



Culture

3

Learning Objectives

After reading chapter 3, you will be able to

- distinguish between dominant culture and sub- or counterculture.
- differentiate between high culture, popular culture and mass culture.
- define and explain the relationship between norms (folkways, mores, and taboos) and sanctions (positive and negative).
- explain why culture is contested.
- define and discuss ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, and cultural relativism.

Chapter Summary

Culture is a **contested**, dynamic system of behaviour, beliefs, knowledges, practices, values, and material artifacts such as buildings, tools, and sacred items. One of the points of contestation is **authenticity**, or what is true to a particular culture. Types of culture can be distinguished along two central oppositions. On one hand, we have the opposition between dominant and sub- or countercultures. On the other hand, sociologists examine culture in terms of the opposition between high culture and popular/mass culture.

With its political and economic power, a **dominant culture** imposes on society language, values, and ways of behaving and interpreting behaviour. Those who are strongly linked to the cultural mainstream are known as **dominants** (white, English-speaking, heterosexual, male university graduates of European background between the ages of 30–55, in good health, who own homes in a middle-class neighbourhood of cities in Ontario or Quebec). In contrast, minority cultures are those that fall outside of the mainstream culture. **Subcultures** share a distinctive set of beliefs and practices that differ in some significant way from the dominant culture without directly opposing it and are organized around occupations or hobbies (e.g., computer nerds, lawyers). **Countercultures** are defined as groups that reject selected elements of the dominant culture (e.g., Goths).

High culture is the culture of the elite—a distinct minority. High culture is associated with classical music, opera, theatre, and other art forms considered accessible only to those with the sophisticated tastes and advanced education to appreciate them. Pierre Bourdieu coined the term **cultural capital** to refer to the qualities that mark one as a person of high culture. By contrast, **popular culture** is the culture of the majority and comprises more commercial art forms including Hollywood movies and hip-hop music.

While popular culture and mass culture are often presented as synonyms for those who fall outside the world of the cultural elite, the two differ in terms of **agency**, which is defined as the ability of the people to be creative or productive with what a dominant culture, colonial power, or mass media has given to them. Social scientists who believe people take an active part in consuming culture and are **reading** cultural texts (e.g., deciding what they will wear, eat, or listen to) use the term *popular culture*. The term **mass culture** is used by social scientists who believe cultural consumption patterns are dictated by powerful corporations and governments. Here the audience is passively absorbing media messages and is merely **deciphering** cultural texts. One feature of mass culture is **simulacra**. Simulacra, as described by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, are stereotypical cultural images that often distort reality and encourage people to act as though they exist. They are “hyperreal,” more real than the real-life elements and situations they are designed to represent.

In addition to the above oppositions, we can examine cultures in terms of their central elements. **Norms** are the rules or standards of behaviour that are expected within society. They differ between and even within cultures and groups. When individuals follow societal norms, they are typically met with **positive sanctions** (e.g., a smile, a pay raise) and when norms are violated, a **negative sanction** awaits (e.g., a frown, a parking fine). According to William Graham Sumner, norms that govern day-to-day matters are known as **folkways** (e.g., holding a door for someone), while norms governing serious matters are called **mores** (e.g., vandalizing a church, synagogue, or temple, theft, speeding, etc.). **Taboos** are deeply ingrained norms that arouse disgust or revulsion (e.g., incest).

Symbols within a culture are both tangible (material) and intangible (non-material) objects that take on tremendous meaning within society. Symbols of ethnic or religious identity denote an individual’s sense of national or ethnic character and represent qualities associated with that identity (e.g., the veil as a symbol for Canadian Muslim women, the Canadian maple leaf sewn to a traveller’s backpack).

Values are standards used by a culture to describe abstract qualities, such as goodness and justice. They guide individual behaviour, but are also used to assess the behaviour of oneself and others. There is often a difference between the values that people profess to hold and the ways they act: in other words between ideal culture and actual culture.

Ethnocentrism is the idea that one culture (usually one’s own) is the standard by which all cultures are to be judged. It is often the product of ignorance. **Reverse ethnocentrism** refers to the idealization of cultures not one’s own. This can include immigrants viewing their culture of origin negatively and favouring that of their adopted nation. **Eurocentrism** is a particular form of ethnocentrism that involves addressing others from a “European” (i.e., western and northern European, and North American) perspective, and assuming that the audience is or would like to be a part of that group. Eurocentrism is exemplified by Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of North America, already home to millions of people. Ethnocentrism plays a crucial role in **cultural globalization**, which refers to the flow of culture around the globe. In practice, this is often a one-way flow from the West, sometimes described as the “Americanization” of the world.

Cultural relativism is an approach to examining the context of another culture and exists at two levels. One level pertains to the understanding of a culture, whereby each aspect of a particular culture must be viewed in its specific social, historical, and environmental context. The other level is a matter of judging, which suggests that individuals should not be judged by the practices of their cultures as these practices have to be understood, again, within the specific context of the culture itself.

Language is a central element of every culture and **sociolinguistics** is the study of language as a part of culture. Language is the main mode of communicating and transmitting culture between individuals, and a culture cannot be fully understood without an understanding of the language(s) of that culture. **Dialects** are versions of the same language, with differences that can be based on pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary. Distinctions between dialect and language are often the product of linguistic and social factors. The relationship between language and culture has been discussed in terms of the **Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis**, which states that how individuals view the world is shaped by the language(s) they speak.

Study Questions

1. Describe the dominant culture in Canada.
2. Define *subculture* and *counterculture* and give one example for each. Explain how they differ and in which ways they are alike.
3. “Folkways and mores can change over time.” Explain using examples.
4. Define “values” and discuss whether or not Canadian and American values are converging over time or diverging.
5. What is the relationship between Eurocentrism and cultural globalization? Provide one example for each.
6. Discuss cultural relativism. According to the textbook, what are the two dimensions of cultural relativism?
7. How do ethnocentrism and cultural relativism differ in how they approach another culture?
8. Define “symbol” and explain the cultural significance of a specific cultural symbol of your choice.

Exploration and Discussion Exercises

1. Explore the following websites:
 - www.thehollywoodgossip.com
 - www.perezhilton.com
 - www.thesuperficial.com

Or look through the following magazines:

- *Star*
- *Us Weekly*
- *The National Enquirer*

What do these sources tell us about North American values, folkways, and mores?

Celebrities are people—just like you and me—so how is it that we have information about their most intimate experiences in life, while they do not even know our names? Celebrities are in the spotlight while they work. Why do they lack the freedom to simply “be” after their workday ends?

Picture your photo being taken (or even worse, a video being shot of you) after leaving a party, gathering, or bar. Then imagine the next day you read an article about yourself, relating an incident that never occurred. Consider how and why society allows people to shift or change norms and values for celebrities? Why are they subject to this treatment? Why do these mass media tools exist?

2. Reading and deciphering are two processes sociologists apply to the consumption of culture. Read and decipher your favourite movie.

Further Readings

Garlick, S. (2010). Taking control of sex? Hegemonic masculinity, technology, and Internet pornography. *Men and Masculinities* 12(5): 597–614.

This article discusses how technology and pornography shape gender and gender relations, which are social and this cultural rather than biological in nature.

Lieberson, S. (2000). *A Matter of Taste: How Names, Fashions, and Culture Change*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Lieberson is a Canadian-born author who explores cultural change using specific examples of names and taste in fashion

Ruby, T.F. (2006). Listening to the voices of hijab. *Women's Studies International Forum* 29(1): 54–66.

This article illustrates the ways in which immigrant Muslim women in Canada perceive the hijab and associate it with diverse meanings.

Watson, J.J. & Wright, K. (2000). Consumer ethnocentrism and attitudes toward domestic and foreign products. *European Journal of Marketing* 34(9/10): 1149–1166.

Explores the relationship between consumer choices and national cultures

Helpful Websites

Popular Culture Association of Canada: <http://www.canpop.ca/>

The Canadian Graduate Journal of Folklore and Ethnology:
<http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~culture/>

Government of Canada on multiculturalism:
<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/citizenship.asp>

Canadian Heritage: <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage.html>
Government of Canada website that provides information on Canadian heritage and culture

Indigenous Foundations: <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home.html>
Provides resources on topics such as Indigenous identity and culture

My Tribe is My Life: https://www.nfb.ca/film/my_tribe_is_my_life_shana/
Interactive documentary that plunges us into the worlds of eight music fans and shows how the Internet has helped them forge their identities

The Merchants of Cool: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/view/>
Examines the relationship between media, teens and popular/consumer culture