

UNIT

3.5

Symbolic Culture: Values, Norms, Sanctions, Folkways, and Mores

Now that we have looked at language and gestures, let's examine the other essential elements of *symbolic culture*—its values, norms, sanctions, folkways, and mores.

Values, Norms, and Sanctions

Whenever you learn a culture—whether it's the one you learn as a baby or another that you learn later in life—you are learning a people's **values**, their ideas of what is desirable in life. To uncover people's values is to learn a great deal about them, for values are the standards by which we 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 ideas about the “right” way to follow its values. The term **norms** refers to these expectations (or rules of behavior). People's reactions when others follow or break norms are called **sanctions**. 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 negative sanctions, too, 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

values the standards by which people define what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad, beautiful or ugly

norms expectations of “right” behavior

sanctions either expressions of approval given to people for upholding norms or expressions of disapproval for violating them

positive sanction a positive reaction for following norms, ranging from a smile to a material reward

negative sanction an expression of disapproval for breaking a norm, ranging from a mild, informal reaction such as a frown to a formal reaction such as a prize or a prison sentence

WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO LEARN?

After you have read this unit, you should be able to

- 1 State how values, norms, and sanctions are related to one another.
- 2 Explain what folkways, mores, and taboos 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.



Mardi Gras, in the many places it is held, is a moral holiday. This photo was taken in New Orleans.

FROM ANOTHER STUDENT ...

I love learning sociology! I enjoy your book! It forces me to think and I love it. I cannot thank you enough for helping me to learn something that I actually enjoy learning. I actually think about sociology outside of school. Thank you so much for improving the way I see the world.

*With amazement,
Charlie Diehl
St Louis College of Pharmacy*

One of the more interesting examples is “Party Cove” at Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri, a fairly conservative area of the country. During the summer, hundreds of boaters—those operating everything from 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 was within the law—she had sprayed shaving cream on certain parts of her body. The Missouri Water Patrol has even given a green light to Party Cove, announcing in the local newspaper that officers will not enter this cove, supposedly because “there is so much traffic that they might not be able to get out in time to handle an emergency elsewhere.”

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 violating 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 parents having sex with their children 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.

folkways norms that are not strictly enforced

mores norms that are strictly enforced because they are thought essential to core values or the well-being of the group

taboo a norm so strong that it often brings revulsion if violated



The violation of mores is considered a serious matter. This streaker at a cricket match in Brisbane, Australia, was knocked to the ground and arrested.

UNIT 3.5 // TESTING MYSELF DID I LEARN IT?

ANSWERS ARE AT THE
END OF THE CHAPTER

- Leticia was shocked when her friend showed her a pornographic magazine. She said, “I don’t understand how anyone can pose for photos like that!” Leticia was expressing
 - a positive sanction
 - a subcultural standard
 - her standards of beauty
 - values
- When Leticia found a pornographic magazine in her son’s bedroom, she grounded her son for a week. He couldn’t leave home, he couldn’t have friends over, and he couldn’t watch television. Leticia’s actions are an example of a
 - positive sanction
 - negative sanction
 - norm
 - subcultural standard
- Leticia told her son, “I don’t care how you feel about it. You will not look at pornography in this house again.” Leticia’s statement expresses a
 - positive sanction
 - narrow opinion
 - norm
 - culture
- After Leticia’s son was grounded for three days, he told his mother that he was sorry and he wouldn’t look at any more pornography. Leticia said that she was going to reduce his grounding by two days. Leticia’s action is an example of a
 - positive sanction
 - negative sanction
 - norm
 - value
- At Mardi Gras in New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a lot of people get drunk. There is also a lot of nudity. Unless things get too far out of line, the

police just smile and tell the people to have fun. At other times of the year, they will arrest people for these same behaviors. This is an example of

- a. the flexibility of norms and values
 - b. what happens when the police are corrupt
 - c. the police failing to uphold the law
 - d. moral holidays
6. The air conditioner wasn't working in the summer heat, and it was stifling hot in the office. Ben said he didn't care if people stared. He took off his shirt. (Ben was not wearing an undershirt.) Ben violated
- a. an ethnocentrism
 - b. a sanction
 - c. a folkway
 - d. one of the mores
7. The air conditioner wasn't working in the summer heat, and it was stifling hot in the office. Jenn said she didn't care if people stared. She took off her blouse. (Jenn was not wearing a slip or a bra.) Jenn violated
- a. an ethnocentrism
 - b. a sanction
 - c. a folkway
 - d. one of the mores
8. Mary was photographed, fingerprinted, and booked. Later the judge sentenced her to 7 years in prison for having sex with her teenaged son. Mary had violated
- a. a taboo
 - b. a sanction
 - c. a folkway
 - d. one of the mores

Subcultures

People who participate in the same activity, whether snowboarding or stamp collecting, tend to develop specialized ways to communicate with one another. To outsiders, their talk, even if it is in English, can seem like a foreign language. Here is one of my favorite quotes by a politician:

There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns; there are things we do not know we don't know. (Donald Rumsfeld, quoted in Dickey and Barry 2006:38)

Whatever Rumsfeld, the former secretary of defense under George W. Bush, meant by his statement probably will remain a known unknown. (Or would it be an unknown known?)

The same thing occurs in the subculture of sociology. Try to figure out what this means:

Path analysis showed that parental involvement fully mediated the effect of parental acculturation on intergenerational relationship, whereas intergenerational relationship mediated the effect of parental involvement on child outcomes. (Ying and Han 2008)

As much as possible, I will try to spare you from such "insider's" talk.

People who specialize in an occupation—from cabbies to politicians—tend to develop a **subculture**, a world within the larger world of the dominant culture. Subcultures are not limited to occupations. They can originate anywhere that people's experiences lead them to have distinctive ways of looking at the world. Even if we cannot understand the quotation from Donald Rumsfeld, it makes us aware that politicians don't view life in quite the same way most of us do. Nor do sociologists.

U.S. society contains *thousands* of subcultures. Some are as broad as the way of life we associate with teenagers, others are as narrow as those we associate with body builders. Some U.S. ethnic groups also form subcultures: Their values, norms, and foods set them apart. So might their religion, music, language, and clothing. As you are learning, sociologists also use a unique language in their efforts to understand the world.

Some subcultures can be illustrated by photos. Take a look at the photo essay on the next two pages.

 **Watch the Video**
The Big Picture:
Culture in **mysoclab**

UNIT

Many Cultural Worlds

3.6

WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO LEARN?

After you have read this unit, you should be able to

Explain the difference between subcultures and countercultures.

Countercultures

Consider this quote from another subculture:

If everyone applying for welfare had to supply a doctor's certificate of sterilization, if everyone who had committed a felony were sterilized, if anyone who had mental illness to any degree were sterilized—then our

subculture the values and related behaviors of a group that distinguish its members from the larger culture; a world within a world