Lecture Notes

# Chapter 3: Society And Culture: Hardware and Software of Our Social World

## Learning Objectives

1. Describe the structure (the “hardware”) of our social world.
2. Illustrate how culture affects individuals, groups, and societies.
3. Provide examples of microcultures, subcultures, countercultures, and global cultures.
4. Compare key ideas in the symbolic interactionist, functionalist, and conflict perspectives on culture.
5. Explain why culture (the “software”) from one society does not always “fit” with the structure (“hardware”) of another society.

## Chapter Overview

This is the first of three chapters to emphasize the importance of structure. The chapter describes the importance of *structure* as serving as a framework where activities, or *processes*, occur. The chapter begins by highlighting different types of societies and how they have developed over time. Next, the chapter defines culture and illustrates the role of culture in everyday life. This section also highlights some of the potential problems with culture, specifically the disjoint between real and ideal culture, and the difference between ethnocentric and culturally relative evaluation of cultures. The chapter, then, details how culture exists at the micro-, meso-, and macro-level of society. Here, the authors emphasize the differences between microcultures, subcultures, countercultures, national cultures, and global culture. Next, the authors describe the influence of material and nonmaterial culture and they describe the importance of norms, values, behaviors, and language in a culture. Finally, the chapter examines how culture is viewed using the Symbolic Interaction, Structural Functional, and Conflict Theories. The chapter ends by asking us to consider the interrelation of the “hardware and software” of our society.

## Lecture Outline

I. Culture and Society

A. Although many different individuals practice many of the same activities, how they complete the activity will vary based on culture

B. Societies consist of individuals who live together in specific geographic areas, interact more with each others than they do with outsiders, cooperate to attain common goals, and share a common culture

i. Society represents the *hardware*

C. Culture makes societies unique. Culture is the way of life shared by a group of people

i. Knowledge

ii. Beliefs

iii. Values

iv. Rules or laws

v. Language

vi. Customs

vii. Symbols

viii. Material products

D. Culture provides a guideline for carrying out tasks

E. Culture represents the *software*

II. Society: The Hardware – an organized and interdependent group of individuals who live together in a specific geographic area; who interact more with each other than they do with outsiders; who cooperate for the attainment of common goals

A. Societies are composed of structures, which include the:

i. Positions we hold

ii. Groups we belong to

iii. Institutions in which we participate

B. Societies are organized in particular patterns that are shaped by a range of factors including the way people procure food, availability of resources, contact with other societies, and cultural beliefs

III. Evolution of Societies

A. Division of Labor – how societies structure roles so that all necessary tasks are completed

B. Durkheim pictured a continuum between simple and complex societies

i. He described simple pre-modern societies as held together by *mechanical solidarity (similarity of individuals in the group)* – common beliefs, values, and emotional ties

C. According to Durkheim, as societies transformed, they became more complex through increasingly complex divisions of labor and changes in the ways people carried out necessary tasks for survival

i. Societies in which social positions are specialized and interdependent are held together by *organic solidarity (differences in individuals in the group)*

D. According to Durkheim, in traditional societies with mechanical solidarity, interpersonal interaction, and community life at the micro-level were the most important aspects of social life

E. *Hunter-Gatherer Societies* were the first societies to exist. This type of society has existed for the majority of human history, and only recently declined in popularity.

i. These societies rely on vegetation and animals occurring naturally in their habitat to sustain life

ii. They are organized around kinship

iii. They tend to have a nomadic lifestyle where they periodically move when food becomes scarce

iv. They tend to be small societies with generally between 20 and 50 members. Too large of a group cannot sustain a hunting and gathering lifestyle

v. There is division of labor by gender and age, however, there are few differences in roles or status

vi. Resources are shared among the people, but sharing is regulated by a complex system of mutual obligations

F. *Herding and Horticultural Societies*

i. These societies cultivate some control over food production. There are two basic types:

1. Herding societies, which produce small herds of domesticated animals for food and survival, and

2. Horticultural societies, which maintain small garden plots for food and survival

ii. The ability to control food sources was a major turning point in human history

iii. More people, surplus food, and greater accumulation of possessions encouraged the development of private property and created new status differences between individuals and families

iv. The end of the horticultural stage saw advances in irrigation systems, fertilization of land, and crop rotation

v. The Neolithic Revolution was characterized by more permanent settlements, land ownership, human modification of the natural environment, higher population density, changes in diets, and power hierarchies

G. *Agricultural Societies* are more efficient than horticulture

i. Technological advances such as the plow, irrigation, use of animals, and fertilization allow intensive and continuous cultivation of the same land, permitting permanent settlements and greater food surpluses

ii. Land in some societies became concentrated in the hands of a few individuals who built armies and expanded their empires

iii. War was prevalent, and societies were divided increasingly into rich and poor classes

iv. Thus, the feudal system was born

v. Food surpluses also allowed some individuals to leave the land and to trade goods or services in exchange for food

H. *Industrial Societies* occur when power-driven machines replace human and animal power

i. The Industrial revolution brought the harnessing of steam power and gasoline engines, permitting machines to replace human and animal power

ii. They rely primarily on mechanized production for subsistence

iii. A pronounced division of labor arises in industrial societies as advancements in technology create a need for a specialized labor force with task-specific knowledge

iv. Economic increase contribute to rise in standard of living

1. Although they also create wide gaps between owners and laborers

v. Populations tend to move to and become concentrated in cities because industrial jobs are available in cities

vi. Kinship patters also change. Families become smaller units, as it takes less people to ensure the survival of others. Children also become a liability instead of an asset because they are no longer able to contribute economically to their families

vii. Meso- and macro-level dimensions of social life expand in industrializing societies, and become more influential in the lives of individuals

viii. Perhaps the most notable characteristic of the industrial age is the rapid rate of change compared to other stages of societal development

ix. Social change occurs faster as the social world becomes more complex

I. *Postindustrial or Information Societies*—are those that have moved from human labor and manufacturing to automated production and service jobs, largely processing information.

i. Technology, the practical application of tools, skills, and knowledge to meet human needs and extend human abilities, such as computers.

ii. The majority of the labor force works in service positions

iii. The division of labor becomes more pronounced and technical and professional education becomes increasingly important as technology advances

iv. Stratification divides individuals in new ways, primarily based on technological knowledge and education

v. Values of 21st-century postindustrial societies favor scientific and creative approaches to problem solving, research, and development and attitudes that support the globalization of world economies

IV. Culture: The Software

A. Culture is the way of shared life by a group of people—the knowledge, beliefs, values, rules or laws, language, customs, symbols, and material products within a society that help meet human needs

i. This culture provides guidelines for the actions and interaction of individuals and groups within the society

B. Everyone *shares a culture with others*, although there may be different views within and between cultures

C. *Culture evolves over time and is adaptive*

D. *The creation of culture is ongoing and cumulative* because individuals and societies continually build on existing culture to adapt to new challenges and opportunities

E. *The transmission of culture is the feature that most separates humans from other animals*

F. Real Versus Ideal Culture

i. Ideal culture consists of practices, beliefs, and values that are regarded as most desirable and are consciously taught to children

ii. Real culture refers to the way things in society are actually done

G. Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativity

i. Objectivity is very important to sociologists when studying other cultures

ii. We are raised to believe that our own values are “natural” and our behaviors are “normal” and “proper”

iii. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to view one’s own group and its cultural expectations as right, proper, and superior to others

1. Ethnocentrism can be used to make members feel like they belong to a group

2. It can also help hold the group together by creating loyalty, unity, morality, and conformity to the rules of a society

3. But, ethnocentrism can also fuel cultural or subcultural conflict through cultural misunderstandings

4. There are some countries that have negative feelings towards the United States due to its political dominance

iv. Cultural relativism is setting aside cultural and personal beliefs and prejudices to understand a group or society by its own standards or as a member of that culture would

1. The goal of cultural relativism is to objectively learn the purpose and the consequences of each practice in a culture

2. Adopting a culturally relative perspective does not mean you must agree with all the beliefs and practices of a culture, but you must attempt to understand their role in the specific culture

V. The Components of Culture

A. Material Culture: The Artifacts of Life

i. Material culture includes all the objects we can see or touch, all the artifacts of a group of people

ii. Material artifacts of a culture do not have to be produced by members of the culture. Through globalization, we see cultural objects of that carry value in one society made in another society that may have no or different value attached to the product

B. Nonmaterial Culture: Beliefs, Values, Rules, and Language

i. Nonmaterial culture is the invisible and intangible parts of culture

ii. The four main elements of nonmaterial culture are beliefs, values, norms or rules, and language

1. Beliefs are ideas we hold about life, about the way the society works, and about where we fit into it

a. Beliefs are based in tradition

b. Beliefs influence choices we make

2. Values are nonmaterial shared judgments about what is desirable or undesirable, right or wrong, good or bad

a. Values are often so much a part of the way of life that they can be hard to identify

b. Groups in society can have different values and this can lead to group conflict

3. Norms are rules of behavior shared by members of a society and rooted in the value system

a. Mores are customs or desirable behaviors that have great moral significance and are more strictly enforced

b. Taboos are actions considered unthinkable or unspeakable in a culture

i. Most likely to exist in societies that do not have centralized governments to establish formal laws

c. Laws are norms that have been formally encoded by those holding political power in society

C. Sanctions are behaviors that reinforce norms through rewards and penalties

i. Formal sanctions or official norms are punishments used to enforce the most important norms

ii. Informal sanctions are unofficial rewards or punishments

iii. Both formal and informal sanctions can be positive or negative

D. Language is the spoken, written, or nonverbal use of symbols to convey meaning, objects, or ideas

i. Language is the foundation of every culture; without language there would be little, if any, culture

ii. Most of a society’s activities and structures are possible though their use of a common language

iii. Language can be spoken, written, or nonverbal

1. Spoken language uses a set of sounds to symbolize an object or an idea

a. The sound is learned by all in the culture and generally holds a common meaning for all members of the culture

i. Written language uses a set of images to symbolize an object or idea

1. Most societies store information through written language

2. Communication over distances is possible through written language

ii. Nonverbal language uses gestures, facial expression, and body posture to symbolize an object or an idea

1. Every culture uses nonverbal language

b. The linguistic relativity theory posits that people who speak a specific language make interpretations of their reality based on their knowledge of language

VI. Society, Culture, and Our Social World

A. Microstructures: Micro-Level Analysis

i. Culture exists at all three levels of society

ii. Microcultures are organizations that influence only a small segment of an individual’s lives or only affect an individual’s life for a small period of time

B. Subcultures and Countercultures: Meso-Level Analysis

i. Subcultures and Countercultures are cultures that exist at the meso-level of society

1. A subculture is a social unit smaller than a nation but large enough to sustain people throughout the lifespan

a. Subcultures have elements that make them unique

b. But, they also share conventions and expectations of the dominant culture

c. Subcultures influence people’s lives in pervasive ways

2. A counterculture is a group with expectations and values that contrast sharply with the dominant values of a particular society

a. Countercultures often have values or practices that go against the laws and regulations of the dominant culture

b. Countercultures can also wish to replace the values of the larger culture

c. Most countercultural groups are short-lived or only have members of certain ages

d. Some aspects of a counterculture can become accepted by the dominant culture

e. Countercultures can also challenge unfair treatment of powerless groups in society

f. Examples of a counterculture found in the United States are anti-government “Patriot” groups

C. National and Global Culture: Macro-Level Analysis

i. Natural Culture and Society: National Society and Culture

1. Every culture is intricately related to a society and to social units within that society

2. Most nations have a national culture of common values and beliefs that tie citizens together

a. Although in some places subcultural loyalties are much stronger than loyalties to national cultures

ii. Global Society and Culture

1. Globalization is the process where the entire globe is becoming a “single socio-cultural place”

a. Globalization has emerged through modernization, the domination of a “western” worldview, and western control over resources

2. Global culture is the behavioral standards, symbols, values, and material objects that have become common across the globe

a. Global culture will expand as issues that can only be dealt with on a global-level surface

VII. Cultural Theory at the Micro-Level

A. Symbolic Interaction Theory

i. Symbolic interaction theory considers how we learn to share meanings of symbols

ii. Symbols are the basic element of all cultures

iii. Humanness comes from the impact we have upon each other through shared understandings of symbols

iv. We learn meanings of symbols through interaction with others

v. We define how we should act through our definition of situations and symbols

1. There are three steps through which symbols come to have meaning and importance

a. The symbol is created

b. The symbol is objectified, assuming a reality independent of the creator

c. The group internalizes the symbol

d. These interactions become our *social construction of reality* (the process by which individuals and groups shape reality through social interaction)

VIII. Cultural Theories and the Meso- and Macro-Level

A. Structural Functional Theory

i. Structural functional theories look for the functions or purposes behind the actions and practices of a culture

ii. Shared norms, values, and beliefs serve the function of holding a society or a subculture together

1. However sometimes shared norms, values, and beliefs are dysfunctional for individuals or groups of individuals within a society

B. Conflict Theory

i. Conflict theorists describe societies as composed of groups; each of which protects its own self-interests and struggles to make its own cultural ways dominant in the society

ii. Dominant groups may impose their cultural beliefs on minorities and other subcultural groups

1. This practice can create conflict

iii. Conflict theorists argue that people with privilege and power in society manipulate agents of socialization so people learn the values, beliefs, and norms of the privileged group(s)

1. However, conflict theory does not explain stable societies

IX. The Fit Between Hardware and Software

A. Computer software cannot work with incompatible machines

B. The same is true with the hardware of society and the software of culture

C. Attempts to transport U.S.-style “software” (culture) to other parts of the world illustrate that these ideas are not always successful in other settings

D. Each society relies on the process of socialization to teach the culture to its members

X. What Have We Learned?

A. Individuals and small groups cannot live without the support of a larger society, the hardware of the social world

B. Without the software—culture—there could be no society for there would be no norms to guide our interactions with others in society

C. As society has evolved into more complex and multi-leveled social systems, humans have learned to live in and negotiate conflicts between multiple cultures, including those at micro- (microcultures), meso- (subcultures), and macro-levels (global cultures)