

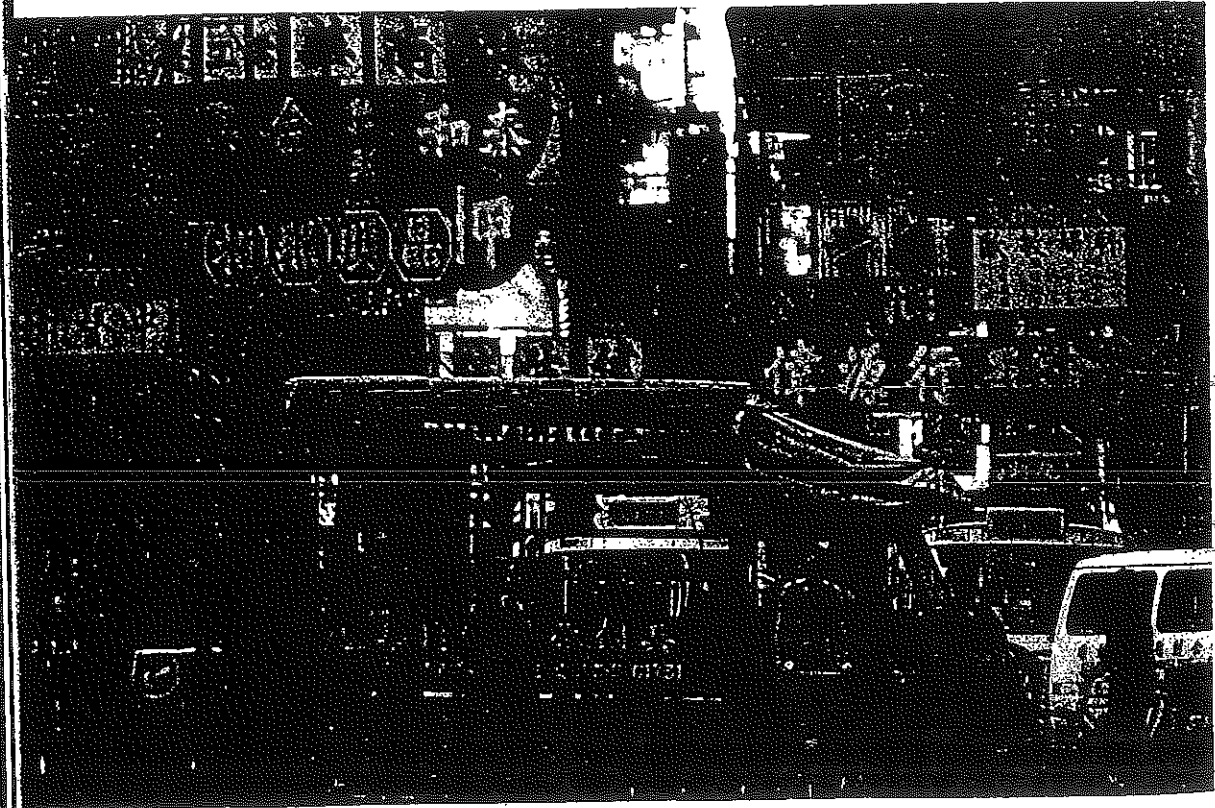
## What Is Culture?

What do McDonald's, Dairy Queen, and Coca-Cola have to do with American culture? How does Japanese culture differ from American culture, in addition to the signs we can't read? *Culture* is the way of life—the shared, learned behavior—of a people. It includes everything they think, do, and have as members of a society. It includes their ideas, values, beliefs, literature, art, music, religion, and philosophy. It includes the material objects they own and the rules by which they guide their behavior. It also includes the business organizations, such as McDonald's and Dairy Queen, that help satisfy people's wants and needs. Our language, the way we dress, the food we eat, our work activities, and the way we spend our leisure time are all part of our culture.

Culture is both shared and learned. This does not mean that everyone in the United States eats at McDonald's. What it means is that people see McDonald's as a part of the business establishment in their local community. Similarly, not all your neighbors may have visited the art museum in your community, but it is still a part of the culture of your community.

Probably the most obvious aspect of any culture is its language. In the United States we learn to speak an American form of English, and we share this language as our means of communicating with one another. Again, although there are members of our society who do not speak English, English is the primary language in which our schools are operated, our books and magazines are printed, our radio and television programs are broadcast, our business affairs are con-

*Language helps make us part of a culture. Would you feel like part of the Chinese culture if you were walking down this busy street in Hong Kong?*



ducted, and so on. When we visit Japan, we are apt to feel isolated and out of place if we haven't learned Japanese and can't communicate with the people.

## Culture and Society

There is a difference between a society and a culture. The basic characteristic of all societies is people. The term **society** refers to a number of people living within a certain geographic area who have a common culture and feeling of unity that help bind them together into a social unit. American society consists of all the people who live in the United States.

As you know, the culture is the way of life of a people. American culture consists of the shared, learned behavior of the people who make up American society. Every society has a culture. Members of the society transmit the culture from generation to generation.

## How We Relate to Our Culture

Our culture is so vast, so complex, and includes so many things that we can only begin to learn parts of it. We relate to different parts of the total culture at different times. We also relate to the culture from different role positions. A **role** is the part an individual plays in relation to the group or society. We may move from the role of child to the role of parent or even grandparent as we go through life. At some stage we may change from the role of employee to the role of retired person. Some of our roles do stay basically the same, however, regardless of age or other roles we might play in the society. When you buy an ice cream cone or a hamburger, you play the role of consumer or customer regardless of whether you are a child, parent, grandparent, employee, or retired person. What are some other roles that you play? Have they changed a lot or stayed basically the same?

Not only do we relate to our culture through many different roles, but the culture itself is continually changing. New material objects are constantly being introduced, as

are new words, expressions, and ideas. A culture doesn't stay the same. It is not *static*. Rather it is constantly changing, or *dynamic*.

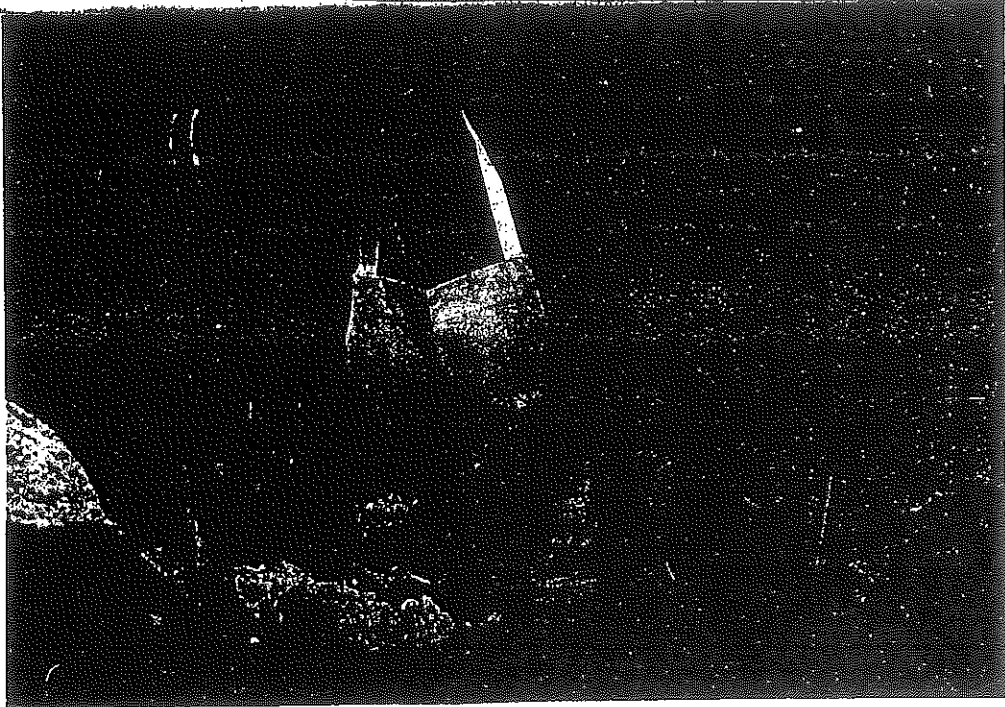
## How Social Scientists Study Culture

If cultures are so vast and complicated and are constantly changing, then how do sociologists study them? They break a culture down into its component parts. They then study the parts separately.

**Culture traits.** The smallest component of culture is the **culture trait**, which is an individual tool, act, or belief related to a particular situation or need. Our use of a fork, knife, and spoon when eating is a culture trait. Another trait is the specific way we greet people. If you are walking down the hall at school and meet a good friend, you are likely to say "hi." When you are introduced to the personnel manager for a job interview, however, you would probably not say "hi." The greeting you use is related to the particular situation or need.

Thus a culture trait can be a tool, such as a fork. And it can be an act, such as greeting a friend. It can also be a belief, such as "Breaking a mirror brings bad luck." Culture traits may be either *material* (tools) or *non-material* (acts and beliefs). They may be simple or highly complex. For example, in lighting a fire you use a match—a simple tool. To get to school you may ride in a car, a bus, or a train—highly complex machines.

**Culture complexes.** Individual culture traits combine to form culture complexes. **Culture complexes** are clusters of interrelated traits. For example, the game of football is a culture complex that involves a variety of traits. First, we have a number of material traits, or tools, such as the football, the measuring chain, cleated shoes, helmets, pads, first-aid kits, and warm-up benches. Second, we have a series of specific acts, such as kicking the ball, passing it, catching it, blocking, tackling, and running with the ball. Third, we have a group of specific beliefs related to the



*Does this home economics class fit our definition of a culture complex?  
What culture traits are involved?*

game, such as the belief that the players should be good sports, that certain rules should be followed in playing the game, that penalties should be given for rule violations, and that "our" team must win.


In the modern industrial cultures of today, there are thousands of culture complexes. Some other examples in American culture are a school dance, lunch in the school cafeteria, a lab experiment, a business office, a retail store, and a manufacturing plant. Each of these complexes involves culture traits, or specific tools, acts, and beliefs. What other culture complexes can you name? Which ones are you involved in during an average day in your life?

**Culture patterns.** Culture complexes combine to form larger units called culture patterns. *Culture patterns* are combinations of a number of culture complexes into an interrelated whole. For example, the complexes of sports such as basketball, softball, swimming, tennis, soccer, and track combine to form the American athletic pattern. Other patterns are related to such aspects of the culture as agriculture, manufacturing, education, religion, and family life.

### **Why Study Culture Traits, Complexes, and Patterns?**

Of what value to you as an individual is this knowledge about culture traits, complexes, and patterns? This knowledge is important if you want to really understand a culture, whether it is your own or a very different culture. To study a culture, we can analyze the various traits as they relate to a specific complex. We can study a number of complexes. We can classify these traits and complexes, trace their development within a society, and discover the various patterns of the culture.

To get a better idea of how culture traits, complexes, and patterns fit together, let's look at your own high school. Your high school contains a number of culture traits and complexes related to the American education pattern. First, consider the different kinds of culture traits. For material traits (tools), you probably have buildings, athletic fields, lockers, desks, textbooks, a library, and so on. You also engage in a variety of acts. During the school day you probably listen to lectures, take part in class discussions, take tests, participate in athletic games, eat



lunch with friends, and so on. You are also exposed to many different beliefs. There are, for example, the beliefs that you should get to class on time, should not cheat on tests, and should complete assignments.

✓ As you can readily see, the number of culture traits involved in a high school is enormous. What are some culture complexes present at your school? How do these traits and complexes fit into a pattern?