



# Culture and the Culture-Learning Process

*The first month or two in class I was always saying, “Look at me when I talk to you,” and the (Navajo) kids simply wouldn’t do it. They would always look at their hands, or the blackboard, or anywhere except looking me in the face. And finally, one of the other teachers told me it was a cultural thing. They should warn us about things like that. Odd things. It makes children seem evasive.*

—Tony Hillerman, *The Skinwalkers*

## Chapter Outline

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**f o c u s   q u e s t i o n s**

1. How is it that you became the cultural being that you are today?
2. How have different individuals and institutions you have come into contact with influenced you?
3. How has the media influenced your cultural identity? your religion? your community? What other forces operate to influence your cultural identity?
4. What do you know about your own culture that you can use to better understand another culture, or that will enable you to talk intelligently about cultural differences with someone who is different from you?

The word *education* is derived from the Latin word *edu-care*, meaning “to lead forth.” If we are to seriously engage in the education of students who will be proactive citizens in a multicultural and global society, then we must lead our students in such a manner that they understand where they have come from, are cognizant of current conditions that affect them and the world, and are able to take the necessary steps to adjust to change.

Clearly, *education* is a broader term than *schooling*. Indeed, one of the difficulties we all encounter in talking about education at all is that it is pervasive in human life. Not often emphasized, however, are the actual settings, apart from schools, in which education occurs and the precise nature of teaching and learning in those settings. Yet, it is in these settings—particularly in the home, the neighborhood, and our houses of worship—that we acquire the language, knowledge, attitudes, and values that let us engage in the dramatic conversation called culture. It is in these settings that we develop the cultural identities that we bring with us to school. And it is through these settings, including the school, that we must work to lead our students forward into the future.

Giroux and Simon speak directly to the importance of teachers understanding their own cultural identities and those of their students:

By ignoring the cultural and social forms that are authorized by youth and simultaneously empower and disempower them, educators risk complicity in silencing and negating their students. This is unwittingly accomplished by refusing to recognize the importance of those sites and social practices outside of the schools that actively shape student experiences and through which students often define and construct their sense of identity, politics, and culture.<sup>1</sup>

These ideas can be clarified through the use of a “thought experiment”—a community you can enter in your imagination, so as to consider the educational implications of living there. In this experiment, posit an imaginary medium-sized city of about three hundred thousand people—say it’s close (about an hour) to one or more major

metropolitan areas that have populations exceeding 1 million. Call this city Midland. Now, conditions in such a city will vary, depending on its ethnic and religious composition, its economic base, and its location (Is it in New England? the deep south? the Midwest? the mountain states of the west? the southwest? the northwest?). The size of Midland is also a factor to consider. If it were a city of several million, or a village of several hundred (or thousand) people, conditions might be different. In this thought experiment, Midland may assume a variety of characteristics: read on and see what you can surmise.

### case study Midland: A Thought Experiment



*To begin with, the imaginary city of Midland is clearly a geographical community, in the sense that it is in some ways like a small city and in other ways like a large town. It has city limits, a mayor, and a city council. It has its own set of laws and is also under the jurisdiction of its county, its state, and the nation. Importantly, it also has a fairly good-sized river that runs through the very middle of the city, a fact that the residents acknowledge by using the terms north side and south side.*

*The city of Midland has a rather wealthy residential section, a number of middle-class neighborhoods, and a few neighborhoods that are rather poor. It has some manufacturing industry, a number of churches, two synagogues—one conservative and one reform—as well as a mosque and a Buddhist temple. It has numerous day care centers, a museum, a relatively large public library with several branch libraries, a television station, several radio stations, and a daily newspaper. There are three hospitals—one of them Catholic—and numerous “neighborhood” medical drop-in centers. It has department stores, discount stores, bars, neighborhood convenience stores, and several commercial and service businesses. It has a municipal park and a Class A professional baseball team with its own ballpark, a YM/YWCA, a welfare department, a children’s services department, and a juvenile reformatory for boys. It has a community theater, several malls, and a downtown business district. It has an adequate number of lawyers, doctors, dentists, accountants, architects, and other professionals. Although the middle schools are all public, it has both public and private elementary and high schools. There are a few Catholic schools as well as one small Jewish day school. There is a well-established, well-endowed private school just outside the city limits. Midland has a university and a community college, both of which interact well with the community.*

*Within the geographical community that is Midland, there is also a set of educational communities—groups of people who are actively engaged in instruction and learning (formal and informal) as well as those organizations and settings in which deliberate and systematic teaching and learning occurs. It is in these educational communities that the dramatic conversations of culture take place—in particular ways in families, neighborhoods, businesses, religious settings, and voluntary associations. So the particular combination of settings in Midland sets the tone, so to speak, of the community itself and of the educational messages—both coherent and conflicting—available to its people.*

*Say, for the sake of the experiment, that Midland is in upstate New York and is a largely Protestant city (of all denominations, including three good-sized black churches). It also has a considerable number of Catholic families, enough to support*

*several churches, as well as a few Catholic schools, 13 public elementary schools that feed into six middle schools, and four comprehensive high schools. There are relatively small groups of Jewish, Islamic and Buddhist families.*

*Say, further, that for the most part, Midland is a largely white, working- and middle-class city. The African Americans who live there have been there for at least fifty years, and they comprise about 12 percent of the population. Most migrated here from the deep south after World War II to work in the city's relatively small factories. Let's further suppose that these industries are suffering from severe competition, both domestic and foreign. Business is not good, and the residents of Midland are fearful that many jobs could be lost, thus creating a depressed economic situation for all income-producing businesses.*

*As in all communities, the cultural conversations of Midland have their roots in the economic, religious, social class, and family life of the town. The particular education received by an individual growing up in Midland depends, in large part, on the ethnic, religious, social class, and occupational character of the individual's family and the character of the housing and neighborhoods in which the individual lives, works, and plays. These factors—as well as others, such as the age of the individual, the individual's health, and the size and composition of the family of which the individual is a member—also have a great deal to do with the access the individual has to a broad or narrow range of educational resources and experiences available both within and outside the school.*

*Take a look, now, at four sixteen-year-old high school students who live in Midland. What cultural conversations do you think have meaning for them?*

**Michael Williams** is an African American who has lived his entire life with his grandmother and grandfather (retired and at home), his mother (an assembly line worker at the light-bulb factory), his aunt (who works evenings cleaning at the museum), two brothers, and a sister in a house on the northeast side of the city. He doesn't know who or where his father is. His older brother works in a local factory and never went on to college after he graduated from high school. The family regularly attends the A.M.E. church. As a child, Michael played basketball at the community house near his home and continues to help out there with younger children. He attends the public North High School and is in the college prep academic program, where he earns excellent grades. He has a steady girlfriend; is a member of the high school golf team, which practices at the local golf course; is on the school newspaper staff, which is advised by an editor of the Midland newspaper; and works after school and weekends at the golf course.

**Toni Catalano** lives in a pleasant ranch house on a cul-de-sac on the south side of town. She is the youngest of a large, extended Italian Catholic family; her parents immigrated to the United States just before she was born. Although she attended Catholic parochial school through the eighth grade, she currently attends the public South High School, where she is majoring in business subjects and is planning to become a secretary—perhaps in one of the local banks. Her family has always been very involved in the local Italian community as well as in the church, and Toni gained a considerable amount of attention (not all of it positive) when she became the first alter girl at St. Mary's. Two of her aunts are nuns; one of them, Sister Rita, is a missionary in Central America. One of her uncles is a priest in a church in a neighboring suburb and disapproves heartily of her aunt's being in Central America. Nevertheless, her family keeps in close contact with Sister Rita, and Toni corresponds with her frequently—increasingly by e-mail. At home, the family speaks a fair amount of Italian, something that Toni finds rather embarrassing when her friends are around. In school, she earns reasonably good grades, is on the cheerleading squad, and is a scorekeeper for the wrestling team. She dates a number of boys, mostly athletes, and works on weekends at a department store in a local shopping mall.

**Steven Wong** lives in a large and comfortable house on The Hill, on the west side of town, with his parents and a younger sister. His father is a lawyer and his mother, an artist, is in charge of the adult volunteers (called docents) at the museum where Steve sometimes works as a guide for special exhibits. His family does not belong to any religious group. He attends a private high school for boys, where he struggles a bit for average grades, and is a member of the tennis and debate teams. As a child, Steve played Little League baseball, belonged to the Boy Scouts, and traveled extensively in the United States and China to visit family. He doesn't date much, and when he does it is usually with non-Asian girls who are children of his parents' friends. He takes karate lessons every week and participates in formal demonstrations of the martial arts. He is not certain that he wants to go to college, much to his parents' dismay.

**Shameka Collins** is living in one of only three African American families on her street, which is on the south side of town. Shameka lives with her parents, an African American mother who works as a bookkeeper for a local department store, and a European American father, who spends much of his time working out of state. She sees him only occasionally—perhaps once or twice a month. Shameka is the only biracial student in her school, although most other students are not aware that her father is white. She has an older brother who is stationed on a nuclear submarine presently on duty in the Persian Gulf. As a child, Shameka was a Girl Scout for a while, but dropped out. She has gone to Sunday school at the local Presbyterian church all her life. After school and on Saturdays, she works at the main branch of the public library downtown, saving most of the money she makes for college. She does not have either the time or the inclination to date much, but she does find time to go to all the exhibitions at the museum and to all the local community theater productions. Once she even had a small part in a play there. Since Shameka and her mother are generally alone, they spend as much time together as possible. Her mother has taught her to sew, and she makes almost all her own clothes. She worries about leaving home when she goes to college and is trying to decide whether to attend the local community college for two years before actually leaving home. Because she takes advanced placement courses in high school, she will be eligible for courses at the college in her senior year and will probably become a student there. She thinks perhaps she will become a doctor.

*Each of these students, lifelong residents of Midland, participates in a particular pattern of educational life, out of which has emerged a cultural identity. The cultural knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and values of these students, like those of most Americans, are multiple—none identifies with a single cultural group. Yet their cultural and educational patterns are different and sometimes surprising. How do you see their various cultural influences impacting their lives? What aspects of their upbringing do you think influences them most today? In what ways are they similar to one another? different? In what ways are they similar or different to you? Can you put yourself in Midland?*



## Exploring the Concept of Culture

One of the greatest difficulties people have when they begin to explore concepts related to culture and culture learning is that of agreeing on what it is they are talking about. This chapter looks closely at the concept of culture and the culture-learning process; that is, how we acquire a cultural identity. The chapter begins with some definitions of culture and with some of the analytical concepts devised by social scientists in their attempts to understand cultural differences among groups of people as well as individuals. This discussion sets the stage for subsequent analysis of cross-cultural interaction and intercultural development that occurs in the context of schools.



**Activity and Reading 4:  
The Nature of Culture and Culture Learning**

## ***Defining Culture***

**Culture** is studied by many different disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, education, psychology, business, and the military. If you were to peruse the literature of these various disciplines looking for the concept of culture, you would find literally hundreds of definitions. Some of these definitions are more useful than others in an examination of how culture influences the teaching-learning process. What all these definitions seem to have in common is the idea that culture refers to a human-made part of the environment as opposed to aspects that occur in nature. Culture determines, to a large extent, peoples' thoughts, ideas, patterns of interaction, and material adaptations to the world around them. This chapter explores this notion in greater detail as it looks at insights and practices from various disciplines.

Coon refers to culture as “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or a population.”<sup>2</sup> He likens culture to the act of cooking. When cooking, you begin with some basic ingredients, but then you add a few condiments, include a little bit more or less of certain items, adjust the cooking time, and so forth. The criteria by which cultures define themselves, and differentiate themselves from one another, vary a great deal. The basic ingredients determining a culture may be geography, ethnicity, language, religion, and history. The factors that divide cultures can consist of any combination of these elements plus the “condiments” of the local scene. In Bosnia, for instance, the split among Croats, Serbs, and Muslims is almost entirely religious. The situation is similar in India, where religion divides Muslim and Hindus; however, the Hindu majority is further split according to the caste to which one is born. In the United States and other modern nation-states, group loyalties based on cultural differences exist, but more or less as subsets of an overarching group loyalty called *nationalism* or *patriotism*. Ethnicity further divides these groups.

A culturally defined group can be as small as a group of Aborigines in the outback of Australia or as large as a nation-state. It can exist in a small, defined territory, or its members can share a territory with other culturally defined groups. It can be a closed system, or it can be open to new ideas introduced from other cultures. The only real requirement is that people who share the culture sense that they are different from those who do not belong to their group.

## ***Culture in Everyday Use***

Sociologists, who study culture in terms of various competing social groups within a society, have developed a number of concepts that are useful in discussions of cultural pluralism. Some of these terms are used interchangeably and often cause confusion. Five terms commonly used to describe social groups that share important cultural elements but that are smaller than a whole society are subculture, microculture, ethnic group, minority group, and people of color.

### ***Subculture***

**Subculture** refers to a social group with shared characteristics that distinguish it in some way from the larger cultural group or society in which it is embedded. Generally,

a subculture is distinguished either by a unifying set of ideas and/or practices (such as the corporate culture or the drug culture) or by some demographic characteristic (such as the adolescent culture or the culture of poverty).<sup>3</sup>

### **Microculture**

**Microculture** also refers to a social group that shares distinctive traits, values, and behaviors that set it apart from the parent macroculture of which it is a part. Although the terms *microculture* and *subculture* are often used interchangeably, *microculture* seems to imply a greater linkage with the parent culture. Microcultures often mediate—that is, interpret and transmit—the ideas, values, and institutions of the larger political community.<sup>4</sup> Thus, for example, the family, the workplace, or the classroom can each be thought of as a microculture embedded in the larger culture of the neighborhood, the business, or the school. These larger macrocultures are themselves embedded in larger professional, regional, or national cultures. Thus a particular entity, such as the school, may be simultaneously both a macroculture (the culture of the school as a model of society) and a microculture (the culture of the particular school).

### **Minority Group**

**Minority group** refers to a social group that occupies a subordinate position in a society. Wagley and Harris define a minority group as one that experiences discrimination and subordination within a society, is separated by physical or cultural traits disapproved of by the dominant group, shares a sense of collective identity and common burdens, and is characterized by marriage within the group.<sup>5</sup> However, characterizing minority groups based on these criteria sometimes leads to confusion and inaccuracy. For example, women are often referred to as a minority group because they are thought to be oppressed, even though they constitute more than half the general population and do not, as a rule, marry within their group. Similarly, when students who are African American, Native American, or Hispanic constitute a majority of the population in a particular school, the school is often referred to as a “majority-minority school.” The term *minority* can also be used in different ways in different countries. In the Netherlands, for instance, *minority* refers to immigrant groups that occupy a low socioeconomic status. Chinese, for instance, are considered minorities in the United States and Canada, but not in the Netherlands because they do not have low socioeconomic status.<sup>6</sup>

### **Ethnic Group**

**Ethnic group** refers to groups who share a common heritage. When you are asked to complete the statement, “I am \_\_\_\_\_” using as many descriptors as possible to define yourself, those statements that reflect identification with some collective or reference group are often indicative of your ethnic identity. When you respond that you are Jewish or Polish or Italian, you are identifying with a group of people who share a common heritage, history, celebrations, and traditions, who enjoy similar foods and might speak a common language other than English. A sense of peoplehood, or the feeling that a person’s own destiny is somehow linked with others who share this same knowledge, reflects identification with an ethnic group.



**Activity 10:**  
**Who Am I?**



### ***People of Color***

**People of Color** refers to nonwhite minority group members, but reflects recent demographic realities of the United States. The phrase *people of color* refers to groups such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans and is preferred over *ethnic minority* because these groups are, in many schools and communities, the majority rather than the minority.

As the United States and its schools grow increasingly complex with respect to cultural difference, many voices are beginning to criticize the use of collective terminology like *people of color*. These voices call for awareness and understanding of specific ethnic, racial, religious, and other groups. In this effort, it is recognized that the terms *Hispanic* or *Latino*, for example, are only umbrella terms for a number of Spanish-speaking ethnic groups, including Puerto Rican, Spanish, Salvadoran, and Mexican. Similarly, the term *Native American* is an umbrella term for an enormous variety of tribal identities (over 400 officially recognized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs), including the indigenous people of Alaska and Hawaii. Clearly, these groups can be as different from one another as they can be from the mainstream society.

## **Commonalities in Definitions of Culture**

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Many definitions of culture ask the question, What do all cultures have in common? Some try to answer this question by examining the functions or purposes of culture. Webb and Sherman, for example, describe culture in a functional way:

Cultures solve the common problems of human beings, but they solve them in different ways. . . . Each provides its people with a means of communication (*language*). Each determines who wields power and under what circumstances power can be used (*status*). Each provides for the regulation of reproduction (*family*) and supplies a system of rules (*government*). These rules may be written (*laws*) or unwritten (*custom*), but they are always present. Cultures supply human beings with an explanation of their relationship to nature (*magic, myth, religion, and science*). They provide their people with some conception of time (*temporality*). They supply a system by which significant lessons of the culture (*history*) can be given a physical representation and stored and passed on to future generations. The representation usually comes in the form of dance, song, poetry, architecture, handicrafts, story, design, or painting (*art*). What makes cultures similar is the problems they solve, not the methods they devise to solve them.<sup>7</sup>

Culture can also be understood in terms of the assumptions or ideas inherent in the concept itself. Four of these assumptions seem particularly important.

### ***Humans Construct Culture***

Human beings are born with certain genetically determined predispositions, some of which underlie behavior while others direct physical features. Although these predispositions are not precise, they do help to determine the parameters under which humans develop. Humans have fewer biological instincts (e.g., breathing, swallowing) than any other species does, which means that we are born relatively helpless and remain so for



a considerable amount of time, longer than any other organism in the animal kingdom. Unlike most members of the animal world, we are not biologically programmed so that we automatically know how to utilize our environment to find food and shelter. In short, we do not know how to survive without other people to care for us and to teach us. Therefore, humans must discover ways of effectively interacting both with their environment and with each other. They must learn how to *construct* the knowledge, including rules of living, that will enable them to survive. This knowledge, the manner in which it is presented (in the family, in the neighborhood, in literature, art, school lessons, etc.), and the meaning it has for us is called culture. Culture, then, is the one factor that determines the kinds of guidelines to which the individual is exposed.

The concept of culture usually refers to things (both physical and mental) that are made or constructed by human beings rather than to things that naturally occur in nature. When you look out over a body of water, for instance, neither the water itself, the undeveloped beachfront, nor the horizon is considered culture. These items are naturally occurring components of the environment. How we *think about* and what we *do* with the natural environment, however, is usually dependent on our culture. Thus, a beachfront such as Miami Beach has, in the United States, been viewed as a good place to build condominiums, piers, a boardwalk, and a marina. In another culture, this same beachfront might be regarded as a sacred space, with little human intervention allowed.

These physical artifacts of mainstream American culture are expressions of our underlying knowledge, attitudes, and values toward a part of the natural environment. Other expressions of our culture are our behavioral patterns, for example, our tendency to litter our oceans and beaches with various kinds of waste. Traditional Native American societies, on the other hand, have an entirely different view of the natural environment. Rather than seeing themselves as controllers of nature, many Native Americans (and others) believe strongly that human beings are an integral part of the natural world. And since in their view we live within rather than outside nature, they believe we should not interfere with it too much.

This example is interesting because it not only shows that different sociocultural groups perceive the world in very different terms but also that cultural beliefs and attitudes can and do change. Western peoples are now beginning to see the damage they have caused to the environment and to consider not only ways to clean it up but also ways of rethinking the very basis of the relation of human beings to nature.

## ***Culture Is Shared***

Culture is not only constructed; it is *socially constructed* by human beings in interaction with one another. Cultural ideas and understandings are shared by a group of people who recognize the knowledge, attitudes, and values of one another. Moreover, they agree on which cultural elements are better than others. That is, cultural elements are usually arranged in a hierarchy of value, which can also change over time. Mainstream American attitudes about children's place in the economy provide a good example. Before the middle of the nineteenth century, children in the United States were regarded as economic assets to their families and to the community. That is, they worked not only on the farm or in the shop but also often outside the family for money that went to help

support the family. Zelizer makes a distinction between the “useful” and the “useless” child in talking about the change that occurred during the last half of the century:

By 1900 middle-class reformers began indicting children’s economic cooperation as unjustified parental exploitation, and child labor emerged for the first time as a major social problem in the United States. . . . By 1930, most children under fourteen were out of the labor market and into schools.<sup>8</sup>

This example illustrates the changing nature of cultural ideas. The notion that children do not belong in the labor market and that parents whose children bring income into the family may be exploiting them has become a highly valued idea in our society, but it is one that is relatively new. In contrast to early-nineteenth-century families, we believe that children should be in school when they are young. Moreover, when we encounter families that do send their children out to work, whether it be in the United States or elsewhere, we have a sense that they are doing something wrong. Thus, in contemporary mainstream U.S. culture, until our children are in mid-adolescence, we place a greater value on the “useless” (nonworking) child than we do on the “useful” one who works. Indeed, although many people find ways around it, we have in this country legal restrictions on the age at which children can be employed.

In nearly all instances, this shared cultural identification is transmitted from one generation to the next. One exception to this cultural transmission process, however, can be seen in the case of deaf persons whose primary language is a manual system, ASL (American Sign Language) in North America. Although most deaf persons have hearing parents, the Deaf normally form strong ties to their own community and tend to marry a deaf partner. Thus, cultural transmission in this instance is deferred until entry into the Deaf community occurs through instruction in schools for the deaf and through a network of social clubs, theater, political organizations, and publications. For some young people, their first enculturation into the Deaf community may come through enrollment at the world-famous Gallaudet University that provides schooling from pre-school levels through college.



### Culture of the Deaf

## ***Culture Is Both Objective and Subjective***

A third common feature of culture is that it is comprised of two components: objective elements and subjective elements.<sup>9</sup> The objective components of culture consist of the visible, tangible elements of a group, that is, the endless array of physical artifacts the people produce, the language they speak, the clothes they wear, the food they eat, and the unending stream of decorative and ritual objects they create. These elements are relatively easy to pick up or observe, and all people would describe them in a similar manner. It is the objective elements of culture that are most commonly thought of when cultural differences are considered. Subjective components of culture, on the other hand, are the invisible, intangible aspects of culture, including attitudes, values, norms of behavior, learning styles, and hierarchy of social roles—in short, the *meaning* that the more objective components of culture have for individuals and groups. In this respect, culture can be likened to an iceberg: only 10 percent of the whole is seen above the surface of the water. It is the 90 percent of the iceberg that is hidden beneath the surface of the water that most concerns

the ship's captain who must navigate the water. Like an iceberg, the most meaningful (and potentially dangerous) part of culture is the invisible or subjective part that is continually operating at the unconscious level that shapes people's perceptions and people's responses to those perceptions. It is this aspect of culture that leads to most intercultural misunderstandings, and that requires the most emphasis in good multicultural or intercultural education.

## ***Culture Is Nurtured***

A final assumption about culture is the idea that it involves nurturing and growth, similar to the nurturing of plants. In the case of humans, however, the growing process involves teaching the young, both formally and informally. Thus, to **enculturate** a child is to help that child become a member of her or his social groups. In the United States enculturation may mean helping a child negotiate the different cultural perspectives found among the various social groups in which he or she participates.

Culture is also related to growth through the fine arts (music, dance, literature, and the visual arts) as well as through social behavior. A "cultured" person is one who has been nurtured (helped to grow) by participation in such activities. However, observation tells us that it is people of comfortable circumstances who most frequently have the time, energy, and inclination to devote to such pursuits. Thus is born the notion of an elite (high-status) group.

The idea that culture "belongs" to an elite group also carries with it the notion that this kind of "high culture" has more value than what we might call "folk" culture. In part, this idea has its roots in the late nineteenth century, when western anthropologists first developed their ideas from the study of so-called primitive peoples. Comparing these civilizations to their own more technological societies, they saw differences that were perceived not simply as differences but as deficits. Warren's 1873 textbook on physical geography introduced its readers to the "races of man" in the following manner:

The Caucasian race is the truly cosmopolitan and historical race. The leading nations of the world, those who have reached the highest state of civilization and possess a history in the true sense of the word, belong to it. It has, therefore, not improperly been called the active race; while the others, embracing the uncivilized or half-civilized peoples, have been termed the passive races.<sup>10</sup>

Such quasi-evolutionary theories of culture have even been invoked to explain disabilities. Down's syndrome, for example, is named for John Haydon Langdon Down's ethnic classification, according to which individuals with "mongolian" features, whatever the "race" of their parents might be, represented regression to a more primitive state of evolutionary development. Tragically, before the discovery of its chromosomal basis in the 1950s, a newborn with Down's syndrome was often described as a "throwback," as were infants with a variety of congenital anomalies.

Western anthropologists' notion of cultural evolution was directed mainly at other (nonwestern) societies. At the top of the cultural hierarchy were the highly "civilized" peoples, mostly the Europeans who popularized the concept. At the bottom were the more primitive "savages" or "natives." Everyone else was placed in between and



### **Activity 5: Childhood Experiences**



### **High Culture**

thought of as having the potential to climb up the cultural ladder. Inherent in this and other cultural models was the anthropologists' assumption that the natural progression of culture is upward. Indeed, the idea of a hierarchy of cultures existed well before anthropology was even accepted as a scientific discipline. In 1824, half a century before Warren wrote his textbook, Thomas Jefferson wrote:

Let a philosophic observer commence a journey from the *savages* of the Rocky Mountains, eastwardly towards the seacoast. These he would observe in the earliest stages of association, living under no law but that of nature, subsisting and covering themselves with the flesh and skins of wild beasts. He would next find those on the frontiers in the *pastoral stage*, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own *semi-barbarous* citizens, the pioneers of the advance of *civilization*, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of *improving* man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day.<sup>11</sup>

Jefferson's categories foreshadow those of the early anthropologists. And in many ways our thinking has not moved very far beyond this framework. Books with such titles as *Affable Savages*<sup>12</sup> and commonly used terms such as *underdeveloped* and *developed nations*, or *Third World* versus *First World* perpetuate the idea of cultural movement toward something perceived as more ideal or better or more civilized. Moreover, the direction of this movement is generally toward a culture that looks a great deal like our own. While these ideas are largely discredited among modern anthropologists, they continue to exist in the minds of most Americans when contrasting U.S. society with other societies, particularly those that are less technological.

Traditionally, Americans have expected their schools to socialize all students into traditional European American, upper- and middle-class culture, generally referred to as "the best of western civilization." Although it is true that great art, beautiful music, and meaningful literature have been given to the world by western peoples, it is equally clear that western contributions do not represent all that is great and beautiful in the world.

## Applying the Concept of Culture

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When school programs are instituted to increase awareness and understanding of specific groups, they are called group-specific or **culture-specific approaches** and stress information about a particular group of people, usually identified by a single characteristic such as race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. Although these approaches have much to offer, several problems are associated with them. First, while they attend to differences *between* one group and another, these approaches still do not attend to important differences *within* groups. Consequently, they tend to give the impression that all people identified as belonging to a group (all Mexican Americans, all Jews, etc.) are alike, which is clearly not the case. Second, because these programs usually rely on students of certain *samples* of the larger group (e.g., *urban* African Americans, *white* middle-class girls, Navajo *who live on reservations*), they may promote stereotypes. Third, group-specific programs, because of their intentionally narrow focus, cannot attend to the wide array of differences that collectively control the teaching-learning process.

In contrast to the group-specific approach to understanding diversity is another, more inclusive approach that attempts to deal directly with the complex nature of cultural phenomena. Called a **culture-general approach**, it derives mainly from principles developed in the field of cross-cultural psychology and training. Cross-cultural psychologists are mostly interested in the effect of culture on the *individual* and on the interface or interaction between individuals of different groups. In addition to describing how culture affects an individual, these psychologists have also been developing a variety of training strategies to help individuals anticipate and deal effectively with problems that may arise in intercultural interaction.



### ***Culture-Specific versus Culture-General Frameworks***

It is important to understand the distinction between culture-specific and culture-general knowledge. A *culture-general* concept is one that is universal and applies to *all* cultural groups, as seen in the following example.

The way an individual “learns how to learn” depends on the socialization processes used by his or her culture. That is, learning style is related to socialization processes. This very general statement can be regarded as a cultural universal, or culture-general concept. It doesn’t tell us anything about an individual’s preferred learning style, but it does tell us that everyone has one and that it is formed by socialization experiences. Thus, knowing that socialization experiences vary from culture to culture, it follows that learning styles will also vary among cultures. Such a culture-general concept is valuable to teachers in that it warns them of the possibility that there will be many variations in learning style among their students; perhaps as many as there are cultural groups represented in their classroom. So informed, a teacher presiding over a multicultural classroom would be alert for signs of learning style differences and would attempt to develop alternative lesson plans or instructional approaches that match these differences.

A group-specific concept, on the other hand, is one that applies to a specific cultural group. For example, both Hawaiian and Native American children have historically acquired most of their knowledge, values, and attitudes about the world through direct participation in real-world events. Their teachers were usually other members of their family or ethnic group who were also participating in those events. Thus direct participation, or **in-context learning**, became their familiar and preferred learning style.

Contrast in-context learning against the more formal schooling given to most urban and suburban middle-class children. These children are sent to a captive learning environment (schools) where specially trained teachers who are usually total strangers use books and other abstract learning tools to provide indirect participation, or **out-of-context learning**, about real-world events. In a classroom where both cultural groups are present, the teacher should anticipate learning style differences (culture-general knowledge), try to assess the culture-specific learning styles that are present, and then adapt instruction accordingly.

In short, teachers in multicultural classrooms need to have both culture-general and culture-specific knowledge. That is, they need to know that certain cultural universals (e.g., learning style differences, patterns of communication, value orientation) are at work in every multicultural classroom, and then they need to gather—through observation, inquiry, and study—the particulars of those variations so that they can plan and

deliver instruction that is appropriate for *all* their students. To focus solely on culture-specific knowledge, which is always based on *samples* taken from some target culture, is to ignore not only individual differences within that group but also the cultural universals that cut across groups. Likewise, to focus solely on culture-general knowledge is to ignore the very real differences that separate groups and that provide a map for assessing and adapting instruction.



**Activity and  
Reading 6:  
Understanding  
Cultural  
Complexity**

### ***Themes from Cross-Cultural Psychology***

Cross-cultural psychology also offers teachers the following set of themes or principles that can be used to study cross-cultural interactions in the classroom.<sup>13</sup>

1. *People tend to communicate their cultural identity to others in the broadest possible terms.* For instance, on meeting someone for the first time, you may communicate many different things about yourself, for example, your age, nationality, ethnic group, religious affiliation, where you grew up, and the nature of your family. At other times you may describe your status at work or in the community, your health, your social class, or the way you have come to understand your gender. Each of these sources of cultural identity carries with it associated rules for behavior. We offer such information to new acquaintances because by doing so we give them cultural clues regarding what to expect from us and how to interact with us. People have multiple “cultures” influencing them at various times. Every one of us may thus be considered multicultural.
2. *Because we are all multicultural, our cultural identity is dynamic and always changing.* As our environmental circumstances and group associations change, we adapt our cultural identity and behavior accordingly. For example, in certain circumstances our gender-related knowledge and beliefs may be predominant; at another time our religious beliefs may stand out; and at still another, our ethnicity may be most important. Thus, our multicultural nature leads to behavior variations that are sometimes difficult to understand and appreciate.
3. *While culture is complex and variable, it is nevertheless patterned.* Culture helps individuals make sense of their world and thereby to develop routinized behavioral patterns to fit different environments. Common phrases such as the “culture of the organization,” “the culture of the community,” or the “culture of the society” refer to the fact that culture is not simply patterned for an individual but also for a setting, a community, or a society as a whole. When viewed from the outside, these patterns can appear quite complicated and difficult to understand. Yet each of us moves quite easily among the cultural patterns with which we are familiar. When confronted by someone whose behavior is *not* familiar, it is the responsibility of the outsider to listen, to observe, and to inquire closely enough so that the patterns of that person (or social group, or society) become evident and understandable. To do so decreases the possibility of misunderstanding and conflict and increases the possibility of new and useful understanding and appreciation.
4. *Interactions with other cultures can be viewed as a resource for understanding.* In this case, complexity can be an asset. The more knowledge and experience we have with other groups, the more sophisticated we can be in our interpretation of

events. The more complex our thinking is, then, the more lenses or insights we can bring to help understand a given situation. Culturally different encounters help prepare us to deal more effectively with the complexity that is increasingly a part of our lives. In short, the number of cultural variables we learn to accommodate will determine our ability to navigate within a fast-moving, ever-changing society.

5. *Behavior should be judged in relation to its context.* Observable behavior cannot be understood apart from the context in which it occurs. Seen outside its context, another's "different" behavior can, at best, seem meaningless and, at worst, be profoundly misinterpreted. Contextual inquiry allows us to be more accurate in our judgments of others. Consider this real-life example of an eleven-year-old boy who would become rowdy and disruptive in the classroom every day about 2:00 in the afternoon. Inevitably, the teacher sent the child to the office, where he was promptly sent home. Defined in terms of the middle-class cultural context of the school, this child was definitely a troubled child, and he was so labeled by nearly all the adults in the building. Eventually, however, an astute counselor recognized a pattern and did some inquiry. It turned out that the mother's boyfriend came home every day about 2:45, often quite drunk and abusive. In his rage, the boyfriend frequently abused the mother. The boy, quite accurately understanding the cultural pattern of the school, figured out that his misbehavior would result in his being sent home and that if he was sent home by 2:30, he would arrive before the boyfriend did and thus be able to protect his mother. Suddenly this so-called troubled boy's behavior makes sense, and he becomes something of a hero because he had found a way to protect his vulnerable mother. Without full knowledge of the context, behavior is often meaningless or badly misinterpreted. Culture thus provides the context from which to view others.
6. *Persons holding a multicultural perspective continually strive to find common ground between individuals.* In a sense, we must strive to be bifocal. That is, we must be able to see the similarities among people as well as their differences. While it is the differences that tend to stand out and separate people, it is precisely in our similarities where common ground, or a common meeting point, can be found. A multicultural perspective permits disagreement without anyone necessarily being accused of being wrong. If culture in all its complexity is understood as an individual's attempt to navigate the river of life, then cultural differences can be understood simply as pragmatic acts of navigation and judged accordingly. In this view, cultural differences become tolerable and the "we-they" or "us-them" debate is avoided. There are no winners and losers. We are all in this together. Either we all win—or we all lose.

## The Culture-Learning Process

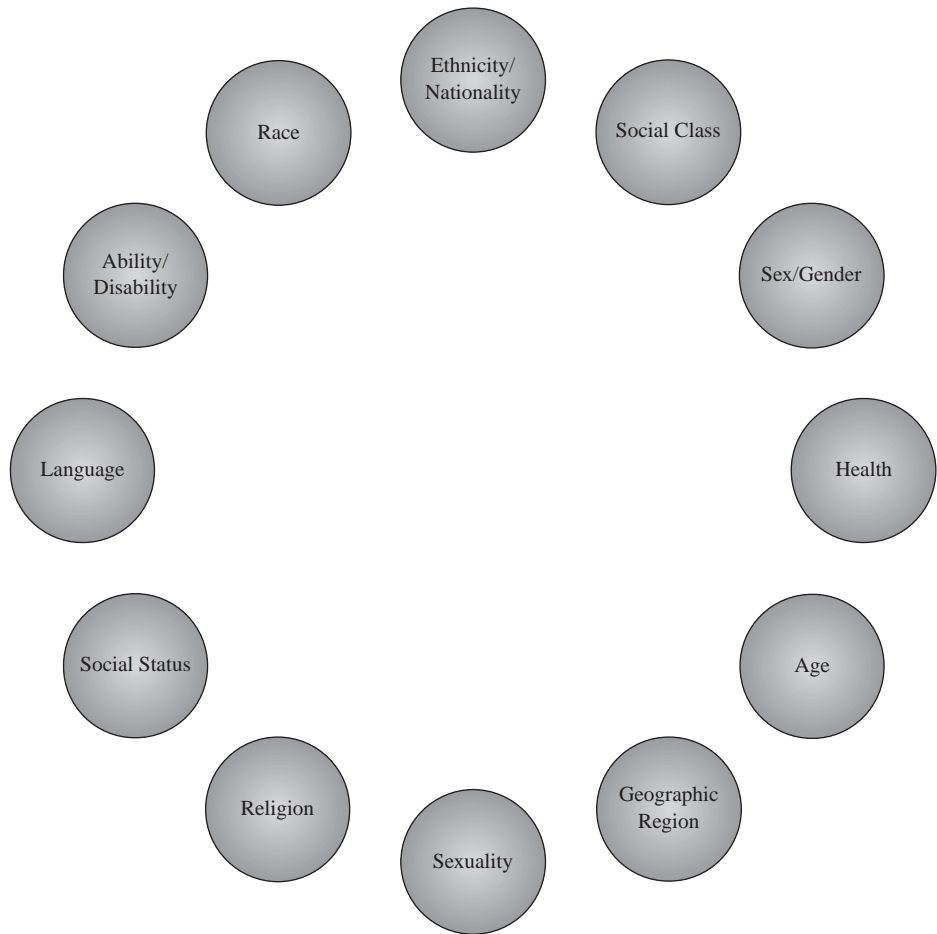
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Individuals tend to identify themselves in a broad manner and in terms of many physical and social attributes. For example, a young man might identify himself as an attractive, athletic, Asian American who intends to be a doctor and live in upper-class society. Other people also identify individuals according to these attributes, and interactions among



**Activity and Reading 11:  
The Culture-Learning Process**





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**figure 2.1** Sources of cultural identity.

individuals are often shaped by such identifications. Figure 2.1 shows twelve sources of cultural identity that influence teaching and learning. Who learns what, and how and when it is learned, is briefly described here and is further illustrated and discussed in later chapters.

### ***What Is Learned: The Sources of Cultural Knowledge***

*Race* is a very amorphous term. Biologically speaking, it refers to the clustering of inherited physical characteristics that favor adaptation to a particular ecological area. However, race is culturally defined in the sense that different societies emphasize different sets of physical characteristics when referring to the same race. In fact, the term

is so imprecise that it has even been used to refer to a wide variety of categories that are not physical, for instance, linguistic categories (the *English-speaking race*), religious categories (the *Jewish race*), national categories (the *Italian race*), and even to somewhat mythological categories (the *Teutonic race*).<sup>14</sup> Although race has often been defined as a biological category, it has been argued that race as a biological concept is of little use because there are no “pure” races.<sup>15</sup> As Yetman notes, “Many groups possess physically identifiable characteristics that do not become the basis for racial distinctions [and] . . . criteria selected to make racial distinctions in one society may be overlooked or considered insignificant or irrelevant by another. For instance, in much of Latin America skin color and the shape of the lips, important differentiating criteria in the United States, are much less important than are hair texture, eye color, and stature. A person defined as black in Georgia or Michigan might be considered white in Peru.”<sup>16</sup> Recent research in mapping the genetic code of five people of different races demonstrates that the concept of race has no scientific basis.<sup>17</sup> Thus, race is an important social characteristic not because of its biology but because of its cultural meaning in any given social group or society. In the United States, race is judged largely on the basis of skin color, which some people consider very meaningful and use as a criterion for extending or withholding privileges of various kinds. Through subtle yet effective socializing influences, group members can be taught to accept as “social fact” a myriad of myths and stereotypes regarding skin color, stature, facial features, and so forth.

Racism results from the transformation of race prejudice and/or ethnocentrism through the exercise of power against a racial group defined as inferior by individuals or by institutions, with the intentional or unintentional support of an entire culture. Simply stated, racism is preference for or belief in the superiority of one’s own racial group.<sup>18</sup>

## **Sex/Gender**

*Sex* is culturally defined on the basis of a particular set of physical characteristics. In this case, however, the characteristics are related to male and female reproduction. Cultural meanings associated with gender are expressed in terms of socially valued behaviors (e.g., nurturing the young and providing food) that are assigned according to sex. Such culturally assigned behaviors eventually become so accepted that they are thought of as natural to that sex. Thus, gender is what it *means* to be male or female in a society, and gender roles are those sets of behaviors thought by a particular people to be “normal” and “good” when carried out by the assigned sex.

In all sociocultural groups, gender includes knowledge of a large set of rules and expectations governing what boys and girls should wear, how they should act and express themselves, and their “place” in the overall social structure. Beardsley notes that any social or psychological trait can be “genderized” in favor of one sex or the other.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in the dominant society of the United States, active traits such as aggressiveness are genderized in favor of males and against females, while more passive traits such as submissiveness are genderized in favor of females and against males.

Like cultural definitions of race, the specific set of traits assigned to males and females may vary by society. And within a society, these traits may vary by ethnicity, class, or religion. For instance, on a continuum of submissiveness to males (a norm in

U.S. society), many African American females might be located closer to the *less* submissive end of the scale, many Hispanic females might be located closer to the *more* submissive end, and many European American females would probably be located somewhere in between.

### **Health**

*Health* is culturally defined according to a particular group's view of what physical, mental, and emotional states constitute a healthy person. The expert opinion of the medical profession usually guides a society's view of health. Although a medical model has dominated cultural definitions of health, most disabilities (mental retardation, deafness, blindness, etc.) are not judged in terms of this model's norms. Thus it is possible to be a healthy blind or retarded person. Nor would a person with cerebral palsy be considered sick.

In the United States and most of the industrialized world, the prevailing health system is almost totally biomedical. However, alternative systems such as acupuncture, holistic medicine, and faith healing are available, and the acceptance of alternative systems varies widely both within and between social groups. In other societies (e.g., China), what we deem alternative medicine may in fact be the dominant model, and our ideas of biomedicine may be operating at the fringes. The cultural meanings associated with health depend on which model, or which combination of models, an individual or family group accepts. For example, a four-year-old Russian child, who had recently immigrated with her family to the United States, suddenly suffered a high fever and flu symptoms. The child's nursery school teacher, who was European American and middle class, wanted the family to take the child to the doctor immediately for an antibiotic. The child's grandmother, on the other hand, who was the family expert on medical matters, prescribed a traditional treatment: the child should be put to bed, surrounded by lit candles and family members engaged in prayer. In this case, the grandmother was the final authority, and the child got better.

### **Ability/Disability**

Like the term *health*, the terms *ability* and *disability* are culturally defined according to society's view about what it means to be physically, emotionally, and mentally "able." The categories of ability and disability refer to a wide variety of mental and physical characteristics: intelligence, emotional stability, impairment of sensory and neural systems, impairment of movement. The social significance of these characteristics may vary by setting as well. For example, the terms *learning disability* or *learning disabled* are primarily used with reference to schooling and are rarely used outside of school. Indeed, it may be that the current emphasis on learning disability in American schools is primarily a reflection of a technologically complex society's concern about literacy. In developing nations, specific learning disabilities among people who are otherwise unimpaired are of little concern. In fact, this "condition," as a category of exceptional individuals, is nonexistent in most of the world.

The cultural meaning of *ability* and *disability* is related to both the needs and the public perception of the ability or disability itself. For example, the culture of the Deaf "needs" a shared, rule-bound system of communication (sign language) as well as

shared traditions and values among its members. However, the public acceptance of deaf individuals is far less positive than for those who are gifted. This lack of acceptance can be seen in the privileges accorded each group in schools. School experience might enhance the self-esteem of a gifted student while it threatens that of a student who is deaf. In the United States, the reaction to ability/disability hovers closely around a socially defined norm: we favor bright individuals but often exclude those who show evidence of extreme intelligence; we favor individuals who “overcome” their disabilities but often exclude those who, for one reason or another, cannot.

### ***Social Class***

*Social class* is culturally defined on the basis of those criteria on which a person or social group may be ranked in relation to others in a stratified (or layered) society. There is considerable debate about the criteria that determine social class. Some criteria identify class membership primarily in terms of wealth and its origin (inherited or newly earned). Other commonly used criteria include the amount of education, power, and influence.<sup>20</sup> Class structures vary widely among societies and social groups in terms of their rigidity and their importance to an individual’s life chances.<sup>21</sup> In some societies, like Britain and India for example, the class structure is fairly rigid and determines to a large extent the opportunities each person will have. In these societies, a person is truly born into a particular social class and tends to remain there. In other societies, the structure is not so rigid, and although individuals may be born into a particular social class, it is expected that they may move up by virtue of their achievements. Societies also vary according to the value placed on leaving one’s social class. In the United States, upward mobility is a value; in Britain it is not so valued. The consequences of these attitudes are not always salutary. In the United States, for example, if individuals do not succeed in moving up, the perception may be that something is wrong with them.

Social class differences are also tied to a person’s social expectations and cultural tastes. For example, individuals who exhibit the child-rearing practices, speech, and general tastes of the upper classes in matters such as dress, food, and housing can affect their social image and thereby their chances for upward mobility.

### ***Ethnicity/Nationality***

*Ethnicity* is culturally defined according to the knowledge, beliefs, and behavior patterns shared by a group of people with the same history and the same language. Ethnicity carries a strong sense of “peoplehood,” that is, of loyalty to a “community of memory.”<sup>22</sup> It is also related to the ecological niche in which an ethnic group has found itself and to adaptations people make to those environmental conditions.

The category of *nationality* is culturally defined on the basis of shared citizenship, which may or may not include a shared ethnicity. In the contemporary world, the population of most nations includes citizens (and resident noncitizens) who vary in ethnicity. Although we are accustomed to this idea in the United States, we are sometimes unaware that it is also true in other nations. Thus, we tend to identify all people from Japan as Japanese, all people from France as French, and so forth. Similarly, when American citizens of varying ethnic identities go abroad, they tend to be identified as

“American.” A tragic example of this misconception is the recent history of ethnic warfare in the former Yugoslavia. Americans in general are unaware of the role that ethnicity may play in dividing people. Most of the conflicts that occur across the planet are the result of long-held ethnic strife and do not cross national boundaries.

### ***Religion/Spirituality***

*Religion* and *spirituality* are culturally defined on the basis of a shared set of ideas about the relationship of the earth and the people on it to a deity or deities and a shared set of rules for living moral values that will enhance that relationship. A set of behaviors identified with worship is also commonly shared. Religious identity may include membership in a worldwide organized religion (e.g., Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism) or in smaller (but also worldwide) sects belonging to each of the larger religions (e.g., Catholic or Protestant Christianity, or Conservative, Reformed, or Hasidic Judaism). Religious identity may also include a large variety of spiritualistic religions, sometimes called pagan or godless religions, that are often but not always associated with indigenous peoples in the Americas and other parts of the world. Like ethnicity, religious affiliation can engender intense loyalty, as recently witnessed through the actions of members of Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network in their attempts to live out their religious missions. Religion also engenders a sense of belonging or community and pride in a peoples’ shared history. Because religious identity involves individuals’ relationship with the earth and with forces perceived to be greater than themselves, the cultural meaning of religion is often expressed in terms of a rigid sense of righteousness and virtue that is linked to a belief in salvation or the possibility of an eternal life after death. It is thus often an extremely powerful determiner of behavior.

### ***Geographic Location/Region***

*Geographic location* is culturally defined by the characteristics (topographical features, natural resources) of the ecological environment in which a person lives. Geographic location may include the characteristics of a neighborhood or community (rural, suburban, urban) and/or the natural and climatic features of a region (mountainous, desert, plains, coastal, hot, cold, wet, dry). It has been argued that, in the United States, people’s regional identity functions in the same way as their national heritage. Thus, southerners, westerners, and midwesterners are identified and often identify themselves as members of ethnic-like groups, with the same kinds of loyalties, sense of community, and language traits. This type of regional identity can also be found in some other countries of the world.

The cultural meanings of geographic location are expressed in terms of the knowledge a person has of how to survive in and use the resources of a particular area. This knowledge may include what foods are “good” (and how to grow and harvest them), how to protect oneself from the natural elements and common dangers of the locality, even how to spend leisure time. This kind of knowledge also applies to the type of community a person lives in. It is commonly acknowledged, for example, that “city people,” “country people,” and “suburban people” can be quite different from one another. The nature of that difference stems in part from their familiarity with and knowledge about how to live in a particular kind of community with particular resources and dangers.

## Age

Age is culturally defined according to the length of time an individual has lived and the state of physical and mental development that individual has attained. Chronological age is measured in different ways by different social groups or societies. Some calculate it in calendar years, others by natural cycles such as phases of the moon, and still others by the marking of major natural or social events.

Mental and physical development is also measured differentially, in much the same way and under many of the same circumstances that health is determined. Most humans view such development as a matter of stages, but the nature and particular characteristics of each stage may differ widely. In most western societies, for example, age cohort groups are usually identified as infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. “Normal” development markers include the acquisition of motor and language skills (infancy and childhood), the ability to understand and use abstract concepts (childhood and adolescence), and the ability to assume responsibility for oneself and others (adolescence and adulthood). In other societies, these cohort groups may differ. For example, in many nonwestern societies, the cohort group we define as adolescents may not exist at all, and the classifications of childhood and old age may be longer or shorter.

The cultural meaning of age is usually expressed in terms of the abilities and responsibilities attributed to it. Thus, in the United States, childhood is prolonged (hence the category of adolescence), and adult responsibilities are not expected until at least age eighteen, if not age twenty-one or beyond. In other societies (and indeed in the United States prior to the twentieth century), childhood is shorter, and adult responsibilities are assumed at younger ages.

## Sexuality

*Sexuality* is culturally defined on the basis of particular patterns of sexual self-identification, behavior, and interpersonal relationships.<sup>23</sup> There is growing evidence that a person’s sexual orientation is, in part, a function of that person’s innate biological characteristics.<sup>24</sup> Culturally speaking, sexuality is tied to a number of factors, including sexual behavior, gender identity (both internal and external), affiliation, and role behavior. Like health, sexuality has a variety of orientations. Because sexuality is frequently linked to a person’s deepest, most meaningful experiences (both religious and interpersonal), deviates from socially approved norms are often socially ostracized and sometimes physically abused or even killed, as in the case of the Matthew Shepard murder. In the United States, the prevailing view of sexuality is bimodal: only male and female are identified as possibilities. In other societies, additional possibilities are available. The Lakota Sioux, for example, approve four sexual orientations: biological males who possess largely masculine traits, biological males who possess largely feminine traits, biological females who possess largely feminine traits, and biological females who possess largely masculine traits. The female-identified male in Lakota society is called *berdache* and is accorded high honor because he possesses multiple traits and characteristics. *Berdache* tend to be teachers and artists, and if a *berdache* takes an interest in one’s child or children, it is considered to be an advantage.



**Other  
Approaches  
to Sexuality**

## **Language**

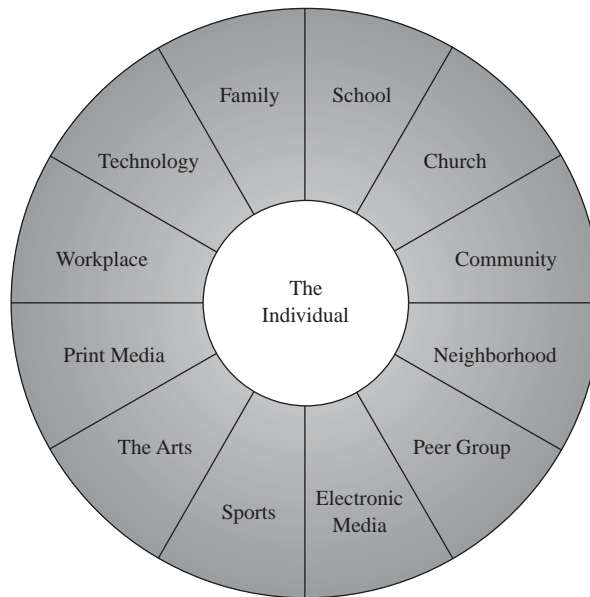
From a cultural standpoint, *language* is often defined as a system of shared vocal sounds and/or nonverbal behaviors that enables members of a particular group to communicate with one another. Language may be the most significant source of cultural learning because it is through language that most other cultural knowledge is acquired. Indeed, some researchers consider language and the category systems available in language to be *the* determiner of culture.<sup>25</sup>

Considerable research on the relation of brain function to language gives evidence that human beings are hardwired for language development at a particular stage in brain development.<sup>26</sup> That is, children who are in the company of other people appear to be programmed to learn whatever spoken language or sign system is used around them. Children even appear to invent their own language systems, complete with syntactical structures, if no other language is available.<sup>27</sup> It may also be that this program decreases in power (or disappears altogether) at a certain point, which helps to explain why it may be more difficult for older children and adults to acquire a new language. Language is meaningful in terms of both its verbal properties (what we name things, people, ideas) and in terms of its nonverbal properties (its norms regarding interpersonal distance, meaningful gestures, and so forth). Because language literally represents reality, the types and meanings of verbal and nonverbal behavior in any society or social group will reflect peoples' experience with their surroundings and the ways in which they interact with it. More than any other characteristic, language is a window into another person's life.

## **Social Status**

*Social status* is culturally defined on the basis of the prestige, social esteem, and/or honor accorded an individual or group by other social groups or by society.<sup>28</sup> Social status cuts across the other categories, since every social group or society appears to construct hierarchies of honor, prestige, and value with which to "sort out" its members, often on the basis of such attributes as race, age, gender, ability, and so forth. In some cases, social status varies with social class; in many other cases, however, social class does not explain a person's status in a social group or society. Thus, persons may occupy a high place in the class system in terms of income and power but not be accorded prestige or honor. The children of a newly wealthy family who can well afford to send them to Harvard, for example, may have little prestige among the sons and daughters of inherited wealth. Similarly, there may be people accorded high status in the society who occupy relatively low-class positions. In U.S. society, many entertainers and sports figures fit this description. Social status is normally expressed through social roles. Thus, status assigned to a person's gender may determine the role that person plays in any situation; an individual's health status may determine the role he or she plays as a "sick" person; an individual's social class status may determine the role that person plays as a member of the upper, middle, or working class; and so forth.

While there is some overlap among these twelve attributes of culture, the important point to remember is that a particular society or social group culturally defines each of them. The cultural identity of all individuals (i.e., their knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills) is formed through their experience with these twelve attributes. Such experience is



**figure 2.2** Socializing agents that transmit culture.

gained through contact with socializing agents such as family, church, workplace, peer group, and the various forms of mass media. These socializing agents can be thought of as transmitters of cultural attributes. It is through these socializing agents (depicted in Figure 2.2) that individuals acquire the cultural knowledge that is defined by race, ethnicity, gender, language, and social class.

### ***How Culture is Learned: The Socializing Agents***

We acquire the specific knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values that form our cultural identity through a variety of socializing agents that mediate the sources of cultural identity and give them a particular “cultural spin.” Thus, a person’s understanding of race, gender, social class, disability, age, sexuality, and so forth depends in part on how that socializing agent is interpreted by those particular families, schools, neighborhoods, peer groups, workplaces, churches, and communities that the person affiliates with at a particular time. Each of these socializing agents has its own slightly different interpretation of a particular cultural attribute, which it passes on to its members.

In contemporary social life, some socializing agents, such as families and peer groups, operate face-to-face, while others, such as the mass media, use technology to operate from a distance. Television, VCRs, the Internet, and the music industry, for example, exert significant influence on the self-perceived identity of many young people. Referred to by some researchers as the “third educator” (following family and school), television influences young peoples’ acquisition of basic language and visual and aural skills. It also influences their ideas of “appropriate” dress, language, attitudes, and values.



**Activity and Reading 12**  
**How Culture Is Learned: The Socializing Agents**



## critical incident

*Definitely College Material*

Steven Wong is the child of a rather well-to-do professional family. Compared to many students in his community, he is well traveled, having had the opportunity to visit China as well as other countries throughout Asia in order to maintain family and cultural connections. He has also had exposure to many different opportunities as he was growing up. To his parents' dismay, Steven is not excited about attending college, sometimes saying he would rather study the martial arts as a professional and at other times saying he would like to leave the area, perhaps move out west, and "find" himself.

How might you explain Steven's apparent ambivalence toward college?

How would you explain the fact that at times he wishes to pursue the martial arts and at other times he is seemingly uncommitted to anything?

What factors in his school and community might contribute to his confusion?

If he were to come to you, a teacher, asking for guidance, how would you advise him?

Cortes suggests that the media functions much like the school curriculum and serves as a powerful teaching medium, especially with regard to multicultural understanding.<sup>29</sup> Like the school curriculum, he says, "the media curriculum is chaotic, inconsistent, multivocal, in many respects unplanned and uncoordinated, laden with conflicting messages, and offering myriad perspectives."<sup>30</sup> In addition, media often blurs information with entertainment, creating confusion in the minds of many people. For example, a survey of viewers of the television show *America's Most Wanted* revealed that 50 percent considered it to be a news program while 28 percent considered it entertainment.<sup>31</sup> These media lessons not only may affect young people's picture of themselves but also may affect the picture that adults have of them.

The media also teaches about older people, and again with conflicting messages. The visual image of the woman who has "fallen and can't get up" describes older people as weak, helpless, and slightly hysterical—and in need of a product that will alert some care-giving agency that she needs help. Conversely, commercials for vitamins for older adults often depict them as active people—hiking, swimming, traveling—no doubt as a result of taking the promoted vitamins. Because we live in a nation that is growing older, we can expect more commercials defining older people as active rather than passive.

Other technological tools, such as computers and microwave ovens, appear to exert significant influence on our notions of time. Teachers and other human service providers have noticed, for example, that over the last twenty years or so both children and adults exhibit a shorter attention span. People seem to have become accustomed to receiving information and accomplishing tasks in shorter periods of time and are unwilling or unable to persevere in tasks that take a long time.<sup>32</sup>

Other socializing agents of note include the performing and visual arts and, in the United States at least, sports. These widely available carriers of cultural messages help to shape people's attitudes, values, and behavior. The aesthetic value of design, language,

music, dance, and theater as well as ideals of moral and ethical behavior are presented through the arts, and behavioral ideals such as fair play, personal achievement, and competition are taught through sport. It is also true that other qualities may be taught through these media; violence, for example, is an increasing part of movies, television, and sports. The contemporary nature of national sports teams as bottom-line businesses comes increasingly into competition with our cultural interest in providing a level playing field for all competitors.

Figure 2.2 provides a visual overview of how cultural knowledge is filtered by a variety of socializing agents to individuals through experience. Although sources of cultural knowledge (race, language, sexuality, etc.) are universal and appear in all cultures, the socializing agents (family, schools, media, etc.) that transmit them vary considerably from one culture to another. In most industrialized societies, for example, a wide variety of socializing agents bombard people daily, often with contradictory messages. In agriculturally oriented societies, on the other hand, a few primary socializing agents (e.g., family and gender group) may share the bulk of the culture-filtering process. As a result, individuals in different cultures develop very different worldviews.

### ***When Culture is Learned: The Process of Socialization***

One way to begin to understand how individuals acquire cultural knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills from the social groups with whom they have meaningful contact is to look closely at the concept of **socialization**. From the point of view of the outside observer (including such people as sociologists and anthropologists who use the term more than most people), *socialization* is “the imposition of social patterns of behavior.”<sup>33</sup> These patterns may include the acquisition of a particular language, knowledge of social roles and role behavior, and particular understandings of all aspects of the physical and social environment and normative behaviors toward it. Berger and Berger note that “the socialized part of the self is commonly called identity.”<sup>34</sup>

There is some consensus that the processes of socialization can occur at three stages of life: (1) primary socialization, which involves the socialization of infants and young children by families and other early caregivers; (2) secondary socialization, which in most contemporary societies involves the neighborhood, the religious affiliation, the peer group, and the school as well as television and other influences that surround and come into the home; and (3) adult socialization, which involves the socialization of adults into roles, settings, and situations for which they may have been unprepared by primary and secondary socialization (for example, taking a new job, marrying, moving to a new area, or becoming a parent).<sup>35</sup>

These stages of the socialization process are not entirely discrete but rather interact with one another in our lives. What we learn as children can be reinforced or modified, for good or ill, by what we learn as we grow up and have more experiences. In each of its three stages, the purpose of socialization is to teach the learner those habits of mind and action that will make him or her a loyal and functional member of a particular group. The use of the word *habits* in this context is important, for it points to another aspect of socialization, which is that the learner should internalize socially approved patterns of behavior so that he or she will voluntarily—and with little thought or effort—think and behave in an appropriate manner.

One important aspect of the internalization of particular knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors is that the process by which they are acquired is, in a sense, a secret. Most people remember very little about their own socialization, the assumptions they make about the world, what has conditioned them, and the various cultural patterns that have become so ingrained in their makeup as to become nearly invisible.

### ***Primary Socialization and Cultural Similarities***

Most people share some aspects of primary socialization that are common to all or most of the people of their primary group. The primary group “Americans,” for instance, would include at least those who have been born in the United States and speak English as a native language. Consider, for example, the rules they have learned about eating. When food is put before most Americans, they expect that it will be placed on a plate or in a bowl on a table at which they expect to sit on chairs. Once seated, the American automatically reaches for utensils called forks, knives, and spoons; cuts meat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right hand (except for left-handed folks); and then switches the fork to the right hand to carry the food to the mouth. In the same situation, a British person expects the plates, bowls, table, and chairs; cuts meat with the fork and knife in the same hands as an American; but then does *not* switch the fork to the right hand but continues to use it in the left hand. In the same situation, a Japanese person may expect the food to be placed on a low table, at which he or she will kneel, and the utensils used to carry food to the mouth will be two long, slender wooden or plastic implements that many westerners call chopsticks. In all cases, the people eating will not consciously think about these expectations and behaviors, they will simply expect and do them because they are “right,” “appropriate,” and “proper.” Friedman’s book *How My Parents Learned to Eat* is an interesting children’s story that discusses Japanese and American eating customs.<sup>36</sup>

Within this general “American” set of rules for eating (as within any large nation-state), however, are many variations. How formally we set our tables, how many utensils we use, whether our plates are served for us or we serve ourselves (and how many different plates we use), what kinds of food we eat, what we commonly use as a beverage (water, milk, wine, soda or pop, coffee, tea), and whether we bring the beverage to the table in its original container or in a pitcher, all depend somewhat on the region in which we live, the ethnic, social class, and religious origins of our parents, our ages, and so forth. No matter what the particulars are of our personal and family rules for eating, however, we believe they are “normal” in part because we have internalized them.

Here is another example of both the secret nature of primary socialization and the degree to which knowledge acquired through primary socialization is internalized: the way people learn to speak. Do you remember how you learned to talk? If you have taken another language in school, perhaps it was difficult for you—but your *own* language, now that was easy! Or so it seems. It might, however, be very difficult for you to teach a non-English speaker to correctly pronounce the sentence “Can you tell me the time?” when that person might more easily say “Can you dell me the dime?” What might you tell this person about English that would correct his or her pronunciation? Go ahead. Try it. How would you teach someone to make the correct sounds?

If you have determined that a little puff of air passes out of the mouth when the *t* sound is made in such words as *tell* and *time* that is not passed in words beginning with the letter *d*, you are on the right track to discovering the secret. Correct speakers of English aspirate their stops; that is, some air passes out of the mouth when such letters as *t*, *p*, or *k* are spoken. This aspect of pronunciation is considered a secret because while most of us differentiate these sounds quite regularly and easily, you probably were not able to describe the difference to others. This practice has become so much a part of your behavior that you take it for granted; you must consciously think about it in order to describe it to others. This is not the end of the secret, however. If you think about it some more, you will realize that English speakers aspirate their stops only at the beginning and in the middle of words, not at the end. We do not aspirate the *t* in *hit*, *bit*, or *cat*.

That you have learned these rules is quite clear; you use them all the time. How these rules were learned, however, is considerably less clear. They were probably not taught in formal sessions with your parents or by reading appropriate language texts. Indeed, you may not have been able to talk about them at all because you did not have the language to use words such as *aspirate*, or *stops*. Rather, you probably learned these rules through trial and error while you learned to speak your native language. This particular language pattern is often hidden, as are its results. The same is true for other aspects of cultural learning; they, too, can be conceived as patterns that are hidden from our conscious thought and behavior.

Few people receive formal education in how to be an appropriate member of any particular cultural group. Rather, people are culturally socialized by observing others, by trial and error, and by continuous reinforcement. In other words, cultural knowledge such as the rules for speaking and eating are learned experientially, not cognitively. Consequently, it becomes difficult for many people to speak comfortably about the cross-cultural problems they might encounter. One of the difficulties people may face in their intercultural encounters, then, is that they may feel uncomfortable or unsure in a given situation *and may be unable to talk about the problem*. They may try to avoid situations in which they feel discomfort—certainly *not* one of the long-term goals of multicultural education. A reasonable goal is for people to become more knowledgeable and thus conversant about the issues at play in cross-cultural interaction.

### **Secondary Socialization**

Perhaps the most important source of secondary socialization in most people's lives is the school. It is in school that individuals are often introduced to ideas and values that differ from those they acquired at home. In fact, one of the purposes of education is to "lead forth" or "liberate" individuals from the narrow confines of their primary socialization—in a sense, to expand their cultural identities. The difficulties of this process of alteration, however, should not be minimized, especially in situations where the cultural knowledge, beliefs, values, and skills required by the school may be in conflict with those of the home. Still, teachers often find themselves attempting to serve as "change agents" of their students' cultural identities.

The main goal of most school socialization in the United States has traditionally been to teach the rules of middle-class attitudes, values, and behavior. This cultural

## critical incident

*Who, Exactly, Am I?*

Toni Catalano is a first-generation immigrant to the United States; her parents are recent immigrants. Toni's father works in a local factory and has learned to speak English rather well. Her mother, however, has never worked outside the home and, as a result, has not had as strong a reason to learn English. Thus, at Toni's home, more Italian is spoken than English, most meals reflect the family's Italian tradition, and most interactions are restricted to family or others from the Italian community. Toni feels as if she is under great pressure, caught between two worlds, torn between the expectations and demands of her own family and culture and those of her American classmates. She is embarrassed to have friends over to her house and has always been uncomfortable when her parents attend school functions as well as parent-teacher conferences.

What cultural factors can you identify that are immediately responsible for her conflicts?

If Toni came to you, her teacher, asking for advice, what would you focus your attention on?

If you were Toni, what would you want from your friends? from your teachers? from your parents?

socialization to the middle class is no less a secret than the varied cultural socialization of individual families. The school, like the family, does not make cultural socialization explicit; it is simply taken for granted as "normal." Thus, few people ever take a formal course in the variations of cultural knowledge that exist, and they almost never examine their own cultural patterns in contrast to others. Few ever learn why they behave the way they do, or why they think many of the things they think. Fewer still ever evaluate the assumptions they make. People thus generally lack the concepts and vocabulary with which to talk about these things. Yet cultural patterns that are a given, along with the assumptions, beliefs, and behavior associated with them, often do guide us along whether we are aware of it or not.

There is yet another aspect of socialization that must be analyzed: the power of early socialization when viewed from the inside. It is certainly true that as we grow up and meet people outside our childhood social groups, we learn that there are a variety of ways to interact with the physical and social environment. As children, however, we experience the imposition of patterns of socialization as absolute.<sup>37</sup>

There are two simple reasons for this absoluteness: (1) the power of adults in relation to young children, and (2) ignorance of any other possibilities. Berger and Berger describe the nature of this experience in the following way:

Psychologists differ in their view as to whether the child experiences the adults at this stage of life as being very much under his control (because they are generally so responsive to his needs) or whether he feels continually threatened by them (because he is so dependent upon them). However this may be, there can be no question that, objectively speaking, adults have overwhelming power in the situation. The child can, of course, resist them, but the probable outcome of any conflict is a victory on the part of the adults. It is they who control most of the rewards that he craves and most of the sanctions that he fears. Indeed, the simple fact that most children are

eventually socialized affords simple proof of this proposition. At the same time, it is obvious that the small child is ignorant of any alternatives to the patterns that are being imposed upon him. The adults confront him with a world—for him, it is *the* world. It is only much later than he discovers that there are alternatives to this particular world, that his parents' world is relative in space and time, and that quite different patterns are possible.<sup>38</sup>

### **Some Results of Socialization**

**Ethnocentrism.** Because of the absoluteness with which the child experiences socialization, he or she begins, early on, to share the human tendency to view the world from his or her own perspective and to begin to believe that his or her way is certainly the *best* way. This perspective, called **ethnocentrism**, refers to the tendency people have to evaluate others according to their own standards and is an almost universal result of socialization. Think again about the example of eating behaviors: when confronted by someone from Bangladesh who eats with his or her fingers, most Americans will consider such behavior not as simply different but as *beneath* or *lesser* than their own. While a certain degree of ethnocentrism serves to bind people together, it can also become a serious obstacle when those who have internalized different ideas and behaviors begin to interact with one another.

One major expression of ethnocentrism is a strong *resistance to change*. People resist change under the best of circumstances, as illustrated in the story of the Wheat Religion people in Chapter 1. If people believe that their way of doing things is best and if they have the power to choose to continue in familiar ways, why should they change? Consider the case of the United States and the adoption of metrics. At this time, *all* other countries of the world have adopted the metric system as their primary means of measurement. The United States is the only country to hold on to something they feel is very dear to them, and they hold on to it despite the difficulties it causes travelers, manufacturers, and others who must interact in a variety of ways with people from other nations. Failure to convert English measures to metric values by NASA scientists was the cause of the September 1999 loss of the Mars planet orbiter, a spacecraft that smashed into the planet Mars instead of reaching a safe orbit. This oversight resulted in the destruction of a \$125 million spacecraft and jeopardized the entire Mars programs.

While these examples come from life outside of schools, other examples of ethnocentric behavior do not. There is, for example, the current insistence on the part of many educators and politicians that we need to strengthen a Eurocentric curriculum in our schools on the grounds that a curriculum based on “the best of western civilization” is the most valuable preparation any student could have. However, there is increasing interest among some educators to consider alternative perspectives. Consider this response to American educators in the mid-1700s about sending Native American children to American schools:

But you who are wise must know that different Nations have different Conceptions of things and you will therefore not take it amiss if our Ideas of this kind of Education happen not to be the same as yours. We have had some Experiences of it. Several of our Young People were formally brought up at the Colleges of the Northern Provinces: 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 . . . neither fit for Hunters, Warriors, nor Councillors, they were totally good for nothing.



**Reading 13:  
Understanding  
Misunder-  
standing:  
Barriers to  
Dealing with  
Diversity**



**The Metric  
System**

We are, however, not the less obliged by your kind Offer, though we decline accepting 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.<sup>39</sup>



### Afrocentric Curricula

More recently, the growing debate over Afrocentric curriculum efforts is, for example, one that should be examined quite closely. Can a school experience that embraces an African perspective effectively reach African American children better than the standard Eurocentric curriculum? Is this curriculum worth embracing and evaluating? Similarly, there is increasing pressure for national, standardized, paper-and-pencil, computer-scored testing on the grounds that it is “objective” (a western idea) and, therefore, fair. The point here is that having the power to choose whether you will adapt to new ways of thinking about and doing things is an important factor in how you exercise your ethnocentric beliefs.

### **Perception and Categorization**

Another result of socialization is that we learn to literally *perceive* the world and to *categorize* information about people and things in our environment in particular ways. Perception and categorization are both cognitive processes that are shaped by socialization.

People receive millions of bits of information every day through their senses. To think that people can respond to each and every individual piece of information is expecting too much; a person’s physical and emotional systems would be overwhelmed. Because of the need to simplify things, people organize their world into categories; into each category they put items that share similar characteristics. People then generally respond to the category to which an individual item belongs.

**Perception** refers to the stimulation of the sense organs, that is, to what people immediately report seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling. While no two people have exactly the same physiological structure and therefore no two people perceive stimuli identically, those with healthy nervous systems tend to perceive similar things in the environment in similar ways. Physicists, for example, tell us that the human eye can discern more than 8 million colors as distinguished by variations in wavelength. There is no practical reason, nor is it humanly possible, even to consider all these fine variations of shade and hue let alone to react to each individual color. Individuals, therefore, need some schema with which to group colors. The most familiar schema to you is probably the one based on the spectrum in which red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet are the major colors. When asked about the color of the sky, a westerner’s response typically is “blue.” A sapphire is blue, oceans depicted on a map are blue, and robin’s eggs are blue. Grass, however, is green, as are the leaves of most trees and the inside of a kiwi fruit.

In traditional Japanese language, however, the term *aoi* refers to colors that span blue and green wavelengths. When asked the color of the sky, a Japanese individual’s response would be “aoi.” When asked the color of grass, the response would again be “aoi.” How would you explain these responses? Certainly the entire Japanese population is not color-blind! Rather, whereas European Americans have learned to place these particular stimuli into different schemata, traditional Japanese have learned to place them in the same one.

## critical incident

*What's Wrong with a Golf Scholarship?*

Michael Williams, who comes from a working-class family and was raised by his grandparents and mother, is planning to go to college, although he does not have a particular major in mind. He is, however, pretty certain that he would like to continue with his golf and hopes to obtain a college scholarship through the sport. Many people in his community would have expected him to play basketball rather than golf.

To what would you attribute this?

To what would you attribute his love of golf?

What obstacles might Michael encounter as he pursues his goals?

If he came to you, his teacher, troubled because many people did not seem to support his wishes, what advice might you give him?

Clearly, sense perception alone is not sufficient. We also need to make sense out of the busy world around us, and to do so, we utilize schemata. Another term for such schemata is category, and **categorization** is the cognitive process through which human beings simplify their world by grouping similar stimuli. What kind of categories we use, how narrow or broad they are, and what meanings are attached to them are all shaped by culture and acquired through socialization. A good example of the relation between perception and categorization is the dog: how people perceive the animal and how they have learned to respond to the stimuli. While all people will see, or perceive, the dog in a similar way, they will certainly think about it differently. Most westerners think of dogs as pets, as companions, and in some cases, as important members of their families. A traditional Muslim, on the other hand, confronted by the same creature, would consider the dog filthy, a lowly animal, and something to be avoided at all costs—similar to the reaction a North American might have to a pig. People in some Asian or Pacific Island nations, on the other hand, might place a dog in the category of food. It is not uncommon to find dog meat as part of the human diet in many parts of the world.

The concept of a *prototype image* is a critical one in the analysis of categories. For most categories that humans create, there is one set of attributes or criteria that best characterizes the members of that category. In other words, there is a clear example of what the category encompasses. This example becomes a “summary” of the group and is the image most often thought of when the category is mentioned. If you were asked to think about a bird, for instance, you may conjure up an image of a creature about eight or nine inches long (beak to tail feathers), brown or perhaps reddish in color, that has feathers, flies, and nests in trees. You probably did not think of a turkey, penguin, ostrich, or even a chicken. For someone socialized in or near the jungles of South America, the prototypic image of a bird might be larger and more colorful, since those birds that we call exotic (e.g., parrots) are part of their everyday world. Yet robins, parrots, and penguins



have all the critical attributes that characterize members of the bird family; they all have feathers, beaks, and hollow or lightweight bones, and they all lay eggs. Teachers must examine what their own prototype image of a student is and how they will respond to those who do not fit neatly into this image.



**Activity 20:  
Examining  
Stereotypes  
Held by Self  
and Others**



**Stereotypes**

**Stereotypes.** Categories help people to simplify the world around them. That is, people put stimuli that have common characteristics into one category and then respond to the group. People do not, for instance, respond to each and every chair or table when they walk into a room but refer to them in their broader context of chairs, tables, or furniture.

People respond in a similar manner in their interactions with people. **Stereotypes** are examples of categories of people. Socially constructed categories designed to simplify the identification of individuals who are in some way “other” frequently become negative stereotypes associated with groups. Here we find that the processes of perception and categorization along with ethnocentrism combine to create a potentially harmful situation. Although any cultural group may teach its members to categorize other groups either positively or negatively, most stereotypes end up as negative labels placed on individuals simply because they are members of a particular group.

In the most general sense, the word *stereotype* refers to any sort of summary generalization (or prototypic image) that obscures the differences *within* a group.<sup>40</sup> Stereotypes obtain their power by providing categories that appear to encode a significant amount of information in a concise manner and that help us avoid having to pay serious attention to all the sensory data that is available. Negative stereotypes also enable us to keep our ethnocentric ideas intact by preventing us from seeing contradictory evidence before our very eyes. For example, it is much easier and quicker for us to think of all girls as stereotypically weak and/or passive than it is to notice that at least some of the girls in our classroom are stronger and more aggressive than the boys. Indeed, if we do notice such a thing, we tend to label those particular girls as “unfeminine,” which helps us avoid the larger task of accurately differentiating one girl from another and also allows us to maintain a cultural value that teaches that boys are supposed to be strong and aggressive while girls are not. Stereotypic conceptions of others can be acquired through both early and later socialization and are powerful insofar as they promote group solidarity and ethnocentric beliefs.

### ***Some Limits on Socialization***

Although perception and categorization both depend in part on the cultural knowledge and meanings associated with the physical and social environment in which a child is socialized and although early socialization is a powerful factor in the development of identity, it is also true that the power of socialization has limits. Three of these limitations are particularly important to educators. First, socialization is limited to some extent by the nature of the child’s physical organism. For example, while it is true that an infant or very young child can learn any language and any particular pattern of living, it is not true that any child can be taught beyond his or her biological limits. Socialization to color wavelength categories, for example, may be limited by color blindness

## critical incident

*Am I Black or White?*

Shameka Collins lives a life many people could not imagine. Being biracial in American society has presented for her both numerous opportunities and many challenges. Many doors were open to her, especially when she was young, but since her father began working away from home, she feels as though things have changed.

Shameka identifies herself as African American now, not because of what she thinks but because of what everybody else thinks. It's just become easier, she says. In seventh and eighth grades, soon after her father left, Shameka saw a counselor on a regular basis. She told her counselor that sometimes she doesn't feel like a black person because in many ways she was raised white. When she was younger, she would tell the counselor, she used to wish that she was just one race, because then she could say that's what she was and it was less confusing for people. But that wish created a dilemma for her. She felt that if she just said she was black, then she was denying her white side. And if she said she was white, she was denying the other side.

How might you help Shameka understand her internal conflicts?

If you were Shameka's classroom teacher, what might you do to make things easier in the classroom for her, or others like her?

to red and green. Similarly, socialization to musical sounds will not necessarily produce an operatic singer. However, sensory limits in one area may be, and often are, compensated for by increased attention to other senses, as in people with hearing limitations.

Second, because socialization is an unending process that is never completely finished, its powers of control are never absolute. Because a child is socialized according to one set of patterns (language, situational behavior, understanding of role, categorization) does not mean that he or she cannot learn new patterns. Indeed, the extension of socialization beyond childhood knowledge is one of the chief purposes of formal schooling.

Third, socialization is limited in its power because human beings are not simply passive recipients of socialization, they always act on that socialization in some way. Individuals resist or reject accepted norms, they reinterpret accepted norms, and they create new kinds of normative behavior. Thus, socialization can be seen not as an all-powerful force that totally molds the human creature but rather as a transactional process through which individuals are shaped but not totally determined. Your future students might become Nobel Prize winners, shuttle astronauts, or famous inventors.

Each of these limits on socialization is a resource on which educators can build. However, as Dewey noted repeatedly, the most effective learning takes place when it begins with what the child already knows and moves on from there.<sup>41</sup> Thus, it is important for teachers to understand not only the nature and purpose of cultural socialization in general but also the specifics of the cultural patterns to which they and their students have been socialized.



**Activity 25:  
Biracial  
Identity and  
the Classroom**



figure 2.3 The culture-learning process.

## Understanding Cultural Differences

### *Variations in Cultural Environments: Returning to Midland*

Figure 2.3 summarizes the discussion of the culture-learning process and points up its complexity in multicultural societies like the United States. Although the sources of cultural identity are the same for all societies, each society—indeed, each community—varies considerably in the number and character of its socializing agents. Thus, in a relatively simple society like the Maasai of Kenya, the sources of cultural identity shown in figure 2.3 will be transmitted through very few socializing agents, most notably the

family and the members of other families in the community. Because these families have nearly every aspect of life in common, there is likely to be little conflict in the way the various attributes of culture (e.g., age, sexuality, social status, etc.) are transmitted to the individual in such a society. The same, by the way, can be said of small towns and villages in the United States, particularly in very poor areas such as Appalachia or widely separated regions such as the broad expanses of the Great Plains in Montana, where contact with the wider society may be limited, even in terms of radio and television.

In complex, multicultural societies like the United States and many other industrialized nations, however, most individuals interact daily with a vast array of socializing agents, each of which puts a slightly different spin on each of the cultural attributes. For example, your place of worship is likely to have a significantly different view of sexuality than your peer group or your favorite television program. Do you think, for instance, that in Midland, Toni Catalano finds a discrepancy between the teachings of her Catholic upbringing and the sexual ideas she views on television's sitcoms or soap operas? This daily interaction with a variety of socializing agents, each of which may have a unique interpretation of the cultural attributes, means that individuals are bombarded with a variety of conflicting cultural messages.

Furthermore, individuals are not simply passive recipients of incoming messages. Once a message is received, each individual interprets and acts (or not) on its content according to his or her own personality and prior experiences. This interactive aspect of culture learning is depicted in Figure 2.3 by the directional arrows that connect the individual to various socializing agents and through them to the universal cultural attributes. In short, culture learning is a two-way process in which individuals are both forming and being formed by incoming cultural messages. And in many ways, no two individuals construct their world in the same manner.

Perhaps another example would be helpful. Gollnick and Chinn describe two hypothetical women who live in New York City and who are both thirty years old, white, middle class, Italian American, and Catholic.<sup>42</sup> One woman identifies very strongly with her Italian American heritage and her church and not very strongly with her age group, her class status, her gender, or her urban life. The other woman defines herself as a feminist, enjoys her urban life, and is conscious of her age but does not pay very much attention to her ethnic background, her religion, or her social class. The significance of these patterns lies not in each woman's self-definition but in the attitudes, values, knowledge, and behavior that such definition entails. Thus, the first woman may well spend more time with family than with nonrelated friends, may be a member of a right-to-life group, might choose wine rather than Perrier, may be knowledgeable about and participate in Italian ethnic organizations, and is likely to understand, if not speak, Italian. The second woman may find her most intimate companions among women's groups, be pro-choice in her stand on abortion, choose to live in the city despite the possibility of living in a small town or the country, and—if she does not have children—hear her biological clock ticking. This example illustrates how individuals operating in relatively similar settings with relatively similar environmental demands and socializing agents can develop distinctly different cultures. Perhaps you can begin to imagine how different groups and individuals operating in different settings with differing environmental

demands and using different sets of socializing agents can develop distinctly different cultures. Figure 2.3 can help you recognize the multitude of different factors that enter into the cultural identity equation.

In addition, consider that each of the three circles in Figure 2.3 can spin so that every cultural attribute can be filtered differently by each of the socializing agents, which results in a variety of personality types. For instance, a passive-reflective individual would interact with the many incoming cultural messages differently than a volatile, nonreflective person might. You can begin to see how complex culture learning can be; how variable individuals can be in the manner in which they receive, process, and output the various influences they encounter; and how these messages can be transformed into differing behavior and belief patterns. Although you might think that in reality an infinite number of cultural formations are possible, the three parts in Figure 2.3 can be used with a little practice as a diagnostic tool for analyzing any multicultural situation.



**Activity 37:**  
**Ethnic**  
**Literacy Test:**  
**A Cultural**  
**Perspective**  
**Differentiating**  
**Stereotypes**  
**from**  
**Generalizations**

Despite this enormous potential for variation among individuals and within groups, there are similarities, or generalizations, that can be made about groups of people, and these generalizations are referred to throughout this book. People have a tendency to use information that may or may not be reflective of all individuals within a given group. We must always be cautious when using culture-specific information to discuss whole groups because there will always be individuals who do not fit. Individual differences between two people who belong to the same group may be greater than between two people who belong to different groups. Generalizations differ from stereotypes about people, and this point must be kept in mind. **Generalizations** refer to the tendency of a majority of people in a cultural group to hold certain values and beliefs and to engage in certain patterns of behavior. Thus, this information can be supported by research and can be applied to a large percentage of a population or group. **Stereotypes**, on the other hand, refer to the application of a generalization to *every* person in that group. Thus, unsupported information blurs specific knowledge about other individuals. Such stereotypes would, for instance, say that Steven Wong *must* get very good grades because he is Chinese and male, and Shameka Collins *ought to* be more interested in a secretarial job because she is African American and female. Clearly, such stereotypes are in error, as life in Midland demonstrates.

### ***Variations in Cultural Attributes, Socializing Agents, and Cultural Learners***

Building a positive attitude toward differences requires a more sophisticated way of looking at diversity. Much of the educational research on individual differences related to culture rests on three assumptions. First, it is assumed that there is a standard or ideal against which difference can be seen, measured, or understood. In this society, people who are white, middle class, Protestant, English-speaking, healthy, physically and mentally typical, heterosexual, and male are said to make up the dominant cultural group. This “ideal” is, of course, a stereotype, much like the stereotypes of other cultural groups. It is important to note, however, that in the United States this particular stereotype refers to people who are socially privileged by virtue of birth characteristics over

which they have little or no control.<sup>43</sup> They are also educationally privileged in that their preschool socialization tends to fit them for schooling, which is based on middle-class attitudes and values. One unfortunate consequence of belonging to this model group is that its members don't have to think of themselves as just one of many groups, each with its particular pattern of characteristics. Because they are the model group, they fit into perceived societal norms and thus do not have to think about their cultural patterns much at all (see the discussion of "white privilege" in Chapter 6). It also must be recognized that many of our institutions have been built with this stereotypical model group as their foundation—the very framework that is in conflict with an increasing number of Americans—and we must work to change this infrastructure.

The second assumption is that any deviation from this normative group is the very definition of difference. If a person speaks only Spanish rather than English or is Asian rather than European American; Jewish rather than Protestant; female rather than male; homosexual rather than heterosexual; working class rather than middle class; chronically ill or with a physical, emotional, or mental disability rather than healthy or typical, that person is likely to be perceived as different, and this difference is seen as a deficit to be overcome.

Finally, research on difference assumes that studies of large groups of children with certain characteristics will tell us a great deal about all children who possess some or most of these characteristics. This assumption has at least two serious problems, however. One is that while most research looks at only one characteristic at a time (e.g., gender or social class), no one ever belongs to just one group. Every individual, for example, simultaneously belongs to a gender, social class, and ethnic group. What these "single-characteristic" studies look for are central tendencies, ways in which each particular group of children are the same. It may be that this tendency to focus on one narrow point is problematic and may encourage stereotypes. In and of itself, such stereotypes are oversimplifications that tend to ignore the diversity of behavior differences that exist within a group.

While this single-characteristic research has taught us much, it does not enable us to focus on differences within groups, only on differences between groups. Furthermore, it compares groups according to only one characteristic. Thus, it does not help us understand how various characteristics (gender, social class, ethnicity, disability, etc.) combine with one another to form individual personalities and learning styles. For example, to be a deaf American who uses American Sign Language with other deaf people but uses English in interacting with hearing persons, as Humphries notes, is "to be bicultural and bilingual. This is just for starters. To be a deaf sign language user *and* African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or American Indian in the United States is to be multicultural."<sup>44</sup>

The second serious problem is that such research is most often statistical and tends to be interpreted by practitioners (and the public) in more global terms than its results warrant. If, for example, 65 percent of a given group of girls are found to be less successful at math than a comparable group of boys, the tendency is to believe that *all* girls are less successful at math. Although this generalization is not warranted by the research, it tends to become "true" in the minds of many people and thus to influence their behavior toward girls. Similarly, educators' attitudes and practices regarding students with

disabilities have too often been based on broad labels or classifications such as *mental retardation*, *learning disability*, and *behavior disorder*, all of which obscure wide individual differences.

This book tries to avoid this problem of group stereotyping by looking at the universal connections between culture and learning. These connections are universal in the sense that they seem to apply to all people no matter what their various group affiliations. Figure 2.1 illustrates the sources of cultural knowledge that, when mixed together, form the cultural identity of *all* groups and individuals. These attributes are, for the most part, societal designations that have little meaning for the individual except as experienced through various socializing agents such as the family, church, neighborhood, and peer group. In other words, individuals acquire a cultural identity within the larger society through their experiences with a variety of daily socializing agents.

What teachers must understand is that cultural-learning patterns vary considerably both between and within various cultural groups. Subsequent chapters describe in more detail some of the ways in which differences in cultural learning may lead to misunderstanding and conflict in schools and classrooms. This book also shows how these same differences can be used as a positive resource in learning-community classrooms. For now, play with the model in Figure 2.3. Ask yourself what the universal attributes mean to you in view of your own life experiences and which socializing agents have accounted for your understanding of them. Do the same for others who are close to you, that is, for family members and friends.

This book will ask these same questions about students, teachers, parents, and school administrators. With the help of the stories incorporated in this book for illustrative purposes and the cases presented for analysis, you will gradually become a sensitive and skillful teacher of *all* children, not just those whose cultural background matches your own. For as you have seen in Midland, while a person may *seem* to be quite different from you, by virtue of membership in a different race or class or religion, they may also share some important cultural aspects with you. And even when an individual *seems* to have many cultural aspects in common with you, they may in fact be quite different in some important ways.

## Summary

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All people, regardless of the culture in which they were raised, share certain common experiences. This chapter presented the dynamics of culture and the culture-learning process that all people, students as well as teachers, experience and bring with them to the school context. Of particular interest to educators are the primary and secondary socialization processes and the twelve sources of cultural knowledge that represent the diversity of knowledge and experiences to which people are exposed. Critical to educators concerned with improving people's skills in intercultural understanding and communication is the recognition that some of the results of the socialization process present barriers to cross-cultural interactions. Effective multicultural education understands and addresses such issues as critical process as well as content.



## Chapter Review

Go to the Online Learning Center at [www.mhhe.com/Cushner4e](http://www.mhhe.com/Cushner4e) to review important content from the chapter, practice with key terms, take a chapter quiz, and find the web links listed in this chapter.

## Key Terms

categorization 61	ethnic group 37	out-of-context learning 43
culture 36	ethnocentrism 59	people of color 38
culture-general approaches 43	generalizations 66	perception 60
culture-specific approaches 42	in-context learning 43	socialization 55
enculturate 41	microculture 37	stereotypes 66
	minority group 37	subculture 36

## Reflective Questions

1. Look back at Webb and Sherman's definition of culture on page 38. Compare two different cultures or ethnic groups that you are familiar with in terms of the categories to which they refer. What categories are similar and which ones are different? How would you explain the differences and similarities?
2. Differentiate between objective culture and subjective culture. Can you provide two examples of each from the cultures or ethnic groups you identified in the first question?
3. Consider the twelve sources of knowledge described in the chapter. Complete an inventory on yourself. How might your inventory differ from one of your parents? Compare your inventory to that of a classmate. How are they similar? different? How would you explain some of the differences?
4. How does the way your parents or community socialized you to understand your social class differ from the way the popular media does? How about your understanding of your gender? How about your understanding of sexual relations?

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