Symbols, Values & Norms: Crash Course Sociology #10

Crash Course: Sociology
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You're about to cross a street.

What do you do? If there are no cars coming, do you stay at the crosswalk, waiting for the light to change?

Or do you just go for it? Do you look left first before you cross, or do you look right? Or maybe you just dart across the street, shouting, 'Hey I'm walking here!' No matter what you do in this situation, what you do is going to depend on culture.

Now you may be thinking, how can something like crossing the street be a cultural phenomenon? Isn't culture, like, opera and galas and fancy art openings with tiny hor d'oeuvres? Or maybe you think culture is bigger than all that, that culture is your heritage, traditions that have been passed down for generations, like Quinceañeras, Bar Mitzvahs, or Sweet Sixteen parties.

The fact is, all of these things – street-crossing, fine arts, and traditional rites of passage – they are all part of culture.

[Theme Music]

Culture is the way that non-material objects – like thoughts, action, language, and values – come together with material objects to form a way of life. So you can basically break culture down into two main components: things and ideas. When you're crossing the road, you can see markers of your culture in the things around you – the street signs, the width of the road, the speed and style of the cars.

This is material culture, the culture of things. Books, buildings, food, clothing, transportation. It can be everything from iconic monuments like the Statue of Liberty to something as simple as a crosswalk sign that counts down how many seconds you have to cross the street.

But a lot of the culture that's packed into crossing the street is non-material, too. We interpret the color red to mean stop – because our culture has assigned red as a symbol for stop and green for go. And if you grew up in a country where cars drive on the right side of the road, your parents probably taught you to look left first before crossing.

This is non-material culture, the culture of ideas. It's made up of the intangible creations of human society – values, symbols, customs, ideals. Instead of the Statue of Liberty, it's the idea of liberty and what it means to be free.

For our purposes as sociologists, we'll mainly be focusing on this second type of culture and its three main elements: symbols, values and beliefs, and norms. Symbols include anything that carries a specific meaning that's recognized by people who share a culture. Like a stop sign.

Or a gesture. If I do this [holds up one hand, palm out, then just 1 finger], you probably know that I mean: hold on a sec. Non-verbal gestures like this are a form of language, which is itself a symbolic system that people within a culture can use to communicate.

Language is more than just the words you speak or write – and it's not just a matter of English or French or Arabic. The type of language you use in one cultural setting may be entirely different than what you'd use in another. Take how you talk to people online.

New linguistic styles have sprung up that convey meaning to other people online, because internet culture. See, there's one right there! If you're internet fluent, me saying 'because' and then a noun makes perfect sense, as a way of glossing over a complicated explanation.

But if you're not familiar with that particular language, it just seems like bad grammar. Whether it's written, spoken or non-verbal, language allows us to share the things that make up our culture, a process known as cultural transmission. And one view of language is that it not only lets us communicate with each other, but that it also affects how people within a culture see the world around them.

This theory, known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, argues that a person's thoughts and actions are influenced by the cultural lens created by the language they speak. Let's go to the Thought Bubble to see an example of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in action. What gender is the moon?

For English speakers, this question might just conjure images of the man in the moon, but in many languages, nouns have genders. And in some languages, the moon is feminine, like the Spanish 'la luna'. But in others, the moon is masculine, like the German 'der mond.' And this affects how Spanish and German people perceive the moon!

In one study, Spanish and German people were asked to rate objects – which were gendered in their language – with reference to certain traits. Like, is the moon beautiful? Is the moon rugged?

Is the moon forceful? The study found that for those whose language used a masculine article, objects were more strongly associated with stereotypically masculine traits, like forcefulness. Another study found that when a name was assigned to an object, and the name matched the gender of the word for it, it was easier for people to remember the name.

Like, "Maria Moon" tended to be remembered more readily by Spanish-speakers than by German speakers. Thanks, Thought Bubble. Now, I should mention that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is one that researchers are divided on.

Benjamin Lee Whorf – the American linguist who helped shape this theory – did his original research on indigenous languages like Hopi and Inuit. And since then, anthropologists have argued that some of his findings don't hold up. For example, Whorf famously claimed that because the Hopi language describes time differently, the Hopi people think of time differently.

But anthropological evidence about the Hopi people suggests otherwise. And Whorf's study led to a strange, and false, stereotype that Hopi people, quote, "have no sense of time." Sociology is an evolving field, and academic disagreements like this are just one reason that we study language and how it shapes our society. But if language helps us communicate, shape, and pass on culture, the next element of culture is what helps us organize culture into moral categories.

Values are the cultural standards that people use to decide what's good or bad, what's right or wrong. They serve as the ideals and guidelines that we live by. Beliefs, by contrast, are more explicit than values – beliefs are specific ideas about what people think is true about the world.

So for example, an American value is democracy, while a common belief is that a good political system is one where everyone has the opportunity to vote. Different cultures have different values, and these values can help explain why we see different social structures around the world. Western countries like the United States tend to value individualism and stress the importance of each person's own needs, whereas Eastern countries like China tend to value collectivism and stress the importance of groups over individuals.

These different values are part of why you're more likely to see young adults in the US living separately from their parents and

more likely to see to multi-generational households in China. Cultural values and beliefs can also help form the guidelines for behavior within that culture. These guidelines are what we call norms, or the rules and expectations that guide behavior within a society.

So giving up your seat for an elderly person? Great. Picking your nose in public? Gross. These are two ways of talking about norms. A norm simply relates to what we think is “normal”, whether something is either culturally accepted, or not.

And we have three main types of norms! The first are what we call folkways. Folkways are the informal little rules that kind of go without saying.

It’s not illegal to violate a folkway, but if you do, there might be ramifications – or what we call negative sanctions. Like, if you walk onto an elevator and stand facing the back wall instead of the door. You won’t get in trouble, but other people are gonna give you some weird looks.

And sometimes, breaking a folkway can be a good thing, and score you some positive sanctions from certain parts of society. Like, your mom might ground you for getting a lip ring, but your friends might think it’s really cool. Another type of norm are mores, which are more official than folkways and tend to be codified, or formalized, as the stated rules and laws of a society.

When mores are broken, you almost always get a negative sanction – and they’re usually more severe than just strange looks. Standing backward in the elevator might make you the office weirdo, but you’ll probably get fired if you come into work topless, because there are strict rules about what kinds of clothing – or lack thereof – are appropriate for the workplace. Hawaiian shirts – probably not.

No shirt? You’re fired. But mores aren’t universal.

You may get fired for showing up without a shirt at work, but men can lay on the beach shirtless, or walk down the street with no problem. For women, these norms are different. In the United States, cultural norms about women’s bodies and sexuality mean that it’s illegal for women to go topless in public.

But then in parts of Europe, social norms are more lax about nudity, and it’s not uncommon for women to also be shirtless at the beach. The last of type of norm is the most serious of the three: taboo. Taboos are the norms that are crucial to a society’s moral center, involving behaviors that are always negatively sanctioned.

Taboo behaviors are never okay, no matter the circumstance, and they violate your very sense of decency. So, killing a person: taboo or not? Your first instinct might be to say, yes, killing is awful.

But, while most cultures agree that life is sacred, and murder should be illegal, it’s not always considered wrong. Most societies say it’s okay to kill in times of war or in self defense. So what is a taboo?

Cannibalism, incest, and child molestation are common examples of behavior we see as taboo. Yes, you can kill someone in self-defense, but if you pull a Hannibal Lector and eat that person, you’re going to jail, whether it started as self-defense or not. So don’t do that.

Ever. Norms like these and many others help societies function well, but norms can also be a kind of constraint, a social control that holds people back. Some norms can be bad, like ones that encourage unhealthy behavior like smoking or binge drinking.

But not all norms have clearly defined moral distinctions – like the way a culture’s emphasis on competition pushes people toward success, but also discourages cooperation. And that’s the tricky thing about culture. Most of the time you don’t notice the cultural forces that are shaping your thoughts and actions, because they just seem normal.

That’s why sociologists study culture! We can’t notice whether our values and our norms are good or bad unless we step back and look at them with the analytical eye of a sociologist. Today we learned what culture is and the difference between material and non-material culture.

We learned about three things that make up culture: symbols, values and beliefs, and norms. We looked at how language influences culture through the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and discussed the three types of norms – folkways, mores, and taboos – which govern our daily life. Crash Course Sociology is filmed in the Dr. Cheryl C. Kinney Studio in Missoula, MT, and it's made with the help of all these nice people. Our Animation Team is Thought Cafe and Crash Course is made with Adobe Creative Cloud.

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