1.4: Chapter 4: Cultural Power

Learning Objectives

- Explain the implications of culture on social status and stratification
- Summarize the mechanisms used by dominant groups to develop and sustain cultural power
- Understand cultural hegemony
- Describe the consequences of social conflicts over cultural power
- Identify and evaluate cultural prejudice and discrimination

4.1 Cultural Hierarchies

All humans are comprised of the same biological structure and matter. The unique distinctions among us stem from our culture (Kottak and Kozaitis 2012). The differences in our values, beliefs, norms, expressive language, practices, and artifacts is which stands us apart from each other. Being culturally unique projects exclusivity that draws attention to our variations and differences. People find cultural fit or acceptance from those who share uniqueness or the same cultural characteristics. Consequently, people may find or experience intolerance or rejection from those with different cultural traits.

Cultural distinctions make groups unique, but they also provide a social structure for creating and ranking cultures based on similarities or differences. A cultural group’s size and strength influences their power over a region, area, or other groups. Cultural power lends itself to social power that influences people’s lives by controlling the prevailing norms or rules and making individuals adhere to the dominant culture voluntarily or involuntarily.

Culture is not a direct reflection of the social world (Griswold 2013). Humans mediate culture to define meaning and
interpret the social world around them. As a result, dominant groups able to manipulate, reproduce, and influence culture among the masses. Common culture found in society is actually the selective transmission of elite-dominated values (Parenti 2006). This practice known as cultural hegemony suggests, culture is not autonomous, it is conditional dictated, regulated, and controlled by dominant groups. The major forces shaping culture are in the power of elite-dominated interests who make limited and marginal adjustments to appear culture is changing in alignment with evolving social values (Parenti 2006). The culturally dominating group often sets the standard for living and governs the distribution of resources.

Social and Culture Capital

Social and cultural relationships have productive benefits in society. Research defines social capital as a form of economic (e.g., money and property) and cultural (e.g., norms, fellowship, trust) assets central to a social network (Putnam 2000). The social networks people create and maintain with each other enable society to function. However, the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1972) found social capital produces and reproduces inequality when examining how people gain powerful positions through direct and indirect social connections. Social capital or a social network can help or hinder someone personally and socially. For example, strong and supportive social connections can facilitate job opportunities and promotions that are beneficial to the individual and social network. Weak and unsupportive social ties can jeopardize employment or advancement that are harmful to the individual and social group as well. People make cultural objects meaningful (Griswold 2013). Interactions and reasoning develop cultural perspectives and understanding. The “social mind” of groups process incoming signals influencing culture within the social structure including the social attributes and status of members in a society (Zerubavel 1999). Language and symbols express a person’s position in society and the expectations associated with their status. For example, the clothes people wear or car they drive represents style, fashion, and wealth. Owning designer clothing or a high-performance sports car depicts a person’s access to financial resources and worth. The use of formal language and titles also represent social status such as salutations including your majesty, your highness, president, director, chief executive officer, and doctor.

People may occupy multiple statuses in a society. At birth, people are ascribed social status in alignment to their physical and mental features, gender, and race. In some cases, societies differentiate status according to physical or mental disability as well as if a child is female or male, or a racial minority. According to Dr. Jody Heymann, Dean of the World Policy Analysis Center at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, “Persons with disabilities are one of the last groups whose equal rights have been recognized” around the world (Brink 2016). A report by the World Policy Analysis Center (2016) shows only 28% of 193 countries participating in the global survey guarantee a right to quality education for people with disabilities and only 18% guarantee a right to work.

In some societies, people may earn or achieve status from their talents, efforts, or accomplishments (Griffiths et al. 2015). Obtaining higher education or being an artistic prodigy often correspond to high status. For example, a college degree awarded from an “Ivy League” university social weighs higher status than a degree from a public state college. Just as talented artists, musicians, and athletes receive honors, privileges, and celebrity status.

Additionally, the social, political hierarchy of a society or region designates social status. Consider the social labels within class, race, ethnicity, gender, education, profession, age, and family. Labels defining a person’s characteristics serve as their position within the larger group. People in a majority or dominant group have higher status (e.g., rich, white, male, physician, etc.) than those of the minority or subordinate group (e.g., poor, black, female, housekeeper,
Overall, the location of a person on the social strata influences their social power and participation (Griswold 2013). Individuals with inferior power have limitations to social and physical resources including lack of authority, influence over others, formidable networks, capital, and money.

Social status serves as a method for building and maintaining boundaries among and between people and groups. Status dictates social inclusion or exclusion resulting in cultural stratification or hierarchy whereby a person’s position in society regulates their cultural participation by others. Cultural attributes within social networks build community, group loyalty, and personal and social identity.

People sometimes engage in status shifting to garner acceptance or avoid attention. DuBois (1903) described the act of people looking through the eyes of others to measure social place or position as double consciousness. His research explored the history and cultural experiences of American slavery and the plight of black folk in translating thinking and behavior between racial contexts. DuBois’ research helped sociologists understand how and why people display one identity in certain settings and another in different ones. People must negotiate a social situation to decide how to project their social identity and assign a label that fits (Kottak and Kozaitis 2012). Status shifting is evident when people move from informal to formal contexts. Our cultural identity and practices are very different at home than at school, work, or church. Each setting demands different aspects of who we are and our place in the social setting.

The significance of cultural capital

This short video summarizes Pierre Bourdieu’s (1930-2002) theory of cultural capital or “the cultural knowledge that serves as currency that helps us navigate culture and alters our experiences and the opportunities available to us.” The video discusses three different forms of cultural capital: embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state with examples of each type that students can apply to their own lives. At the end of the video, discussion questions are included to assist students in applying the concept of cultural capital to what is happening in the world today. Prepare a written response addressing the four discussion questions presented in the video to share with the class.

Sociologists find cultural capital or the social assets of person (including intellect, education, speech pattern, mannerisms, and dress) promote social mobility (Harper-Scott and Samson 2009). People who accumulate and display the cultural knowledge of a society or group may earn social acceptance, status, and power. Bourdieau (1991) explained the accumulation and transmission of culture is a social investment from socializing agents including family, peers, and community. People learn culture and cultural characteristics and traits from one another; however, social status effects whether people share, spread, or communicate cultural knowledge to each other. A person’s social status in a group or society influences their ability to access and develop cultural capital.

Cultural capital provides people access to cultural connections such as institutions, individuals, materials, and economic resources (Kennedy 2012). Status guides people in choosing who and when culture or cultural capital is transferable. Bourdieu (1991) believed cultural inheritance and personal biography attributes to individual success more than intelligence or talent. With status comes access to social and cultural capital that generates access to privileges and power among and between groups. Individuals with cultural capital deficits face social inequalities (Reay 2004). If someone does not have the cultural knowledge and skills to maneuver the social world she or he occupies, then she or he will not find acceptance within a group or society and access to support and resources.
College Success and Cultural Capital

Cultural capital evaluates the validity of culture (i.e., language, values, norms, and access to material resources) on success and achievement. You can measure your cultural capital by examining the cultural traits and patterns of your life. The following questions examine student values and beliefs, parental and family support, residency status, language, childhood experiences focusing on access to cultural resources (e.g., books) and neighborhood vitality (e.g., employment opportunities), educational and professional influences, and barriers affecting college success (Kennedy 2012).

1. What are the most important values or beliefs influencing your life?
2. What kind of support have you received from your parents or family regarding school and your education?
3. How many generations has your family lived in the United States?
4. What do you consider your primary language? Did you have any difficulty learning to read or write the English language?
5. Did your family have more than fifty books in the house when you were growing up? What type of reading materials were in your house when you were growing up?
6. Did your family ever go to art galleries, museums, or plays when you were a child? What types of activities did your family do with their time other than work and school?
7. How would you describe the neighborhood where you grew up?
8. What illegal activities, if any, were present in the neighborhood where you grew up?
9. What employment opportunities were available to your parents or family in the neighborhood where you grew up?
10. Do you have immediate family members who are doctors, lawyers, or other professionals? What types of jobs have your family members had throughout their lives?
11. Why did you decide to go to college? What has influenced you to continue or complete your college education?
12. Did anyone ever discourage or prevent you from pursuing academics or a professional career?
13. Do you consider school easy or difficult for you?
14. What has been the biggest obstacle for you in obtaining a college education?
15. What has been the greatest opportunity for you in obtaining a college education?
16. How did you learn to navigate educational environments? Who taught you the “ins” and “outs” of college or school?

4.2 Cultural Hegemony

The very nature of cultural creation and production requires an audience to receive a cultural idea or product. Without people willing to receive culture, it cannot be sustainable or become an object (Griswold 2013). Power and influence play an integral part in cultural creation and marketing. The ruling class has the ability to establish cultural norms and manipulate society while turning a profit. Culture is a commodity and those in a position of power to create, produce, and distribute culture gain further social and economic power.

Culture producing organizations such as multinational corporations and media industries are in the business of producing mass culture products for profit. These organizations have the power to influence people throughout the
world. Paul Hirsch (1972) referred to this enterprise as the culture industry system or the “market.” In the culture industry system, multinational corporations and media industries (i.e., cultural creators) produce an excess supply of cultural objects to draw in public attention with the goal of flooding the market to ensure receipt and acceptance of at least one cultural idea or artifact by the people for monetary gain.

The culture industry system produces mass culture products to generate a culture of consumption (Grazian 2010). The production of mass culture thrives on the notion that culture influences people. In line with the humanities’ perspective on culture, multinational corporations and media industries, believe they have the ability to control and manipulate culture by creating objects or products that people want and desire. This viewpoint suggests cultural receivers or the people are weak, apathetic, and consume culture for recognition and social status (Griswold 2013). If you consider the cultural object of buying and owning a home, the concept of owning a home represents attaining the “American dream.” Even though not all Americans are able to buy and own a home, the cultural industry system has embedded homeownership as a requisite to success and achievement in America.

In contrast, popular culture implies people influence culture. This perspective indicates people are active makers in the creation and acceptance of cultural objects (Griswold 2013). Take into account one of the most popular musical genres today, rap music. The creative use of language and rhetorical styles and strategies of rap music gained local popularity in New York during the 1970s and entered mainstream acceptance in mid-1980s to early ‘90s (Caramanica 2005). The early developments of rap music by the masses led to the genre becoming a cultural object.

Is brown the new green?

Latinos are the largest and fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States. The culture industry system is seeking ways to profit from this group. As multinational corporations and media industries produce cultural objects or products geared toward this population, their cultural identity is transformed into a new subculture blending American and Latino values, beliefs, norms, and practices. Phillip Rodriguez is a documentary filmmaker on Latino culture, history, and identity. He and many other race and diversity experts are exploring the influence of consumption on American Latino culture.

1. Research the products and advertisements targeting Latinos in the United States. Describe the cultural objects and messaging encouraging a culture of consumption among this group.
2. What type of values, beliefs, norms, and practices are reinforced in the cultural objects or projects created by the culture industry system?
3. How might the purchase or consumption of the cultural objects or products you researched influence the self-image, identity, and social status of Latinos?
4. What new subculture arises by the blending of American and Latino culture? Describe the impact of uniting or combining these cultures on Latinos and Americans.

Today, rap music like other forms of music is being created and produced by major music labels and related media industries. The culture industry system uses media gatekeepers to regulate information including culture (Grazian 2010). Even with the ability of the people to create popular culture, multinational corporations and media industries maintain power to spread awareness, control access and messaging. This power to influence the masses also gives the hegemonic ruling class known as the culture industry system the ability to reinforce stereotypes, close minds, and promote fear to encourage acceptance or rejection of certain cultural ideas and artifacts.

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Social_Work/Book%3A_Human_Behavior_and_the_Social_Environment_II_(Payn...
4.3 Prejudice and Discrimination

Cultural intolerance may arise when individuals or groups confront new or differing values, beliefs, norms, expressive symbols, practices, or artifacts. Think about a time when you came across someone who did not fit the cultural “norm” either expressively or behaviorally. How did the person’s presence make you feel? What type of thoughts ran through your head? Were you compelled to understand the differences between you and the other person or were you eager to dismiss, confront, or ignore the other person?

Living in a culturally diverse society requires us to tackle our anxiety of the unknown or unfamiliar. The discomfort or cognitive dissonance we feel when we are around others who live and think differently than ourselves makes us alter our thoughts and behaviors towards acceptance or rejection of the “different” person in order to restore cognitive balance (Festinger 1957). When people undergo culture shock or surprise from experiencing new culture, their minds undergo dissonance. Similar to a fight or flight response, we choose to learn and understand cultural differences or mock and run away from them.

People have a tendency to judge and evaluate each other on a daily basis. Assessing other people and our surroundings is necessary for interpreting and interacting in the social world. Problems arise when we judge others using our own cultural standards. We call the practice of judging others through our own cultural lens, ethnocentrism. This practice is a cultural universal. People everywhere think their culture is true, moral, proper, and right (Kottak and Kozaitis 2012). By its very definition, ethnocentrism creates division and conflict between social groups whereby mediating differences is challenging when everyone believes they are culturally superior and their culture should be the standard for living.

In contrast, cultural relativism insinuates judging a culture by the standards of another is objectionable. It seems reasonable to evaluate a person’s values, beliefs, and practices from their own cultural standards rather than judged against the criteria of another (Kottak and Kozaitis 2012). Learning to receive cultural differences from a place of empathy and understanding serves as a foundation for living together despite variances. Like many aspects of human civilization, culture is not absolute but relative suggesting values, beliefs, and practices are only standards of living as long as people accept and live by them (Boas 1887). Developing knowledge about cultures and cultural groups different from our own allows us to view and evaluate others from their cultural lens.

Sometimes people act on ethnocentric thinking and feel justified disregarding cultural relativism. Overcoming negative attitudes about people who are culturally different from us is challenging when we believe our culture and thinking are justified. Consider the social issue of infanticide or the killing of unwanted children after birth. The historical practice occurred in times of famine or hardship when resources were scarce to keep non-productive humans alive. Many people find infanticide a human rights violation regardless of a person’s cultural traditions and beliefs and think the practice should stop. People often feel justified condemning the practice of infanticide and the people who believe and practice the tradition.

Stereotypes are oversimplified ideas about groups of people (Griffith et al. 2015). Prejudice is an attitude of thoughts and feelings directed at someone from prejudging or making negative assumptions. Negative attitudes about another’s culture is a form of prejudice or bias. Prejudice is a learned behavior. Prejudicial attitudes can lead to discriminatory acts and behaviors. Discrimination is an action of unfair treatment against someone based on characteristics such as age, gender, race, religion, etc.
Privilege and Life Changes

Research You-Tube user-created videos on privilege and life chances such as the following:

- Privilege Activity by Adam Doyne
- What is Privilege by BuzzFeedYellow
- Check Your Perspective, Not Your Privilege by Rachel West

Complete the [Test Your Life Chances](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Social_Work/Book%3A_Human_Behavior_and_the_Social_Environment_II_(Payn...) exercise and type a written response addressing the following questions:

1. What life barriers or issues are you able to identify about yourself after completing the exercise?
2. What life advantages or opportunities are you able to distinguish about yourself after completing the exercise?
3. Were there any statements you found more difficult or easier to answer? Explain.
4. Were there any life challenges or obstacles that you have faced missing in the exercise? If so, explain.
5. Were there any life privileges you have experienced missing in the exercise? If so, explain.
6. Did you ever answer untruthfully on any of the statements? If you are comfortable sharing, explain which one(s)? Why did you not answer truthfully?
7. How do life’s barriers and opportunities influence people’s lives? What connections do you see among upward mobility and life chances in regards to: disability, racial-ethnic identity, gender identity, language, sexuality, and social class?

Thinking the practice of infanticide should stop and those who practice it malevolent is prejudicial. Trying to stop the practice with force is discriminatory. There are times in the case of human rights issues like this where the fine line between criticizing with action (ethnocentrism) and understanding with empathy (cultural relativism) are clear. However, knowing the appropriate context when to judge or be open-minded is not always evident. Do we allow men to treat women as subordinates if their religion or faith justifies it? Do we allow people to eat sea turtles or live octopus if it is a delicacy? Do we stop children who do not receive vaccinations from attending school? All of these issues stem from cultural differences and distinguishing the appropriate response is not always easy to identify.

When social groups have or are in power, they have the ability to discriminate on a large scale. A dominant group or the ruling class impart their culture in society by passing laws and informally using the culture industry system or “market” to spread it. Access to these methods allows hegemonic groups to institutionalize discrimination. This results in unjust and unequal treatment of people by society and its institutions. Those who culturally align to the ruling class fare better than those who are different.

**Visual Ethnography**

**Part 1**

Visual ethnography is a qualitative research method of photographic images with socio-cultural representations. The experience of producing and discussing visual images or texts develops ethnographic knowledge and provides sociological insight into how people live. In your home or the place you live, take one photo of the following:

- Part 2
1. Watch the video by Anna Rosling Ronnlund entitled See [How the Rest of the World Lives](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_yGk1M3HhM), Organized by Income.

2. Next visit the website [Dollar Street](https://dollarstreet.org).

3. Once you have accessed the Dollar Street website, take the Quick Tour for a tutorial on how to use the site. If the Quick Tour does not appear when you click the site link, click the menu on the right-hand top corner and select Quick Guide, which will open the Quick Tour window.

4. After completing the Quick Tour, access your visual ethnography photos and compare your photographs with other people throughout the world.

5. For your analysis, incomplete sentences explain the differences and similarities based on income and country. Specifically, describe what the poorest conditions are for each item as well as the richest conditions and what cultural similarities and/or differences exist in comparison to your items.

References


Griffiths, Heather, Nathan Keirns, Eric Strayer, Susan Cody-Rydzewsk, Gail Scaramuzzo, Tommy Sadler, Sally Vyain, Jeff Byer, and Faye Jones. 2015. Introduction to Sociology 2e. Houston, TX: OpenStax College.


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