Sociologists sometimes refer to nonmaterial culture as symbolic culture, because its central component is the symbols that people use. A symbol is something to which people attach meaning and that they then use to communicate with one another. Symbols include gestures, language, values, norms, sanctions, folkways, and mores. Let’s look at each of these components of symbolic culture.

**Gestures**

Gestures, using one’s body to communicate with others, are shorthand ways to convey messages without using words. Although people in every culture of the world use gestures, a gesture’s meaning may change completely from one culture to another. North Americans, for example, communicate a succinct message by raising the middle finger in a short, upward stabbing motion. I wish to stress “North Americans,” for this gesture does not convey the same message in most parts of the world.

I was surprised to find that this particular gesture was not universal, having internalized it to such an extent that I thought everyone knew what it meant. When I was comparing gestures with friends in Mexico, however, this gesture drew a blank look from them. After I explained its intended meaning, they laughed and showed me their rudest gesture—placing the hand under the armpit and moving the upper arm up and down. To me, they simply looked as if they were imitating monkeys, but to them the gesture meant “Your mother is a whore”—the worst possible insult in that culture.

With the current political, military, and cultural dominance of the United States, “giving the finger” is becoming well known in other cultures. Following 9/11, the United States began to photograph and fingerprint foreign travelers. Feeling insulted, Brazil retaliated by doing the same to U.S. visitors. Angry at this, a U.S. pilot raised his middle finger while being photographed. Having become aware of the meaning of this gesture, Brazilian police arrested him. To gain his release, the pilot had to pay a fine of $13,000 (“Brazil Arrests” . . . 2004).

Gestures not only facilitate communication but also, because they differ around the world, can lead to misunderstanding, embarrassment, or worse. One time in Mexico, for example, I raised my hand to a certain height to indicate how tall a child was. My hosts began to laugh. It turned out that Mexicans use three hand gestures to indicate height: one for people, a second for animals, and yet another for plants. They were amused because I had ignorantly used the plant gesture to indicate the child’s height. (See Figure 2.1.)

**Figure 2.1** Gestures to Indicate Height, Southern Mexico
To get along in another culture, then, it is important to learn the gestures of that culture. If you don’t, you will fail to achieve the simplicity of communication that gestures allow and you may overlook or misunderstand much of what is happening, run the risk of appearing foolish, and possibly offend people. In some cultures, for example, you would provoke deep offense if you were to offer food or a gift with your left hand, because the left hand is reserved for dirty tasks, such as wiping after going to the toilet. Left-handed Americans visiting Arabs, please note!

Suppose for a moment that you are visiting southern Italy. After eating one of the best meals in your life, you are so pleased that when you catch the waiter’s eye, you smile broadly and use the standard U.S. “A-OK” gesture of putting your thumb and forefinger together and making a large “O.” The waiter looks horrified, and you are struck speechless when the manager asks you to leave. What have you done? Nothing on purpose, of course, but in that culture this gesture refers to a part of the human body that is not mentioned in polite company (Ekman et al. 1984).

Is it really true that there are no universal gestures? There is some disagreement on this point. Some anthropologists claim that no gesture is universal. They point out that even nodding the head up and down to indicate “yes” is not universal, because in some parts of the world, such as areas of Turkey, nodding the head up and down means “no” (Ekman et al. 1984). However, ethologists, researchers who study biological bases of behavior, claim that expressions of anger, pouting, fear, and sadness are built into our biological makeup and are universal (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1970:404). They point out that even infants who are born blind and deaf, who have had no chance to learn these gestures, express themselves in the same way.

Although this matter is not yet settled, we can note that gestures tend to vary remarkably around the world. It is also significant that certain gestures can elicit emotions; some gestures are so closely associated with emotional messages that the gestures themselves summon up emotions. For example, my introduction to Mexican gestures took place at a dinner table. It was evident that my husband-and-wife hosts were trying to hide their embarrassment at using their culture’s obscene gesture at their dinner table. And I felt the same way—not about their gesture, of course, which meant nothing to me—but about the one I was teaching them.

Language

The primary way in which people communicate with one another is through language—symbols that can be combined in an infinite number of ways for the purpose of communicating abstract thought. Each word is actually a symbol, a sound to which we have attached some particular meaning. Although all human groups have language, there is nothing universal about the meanings given to particular sounds. Like gestures, in different cultures the same sound may mean something entirely different—or may have no meaning at all. In German, for example, gift means poison, so if you give chocolate to a non-English speaking German and say, “Gift” . . .

Because language allows culture to exist, its significance for human life is difficult to overstate. Consider the following effects of language.

Language Allows Human Experience to Be Cumulative  By means of language, we pass ideas, knowledge, and even attitudes on to the next generation. This allows others to build on experiences in which they may never directly participate. Because of this, humans are able to modify their behavior in light of what earlier generations have learned. Hence the central sociological significance of language: Language allows culture to develop by freeing people to move beyond their immediate experiences.

Without language, human culture would be little more advanced than that of the lower primates. If we communicated by grunts and gestures, we would be limited to a
short time span—to events now taking place, those that have just taken place, or those that will take place immediately—a sort of slightly extended present. You can grunt and gesture, for example, that you want a drink of water, but in the absence of language how could you share ideas concerning past or future events? There would be little or no way to communicate to others what event you had in mind, much less the greater complexities that humans communicate—ideas and feelings about events.

**Language Provides a Social or Shared Past** Without language, our memories would be extremely limited, for we associate experiences with words and then use words to recall the experience. Such memories as would exist in the absence of language would be highly individualized, for only rarely and incompletely could we communicate them to others, much less discuss them and agree on something. By attaching words to an event, however, and then using those words to recall it, we are able to discuss the event. As we talk about past events, we develop shared understandings about what those events mean. In short, through talk, people develop a shared past.

**Language Provides a Social or Shared Future** Language also extends our time horizons forward. Because language enables us to agree on times, dates, and places, it allows us to plan activities with one another. Think about it for a moment. Without language, how could you ever plan future events? How could you possibly communicate goals, times, and plans? Whatever planning could exist would be limited to rudimentary communications, perhaps to an agreement to meet at a certain place when the sun is in a certain position. But think of the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of conveying just a slight change in this simple arrangement, such as “I can’t make it tomorrow, but my neighbor can take my place, if that’s all right with you.”

**Language Allows Shared Perspectives** Our ability to speak, then, provides us a social (or shared) past and future. This is vital for humanity. It is a watershed that distinguishes us from animals. But speech does much more than this. When we talk with one another, we are exchanging ideas about events; that is, we are sharing perspectives. Our words are the embodiment of our experiences, distilled into a readily exchangeable form, one that is mutually understandable to people who have learned that language. Talking about events allows us to arrive at the shared understandings that form the basis of social life.

Not sharing a language while living alongside one another, however, invites miscommunication and suspicion. This risk, which comes with a diverse society, is discussed in the Cultural Diversity box on the next page.

Language is the basis of human culture around the world. The past decade has seen a major development in communication—the ease and speed with which we can “speak” to people across the globe. This development is destined to have vital effects on culture.
Cultural Diversity around the World

WITH VAST IMMIGRATION FROM CUBA and other Spanish-speaking countries, the city of Miami has become a Latin American mecca. Nothing reflects Miami’s changed character as much as its long-simmering feud over language: English versus Spanish. Half of the city’s 385,000 residents have trouble speaking English. Only one-fourth of Miamians speak English at home.

As this chapter stresses, language is a primary means by which people learn—and communicate—their social worlds. Consequently, Miami’s language differences reflect not only cultural diversity but also the separate social worlds of the city’s inhabitants.

Although its ethnic stew makes Miami culturally one of the richest cities in the United States, the language gap sometimes creates misunderstandings and anger—in both directions. Anglo business owners, feeling excluded, have become fed up with people speaking Spanish. An employee at the Coral Gables Board of Realtors lost her job for speaking Spanish at the office, and a cashier at a Publix supermarket was fired for chatting with a friend in Spanish. The protests by Spanish speakers that followed these firings made headlines in Miami newspapers.

Latinos are now a majority in Miami, and many think that learning language should be a two-way street. Anglos, they feel, should try to learn at least some Spanish. Nicaraguan immigrant Pedro Falcon, for example, who is studying English, wonders why more people don’t try to learn his language. “Miami is the capital of Latin America,” he says. “The population speaks Spanish.”

This, of course, as Anglos see it, is the problem. Miami is in the United States, not in Latin America.

This problem of the language of immigrants isn’t new. The millions of Germans who immigrated to the United States in the 1800s brought their language with them. They operated schools in German, published German-language newspapers, held their religious services in German, and, of course, spoke German at home and in the taverns.

If Germany had bordered the United States, there would still be a lot of German spoken here.

With the continuing immigration from Spanish-speaking countries, Miami’s percentage of non-English speakers will increase further. But, as sociologist Douglas Massey says, this “doesn’t mean that Miami is going to end up being a Spanish-speaking city.” Instead, Massey believes that bilingualism will prevail. He says, “The people who get ahead are not monolingual English speakers or monolingual Spanish speakers. They’re people who speak both languages.”

In the meantime, Miami officials have tried to resolve the controversy by declareing English to be the official language of Miami. In one small way, at least, they have succeeded. When we tried to get a photograph of “Bienvenidos a Miami” for this box, we discovered that such a sign would be illegal!


Language Allows Complex, Shared, Goal-Directed Behavior

Common understandings enable us to establish a purpose for getting together. Let’s suppose you want to go on a picnic. You use speech not only to plan the picnic but also to decide on reasons for having the picnic—which may be anything from “because it’s a nice day and it shouldn’t be wasted studying” to “because it’s my birthday.” Language permits you to blend individual activities into an integrated sequence. In other words, through
discuss the following: who will go; who will drive; who will bring the hamburgers, the potato chips, the soda; where you will meet; and so on. Only because of language can you participate in such a common yet complex event as a picnic—or build roads and bridges, or attend college classes.

**IN SUM** The sociological significance of language is that it takes us beyond the world of apes and allows culture to develop. Language frees us from the present, actually giving us a social past and a social future. That is, language gives us the capacity to share understandings about the past and to develop shared perceptions about the future. Language also allows us to establish underlying purposes for our activities. As in the example of planning a picnic, each individual is able to perform a small part of a larger activity, aware that others are carrying out related parts. In this way, language enables a series of separate activities to become united into a larger whole.

In short, language is the basis of culture. Like most aspects of culture, its linguistic base is usually invisible to us.

**Language and Perception: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis** In the 1930s, two anthropologists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, became intrigued when they noted that the Hopi Indians of the southwestern United States had no words to distinguish among the past, the present, and the future. English, in contrast—as well as French, Spanish, Swahili, and other languages—distinguishes carefully among these three time frames. From this observation, Sapir and Whorf began to think that words might be more than labels that people attach to things. Eventually, they concluded that language has embedded within it ways of looking at the world. In other words, language not only expresses our thoughts and perceptions but also shapes the way we think and perceive. When we learn a language, we learn not only words but also ways of thinking and perceiving (Sapir 1949; Whorf 1956).

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis reverses common sense: It indicates that rather than objects and events forcing themselves onto our consciousness, it is our language that determines our consciousness, and hence our perception of objects and events. Sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1991) gives a good example. Hebrew, his native language, does not have separate words for jam and jelly. Both go by the same term, and only when Zerubavel learned English could he “see” this difference, which is “obvious” to native English speakers. Similarly, if you learn to classify students as Jocks, Goths, Stoners, Skaters, and Preps, you will perceive students in an entirely different way from someone who does not know these classifications.

Although Sapir and Whorf’s observation that the Hopi do not have tenses was inaccurate (Edgerton 1992:27), they did stumble onto a major truth about social life. Learning a language means not only learning words but also acquiring the perceptions embedded in that language. In other words, language both reflects and shapes cultural experiences (Drivonikou et al. 2007). The racial-ethnic terms that our culture provides, for example, influence how we see both ourselves and others, a point that is discussed in the Cultural Diversity box on the next page.

**Values, Norms, and Sanctions** To learn a culture is to learn people’s values, their ideas of what is desirable in life. When we uncover people’s values, we learn a great deal about them, for values are the standards by which people define what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Values underlie our preferences, guide our choices, and indicate what we hold worthwhile in life.

Every group develops expectations concerning the right way to reflect its values. Sociologists use the term norms to describe those expectations (or rules of behavior) that develop out of a group’s values. The term sanctions refers to the reactions people receive for following or breaking norms. A positive sanction expresses approval for following a norm, and a negative sanction reflects disapproval for breaking a norm. Positive sanctions can be material, such as a prize, a trophy, or money, but in everyday life they usually consist of hugs, smiles, a pat on the back, or even handshakes and “high fives.” Negative sanctions can also be material—being fined in court is one example—but they,
Cultural Diversity in the United States

THE GROUPS THAT DOMINATE society often determine the names that are used to refer to racial-ethnic groups. If those names become associated with oppression, they take on negative meanings. For example, the terms Negro and colored people came to be associated with submissiveness and low status. To overcome these meanings, those referred to by these terms began to identify themselves as black or African American. They infused these new terms with respect—a basic source of self-esteem that they felt the old terms denied them.

In a twist, African Americans—and to a lesser extent Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans—have changed the rejected term colored people to people of color. Those who embrace this modified term are imbuing it with meanings that offer an identity of respect. The term also has political meanings. It indicates bonds that cross racial-ethnic lines, mutual ties, and a sense of identity rooted in historical oppression.

There is always disagreement about racial-ethnic terms, and this one is no exception. Although most rejected the term colored people, some found in it a sense of respect and claimed it for themselves. The acronym NAACP, for example, stands for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The new term, people of color, arouses similar feelings. Some individuals whom this term would include claim that it is inappropriate. They point out that this new label still makes color the primary identifier of people. They stress that humans transcend race-ethnicity, that what we have in common as human beings goes much deeper than what you see on the surface. They stress that we should avoid terms that focus on differences in the pigmentation of our skin.

The language of self-reference in a society that is so conscious of skin color is an ongoing issue. As long as our society continues to emphasize such superficial differences, the search for adequate terms is not likely to ever be “finished.” In this quest for terms that strike the right chord, the term people of color may become a historical footnote. If it does, it will be replaced by another term that indicates a changing self-identification in a changing historical context.

The ethnic terms we choose—or which are given to us—are major self-identifiers. They indicate both membership in some group and a separation from other groups.太, are more likely to be symbolic: harsh words, or gestures such as frowns, stares, clenched jaws, or raised fists. Getting a raise at work is a positive sanction, indicating that you have followed the norms clustering around work values. Getting fired, however, is a negative sanction, indicating that you have violated these norms. The North American finger gesture discussed earlier is, of course, a negative sanction.

Because people can find norms stifling, some cultures relieve the pressure through moral holidays, specified times when people are allowed to break norms. Moral holidays such as Mardi Gras often center on getting rowdy. Some activities for which people would otherwise be arrested are permitted—and expected—including public drunkenness and some nudity. The norms are never completely dropped, however—just loosened a bit. Go too far, and the police step in.

Some societies have moral holiday places, locations where norms are expected to be broken. Red light districts of our cities are examples. There, prostitutes are allowed to work the streets, bothered only when political pressure builds to “clean up” the area. If these same prostitutes attempt to solicit customers in adjacent areas, however, they are promptly arrested. Each year, the hometown of the team that wins the Super Bowl becomes a moral holiday place—for one night.

One of the more interesting examples is “Party Cove” at Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri, a fairly straight-laced area of the country. During the summer, hundreds of boaters—from those operating cabin cruisers to jet skis—moor their vessels together in a highly publicized cove, where many get drunk, take off their clothes, and dance on the boats. In one of the more humorous incidents, boaters complained that a nude woman was riding a jet ski outside of the cove. The water patrol investigated but refused to arrest the woman because she...
Many societies relax their norms during specified occasions. At these times, known as moral holidays, behavior that is ordinarily not permitted is allowed. From a functional standpoint, moral holidays, such as the Mardi Gras held at New Orleans, and spring break in Florida and Mexico, serve as safety valves, allowing a release of deviance. When the moral holiday is over, the usual enforcement of rules follows.

Folkways and Mores

Norms that are not strictly enforced are called folkways. We expect people to comply with folkways, but we are likely to shrug our shoulders and not make a big deal about it if they don’t. If someone insists on passing you on the right side of the sidewalk, for example, you are unlikely to take corrective action, although if the sidewalk is crowded and you must move out of the way, you might give the person a dirty look.

Other norms, however, are taken much more seriously. We think of them as essential to our core values, and we insist on conformity. These are called mores (MORE-rays). A person who steals, rapes, or kills has violated some of society’s most important mores. As sociologist Ian Robertson (1987:62) put it,

A man who walks down a street wearing nothing on the upper half of his body is violating a folkway; a man who walks down the street wearing nothing on the lower half of his body is violating one of our most important mores, the requirement that people cover their genitals and buttocks in public.

It should also be noted that one group’s folkways may be another group’s mores. Although a man walking down the street with the upper half of his body uncovered is deviating from a folkway, a woman doing the same thing is violating the mores. In addition, the folkways and mores of a subculture (discussed in the next section) may be the opposite of mainstream culture. For example, to walk down the sidewalk in a nudist camp with the entire body uncovered would conform to that subculture’s folkways.

A taboo refers to a norm so strongly ingrained that even the thought of its violation is greeted with revulsion. Eating human flesh and having sex with one’s parents are examples of such behaviors. When someone breaks a taboo, the individual is usually judged unfit to live in the same society as others. The sanctions are severe, and may include prison, banishment, or death.