

# UNIT Culture and Orientations to Life

## 3.2


### “Culture within Us”: Our Lens for Viewing Life

 **Explore the Concept**  
The Asian American Population of the United States – The Diversity of Cultures in **mysoclab**

sounds like a strange statement, but it makes sense. It simply means that we tend to take the world we are reared in for granted. Our culture—except in unusual circumstances—remains below our radar. We take *our* speech, *our* gestures, *our* beliefs, and *our* customs for granted. We assume that they are “normal,” even “natural,” and we almost always follow them without question.

Culture’s influence on you is so profound that it touches almost every aspect of who and what you are. You came into this life without a language; without values and morality; with no ideas about religion, war, money, love, use of space, and so on. You possessed none of these fundamental orientations that are so essential in determining the type of person you have become. Yet they now are an essential part of you, and, like the fish and the water, you take them for granted.

Sociologists call this *culture within us*. These learned and shared ways of believing and of doing (another definition of culture) that penetrate us at an early age become our taken-for-granted assumptions about what normal life is. *Culture becomes the lens through which we perceive and evaluate what is going on around us*. Seldom do we question these assumptions, for, like water to a fish, the lens through which we view life remains largely beyond our perception.

 **Watch the Video**  
Sociology on the Job: Culture in **mysoclab**

culture “from the outside,” but my trip to Africa revealed how fully I had internalized my culture. My upbringing in Western culture had given me assumptions about social life that had become rooted deeply in my being—eye contact, hygiene, and the use of space. These are an essential part of the way I get through everyday life in the States. But in this part of Africa these assumptions were useless in helping me navigate everyday life. No longer could I count on people to stare tactfully, to take precautions against invisible microbes, or to stand in line, one behind the other.

Anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936) once said, “The last thing a fish would ever notice would be water.” This


## WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO LEARN?

After you have read this unit, you should be able to

- 1 Explain how culture is the lens through which you view life.
- 2 Know what culture shock, ethnocentrism, and cultural relativism are.

I found these unfamiliar behaviors unsettling, for they violated my basic expectations of “the way people *ought* to be.” I did not even realize how firmly I held these expectations until they were challenged in this unfamiliar setting. When my nonmaterial culture failed me—when it no longer helped me to make sense out of the world—I experienced a disorientation known as **culture shock**. In the case of buying tickets, being several inches taller than most Moroccans let me outreach others. But I never got used to the idea that pushing ahead of others was “right.” I always felt guilty when I used my size to receive better treatment.

**IF YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE** about culture shock, as it was experienced by the Hmong when they were abruptly transported from Laotian villages to the United States,

 **Read more from the author:** Culture Shock: The Arrival of the Hmong in **mysoclab**

**IN SUM:** To avoid losing track of the ideas we are discussing, let’s pause for a moment to summarize and, in some instances, clarify the principles we have covered.

1. There is nothing “natural” about material culture. Arabs wear gowns on the street and feel that it is natural to do so. Americans do the same with jeans.
2. There is nothing “natural” about nonmaterial culture. It is just as arbitrary to stand in line as to push and shove.
3. Culture penetrates deeply into our thinking, becoming a taken-for-granted lens through which we see the world.
4. Culture provides implicit instructions that tell us what we ought to do and how we ought to think. It establishes a fundamental basis for making our decisions.
5. We view what people do as right or wrong according to the culture we internalize. (I, for example, believed deeply

**culture shock** the disorientation that people experience when they come in contact with a fundamentally different culture and can no longer depend on their taken-for-granted assumptions about life



This photo of passengers riding outside a train because the inside is packed illustrates how the norms of India differ from those of the United States.

that it was wrong to push and shove to get ahead of others.)

6. Coming into contact with a radically different culture challenges our basic assumptions of life. (I experienced culture shock when I discovered that my deeply ingrained cultural ideas about hygiene and the use of personal space no longer applied.)
7. Culture itself is universal. All people have culture, for a society cannot exist without developing shared, learned ways of dealing with the challenges of life. The specifics of those cultures, though, differ from one group of people to another.

## Ethnocentrism and Orientations to Life



### Read the Document

"Body Ritual Among the Nacirema"  
by Horace Miner in **mysoclab**

way our own group does things. All of us learn that the ways of our own group are good and right, even superior to other ways of life. As sociologist William Sumner (1906), who developed this concept, said, "One's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it." The results of ethnocentrism are both positive and negative. On the positive side, it creates in-group loyalties. On the negative side, ethnocentrism leads to discrimination against people whose ways differ from ours.

"Culture within us" brings **ethnocentrism**, a tendency to judge others by the

**ethnocentrism** the use of one's own culture as a yardstick for judging the ways of other individuals or groups, generally leading to a negative evaluation of their values, norms, and behaviors

To counter our tendency to use our own culture as the standard by which we judge other cultures, we can practice **cultural relativism**; that is, we can try to understand a culture on its own terms. This means looking at how the elements of a culture fit together, without judging those elements as better or worse than our own way of life.

With our own culture embedded so deeply within us, however, practicing cultural relativism can be a challenge. A little while ago, I asked how you felt about bullfighting. From the perspective of U.S. culture, it is wrong to raise bulls for the purpose of stabbing them to death in front of crowds that shout "Olé!" If we use cultural relativism, however, we will view bullfighting from the perspective of the culture in which it takes place. We will look at *its* history, *its* folklore, *its* ideas of bravery, and *its* ideas of sex roles.

You may still regard bullfighting as wrong, of course, especially if your culture, which is part of you, has no history of bullfighting. We all possess culturally specific ideas about cruelty to animals, ideas that have evolved slowly and match other elements of our culture. In the United States, for example, practices that once were common in some areas—cockfighting, dogfighting, bear-dog fighting, and so on—have been gradually eliminated.

No matter how hard we try, none of us can be entirely successful at practicing cultural relativism. Our own culture is too deeply engrained in us for this to occur. We just can't help thinking that our ways are superior. To see what I mean, consider the foods discussed in *Making It Personal* on page 52.

I think you'll find the next attempt to apply cultural relativism a bit easier. Look at the photos on the next page. As you view them, try to appreciate the cultural differences they illustrate about standards of beauty.

## ATTACK ON CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Although cultural relativism can help us avoid cultural smugness, this view has come under attack. In a provocative book, *Sick Societies* (1992), anthropologist Robert Edgerton suggests that we should develop a scale for evaluating cultures on their "quality of life," much as we do for U.S. cities. He asks why we should consider cultures that practice female circumcision, gang rape, or wife beating, or cultures that sell little girls into prostitution, as morally equivalent to those that do not. Cultural values that result in exploitation, he says, are inferior to those that enhance people's lives.

Edgerton's sharp questions and challenging examples bring us to a topic that comes up repeatedly in this text: the disagreements that arise among scholars as they confront contrasting views of reality. It is difficult to argue against Edgerton. I find myself nodding my head immediately. Yet I fear ethnocentrism—that the standards for judging a culture's "quality of life" will reflect the culture of those who do the judging. The matter is complicated, with arguments on both sides. Such questioning of assumptions keeps sociology interesting.

**cultural relativism** not judging a culture but trying to understand it on its own terms



## Standards of Beauty

Standards of beauty vary so greatly from one culture to another that what one group finds attractive, another may not. Yet, in its ethnocentrism, each group thinks that its standards are the best—that the appearance reflects what beauty “really” is.

As indicated by these photos, around the world men and women aspire to their group’s norms of physical attractiveness. To make themselves appealing to others, they try to make their appearance reflect their culture’s standards.



Ecuador



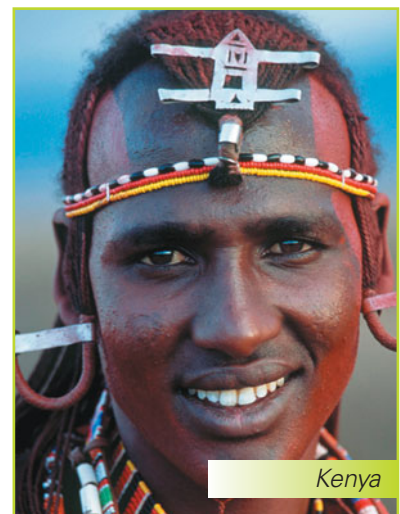
United States



Thailand



China



Kenya



Cameroon



Tibet



New Guinea



Roasted guinea pigs for sale in Lima, Peru.

Could you eat these things, prepared in this way, which are assumed to be natural within that culture?

If you are still nodding your head, and judging these things as fine despite your culture, then try this one. In parts of Thailand, scorpions are on the menu of restaurants. So are crickets, beetles, even flies (Gampbell 2006).

Did you handle those okay? I doubt it, but let's try one more. In some Asian cultures, chubby dogs and cats are considered a delicacy. ("I'll take the one wagging its tail. Lightly browned with a little puppy sauce, please.")

Why is it that we have difficulty with these types of foods? It is *not* because of the food. It is because of our culture. We have learned that certain things are "food" and other things are "not food." ("Puppies are supposed to be cute pets, not food.") This is *culture within us*.

You "learned food" at such a young age that this might be difficult to accept. It's the same for everyone in the world. This becomes clearer if we turn the situation around. Marston Bates (1967), a zoologist, was in the llanos of Colombia sharing a dish of toasted ants. When he and his host began to talk about what people eat or do not eat, he remarked that in the United States people eat the legs of frogs. He reported that "the very thought of this filled my ant-eating friends with horror. It was as though I had mentioned some repulsive sex habit."

Cultural relativism is an attempt to refocus our cultural lens so we can appreciate other ways of life rather than simply asserting "Our way is right." But you can see how difficult this is.

## MAKING IT PERSONAL

### Bon Appétit. Would You Eat These Foods?

You probably know that the French like to eat snails. Would you?

Or how about this? A friend, Dusty Friedman, told me that when she was traveling in Sudan, she was served and ate raw baby camel liver. She also ate camel milk cheese patties that had been cured in dry camel dung.

## UNIT 3.2 // TESTING MYSELF

### DID I LEARN IT?

ANSWERS ARE AT THE  
END OF THE CHAPTER

- When Ralph Linton said, "The last thing a fish would ever notice would be water," he meant that
  - like fish, we don't observe much about our world
  - fish have bad eyesight
  - water in its pure form is so clear it is practically invisible
  - we tend to take the culture we are reared in for granted
- Culture—the learned and shared ways of believing and doing—penetrates us at an early age, and
  - is highly questioned by most of us during our teen years
  - is the source of rebellion for those who get in trouble with the law
  - becomes our taken-for-granted assumptions about what normal life is
  - is difficult to transfer
- The phrase culture within us means that
  - culture is the lens through which we perceive and evaluate the world
  - culture is like food to our bodies
  - we do not eat foods that are not part of our culture
  - if you want to study culture, you have to study people
- The term ethnocentrism refers to our tendency to
  - find fault with others as we encourage them to live up to our standards
  - be culturally relative
  - avoid foods that are not like those we learned to eat during childhood
  - judge others by the way our own group does things
- There are two right answers here. Choose the broadest. The term culture shock refers to the disorientation people feel when they
  - are exposed to a culture that differs fundamentally from their own

- b. try to discover new ways of doing things
  - c. sit down to eat a meal and learn that they are being served dog
  - d. face their worst fears
6. The positive side of ethnocentrism is that it
- a. provides a way to overcome our prejudices
  - b. is never far from being a good guide to everyday life
  - c. creates in-group loyalties
  - d. is a source of goodwill among people
7. The negative side of ethnocentrism is that it
- a. can disappear practically overnight
  - b. leads to discrimination
  - c. seldom turns out to be right
  - d. is a foolish choice to make
8. The term cultural relativism refers to
- a. our tendency to be ethnocentric
  - b. an effort to find something good in another culture even when it is bad
  - c. trying to understand a culture on its own terms
  - d. the culture that we internalize becoming the “right” way of doing things
9. From the Making It Personal on food customs, it would be fair to say that
- a. we are like cows when it comes to food; our bodies tell us what we should eat
  - b. items viewed as food in one culture can be seen as repulsive in another culture
  - c. everyone views food in about the same way
  - d. there is good reason that hamburgers have become popular around the world
10. Robert Edgerton’s attack on cultural relativism centers on the idea that
- a. cultures that try to reform themselves are better than those that do not
  - b. there are a lot of ways to develop a quality of life
  - c. the quality of life of a culture cannot be established
  - d. cultures that have less exploitation represent a better quality of life

# UNIT

## Symbolic Culture: Language

# 3.3

### WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO LEARN?

After you have read this unit, you should be able to

- 1 Explain how language is the basis of culture and even makes a past and future possible.
- 2 Summarize the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and know how language contains ways of viewing the world.

The problem with the term *nonmaterial culture*, developed by anthropologists, is that it refers to what this part of culture is *not*. The term says that nonmaterial culture is *not* its material part. This is okay, but sociologists prefer to use a term that refers to what it *is*, so they usually call it **symbolic culture**. They chose this term because nonmaterial culture consists of the symbols that people use. A **symbol** is something to which we attach meaning and use to communicate with one another.

For a group to exist, it is essential that its members be able to communicate with one another. Talk, as you know, is our usual form of communicating, so let’s suppose that you are listening and watching people who are talking. What do you hear and see? You hear language and see gestures, two of the main elements of *symbolic culture*. To start our exploration of symbolic culture, then, let’s begin with how we communicate with one another.

## Language

**Language** consists of symbols that can be combined in an infinite number of ways for the purpose of communicating abstract thought. Each word is actually a symbol, a sound to which we have

**symbolic culture** another term for nonmaterial culture

**symbol** something to which people attach meaning and then use to communicate with others

**language** a system of symbols that can be combined in an infinite number of ways and can represent not only objects but also abstract thought