languages that have no meaning at all in other languages. And there are whole concepts that are captured in some languages and not in others. Time, for example. The Hopi Indians use no words to denote past, present and future. Instead, they organize their world into “manifest” (that which is available to the physical reality) and “not manifest” (that which is not available to the physical reality).

If this makes no sense to you, remember that you have been processed through decades of “reality training” in your own peculiar language and culture, and this narrows your ability to understand other systems. Rest assured that the Hopi’s language worked well for the Hopi; it was all part of a culture finely woven together into an organized whole.

Perhaps the most fundamental impact of language is the way in which it impacts our sense of reality. Words and gestures are *fused* not just to a concrete *meaning* but to culturally learned *emotions* that relate to the word. Consider, for example, the word “gay” in our own language. Today in the USA, the most recognized concrete meaning of “gay” relates to sexual orientation. But “gay” is a word that has a high emotional charge *fused* to it. No matter what your personal feelings are on gay sexual orientation, the word “gay” is not merely a descriptive term. It is a virtual warehouse of potentially explosive emotions. How you might choose to use “gay” in a conversation transmits a unique spin to those who share your culture and know what you intend to transmit. These meanings do not transfer easily to individuals in every culture.

All languages are subject to these unique meanings that are nearly impossible to interpret from language to language because the cultural realities are incompatible. This means that *a unique and separate social reality* is captured in each distinct language. **Language then, is really a reflection of a given culture’s special sense of reality.** No matter how hard we study a foreign language, we might never fully understand it without living in the culture it belongs to, almost from birth. As Edward Sapir wrote in 1929, “the [social] worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.”[2]

In fact, one characteristic a sociologist would use to determine if a culture is still alive and functioning for a given group of humans is to learn whether or not that group still speaks its own unique language.

While traveling by canoe to the very remote islands of Venezuela’s Orinoco Delta in August of 2002, my son and I visited some scattered villages of Waro (“wah-roh”).



Waro children of the Orinoco Delta



Photos by Sayer Payne 2002

The Waro tribe subsists mainly on fishing, and are builders of high-quality hand-hewn dugout canoes. We didn't expect the Waro to speak English, so we relied on our basic knowledge of Spanish. Venezuela was conquered by Spain 500 years ago, and Spanish has been the official language for centuries.

But we had difficulty communicating with the Waro because their isolated lifestyle and geographic location had allowed them to maintain their culture, including their unique language across five centuries. Only a few Waro knew any Spanish to translate our words for the group. We were reduced to staring at each other and smiling to keep the situation friendly. It was only after some time that the community Chief revealed he knew some Spanish and was able to interpret for us.

Culturally, then, the Waro were still substantially intact. Without a language of their own (and its corresponding sense of reality), there is a high likelihood that the Waro could not have kept their core beliefs together.

They had to make an effort at it. Most Waro parents kept their children away from the Catholic Mission facility (an hour away, by motorboat, transportation provided free by the Mission). The Waro felt insulted by the attempts of missionaries to convert their children to Christianity and to the Spanish language. Had the Waro allowed these conversions to take place among their youth, it would have signaled the eventual termination of their own culture after their elders died off. The Waro understood this well enough to turn away the charity of the Mission, which included some real benefits for their children, a tough choice for the Waro elders.



Culture Removal [3]

Above left: Carlisle Industrial School in Pennsylvania.

Between 1869 and 1960, hundreds of thousands of Native American children as young as 4 years old were removed from their families and forced into one of 408 institutions operated by the federal government and various churches in the USA.

They were prohibited from speaking their languages, wearing their traditional clothes or practicing their cultural rituals. Sexual abuse was rampant. They were leased out as defacto slave labor. They were forced to learn English and accept Christianity.

In Minnesota's Pipestone boarding school (center image) removed Dakota, Sac and Fox Tribe children were dressed in the same uniforms worn by the military personnel that displaced and/or massacred their people.

Canada and the USA are finding substantial burial sites at these schools without records of names or causes of mortality. Hundreds just disappeared into early graves.

Ethnocentrism didn't end with the closing of these boarding schools. At left a popular child's game (for the dominant society) was part of the socialization process for citizens still alive today. The object of the game is to get rid of all ten of the "Little Indians." It asks: "Can you make them all disappear?"

A toy, made in the USA, shaping children's minds.



Similar aboriginal cultures around the globe are struggling to teach their children their original language for the same reason, even when no one else in their geographic region speaks it, and even after being ruled by colonial powers for centuries. Most however, are coming to the realization of the power of language too late to save their cultures.

Sociologists have also noted with interest the political battles in various countries, including our own, over which languages should be taught or spoken in public schools. This is a battle for survival of culture, so the stakes are high. The dominant culture in the United States has been resistant to allowing any language but English to be used. This violates the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed after the Mexican-American War, in which the United States agreed to let the Spanish language be used in schools and courts in the ceded territories of the southwestern United States, most of which were heavily populated by Spanish speaking citizens already. The matter has been a point of controversy for more than a century.

It is possible to operate a multi-cultural and multi-lingual nation. Canada has accommodated the significant French and English speaking portions of its population by printing government documents and signage in both languages, seemingly without difficulty. This has encouraged a bilingual society in Canada, which gives the country an international flair, and allows many Canadians the opportunity to travel much more easily in the many French-speaking parts of the world. However, the original American Indian inhabitants of Canada have had no such fair treatment by Canada's government.

As crucial as language may be in transmitting a sense of reality to a society, language often transmits a sense of *unreality* as well. **All languages are loaded with cultural biases that individuals often fail to detect, especially from inside the culture.** These language biases lead us to think in certain ways that benefit institutional goals, and these biases may be passed on to future generations. In extreme cases, **language may be used to cover up rather than transmit meaning.** All examples below were invented or used by U.S. Presidents and their appointees in recent decades:

- “Revenue enhancement” = A tax increase.
- “Pre-emptive self-defense” = A military attack on another country that has not attacked us first.
- “Collateral damage” = Innocent victims killed or injured by mistake in a poorly targeted bombing mission.
- “Enemy non-combatants” = Suspected terrorists held as prisoners without due process in violation of our constitution and international human rights laws.

An institution often attempts to avoid public recognition of its mistakes by describing embarrassing situations it has created with clever language that actually *hides* true

meaning. If the public accepts the description, a very harsh reality may be effectively concealed and ignored. It then becomes a culture-wide delusion.

The quotes above are examples of institutional failures to conceal meaning, because the usage was so absurd that the public reacted against them. But the vast majority of institutional biases are very subtle, more easily accepted and therefore more effective at maintaining public support for institutional policies. If we as individuals learn to expect, detect and understand these biases, we gain the ability to think more clearly for ourselves about the real issues involved.

VALUES AND NORMS AS SOCIAL CONTROL

Humans are, and have always been, social animals. We survive by operating as a group. For people to operate as a group, their behavior must be organized. And since we are very complex critters, there are hundreds of rules for everyone to follow obediently, or the society will not function very well.

Cultural **norms – rules of behavior based on our values** - are not innate; we are not born with rules already plugged into our heads. Thus, we have to learn the norms as we grow up. And we are *expected* to accept these rules as legitimate; otherwise they would not make sense. Over centuries of human history, rules of behavior developed that were based on institutional authority, mostly religious, but later, governmental. The institutions needed these rules (norms) to seem legitimate, and so each specific norm was promoted as a piece of a larger – and somewhat vague - moral or legal perspective. In sociology, we define these broad perspectives as **cultural values – our convictions about what is right or wrong**. Again, the norms (specific rules) are based on our values (convictions).

Of course, with thousands of norms to obey, some of which make little sense as time passes and things change, violations occur every day. Sociologist William Sumner ranked these violations by their seriousness.[4] For example, a very mild misbehavior could be overeating at the church potluck. This would be viewed as a violation of a **folkway – the way folks usually do things in everyday interaction**.

On the other hand, a **serious norm violation that usually amounts to breaking of a law is called - a *more*** (pronounced “moh-ray”). A law is a *more* that has been **formalized** in writing by society. Pick-pocketing someone’s billfold at the church potluck would be an example of violating a more.

A **taboo is a very intensely held norm, prohibiting acts which are considered almost unthinkable and entirely loathsome**. A violation of a taboo is Sumner’s most serious norm transgression. Taboo violations are so unthinkable that states sometimes do not even have laws against these acts, for example, incest, or cannibalism. Roasting and eating the preacher at the church potluck would be an example of violating a taboo. Please forgive the example; taboos are intense topics.



You probably don't have the foggiest idea as to what this painting is about. Don't feel too bad; I don't either. I made the mistake of buying this painting in Haiti years ago because it was so striking but I was never able to meet with the artist to catch the *meaning*. And since I wasn't raised in that culture there is probably no way to figure it out without returning to Haiti. But you can bet that almost any adult (and maybe the older kids too) in Haiti could look at it and identify clues that would lead them to at least a basic understanding of what the artist intended. It's full of symbolic imagery they've absorbed from life inside their cultural funnel.

Many norms, whether minor or very serious, will be subject to **sanctions – rewards or punishments based on conformity or nonconformity**. These are given out by institutions as a means of guiding our behavior. The positive sanctions will vary from an approving smile, to paychecks and even medals of honor. The negative sanctions range from a frown to death by hanging. Cultural institutions usually make sure that sufficient sanctions are present to keep society reasonably orderly.

When one individual breaks a formalized norm (robs a liquor store, or stabs someone) it attracts attention by witnesses, police and reporters. But when millions of people get through a day obeying hundreds of the norms they are expected to conform to, it gets very little notice. We may think we live in an ‘outlaw’ society, with the social order breaking down – and statistics *do* indicate citizens of the USA are far more likely than citizens in most other nations to violate serious norms. Yet we should not forget that nearly all of us are operating nearly always with almost robot-like obedience to a vast network of institutional norms (rules). The social order may have frayed in recent years, but it has not collapsed.

BELIEFS AND MYTHS

Beliefs - are assertions about the nature of reality. Beliefs and myths are grouped together here, because so many of the beliefs in any culture are half truths, or even pure mythology. Myths usually evolve over time, pieced together gradually by institutions to increase loyalty among the public, to raise morale or shape citizen behavior. A myth may not reflect reality at all, but it can be perpetuated by being repeated over and over by institutional authorities until it seems true, even if it is not.

A controversial belief: The USA is, “the land of the free.” Freedom can be measured in many ways, and in some ways, citizens of our nation really *do* enjoy high levels of freedom: speech, press, assembly, and religion. If weighed against dictatorships around the globe, the USA compares very favorably. We can be appreciative and proud of that.

However, our rights and freedoms also exist in dozens of modern democracies; we are not a particular standout. In fact, our Constitution and our Bill of Rights began as copies of British government designs. And if we judge freedom from the standpoint of the percent of the nation’s people in jail or prison, the USA flunks the freedom test entirely. As noted in Chapter 7 of this book, the USA often has a higher percent of its people in prison than any other country, higher than any nation in history since the recording of such statistics began.

By this measure, the USA is actually a standout of *non*-freedom. Our history of slavery (as the last nation in North America to reject it) and the treatment of our nation’s original American Indian inhabitants do not read like a great blueprint for freedom-lovers either.

TABLE 2.1: UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE IN THE USA

Few citizens of any nation have an opportunity to compare their nation objectively with other nations. Sociologists seek to know *who we really are* on this planet. That is possible to do now, with global statistics generated by the United Nations and reputable independent research organizations.

1. U.S. citizens work very hard. We work over 1800 hours each year at our occupations, longer than people in any other modern democratic nation according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).
 2. We have chronic, extreme inequality. Most of the world's billionaires live here, yet we have the highest percent of homeless citizens among wealthy democratic nations.
 3. We are very religious. Over 60% of U.S. citizens maintain religious beliefs (overwhelmingly Christian) according to Pew Research Center Surveys.
 4. We are very individualistic. Christian notions of individual salvation and damnation carry over to our general view of humanity, law & punishment.
 5. We are inventive. The U.S. wins far more than its share of Nobel prizes.
 6. We are very warlike. Our military budget is often as large as all other nations' budgets combined. We sell more weapons than any other nation. We are the only nation in history to have used nuclear weapons on civilians.
 7. We are mobile. U.S. citizens move their residences every five years on average, according to Census data.
 8. We are incredibly consumptive. We use up more of the Earth's resources per person than the people of any other nation according to World Population Review in 2025.
 9. We are highly commercialized. Our media, highways, schools, cars and clothing are covered with corporate brand symbols, signs, ads or billboards.
 10. We are very punitive. We have the highest rate of incarceration in world history and the only Western democracy to allow the use of the death penalty.
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The myth of the USA as a *singular* beacon of freedom is so pleasing to hear and believe - and our institutions are so eager to repeat it - that it endures in spite of the obvious contradictions. Similar myths are believed by the peoples of all cultures. The willingness of any society to believe its cultural myths can be considered a form of cultural hypnosis. People under the spell – almost everyone, everywhere – are at least partly detached from objective social reality. Although these cultural myths and half truths are part of the glue that holds society together, they can also hold a society back. If members of a culture raise serious questions about the truthfulness of our cherished myths, they will likely find themselves facing social disapproval. Nevertheless, thoughtful criticism helps societies advance past previous mistakes to build a better future. Viewed that way, it is very patriotic.



Photographer unknown, Courtesy Government of Cuba, circa 1860

Handcuffed and tied down with a fishnet, one of the last Africans captured before slave transport ended waits to be sold on a pier in Havana harbor. A questions: How could our nation's institutions have portrayed themselves as righteous and caring while so many of their members were deeply involved in this? Are there any hidden present-day equivalents?

TABLE 2.2 MYTHS: THE STORY OF THANKSGIVING

There are many versions of this symbolic event floating around. Below is a scholarly one that probably contradicts the one that your grandparents learned as a child.

The First Thanksgiving in America[5]

The first official Thanksgiving wasn't a festive gathering of Indians and Pilgrims as in our traditional folklore, but rather a celebration of the massacre of Pequot men, women and children, according to anthropologist William B. Newell, former chairman of the Anthropology Department at the University of Connecticut. At 84 years of age, Newell has studied the Thanksgiving story at great length.

Newell based his research on studies of Holland Documents and the 13-volume Colonial Documentary History, both thick sets of letters and reports from colonial officials to their superiors and the King in England, and the private papers of Sir William Johnson, British Indian agent for the New York colony for 30 years in the mid-1600s. His conclusion:

"Thanksgiving Day was first officially proclaimed by the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1637 to commemorate the massacre of 700 men, women and children who were celebrating their annual green corn dance - "Thanksgiving Day to them," Newell said. "Gathered in this place of meeting they were attacked by mercenaries [hired killers] and Dutch and English [settlers]. The Indians were ordered from the building and as they came forth they were shot down. The rest were burned alive in the building," he said.

To be fair, not all cultural beliefs are myths. And there are varying levels of truth *within* myths, enough for them to survive as folklore, if not actual history.

MATERIAL CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY

Most of culture is *non*-material: its standards, norms, ideas, beliefs and lifestyle. But every culture also creates some physical objects that distinguish it from others, especially its tools, which we refer to as technology. Modern societies are creating material objects at a rate never imagined before in the history of humanity.

Archeologists normally have to hunt for objects from civilizations long vanished. That will not be a problem for those who study modern societies in the centuries ahead. In fact, the problem in studying our culture will be finding a piece of the Earth that was *not* affected by our present materialistic lifestyle.

Technology is a powerful social change agent, a major “go pedal” that accelerates social change. In the lifetime of the readers of this page, personal

communication devices have changed our society in profound ways. The key concern is that in consumer societies, *technology changes the world in random and unplanned ways* that are more likely to create unintended problematic consequences. A more rational approach to making major social changes to our culture would come from increased *planning*. But highly capitalist nations like the USA tend to let market forces determine the direction of culture, with less planning or restrictions regarding the long-term social or environmental effects of the processes or material products produced.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Just by looking at the architecture of the Mayan empire in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize we can learn a lot about this civilization that was collapsing before Columbus arrived in the Americas. The Maya were warlike; their art and architecture were designed around religious rituals and defense. We know they studied Earth's rotations without religious censorship, for their elegant sundials and other items marked the movement of the planets and stars. These artistic structures were masterpieces that survived frequent earthquakes.

However, art can be much more than that. **Artists are often effective *critics* of cultural institutions. That makes art a major change agent, as is technology. But change by artistic criticism is not random and unplanned as it is with technology.** Instead, art – especially in modern societies – is often the only element of culture with the independence or courage to raise sensitive issues and warn the public about institutional failures. Artists often analyze and expose the weaknesses of a culture. And by doing so, they lead individuals to question their own cultural design. This is a step towards intelligent social planning: publicly identifying social problems so that they can be fixed.

The ability of art to make us think, question, and act to change our cultural design often frightens institutional leaders. Critical art takes many forms: editorial cartoons, standup comedy, protest songs, progressive books, movies, theatre productions and even political graffiti (the art of the street) have all successfully triggered institutional change. Occasionally these art forms may be disturbing or vulgar. But a truly free society tolerates critical art, even when it is disturbing.

Institutional leaders who seek to control the thought processes of a society try to control art. Adolph Hitler (he does make for great examples) who had been an artist as a young man, understood the ability of art to criticize government. Once elected, he declared himself the *only art critic* in Germany. Thereafter, only Hitler could determine publicly what was “good” and “bad” art. He preferred landscapes, statues of strong looking men, bowls of fruit and other non-controversial art forms. Many German artists got the message and held back the critiques necessary to expose his cruelty.[6]

In 1947, only two years after Hitler was defeated, the U.S. Congress went on its own rampage of art censorship. This unfortunate episode purged Hollywood of over three hundred actors, writers, producers and directors that had been involved in making films

with controversial themes. A list of their names was created by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which became known as the “Hollywood Blacklist.”[7] Some of the Hollywood film workers had socialist political affiliations and had begun criticizing the huge gap between rich and poor in the USA.

In the 1950s, ultra-conservative Senator Joseph McCarthy took over the investigation, forcing dozens of citizens to inform on each other, under threat of imprisonment. By 1954, some artists were in prison or had fled the USA for Europe. The critical function they could have provided to guide the country was lost for a decade.



Senator Joseph McCarthy



Photos Library of Congress

Committee on Un-American Activities

Musicians brought some critical art forms back in the 1960s and 1970s. Famous young folk singers and bands like the Beatles and Bob Dylan led the younger generation to strongly reject the Vietnam War in which over a million Vietnamese were killed. “Protest music” as an art form became an extremely useful media for youth to organize each other against the war. Eventually, the military had to pull out of Vietnam, for youth were the only large potential source of soldiers. Some were fleeing the country, going to prison to avoid the war or becoming involved in protests themselves.

In partial retaliation, President Nixon secretly attempted to get legendary singer Elvis Presley to set up the Beatles in a drug bust to destroy their prestige. But Elvis had his own drug problems; he declined to help Nixon.

In recent decades, the *political* control of art has been joined by an impenetrable *corporate* control by the stockholders of the nation’s giant media outlets. As these outlets have merged into mega-chains, this form of censorship is less accessible for redress by the public. Former Beatle John Lennon’s *Imagine* – arguably the most popular recorded song in worldwide history - was removed from play by Clear Channel Communications (CCC) as were recordings of The Dixie Chicks, Cat Stevens and Rage Against the Machine. CCC dominated broadcast radio, owning many of the largest 250 networks, along with scores of TV stations.

FIGURE 2.2: EXAMPLES OF PROTEST MUSICIANS SINCE YEAR 2000



You readers of this text have had some colorful protest-oriented musicians make their mark on our nation's conscience in your lifetime. And they have paid the price. Zach de la Roca (upper left) and Rage Against the Machine found their concert hall surrounded by the heavily armed National Guard in Minneapolis. Rage was protesting corporate/military dominance and assassination in poor nations, especially Mexico.

The country group Dixie Chicks had criticized President Bush's military attack on Iraq. Dixie Chicks' music was widely banned on radio stations thereafter. Ironically, their music became more popular, as "forbidden fruit."

In Russia, the human rights advocacy band Pussy Riot did impromptu concerts calling out Russian President Putin for his corruption, sexism and undercover poisoning of whistleblowers like themselves. In response, they were regularly jailed and handled brutally. At least one member of Pussy Riot was poisoned. Yet, in their time, all these groups started important cultural conversations. They took the blows and stood their ground. Pussy riot visited the USA in 2025, warning us about growing fascism in our nation.

Mega-retailer Walmart has been another major source of corporate censorship. It takes an active part in controlling the content of music and video recordings sold in its enormous chain of stores. Below is an (edited) summary quote from a PBS television special:

"...Walmart believes that being a "family" store is the key to their mass appeal. They refuse to carry CDs with cover art or lyrics deemed overtly sexual or dealing with topics such as abortion or homosexuality... While Walmart is the world's largest CD retailer, and in some regions the only place in town to purchase music entertainment products, music represents only a fraction of their business. However, it is a different story for recording artists. Because Walmart reaps about 10 percent of the total domestic music CD sales, most musicians and record companies will agree to create a "sanitized" version specifically for the megastores...

...when Sheryl Crow released her self-titled album, Walmart objected to her lyrics: "Watch our children as they kill each other with a gun they bought at Walmart discount stores." After Crow would not change the verse, the retailer refused to carry the album. This type of censorship has become so common that it is often regarded as simply another stage of editing. Now some record labels issue two versions of the same album for their big-named artists. Less well-known bands, however, are forced to offer "sanitized" albums right out of the gate." [8]

In recent years a movement to censor progressive movies, novels and other art forms in high schools and even in colleges. There is no doubt that your generation's art is still being censored.



Marilyn Manson was not normally associated with protest music *per se*. But some think his music was really a critique on the brutality of our culture. They point to his thoughtful comments to Michael Moore in the documentary *Bowling for Columbine* which examined the horrible mass school shooting in Littleton, Colorado. Ironically, he was also accused of inciting violence. Certainly, art can be powerful.

ETHNOCENTRISM

Culture is a funnel. There is no *easy* way to avoid thinking and behaving the way we are taught from birth. Surrounded by their culture, most individuals absorb the notion that their way of life is best, and that living in a fundamentally different way is unthinkable. People in almost every nation are shaped to believe that their lifestyle makes the most sense, that their religious beliefs are correct, that their history is generally quite heroic, and that their nation is somehow special...and better than the rest.

This blissful attitude by individuals regarding their culture offers many benefits. Feeling good about your way of life increases personal and social self-esteem. A proud nation tends to operate more smoothly. And the institutional leaders of all nations love to bask in the glow of a strongly patriotic population.

But there is a downside to encouraging extreme cultural loyalty on a small planet covered with hundreds of nations/cultures holding *exclusive* beliefs. People in every society suffer from a lack of knowledge and objectivity about *other* cultures, and this ignorance often leads to racism, violence or genocide between different nations or *within* nations consisting of different subcultures or ethnic groups.

Sociologists define this lack of objectivity as **ethnocentrism – the tendency to judge other cultures by the standards of one’s own culture**. It is similar to being “self-centered,” but on a national scale. When we watch the behavior, attitudes, or lifestyle of members of a very different culture on television – often the only contact we have with them – we fail to realize that our own cultural biases grossly affect our observations.

Even the best social scientists have to resist their own ethnocentrism, no matter how hard they try to stay neutral. But the general public of many nations often does not even pretend a commitment to cultural neutrality. These citizens of the world willingly forfeit the opportunity to really understand humanity and global events which affect their lives. Intolerance towards other cultures is still the order of the day, a dangerous global reality during decades of massive military spending.

It is not difficult to trace where individual intolerance is rooted. The institutions that surround us from birth leave little room for tolerance and understanding, despite often claiming otherwise. As noted in Chapter 1, institutions generally portray reality in terms of **absolute truths: assertions about reality that allow no other explanations**. But institutions don’t merely deny other explanations; they frequently *ridicule* them.

Once we are processed - from birth - through our cultural institutions, we tend to internalize these absolute truths as our own. And as we age, our world view tends to gradually harden. Any competing assertions from distinctly different cultures that we encounter later in life are more likely to be viewed as odd, primitive, stupid, immoral, silly, disturbing or just plain wrong. Sociologist C. Wright Mills would urge us to peer through these cultural barriers for the sake of our own survival.

TABLE 2.3: EARLY AMERICAN CULTURE CLASH

The ignorance that led to the genocide of American Indians and a number of murders of white immigrants to this continent is perhaps the worst chapter in humanity's very ethnocentric history. However, quotes by leaders of all sides indicate an inability to connect with people of other cultures. Below are two excellent examples. The first is taken from the written diary of Christopher Columbus, after his first sighting of American Indians on the island of Hispaniola:

[The Arawak Indians] brought us parrots and balls of cotton and many other things... they willingly traded everything they owned...they were well built with good bodies and handsome features...they do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves...they would make fine servants... with fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.

The second is from *The Ben Franklin Papers*. It is a classic comment from an anonymous American Indian leader of Virginia in the 1700s that refused a generous offer from white colonists to educate Indian youth at the College of William and Mary:

You [whites] who are wise must know that different nations have different conceptions about things...our ideas of this education happen not to be the same with yours. We have had some experience of it; several of our young people were brought up at your colleges of the northern province; they were instructed in all your sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, nor kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly and were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, nor councillors; they were totally good for nothing. We are however, not the less obligated by your kind offer, though we decline it; and to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them.

Assertions from the powerful economic, religious and government institutions are the most intensely held beliefs. It is dangerous for members from *within* a culture to seriously challenge fundamental assertions from their own institutions. To do so in a public forum is likely to trigger negative sanctions in return, public shunning or attack.

U.S. citizens can freely argue fine points about how our economy should be managed. But if a citizen suggests adopting a *fundamentally different* economy, religion or government system he/she is not likely to be taken very seriously. At various times in our history, such a protest sometimes triggered prison or exile. Most of the present authoritarian nations have a similarly ethnocentric history.

The three major religions that spread successfully across the globe, primarily through military conquest - Judaism, Christianity and Islam – hold warlike doctrines which are also quite *exclusive* of other religions. Some Orthodox Jews say a prayer every morning

that begins with this sentence: “Blessed art thou, oh Lord our God, King of the Universe, that I was not born a gentile [a non-Jew].”

The Islamic Koran, according to at least one of its passages, suggests that Christians and Jews belong in Hell. Likewise, the Biblical admonition to Christian believers is well known, “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.” And when the Biblical God and Joshua teamed up to wipe out nonbelievers (as told in the book of Joshua), there was no mercy shown for anyone in the cities they crushed, including children.



Gary Payne 2003

An example of an *absolute* truth (according to Islamic doctrine) I discovered in a St. Paul grocery store.

In the photo immediately above, the quote is from the Koran, the holy book of Islam. The absolute truth quoted here casts shade on the validity of other religious beliefs.

Most religious followers do not interpret their religious doctrines so literally. But the examples set in their sacred documents established precedents that contribute to nearly continuous armed struggle. War tends to be a violent competition between cultural institutions of two or more nations, with human bodies provided by their poorer and younger members. But ethnocentrism is common *within* nations too (see below).

Throughout the 1920s the KKK grew in Minnesota, recruiting thousands to its gospel of white Protestant supremacy.

In Duluth, veterans returned to find U.S. Steel, the city's largest employer, importing blacks to work at the Morgan Park steel mill and quell strike threats by white workers. The black population of Duluth was not large, but distrust of blacks boiled over into a horrendous event on June 15, 1920, when circus workers Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie were murdered by a white mob. The furious crowd wrongly believed the black men had raped a white girl. Ten thousand are believed to have attended the lynchings.¹

MN Historical Society Photo



K. K. K. Holds Outdoor Meeting

SEVERAL HUNDRED GATHERED AT CULLEN LAKE FRIDAY NIGHT

It has been rumored for some time that the Ku Klux Klan is rapidly gaining members in this section of the state, but there was no marked evidence of it until last Friday night, when members, said to be from Pequot, Brainerd, Pine River and Backus, staged a big out-door meeting on the state road 5 miles south of Pequot, between lake Edna and Cullen lake.

Cars estimated to number at least a hundred were placed in a large circle, with white-robed sentries scattered among them. The initiate apparently had a password, for some got in the circle, while spectators were kept outside. Lights from cars here and there were played on the circle and furnished light. Over on the dark side of the arena there was a piano and a quartette sang.

Pequot Review June 27, 1924

Pequot Review July 25, 1924

Announce K.K.K. Public Meetings

NATIONAL LECTURER TO BE AT PEQUOT AND NEARBY PLACES

Announcement is being made of a series of public meetings in this vicinity by the Ku Klux Klan at which a Klan lecturer of national repute will deliver addresses explaining the aim and purposes and methods of the Klan organization.

Night meetings are announced at Brainerd on August 4, at Pillager August 5, at Backus August 6, at Pine River August 7 and at Pequot on August 9. It is thought likely that the Pequot meeting will be held at the fair grounds. These meetings, we are informed, will be open to the public.

FIERY CROSS IS BURNED

Above are clippings from several publications that reveal a very ethnocentric period in Minnesota history. Few citizens of the USA realize that the Ku Klux Klan was popular even in the far northern regions of the nation. The KKK began – and remains – a Christian political movement that has been growing in recent years. Hatred against racial minorities, Jews, Catholics, gays or immigrants still exists within a wide variety of political and religious groups in the USA. The images above are rarely seen or discussed today. Censorship leaves us clueless about our own history.

If humanity has a chance to avoid perpetual war in the future, cultural institutions of all nations must rethink their ethnocentric postures.

That may seem an unrealistic hope. But I have personally witnessed such changes in the nation of Guyana, where former religious and ethnic enemies have committed themselves to *far* greater openness and acceptance than is common in the United States and many other countries I have visited. A primary goal of many sociologists is to increase human tolerance to ensure human survival.



Pagwah (above) is a Hindu ceremony in which the faithful chase away evil spirits. But in South America's little nation of Guyana *everyone* is invited. After this ceremony an enormous crowd of Muslims, Christians, and people of other faiths were escorted as guests to the local Hindu temple for a feast. No one was turned away. Only an hour before this ceremony the Hindus had likewise attended a massive Good Friday celebration by Christians in which people of various religions sang to each other. This nation seems far ahead of most nations on the issue of tolerance and inclusion. Ironically, Guyana is a nation of almost entirely former slaves brought here – and set against each other - by the Dutch and English in centuries passed. Now they celebrate each other's holidays, during which the entire government shuts down. If these former enemies can get along, it's likely that people in any nation can, if their institutions let them - or if they *demand it* - from their institutions. (Photo, Gary Payne 2008)

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

The very opposite of ethnocentrism is **cultural relativism – the recognition that one culture cannot be objectively judged by the standards of another.** Truth for a cultural relativist would not be *absolute*, but *relative* to the culture being studied. A cultural relativist would recognize that the unique history and physical environment of a culture explains its particular mix of lifestyle, beliefs and traditions. A cultural relativist

would not automatically assume that her or his own culture has all the correct answers in religious, economic and political realms. Of course, this is more easily said than done.

Cultural relativism, as a strategy for tolerance and understanding, cuts through a mountain of ethnocentric ignorance. After all, most characteristics of a culture – clothing and diet for example – are neither morally right nor wrong but are merely adaptations to whatever physical and historical reality the society was surrounded by. Living in a near-naked state, and eating insects or snails is no more wrong or harmful than wearing high heels or eating “curly” fries, Spam or cotton candy.

However, there are moral limits to cultural tolerance on serious issues. Cultural relativism should not mean *moral relativism*, the view that *any* form of morality is always as good as another. The United Nations has been working on a set of *universal* standards for human rights that would apply to *all* cultures. Female infanticide, juvenile execution, cannibalism and torture are examples of brutality that should not be accepted in *any* culture.

No culture has all the answers. Every culture exhibits a variety of illogical or self-destructive social behaviors and is at least partially blind to it. Thus, it is very easy to criticize the weaknesses in any *other* culture from the outside looking in.

Criticizing another culture does not automatically brand any of us as ethnocentric. But neither is it much of an accomplishment. The far more courageous and difficult task is to detect and admit weaknesses *in our own* culture.

If individuals – sociology students, for example – wish to experiment with cultural relativism, some mental exercises are helpful.

One strategy that allows us to view other cultures without losing too much objectivity is as follows: Whenever we observe brutal, self-destructive or otherwise illogical behavior on the part of people in other cultures, we tend to recoil in horror. This horror may be entirely justified, especially if human rights are being trampled on. But, in each case, we can also ask ourselves if our own culture includes some illogical behavior that is roughly similar. The object would be to continually pierce the illusion that *their* irrational behavior is somehow singular, special and always categorically worse than *our* irrational behavior. This isn't easy. And it can be painful.

Here are some examples:

Is their use of dried red clay on their scalps any more ridiculous than our use of petroleum-based hair dyes and pig fat ingredients in our eye make-up?

Is their fresh goat-blood drink any more harmful than our corn dogs, super-sized sugar-laden drinks or “sausage” pizza?

Is their tattered donkey cart any less useful (in the long run) than our gas guzzling SUVs that kill tens of thousands of our citizens every year and are polluting the atmosphere?

Examples from our wars are the most difficult for us to tolerate. But...here we go:

Was their beheading of our captured soldiers a greater crime against humanity than our firing hundreds of cruise missiles into Iraqi cities full of civilians for what our Army proudly called, "Shock and Awe?"

Was their sneaky planting of roadside bombs any more cowardly than our use of napalm in Vietnam, or our cluster bombs in Laos or our landmines in Afgani areas populated by children?

Was their dancing around our blown-up military vehicles and our dying soldiers worse than our killing, torture and sexual molestation of suspected enemies at our military prisons in Iraq or Guantanamo Bay Cuba?

These last comparisons are *intensely* painful questions for us, and you readers are welcome to disagree with the implied point of view. But by this point, you must be aware that sociology questions *all* commonly held beliefs and norms to break free of ethnocentrism. We are not only U.S. citizens; we are *planetary citizens*.

SUBCULTURES

There are, within cultures, groups with distinctly different norms from the dominant culture: the "Old Order" Amish, the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, American Indian Tribes or the "Hillbilly" descendants of Scottish and Irish indentured servants living in Appalachia (the term *Hillbilly* is a term of pride in most Appalachian communities.)

Sociologists refer to these groups as **subcultures – cultures within a culture that maintain some distinctly different norms from the dominant culture**. Each of these subcultures adds a lot of color to the overall culture and is interesting to study and observe. The presence of functioning subcultures also confirms the existence of a significant level of personal freedom in a culture.

Some scholars and a portion of the general public argue that subcultures are a threat to the dominant culture because they fragment society. But others suggest that subcultures are merely an adaptation to a unique history or social ills. For example, the racially white "hillbillies" of Appalachia's Smokey Mountains have been portrayed as relatively "unmotivated" (lazy) by the dominant culture. However, sociologist Jack Weller argues that the personalities of Appalachians were merely a response to centuries of severe economic exploitation among this poor and less educated white subculture.[9]

IDEAL CULTURE VS. REAL CULTURE

A huge disconnect exists between **ideal culture - what a culture *claims* its standards are** and **real culture – *actual* cultural standards**. For example, a core value of culture in the USA is *honesty*, yet cheating on everything from taxes to college exams is commonplace. Another core value is our attachment to *democracy*, yet voter turnout in most elections in the United States is often far lower than in other modern democracies.

Pondering this, one might ask if our cultural ideals no longer matter. They do matter. Cultural ideals represent goals that most people still attempt to reach. Without these goals, our culture might suffer from a lack of positive themes or direction. The ideals of a society define who we wish we were, and might someday become, if these ideal goals are there to aim towards.

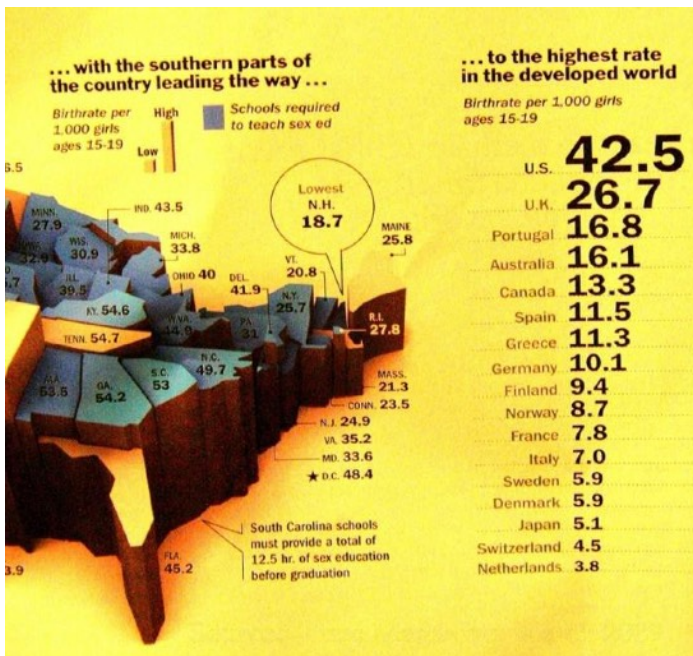


Gary Payne, 2015

We are not accustomed to seeing belly dancers in a sheep pasture in rural Minnesota, but that is what you are looking at here. This shot was from a gathering of central Minnesotans that included “back-to-the-land” organic farmers, shepherders, environmental activists and politically leftist “country” musicians. In my view, this cohesive group qualifies as a *subculture* with distinctly different norms from the dominant culture.

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The variation of **teen birth** statistics from nation to nation is so extreme (more than 10 times!) that only cultural factors could explain it. Each culture is like a unique machine pumping out unique behavioral outcomes. Even within the USA we see a three-fold variation as the states also have "personalities". This photo is from a Newsweek magazine more than a decade old and these rates have improved; I posted it here merely to demonstrate the powerful consequences of culture in any given moment. I also hate to waste a partially blank page!