CULTURE

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With Emphasis on Transcultural Encounters and Exchanges
In this photo, a South Korean child who is part of an English language class is having fun playing with a U.S. serviceman dressed in plain clothes. The U.S. military sponsors many programs that promote cultural exchange and understanding such as the Good Neighbor Program and English Dream Camps. The serviceman’s attempt to connect with this South Korean child represents one of hundreds of millions of transcultural encounters and exchanges that have taken place between American soldiers and South Koreans. The U.S. military has had a presence in Korea for the past 65 years, dating back to the end of World War II. Over that time, an estimated 7.5 million U.S. servicemen and women have served in South Korea and, in the process, they have encountered and interacted with countless numbers of South Koreans. Sociologists think of these interactions and encounters as transcultural because the parties have forged relationships that cross and blur existing cultural boundaries, and opened people in both countries up to transformation.

Why Focus on Transcultural Exchanges and Encounters?

In this chapter, we consider how sociologists think about culture and about transcultural encounters and exchanges (hereafter referred to as just transcultural encounters). We apply the sociological framework to understand how such encounters influence and change the people and cultures involved. To illustrate, we consider examples that relate to the United States and South Korea and exchanges between people from both countries. Keep in mind though that we can use the sociological framework to think about any culture and any transcultural encounter.

The term transcultural alerts us to the fact that cultures do not exist in isolation. For the entire history of humanity, people from different cultures have crossed borders, boundaries, and spaces to encounter and interact with one another. In the process, they have confronted, negotiated, and managed differences. Transcultural encounters drive globalization—the ever-increasing flow of goods, services, money, technology, information, and other cultural items across national boundaries (see “No Border, No Boundaries”).

The boundary crossings are very often facilitated by organizations that disregard cultural boundaries to achieve some valued goal such as achieving national security (the U.S. military in 140 countries), to sell products (Korean-based Samsung with 337 offices in 58 countries [Samsung 2013]), to share videos on a global scale (YouTube, which facilitated 1.22 billion views of the video “Gangnam Style”), and to educate beyond the classroom (universities that sponsor 3.0 million study-abroad experiences worldwide each year [Braintrack 2013]).

This billboard announces a new version of one of the world’s most popular smartphones. By now, the Samsung Galaxy SIII is likely considered old technology. Samsung, a transnational organization that competes fiercely with Apple, releases new versions of its smartphones every eight months. Samsung facilitates transcultural encounters because it offers consumers digital technologies that allow them to communicate across geographic borders albeit virtually.

globalization The ever-increasing flow of goods, services, money, people, technology, information, and other cultural items across political boundaries, most notably countries.
Defining and Describing Cultures

CORE CONCEPT 1 Culture is an important, yet elusive concept that consists of material and nonmaterial components.

Sociologists define culture as the way of life of a people. To be more specific, culture includes the shared and human-created strategies for adapting and responding to one’s surroundings. These strategies include the invention of the automobile as a strategy for transporting people (and their possessions) from one point to another; the use of the high-five gesture as a strategy for celebrating some accomplishment with others; and the invention of YouTube as a strategy for “entertaining, inspiring, and informing” others through video.

A culture can be something as vast as a national culture (U.S. or Korean culture) or it can be something much smaller in scale, such as the culture of a family, a school, a workplace, or even a coffee shop. In our everyday use of the word culture, we often use it in reference to differences and misunderstandings: “The cultures of X and Y are very different”; “There is a culture gap between X and Y”; “It is a shock to come from X and live in Y.” In light of the ways we apply the word, we may be surprised to learn that it is not so easy to identify and describe a culture. Challenges revolve around the following questions:

- How do you describe a culture? To put it another way, is it possible to offer a description of something so vast as the way of life of an entire people? What exactly is American or Korean culture?
- How do we know who belongs to a culture? To what culture does a person who appears Korean but who has lived in the United States most of his or her life belong? Is everyone who grows up in Korea considered Korean, no matter their physical appearance? Are ethnic Koreans who live in Mexico and speak Spanish considered Korean?

The countries highlighted in red are those where the song “Gangnam Style,” by Korean artists Psy, topped the charts at number one. The countries highlighted in blue are those where the song place among the top 50, but not number 1. The popularity of “Gangnam Style” can also be measured by the record number of views on YouTube, over 1.2 billion.
• What are the distinguishing characteristics that set one culture apart from others? Is eating rice for breakfast a behavior that makes someone Korean? Does an ability to speak the Korean language make someone Korean? Does an American who learns to dance “Gangnam Style” become a little bit Korean?

The point of these questions is to illustrate culture’s elusive and dynamic qualities. After all, cultures do not exist in isolation; they “bump up against one another and transform each other” (James Madison College 2013) and, as a result, they are always evolving. Still, culture acts as a blueprint of sorts that guides, and in some cases, even determines how people think and behave.

Components of Culture

Culture consists of material and nonmaterial components. Material culture consists of all the natural and human-created objects to which people have attached meaning. Material culture includes plants, trees, natural resources, dogs, cars, trucks, microwave ovens, computers, and smartphones. When sociologists think about material culture, they consider the uses to which an item is put and the meanings assigned by the people who use it (Rohner 1984).

Learning the meanings that people assign to material culture helps sociologists grasp the significance of those objects. Bath towels are examples of material culture. The meanings people assign to them vary and shift according to context. From an American point of view, a bath towel is something used to wipe off water from the body or to cover the body after showering, especially when children are around. An American woman visiting Korea describes walking into a public bathhouse and learning that bath towels have different meanings:

Looking around, I noticed that all the women were completely naked—at a Korean bath, you check your modesty at the door, and the towel is for scrubbing, not drying or draping. After stripping down, I tentatively stepped through steamy glass doors, into the world of the baths—a large, noisy, cheerful area where about 100 women of all ages and small children of both sexes were scrubbing, chatting, and soaking. To one side were rows of washing stations, with faucets, hand showers, and mirrors set low to the ground. (Koreans, like Japanese, sit while washing.) (McClane 2000)

This firsthand account suggests that Korean women do not define a bath towel (material culture) as something used to cover themselves when in a public setting with young children because they are influenced by the nonmaterial component of Korean culture, which encompasses beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and language.

Beliefs

Beliefs are conceptions that people accept as true, concerning how the world operates and where the individual fits in relationship to others. Beliefs can be rooted in blind faith, experience, tradition, or in science. Whatever their accuracy or origins, beliefs can exert powerful influences on actions as they are used to justify behavior, ranging from the most generous to the most violent. Koreans, for example, believe that it is fine for young children of both sexes to bathe with their mothers, grandmothers, and other women in a public bathhouse. Two British tourists visiting a South Korean bathhouse describe the belief-shaking encounter this way: “The most amazing thing is the range of ages here, from grandmother to babies, all enjoying the same space. . . . It takes a few trips here to get used to walking around naked. . . . And [in Britain] you never see your own grandmother naked . . .” (ABC News/Travel 2008).

Values

A second component of nonmaterial culture is values: general, shared conceptions of what is good, right, appropriate, worthwhile, and important with regard to conduct, appearance, and states of being. One important study on values identified 36 values that people everywhere share to differing degrees, including the values of freedom, happiness, true friendship, broad-mindedness, cleanliness, obedience, and national security. The study suggested that societies are distinguished from one another not according to which values are present in one society and absent in another, but rather, according to which values are the most cherished and dominant (Rokeach 1973). Americans, for example, place higher value on the individual, whereas Koreans place higher value on the group. These values manifest themselves in the American preference to bathe alone and the Korean preference to share the experience with others in public bathhouses, including relatives of all ages.

Sports offer further insights about a culture’s values. The national sport of South Korea is tae kwon do. That sport places value on physical power when it is used in

material culture All the natural and human-created objects to which people have attached meaning.

beliefs Conceptions that people accept as true, concerning how the world operates and where the individual fits in relationship to others.

nonmaterial culture The nonphysical creations that people cannot hold or see.

values General, shared conceptions of what is good, right, appropriate, worthwhile, and important with regard to conduct, appearance, and states of being.
Sociologists gain insight into norms from observing how people in a particular setting are behaving. American sociologists studying Korean bathhouses would be struck by the public nature of the bath, the relaxed and casual relationships among nude children and adult women, the lack of self-consciousness, and acceptance of one’s own body and others’ bodies. One Western woman who went with her Korean sister-in-law to a bathhouse observed that her sister-in-law “just stripped and did likewise to her son. She didn’t notice my very hesitant moves to do the same. . . . I felt so weird and exposed, but at the same time tried not to show it, as everyone seemed to be quite comfortable like that” (Chung 2003).

When studying norms governing behavior, sociologists distinguish between folkways and mores. Folkways are norms that apply to the mundane aspects or details of daily life: when and what to eat, how to greet someone, how long the workday should be, how many times caregivers should change babies’ diapers each day. As sociologist William Graham Sumner (1907) noted, "Folkways give us discipline and support of routine and habit"; if we were forced constantly to make decisions about these details, "the burden would be unbearable" (p. 92). Generally, we go about everyday life without asking why until something reminds us, or forces us to see, that other ways are possible.

Consider the folkways that govern how a meal is typically eaten at Korean and American dinner tables. In Korea, diners do not pass items to one another, except to small children. Instead, they reach and stretch across one another and use their chopsticks to lift small portions from serving bowls to individual rice bowls or directly to their mouths. The Korean norms of table etiquette—reaching across instead of passing, having no clear place settings, and using the same utensils to eat and serve oneself food from platters and bowls—deemphasize the individual and reinforce the greater importance of the group.

Americans follow different dining folkways. They have individual place settings, marked clearly by place mats or blocked off by eating utensils. It is considered impolite to reach across another person’s space and to use personal utensils to take food from the communal serving bowls. Instead, diners pass items around the table and use special serving utensils. That Americans have clearly marked eating spaces, do not typically trespass into other diners’ spaces, and use separate utensils to take food reinforces values about the importance of the individual.

Often, cultural guides list folkways that foreign travelers should follow when visiting a particular country. When the U.S. military introduced a new housing policy in 2010 that allowed military families to live off base in housing complexes with Korean neighbors, it created culturally oriented videos to educate servicewomen and men about Korean folkways, pointing out that “we are guests” in Korea and not to expect Koreans to make concessions.
family name first and then their given name. In effect, the family name is given precedence over the individual’s first name.

While we have a reviewed set of concepts for thinking about and describing the components of any culture, the real challenges lie with establishing characteristics that distinguish one culture from others. In this regard, anyone who travels to Iran and then Korea will notice that the length of women’s skirts is “strikingly different.” Everyone who travels to South Korea will no doubt observe that rice is a very common breakfast food; they will also notice some Koreans eating cereal or donuts. The point is that we can identify characteristics that seem to distinguish one culture from another. Yet establishing the extent to which everyone associated with that culture behaves and thinks in the same ways is “distressingly difficult” (Wallerstein 1990). In other words, just when you think you have identified a quality that sets a culture apart from another, too many exceptions to the rule present themselves.

Because it is impossible to describe a way of life (e.g., culture) that everyone in a society shares in all its aspects, we

Symbols

Symbols are any kinds of physical or other phenomena—words, objects, sounds, feelings, odors, gestures, behaviors—to which people assign names and meanings. The meanings assigned are not immediately evident because meaning can vary by context. As we have seen, the act of a grandmother and child bathing together has much different meaning in the context of a Korean bathhouse than in the context of American bathroom.

Language is a symbol system involving the use of sounds, gestures (in the case of sign language), and/or characters (such as letters or pictures) to convey meaning. When people learn language, they learn a symbol system. Those learning spoken languages must learn the agreed-upon sounds that convey words, and they must learn rules about how to order words. English-language speakers learn to arrange words in subject-verb-object order (We are reading the book). Koreans, on the other hand, follow a subject-object-verb format (We book are reading). As another example, rules governing word order apply to stating first and last names. Consider that Koreans tend to identify themselves by stating their

mores Norms that people define as critical to the well-being of a group. Violation of mores can result in severe forms of punishment.
language A symbol system involving the use of sounds, gestures (signing), and/or characters (such as letters or pictures) to convey meaning.
must ask what exactly holds people who believe they constitute a culture together? One answer is cultural anchors that unite a people. Cultural anchors are things—material (a color, a mascot, a book) or nonmaterial (a belief, value, norms, cherished symbol)—that elicit broad consensus about their importance but also can withstand debate and dissent about their exact meaning (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011). For the United States, one cultural anchor is the high value placed on freedom—whether it be freedom to pursue happiness, a religion, a particular lifestyle, or to just be oneself. As one measure of its importance, consider that “freedom” is presented as the reason the United States engages in wars and sends its soldiers all over the world. For South Koreans, one cultural anchor is the celebrated writing system known as hangul introduced by King Sejong in 1446, with the clear goal of encouraging widespread literacy. As one measure of Sejong’s influence, Teachers’ Day in Korea is celebrated on the birthday of King Sejong.

The Role of Geographical and Historical Forces

CORE CONCEPT 2 Geographical and historical forces shape culture.

Culture is shaped by a history—the cumulative impact of past events—and geography that encompasses such things as location, terrain, and natural resources. Without a doubt, the geographic location of the Korean Peninsula next to three powerful neighbors—Japan, China, and former Soviet Union—competing to control it has shaped Korean culture. Japan ruled the peninsula from 1910 to end of World War II, when it surrendered to United States and Allied forces. Upon Japan’s surrender, the Korean Peninsula was divided in half along the 38th parallel. U.S. military forces occupied the southern half and Soviet forces occupied the northern half. When the North Korean military invaded South Korea in 1950, the United States took the lead, providing 90 percent of the troops to fight alongside South Koreans. The U.S. government supported South Korea, seeing it as a key player in neutralizing the Soviet Union and China’s influence over Japan weakened by defeat. On July 27, 1953, the Korean War ended in stalemate, and a 2.5-mile-wide demilitarized zone (DMZ) or border was created. On that day, an estimated five million Koreans who were working, visiting, and shopping on the “wrong” side found themselves stuck, never to return home or see relatives who were likewise stuck on the other side. For the most part, North and South Koreans have not communicated or interacted with each other since 1953. To date, about 20,000 North and South Koreans have reunited briefly, and an estimated 80,000 Koreans, now in their mid-80s, are on waiting lists to see relatives. Some South Koreans travel to newly opened resorts in
The division of North and South Korea has helped to forge transcultural relationships between people from different cultural traditions for more than 60 years. The photos illustrate four examples of such relationships. The upper left photo shows North Koreans waving good-bye to South Korean relatives who recently crossed the border to visit them at a resort in North Korea. That visit marked the first time, since 1953, that they have seen or otherwise communicated. The top right photo captures cultural exchanges where U.S. soldiers learn Korean culture, including the art of calligraphy. The bottom left photo shows a Korean-born boy with his adopted American grandmother. Their relationship can be traced to a partnership formed in 1955 between Korean government, the U.S. government, and Holt International Children’s Services to find homes for Korean children orphaned as a result of the Korean War. The adoption program remains in place today. To date, American parents have adopted 120,000 Korean children (McGinnis 2007, Holt International Children Services 2013). In the bottom right photo a North Korean soldier looks through the window from the North Korean side of the border, at then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as she toured the demilitarized zone on the South Korean side of the border.

North Korea that are isolated from that county’s population (Korean Overseas Information Service 2006). About 100 South Korean firms employ tens of thousands of North Koreans who work in a special industrial zone within North Korea (CNBC 2010).

This history and geography have affected the personal lives and culture of Koreans on both sides of the DMZ. Today, North Korea possesses a communist-style government and has one of the most isolated and centrally planned economies in the world. South Korea, on the other hand, is a republic, and it has the 15th largest economy as measured by gross domestic product (GDP).

Another key factor related to geography that has shaped Korean culture is that the peninsula is resource-poor, most notably with regard to oil. Thus both North and South Korea are especially vulnerable to any event that might affect prices or disrupt the flow of oil into the country. Contrast this with the United States and the abundant resources and
oil found within its borders. One key event that launched a consumption-oriented culture in the United States was discovery of the Spindletop, a Texas oil field in 1901. That discovery made the United States the largest producer of oil at the time and the most powerful nation in the world. “Oil was the new currency of the industrialized world, and America was rich.” Few Americans grasped the significance of their energy wealth, and most took their “subterranean wealth for granted” (Halberstam 1986, p. 87). Until the mid-1970s, the United States produced all the oil it consumed, and even today it is the world’s second largest producer of oil, extracting about seven million barrels a day, enough to meet half the domestic demand (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2013).

These contrasting histories shape American and Korean folkways regarding energy use. Consider that the South Korean folkways of opening the refrigerator door only as wide and as long as necessary to remove an item works to conserve energy. The American folkway of opening the refrigerator door and leaving it wide open to look inside and decide what to eat wastes energy. Most North Koreans do not own refrigerators and they follow a folkway of shopping for food daily or preserving food using salt (Yoo 2009).

In summary, South and North Korea’s conservation-oriented folkways are rooted in circumstances of resource shortages. To understand this connection, recall a time when your electricity or water was turned off. Think about the inconvenience you experienced after a few minutes and how it increased after a few hours. The idea that one must conserve available resources takes root. People take care to minimize the number of times they open the refrigerator door. Now imagine how a permanent resource shortage or almost total dependence on other countries for resources can affect people’s lives. In contrast, you can imagine how a greater abundance of resources breaks down conservation-oriented behaviors.

**Culture as a Tool for the Problems of Living**

**CORE CONCEPT 3 Culture provides a variety of formulas that enable individuals to adjust to the challenges of being human.**

Anthropologist George Murdock (1945) distinguished between cultural universals and particulars. Cultural universals are things all cultures have in common. Every culture has natural resources such as trees, plants, and rocks that people put to some use. Cultural universals also include the challenges every culture must address. Those challenges include containing emotions, satisfying hunger, quenching thirst, channeling sexual desire, eliminating human waste, perpetuating the species, and finding ways to die with dignity. Cultural particulars include the specific responses or practices that cultures have put in place to direct the use of things like natural resources and to handle inevitable challenges of being human.

Cultural universals Things all cultures have in common.

Cultural particulars Include the specific responses or practices that cultures have put in place to direct the use of things like natural resources and to handle inevitable challenges of being human.
excellent source of protein, but not every culture chooses to eat them. Dogs and snakes are among the foods defined by some Koreans and other Asian peoples as edible. Most Americans find it appalling that someone would eat dog meat, but they have no trouble eating deer, lamb, beef, or pork. Cultural formulas for relieving hunger not only help people to “decide” what to eat but “decide” who should prepare the food, how the food should be served and eaten, how many meals should be consumed in a day, at what times meals should be eaten, and with whom one should eat.

South Korean formulas for satisfying hunger center also around kimchi, a spicy cabbage dish that is served with every meal. Rice is also a staple of the South Korean diet. Much of the American diet is affected by corn. Corn (in one form or another) appears in soft drinks, canned foods, candy, condensed milk, baby food, jams, instant coffee, instant potatoes, and soup, among other things (Visser 1986). Like corn, rice and the by-products of rice plants have many uses: to feed livestock; to make soap, margarine, beer, wine, cosmetics, paper, and laundry starch; to warm houses; to provide inexpensive fuel for steam engines; to make bricks, plaster, hats, sandals, and raincoats; and to use as packing material to prevent items from breaking in shipping.

Culture also provides formulas for containing and expressing social emotions, internal bodily sensations that we experience in relationships with other people. Empathy, grief, love, guilt, jealousy, and embarrassment are a few examples of social emotions. Grief, for instance, is felt at the loss of a relationship; love reflects the strong attachment that one person feels for another person; jealousy can arise from fear of losing the affection of another (Gordon 1981). People do not simply express emotions directly, however. Rather, they interpret, evaluate, modify, and suppress bodily sensations upon considering “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1976).

Feeling rules are norms that specify appropriate ways to express the internal sensations. They also define sensations that one should feel toward another person. In the dominant culture of the United States, for example, same-sex friends are supposed to like one another but not feel anything resembling romantic love. It is also generally unacceptable for same-sex people to hold one another or to “celebrate” their friendship by holding hands in public. In this regard, the U.S. Army publishes a list of “must-know items” about South Korea for American soldiers stationed there. It informs them that their feeling rules do not apply in South Korea. One item says, “Don’t be surprised to see two Korean women or men walking arm in arm. They are just good friends and there is nothing sexual implied” (U.S. Army 1998).

Feeling rules can also apply to the social emotions people feel and display toward political leaders. In the case of North Korea, it is difficult for Americans and South

Koreans to imagine how much Kim Il-sung, the country’s founding and “eternal” president, and his son Kim Jong-il, and now grandson Kim Jong-un dominate North Korea’s emotional life, culture, and landscape (McGeown 2003, Winzig 1999). Even defectors and outside observers maintain that most North Koreans feel genuine emotion for their leaders, especially for the founder, Kim Il-sung (Demick 2010). One defector recalled the emotions he felt when he took ideology classes in college: “I cried often. I was so touched by the consideration Kim Il-sung showed for his people” (Kristof 2005). Why do North Koreans

Music—including the words and the way artists dress and present themselves—conveys feeling rules. Some critics argue that K-pop is so well received around the world because of “the delicate way” its artists represent love and other emotions. K-pop songs are “sweeter, romantic in a beautiful way” and absent the physical, often raw, sexuality of songs American artists perform (Ravina 2009).

social emotions Internal bodily sensations that we experience in relationships with other people.

feeling rules Norms that specify appropriate ways to express internal sensations.
feel such emotion for leaders who, by many accounts, have mismanaged the country? Programs and activities in North Korea offer some answers:

- In North Korea, students from nursery school through college take hundreds of hours of coursework that focuses on the lives and accomplishments of the three Kims, but especially those of the country’s founder.
- People, places, and objects connected to Kim Il-sung are treated as sacred. As Helen-Louise Hunter writes, in Kim Il-sung’s North Korea, “His parents, grandparents, wife, and oldest son are still worshipped as an extension of Kim. Objects that he touched on his visits to collective farms or universities are covered with glass or draped with a veil” (Winzig 1999).
- An estimated 80 percent of the titles in any given bookstore are about or written by the Kims. There are no dissident authors in North Korea to challenge the Kim’s writings (Sharp 2005, Winzig 1999).
- Major buildings and institutions are named after the Kims, and there are more than 40,000 Kim Il-sung Revolutionary Thought Study Rooms in the country (Koreascope 1998, Winzig 1999).

The Transmission of Culture

For the most part, people do not question the beliefs they hold, the values they follow, the norms to which they conform, the symbols they use, or the words they use to communicate and think about the world “any more than a baby analyzes the atmosphere before it begins to breathe it” (Sumner 1907, p. 76). Nor are people usually aware of other ways of thinking and behaving, because much of their culture was in place before they were born. Thus, people think and behave as they do simply because they know no other way. And, because these behaviors and thoughts seem natural, we lose sight of the fact that culture is learned.

**CORE CONCEPT 4 Culture is learned.**

Parents transmit to their offspring via their genes a biological heritage that is common to all humans yet uniquely individual. The genetic heritage common to humans gives us a capacity to learn and speak a language, to stand upright, and to use our fingers and thumbs to grasp objects, and many other capabilities. If these traits seem overly obvious, consider that they allow humans to speak innumerable languages, perform countless movements, and devise and use many inventions and objects (Benedict 1989).

Regardless of their physical appearance (for example, eye shape and color, hair texture and color, skin color), babies are destined to learn the ways of the culture into which they are raised. That is, our genes endow us with our human physical characteristics, but not our cultural characteristics. We cannot assume that someone is part of a particular culture simply because he or she looks like someone we expect to come from that culture. This fact becomes obvious to Korean American youth who travel to South Korea as part of cultural immersion programs. “Many say they have never felt so American as when they are slurping noodles in Korea. Even their slurps have an American accent” (Kristof 1995, p. 47).

The Role of Language

Human genetic endowment gives us a brain that is flexible enough to allow us to learn the languages spoken (or signed) by the people around us. As children learn words and the meanings of words, they learn about their culture and what is important to it. They also acquire a tool that enables them to think about the world, interpret their experiences, establish and maintain relationships, and convey information.

For example, in Korean society, it is nearly impossible to carry on a conversation, even among siblings, without considering age. This is because age is an exceedingly important measure of status: Korean language acknowledges the importance of age by its use of special age-based hierarchical titles for everyone. In fact, even words a person uses to address a sibling acknowledges his or her age in relation to the person speaking. This is true even if the sibling is a twin, because one twin was born first. Furthermore, Korean forms of address do not allow speakers to refer to elder brothers or sisters by their first names. A boy addresses his elder brother as hyung and his elder sister as muna; a girl addresses her elder brother as oppa and her elder sister as unni. Regardless of gender, however, people always address their younger siblings by their first names (Kim and Kirby 1996).

Consider another example of how language channels thinking. Americans use the word *my* to express “ownership” of people or things over which they do not have exclusive rights: my mother, my school, my country. The use of *my* reflects the American preoccupation with the needs of the individual over those of the group.

These language differences suggest that people see the world through the language(s) they have learned. The mind—or more precisely, the linguistic systems in our minds—give order to a kaleidoscope of images, sounds, and impressions bombarding us. The words we have at our disposal allow us to organize the world, to notice some things and not others, and to ascribe significance to what we do notice. Keep in mind that when we learn a language, we become parties to “an agreement to communicate and organize our thoughts in a particular way” (Whorf 1956, pp. 212–214). Linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf advanced the linguistic relative hypothesis, which states
event that a child experiences—being born, being fed, being cleaned, being talked to, toilet training, talking, playing, and so on—involves people. Those in the child’s life may include a father, mother, grandparents, brothers, sisters, playmates, other adult relatives, neighbors, babysitters, and others (Wallace 1952). All these people consciously or unconsciously expose and pass on to that child their own “versions” of culture, emphasizing aspects they believe children should know. The child, especially as he or she ages, may accept, reject, or modify those versions, and even seek new cultural experiences. Consider the case of Kim Il-sung, the founding president of North Korea. Kim Il-sung’s father raised him as Christian. As a youth, Kim attended church regularly, even playing the organ. However, when he took power in 1948, he abolished Christianity in the country, “keeping a couple of churches for show but staffing them with actors and actresses to impress foreign visitors with his tolerance” (Kristof 2005, p. 25). The case of Kim Il-sung suggests that individuals cannot be viewed as passive agents who simply absorb or stay within the culture around them.

Transcultural Diffusion

Most people tend to think that the material and non-material culture that surrounds them is “homegrown”—that it originated in their society. The toothbrush is believed to be a Chinese invention (1498); buttons are considered a Greece invention (770 BC), and potatoes are believed to have originated in what is now Peru more than 8,000 years ago. The point is that most people tend to underestimate the extent to which familiar ideas, materials, products, and other inventions are connected to or are borrowed outright from foreign sources (Liu 1994).

CORE CONCEPT 5 People borrow material and nonmaterial culture from other societies.

The process by which an idea, an invention, or some other cultural item is borrowed from a foreign source is called transcultural diffusion. The word borrow is
used in the broadest sense: It can involve stealing, imitating, learning, purchasing, or being forced to use an idea, an invention, or some other item from a culture considered foreign. The opportunity to borrow occurs whenever people from different cultures make contact, whether face-to-face, over the phone, or through televised broadcasts, Skype, or other platforms that mediate communication.

Basketball, considered a U.S. invention, has been borrowed by people in 213 countries (Federation of International Basketball 2013). Baseball, another U.S. invention, has been borrowed by people in more than 90 countries (World Baseball Classic 2013). Instances of opportunities for transcultural diffusion are endless and can easily be found by skimming the newspaper headlines. Consider the following examples:

- “North Korea Allows Foreigners to Take Mobile Phones In” (ABC Online 2013)
- “Johnny Rockets Invading South Korea” (Fast Casual 2013)
- “Super Bowl Pistachio Ad to Feature ‘Gangnam Style’ Artist” (Nelson 2013)
- “[Korean] Universities Lure Foreign Students” (Korea Joong Ang Daily 2010)

People of one society do not borrow ideas, materials, or inventions indiscriminately. Instead, borrowing is almost always selective. That is, they are choosy about which features of the item they adopt. Even the simplest invention is really a complex of elements, including various associations and ideas of how it should be used. Not surprisingly, people borrow the most concrete and most tangible elements and then develop new associations and shape the item to serve new ends (Linton 1936). One might be surprised to learn that male circumcision in South Korea can be traced to contact with the U.S. military during the Korean War. Koreans, however, depart from the American practice of circumcising male babies at birth. In fact, only one percent of South Korean babies are believed to be circumcised at birth; most circumcisions occur during the elementary and middle school years (Ku et al. 2003).

In contrast to South Korea, the North Korean government limits transcultural diffusion opportunities by restricting access to information from the outside world. With rare exceptions, the 22.5 million people of North Korea cannot receive mail or calls from outside the country. Only the most elite have access to the Internet. Nor can they travel beyond their country’s borders.

**CORE CONCEPT 6** The home culture is usually the standard that people use to make judgments about another culture.

Most people come to learn and accept the ways of their culture as natural. Thus, when they encounter foreign cultures they can experience mental and physical strain that comes with orienting to new ways of thinking and behaving. Sociologists use the term **culture shock** to describe
Sociologists define popular culture as any aspect of culture that is embraced by the masses within and outside of that society from which it is believed to originate. Examples include a sandwich (such as the Big Mac), a doll (such as Barbie), a television show (such as Desperate Housewives), a book (50 Shades of Grey), a movie (Twilight), an item of clothing (such as blue jeans), and a persona (such as "Gangnam Style"). Any analysis of popular culture must consider the industries that sell and market it, including the ways by which it reaches the masses: whether it be via commercials, television programs, radio, YouTube, or newspapers—to name a few. The "Korean Wave" (hallyu in Korean) is a term used to capture the surge in the international visibility of Korean popular culture beginning in East Asia (1990s) and eventually reaching Europe, Central and South America, and the United States. The wave is driven, most notably by Korean television dramas and pop music (K-pop), although the country's literature, cuisine, fashion, and other music genres are also part of this wave.

Because the Korean Wave involves the export of Korean popular culture, it is a transnational phenomenon. The South Korean government has played a major role in "spreading of Korean brands and culture worldwide," opening Korean cultural centers in countries such as Australia, Spain, Indonesia, and the Philippines to introduce Korean cultural products. The government upgraded South Korea's communication infrastructure and established agencies dedicated to promoting K-pop globally and as a tourist attraction (Korean Communication Commission 2011). In addition, the three largest music agencies in South Korea recruited talent, crafted the K-pop style, and marketed it as a global product. Those agencies are SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment. At the time of this writing, the best known Korean artist was Psy ("Gangnam Style"), and best-known Korean girl and boy groups were Big Bang, TVXQ, 2PM, Girls’ Generation, and the Korean American Far East Movement ("Like a G6"). Two Korean Americans—Johnny Noh and Paul Han—of Allkpop.com website (2010) report 2 million hits each month, with about 40 percent from fans based in the United States. Noh and Han believe that "Korea has the idol formula down pat; they are very polished in their mannerisms on stage and in society. Fans are able to fall in love not only with artists’ music, but their personalities as well" (Garcia 2010).

As one measure of the effort Korean pop groups expend, Girls’ Generation, a nine-member female pop group, can introduce themselves in four languages—Korean, English, Japanese, and Chinese. The group believes that learning foreign languages is the key to reaching audiences outside of South Korea (Wall Street Journal 2010). "We've been really focusing on the language these days, especially since we want to be able to connect with our foreign fans. It takes time, patience, and a lot of practice but we really wanna be able to express ourselves to our foreign fans" (Casper 2010).

that strain that comes with transnational encounters. That strain comes from adjusting to a new language and from realizing that the behaviors and responses learned in the home culture do not apply in the foreign setting. The intensity of culture shock depends on several factors: (1) the extent to which the home and foreign cultures differ, (2) the level of preparation, and (3) the circumstances (such as vacation, job transfer, or war) surrounding the encounter. Some cases of culture shock are so intense and unsettling that people become ill. Among the symptoms are "obsessive concern with cleanliness, depression, compulsive eating and drinking, excessive sleeping, irritability, lack of self-confidence, fits of weeping, nausea" (Lamb 1987, p. 270).

Minor league outfielder for the Charlotte Stone Crabs Kyeong Kang experienced culture shock when he moved with his family from South Korea to Norcross, Georgia, when he was 14 years old. His family moved to the United States so he could play high school baseball. Kang experienced culture shock because he “didn’t know any English at all” when he first came to the United States. Other adjustments Kang remembers relate to not having to wear uniforms in school, the lack of respect for elders, and McDonalds with no shrimp burgers on the menu (Gantt 2010). As another example, Tiffany, who is one of two Americans in the nine-member group Girls’ Generation, points to a number of challenges she experienced adapting to Korean culture: “I thought I would be able to adjust, because my parents spoke Korean at home. But I didn’t imagine how different it could be. American culture is so open compared to Korean culture, which is really conservative. So I would be, like ‘Hi!’ and they were like, ‘You don’t say “Hi!” you bow!’” (Seabrook 2012, p. 94).

Do not assume that culture shock is limited to experiences with foreign cultures. People can also experience
reentry shock, or culture shock in reverse, upon returning home after living in another culture. In fact, some researchers have discovered that many people find it surprisingly difficult to readjust to the return home after spending a significant amount of time elsewhere. As in the experience of culture shock, they face a situation in which differences jump to the forefront.

The intensity of reentry shock depends on an array of factors, including (1) the reason for being in the host culture, (2) the length of time lived in the host culture, and (3) the extent of the returnee’s immersion in the everyday lives of people in the host culture. Symptoms of reentry shock are essentially the mirror image of those associated with culture shock. They include panic attacks (“I thought I was going crazy”), glorification of the host culture, nostalgia for the foreign ways, panic, a sense of isolation or estrangement, and a feeling of being misunderstood by people in the home culture. This reflection by one American returning to the United States after living in South Korea illustrates:

“You find it hard to accept some of the ways people do things at home, and you find yourself questioning habits and customs that have been a part of your life for a long time. The main way I felt this to be the case was with the American health care system. After experiencing amazing health care in Korea, I wondered why America’s system is so complicated and so expensive. When in Korea, I could drop into a small hospital (they were almost on every corner), see a doctor within 10 minutes, pay $7, and get a prescription that I got filled within 3 minutes at the pharmacy downstairs.”

(Catbird in America 2011)

Although many people expect to have problems adjusting to a stay in a foreign culture and even prepare for such difficulties, most do not expect to have trouble adjusting upon return to their home culture. Because reentry shock is unexpected, many people become anxious and confused and feel guilty about having problems with readjustment (“How could I possibly think the American way was anything but the biggest and the best?”). In addition, they may worry about how family, friends, and other acquaintances will react to their critical views of the home culture; they may be afraid that others will view them as unpatriotic.

The experience of reentry shock points to the transforming effect of an encounter with another culture (Sobie 1986). That the returnees go through reentry shock means that they have experienced up close another way of life and that they have come to accept the host culture’s norms, values, and beliefs. Consequently, when they come home, they see things in a new light.

One reason people experience culture and reentry shock is that they hold the viewpoint of ethnocentrism. That is, they use one culture as the standard for judging the worth of foreign ways. From this viewpoint, one way is the center of everything, and all other ways are “scaled and rated with reference to it” (Sumner 1907, p. 13). Thus, other cultures are seen as “strange,” or worse, as “inferior.”

**Ethnocentrism**

Several levels of ethnocentrism exist. Arguably the more harmless type of ethnocentrism is simply defining foreign ways as peculiar, as did some Americans who attended the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea. Upon learning that some Koreans eat dog meat, some tourists made jokes about it. People speculated about the consequences of asking for a doggy bag, and they made puns about dog-oriented dishes: Great Danish, fettuccine Alfido, and Greyhound as the favorite fast food (Henry 1988). Keep in mind that Koreans don’t eat their pet dogs; rather, they eat a “special breed of large tan-colored dogs raised especially for canine cuisine” (Kang 1995, p. 267). In fact, Koreans who eat dogs would argue that Americans who eat pigs, cows, chickens, and lambs are in no position to judge them (Kang 1995).

The most extreme and destructive form of ethnocentrism is cultural genocide, in which the people of one society define the culture of another society not as merely offensive, but as so intolerable that they attempt to destroy it. There is overwhelming evidence, for example, that Japanese tried to exterminate Korean culture between 1910 and 1945. After Japan annexed Korea in 1910, Japanese became the official language, Koreans were given Japanese names, Korean children were taught by Japanese teachers, Korean literature and history were abandoned, ancient temples—important symbols of Korean heritage—were razed, the Korean national anthem was banned, and the Korean flag could not be flown. Even Korean flowers were banned, as Japanese officials forced Koreans to dig up their national flowers and plant cherry trees (Kang 1995). Japanese brutally suppressed all resistance on the part of Korean people. When Koreans tried to declare their right to self-determination in March 1919, thousands of people were injured or killed in clashes with the Japanese military.
Sociologist Everett Hughes (1984) identifies yet another type of ethnocentrism where:

“One can think so exclusively in terms of his own social world that he simply has no set of concepts for comparing one social world with another. He can believe so deeply in the ways and the ideas of his own world that he has no point of reference for discussing those of other peoples, times, and places. Or he can be so engrossed in his own world that he lacks curiosity about any other; others simply do not concern him.” (p. 474)

Another type of ethnocentrism is reverse ethnocentrism, in which the home culture is regarded as inferior to a foreign culture. People who engage in this kind of thinking often idealize other cultures as utopias. For example, they might label Korean culture as a model of family and filial piety and ignore the fact that the divorce rate is among the world’s highest, prompting the South Korean government to institute a mandatory waiting period of one to three months before courts grant a divorce (Korean Herald 2012, Cho 2012). People who engage in reverse ethnocentrism not only idealize other cultures but also reject any information that contradicts their view.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is an antidote to ethnocentrism. Cultural relativism means two things: (1) that a foreign culture should not be judged by the standards of a home culture and (2) that a behavior or way of thinking must be examined in its cultural context—that is, in terms of that culture’s values, norms, beliefs, environmental challenges, and history. Critics of cultural relativism maintain that such a perspective encourages an anything-goes point of view, discourages critical assessment, and portrays all cultures as equal in value, regardless of obviously cruel practices (Geertz 1984, p. 265).

In response to this criticism, there is no question that notions of rightness and wrongness vary across cultures, and if we look hard enough, we can probably find a “culture in which just about any idea or behavior exists and can be made to seem right” (Redfield 1962, p. 451). But that is not the purpose of cultural relativism. Ideally, cultural relativism is a perspective that aims to understand a culture on its own terms, not to condone or discredit it. More than anything, cultural relativism is a point of view that acts as a check against an uncritical acceptance a home culture, narrow thinking, and unsympathetic portrayals (Geertz 1984).

For example, whereas most Americans cannot understand why some Koreans eat dog meat, most Koreans are equally appalled that many Americans have such large dogs as pets and often let dogs lick their faces, and spend so much money on them when the U.S. population includes many poor and homeless people. When we consider the historical and environmental challenges that led to the Korean practice of eating dog meat, this practice might not seem so unreasonable. Whereas the United States has an abundance of fertile, flat land for grazing cattle, many Asian countries with limited space, such as North and South Korea, employ available land to grow crops, not to graze cattle. Similarly, in light of American feeling rules that see touch as sexual, thus limiting touch between friends and family, Koreans might not express shock at the close relationships many Americans have with their pets, perhaps as a way of compensating.

Subcultures

CORE CONCEPT 7 Within every society, there are subcultures that possess distinctive traits that set them apart from the mainstream culture.

When thinking about cultural variety, the concepts of subcultures and countercultures are especially useful. In every society, there are many groups that share some parts of the mainstream culture but adhere to values, norms, beliefs, symbols, language, and/or material culture that also set them apart in some way. These groups are called subcultures. One characteristic of subcultures is that their members are separated or cut off in varying degrees from those thought to be part of the mainstream culture. That separation may be complete or it may be confined to a particular setting such as a workplace, school cafeteria, place of worship (Korean church), or a neighborhood. In addition, that separation may be voluntary, imposed, or some combination of the two forces.

Often we think we can identify subcultures simply based on a specific marker such as physical traits, an ethnic appearance, religious membership, a specific neighborhood, age, gender, dress, or some distinctive marker. Determining who belongs to a particular subculture, however, is actually a complex task that must go beyond simply including anyone who possesses a single social

reverse ethnocentrism A type of ethnocentrism in which the home culture is regarded as inferior to a foreign culture.
cultural relativism The perspective that a foreign culture should not be judged by the standards of a home culture and that a behavior or way of thinking must be examined in its cultural context.
subcultures Groups that share in some parts of the dominant culture but have their own distinctive values, norms, beliefs, symbols, language, or material culture.
attribute or who lives in a certain place. For example, we might be tempted to think that Koreatown, USA, located west of downtown Los Angeles is populated by those of Korean ethnicity. Surprisingly, the largest ethnic group living there now are Hispanics or Latinos, who make up 54 percent of the population.

Sociologists use the term **countercultures** in reference to subcultures that challenge, contradict, or outright reject the dominant or mainstream culture. Sociologist J. Milton Yinger (1977) maintains that members of countercultures feel strongly that the society as structured cannot bring them satisfaction; some believe that “they have been caught in very bad bargains, others that they are being exploited,” and still others think the system is broken (p. 834). Because countercultures emerge as a critical response to an existing order, Yinger argues that “every society gets the countercultures it deserves.” Countercultures express themselves by deploring society’s contradictions, weaknesses, and abandoned traditions and by attacking “the frustrating social order” (p. 834).

Yinger presents three broad, and at times overlapping, categories of countercultures:

- **Communitarian utopians** withdraw into a separate community where they can live with minimum interference from the larger society, which they view as evil, materialistic, wasteful, or self-centered. In the United States, the Old Order Amish (one of at least four Amish subcultures) constitutes a communitarian counterculture in that its members remain largely separate from the rest of the world, organizing their life so that they do not even draw power from electrical grids.

- **Mystics** search for “truth and for themselves” and turn inward in the process. “They do not so much attack society as disregard it, insofar as they can, and float above it in search of enlightenment” (p. 838). Buddhist monks constitute a counterculture known as mystics because they make a point of rejecting the material trappings of capitalistic society.

- **Radical activists** preach, create, or demand a new order with new obligations to others. They stay engaged, hoping to change society and its values. Strategies to bring about change can include violent and nonviolent protest. Organizers of the Gay Games constitute radical activists in that they have rejected mainstream cultural norms that limit participation in Olympic and other athletic competitions to the most skilled. Anyone, regardless of ability and sexual orientation, can qualify for the Gay Games (Federation of Gay Games 2007). Organizers of the Gay Games reject the idea that in certain sports, such as paired figure skating, the competitors must be male–female pairs.

**countercultures** Subcultures that challenge, contradict, or outright reject the dominant or mainstream culture.
The map shows U.S. military personnel are stationed in 140 countries. Depending on the country and the setting within the country, the U.S. military’s presence can constitute a subculture or a counterculture. In places where U.S. presence is welcome, the military might be viewed as a subculture living within the country. In places where the U.S. military is not welcome, it is might be viewed as a counterculture.

**FIGURE 3.2** Countries and Waters In Which the U.S. Has a Military Presence
Source: Data from Department of Defense (2013), OEMA (2013)

In this chapter, we consider how sociologists think about culture and about transcultural encounters and exchanges. We applied the sociological framework to understand how such encounters influence and change the people and cultures involved. Although we give examples that relate to the United States and the Koreas, we can use the sociological framework to think about any culture.

**CORE CONCEPT 1** Culture is an important, yet elusive concept that consists of material and nonmaterial components.

Sociologists define culture as the way of life of a people, specifically the human-created strategies for adjusting to the environment and to humans and other creatures that are part of the environment. Material culture is the physical creations (natural and man-made) to which people attach meaning. Nonmaterial culture includes the nonphysical creations. Sociologists are interested in meanings people assign to material culture, the ways in which material and nonmaterial culture shapes social relationships, and the ways material culture shapes and is shaped by values, norms, beliefs, symbols, and language.
CORE CONCEPT 3  Culture provides a variety of formulas that enable individuals to adjust to the challenges of being human.

Being human presents us with a number of inevitable challenges. Cultures have developed formulas to help their members respond to these challenges. Formulas exist for eliminating human waste; caring for children; satisfying the need for food, drink, and sex; channeling and displaying emotions; and eventually dying. There are even formulas that govern how people feel for political leaders.

CORE CONCEPT 4  Culture is learned.

Regardless of their physical appearance, people are destined to learn the ways of the culture into which they are raised. A Korean-born boy, adopted by an American family, will be American in culture. When people learn a language, they simultaneously learn about a culture and what is important to it. They also acquire a tool that enables them to think about the world, interpret their experiences, establish and maintain relationships, and convey information. Regardless of the culture to which we are exposed, all those who belong to that culture are not replicas of one another, if only because each person experiences and learns different slices of the same culture.

CORE CONCEPT 5  People borrow material and nonmaterial culture from other societies.

Cultural diffusion is the process by which an idea, an invention, or some other cultural item is borrowed from a foreign source. The borrowing may include imitating, stealing, purchasing, copying, or learning about something. The opportunity to borrow occurs whenever two people from different cultures make contact.

CORE CONCEPT 6  The home culture is usually the standard that people use to make judgments about another culture.

When people encounter a foreign culture, they can experience mental and physical strain known as culture shock. One reason people experience culture shock is that they hold the viewpoint of ethnocentrism. That is, they use their home culture as the standard for judging the worth of foreign ways. Sociologists take a position of cultural relativity when they evaluate a foreign culture. That is, they seek to hold ethnocentrism in check and work to understand a culture in all its complexity.

CORE CONCEPT 7  Within every society, there are subcultures that possess distinctive traits that set them apart from the mainstream culture.

Groups that share in certain parts of the dominant culture but have their own distinctive values, norms, beliefs, symbols, language, or material culture are called subcultures. One characteristic central to all subcultures is that their members are separated or cut off in some way from other people in the larger culture. Some subcultures are known as countercultures. That is, they challenge, contradict, or outright reject the dominant or mainstream culture. There are three broad, and at times overlapping, categories of countercultures: communitarian utopians, mystics, and radical activists.
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