

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE:  
ITS MEANINGS, CHARACTERISTICS,  
AND COMPONENTS

- LECTURE OUTLINE

- I. What is Culture?
- II. Components of Culture
- III. High Culture and Popular Culture
- IV. Cultural Diversity

# • **Questions and Issues**

- What part does culture play in shaping people?
- What are the essential components of culture?
- To what degree are we shaped by popular culture?
- How does culture change?
- What part does culture play in intolerance toward others and hate crimes?

# I. WHAT IS CULTURE?

- *Culture* is the knowledge, art, morals, habits, customs, language, values, customs, and material objects that are shared and are passed from one generation to the next in a society.
- Culture includes ways of thinking as well as patterns of behavior.
- Culture can be an enormously stabilizing force for a society, as it can provide a sense of continuity. However, culture can also be a force that generates discord, conflict, and even violence.
- How people view culture is intricately related to their location in society with regard to their race/ethnicity, class, sex, and age.

- **1. Material Culture and Nonmaterial Culture**
- Our cultural tool box is divided into two major parts: material culture and nonmaterial culture.
- *Material culture* consists of the physical or tangible creations that members of a society make, use, and share.
- Initially, items of material culture begin as raw materials or resources such as ore, trees, and oil.
- Through technology these raw materials are transformed into usable items (ranging from books and computers to guns and tanks).
- Other examples: foods, housings, toys, tools, clothing, eating utensils, machines, musical instruments, etc.

- *Nonmaterial culture* consists of the abstract or intangible human creations of society that influence people's behavior.
- Language, beliefs, ideas, values, customs, rules of behavior, laws, family patterns, gestures, organizations, and political systems are examples of nonmaterial culture.

## 2. Cultural Universals

- Because all humans face the same basic needs (such as for food, clothing, and shelter), we engage in similar activities that contribute to our survival.
- Anthropologist George Murdock compiled a list of over 70 cultural universals—customs and practices that are common to all human cultures worldwide.
- His categories included:
  - appearance (such as bodily adornment and hairstyles)
  - activities (such as sports, dancing, games, joking, and visiting)
  - social institutions (such as family, law, and religion)
  - customary practices (such as cooking, folklore, gift giving, and hospitality)
  - rules governing sexual conduct
  - a taboo against incest

- While these general customs and practices may be present in all cultures, their specific forms vary from one group to another and from one time to another within the same group.
- For example, although telling jokes may be a universal practice, what is considered to be a joke in one society may be an insult in another.
- Eating pork is forbidden to Orthodox Jews and Muslims, while it is a dietary staple in China, Japan, and Korea.
- All cultures have standards of beauty and ornamentation, but what is regarded as beautiful in one culture may be seen as ugly in another.
- E.g., Neck rings, lip plate, foot binding,



### 3. Characteristics of Culture

- a. Culture is shared
- b. Culture is learned
- c. Culture is taken for granted
- d. Culture is symbolic
- e. Culture varies across time and place

## II. COMPONENTS OF CULTURE

- While there are innumerable components of culture and even though the specifics of individual cultures vary widely, the five most important cultural components are:
  - Q: What are the five most important cultural components?
  - 1) symbols
  - 2) language
  - 3) beliefs
  - 4) values
  - 5) norms

- **1. Symbols**

- A *symbol* is anything that meaningfully represents something else.
- Culture could not exist without symbols because there would be no shared meanings among people.
- Symbols help us communicate ideas such as love or patriotism because they express abstract concepts with visible objects.
- For example, flags can stand for patriotism, nationalism, school spirit, or religious beliefs held by members of a group or society.
- Gestures are a symbolic form of communication—a movement of the head, body, or hands can express our ideas or feelings to others.

- **2. Language**

- *Language* is a set of symbols that expresses ideas and enables people to think and communicate with one another.
- Verbal (spoken) language and nonverbal (written or gestured) language help us describe reality.
- One of our most important human attributes is the ability to use language to share our experiences, feelings, and knowledge with others.
- "Life is lived as a series of conversations."
- Language also allows people to distinguish themselves from outsiders and maintain group boundaries and solidarity.

- *Language and Social Reality*
- Anthropological linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf have suggested that language not only expresses our thoughts and perceptions but also influences our perception of reality.
- "Language influences how we perceive things, which in turn influences our experience of the world. Our experiences help us develop language, but our use of language also influences our experience."
- What this means is that people who speak different languages actually perceive the world differently.
- It is also true that the language reflects the core values of the speakers in society.

- If language actually shapes the reality we perceive and experience, then some aspects of the world are viewed as important and others are virtually neglected because people know the world only in terms of the vocabulary and grammar of their own language.
- For example, the Aztecs had only one word for snow, frost, ice, and cold, and presumably tended to see these as essentially the same phenomenon.
- There is only one word for snow in English, but the Inuit (Eskimo) language, while having no general word for snow at all, has over twenty words associated with snow, making it possible for people to make subtle distinctions regarding different types of snowfalls, e.g., snow on the ground, snow falling, snow drifting, and so on.

- The Koya of South India do not distinguish among snow, fog, and dew, but their language distinguishes seven types of bamboo—distinctions that are important to them but that we would be unlikely to notice.
- Several terms for bananas in the Philippines.
- Even the color spectrum is dissected in different ways by different languages.
- The human eye can make between 7 and 10 million different color discriminations, but all languages recognize only a handful of different colors.
- Many languages recognize only two colors: for example, the Jale and the Dani of New Guinea divide the color spectrum into the colors *hui* and *ziza*, representing the warm and cold colors of the spectrum, respectively.

- In the present time, most people perceive time as something that can be saved, lost, or wasted; therefore, “being on time” or “not wasting time” is important.
- By contrast, people in preindustrial societies were not so attached to these conceptualizations of time.



- The fact that languages influence people's thought is exemplified by the fact that bilingual speakers seem to think differently when they change languages.
- In one study, students in Hong Kong were asked to complete a values test and they expressed more traditional Chinese values when they answered in Cantonese than when they spoke English.
- A survey also showed that while Americans are more likely to choose extreme responses like "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree," Chinese and Japanese respondents tend to choose the less extreme responses.

- If language does create reality, are we trapped by our language?
- Many social scientists agree that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis overstates the relationship between language and our thoughts and behavior patterns.
- Although they acknowledge that language has many subtle meanings and that words used by people reflect their central concerns, most sociologists contend that language may *influence* our behavior and interpretation of social reality but does not determine it.

### • **3. Beliefs**

- A central component of nonmaterial culture is *beliefs*—the conviction that certain things are true.
- Beliefs provide a meaning system around which culture is organized, and whatever the beliefs, they orient people to the world and provide answers to questions about the meaning of life.
- Whether belief stems from religion, myth, folklore, or science, it shapes what people believe to be true and guides people through their lives.
- Shared beliefs are part of what binds people together in society.
- Beliefs are also the basis for many of the norms and values of a given culture.
- Faith in a supreme being, democracy, and trust in another person are examples of beliefs.