

Values and Beliefs

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how cultures transmit values and beliefs. You already touched on a culture's moral judgments and convictions when distinguishing between mores and folkways in the previous tutorial, but now we are going to look more closely at where cultural moral judgments come from and how they are applied. You will also examine how values and beliefs cultivate self and social awareness. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Values and Beliefs

Values are a culture's standard for discerning what is good and just in society. Values are deeply embedded and critical for transmitting and teaching a culture's beliefs. **Beliefs** are the tenets or convictions that people hold to be true. Individuals in a society have specific beliefs, but they also share collective values. To illustrate the difference, some communities of Americans commonly believe in the American Dream, which is the name for the belief that anyone who works hard enough will be successful and wealthy. That they believe in this idea does not make it true or false. The thing that makes it sociologically important is that many people believe it to be true. Underlying this belief, however, is an American value which holds that the accumulation of wealth and property is good and important.

Values help shape a society by suggesting what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, to be sought or avoided. Consider the value commonly held in the United States that attaches positive attributes to youth and youthful appearance, and negative attributes to age and aged appearance. Shaped by this value—and by marketing campaigns promoting this value—Americans spend millions of dollars each year on cosmetic products and surgeries to look young and beautiful. The United States also has an individualistic culture, which means that Americans generally place a high value on individuality and independence. In contrast, many other cultures are collectivist, meaning the welfare of the group and group relationships is a primary value.

Values are not static; they vary across time and between groups as people evaluate, debate, and change collective societal beliefs. Many Americans used to value abstention from alcohol. The value attached to sobriety was once so widespread that for a few years in the 1920s, alcohol was illegal across the country, in the era now known as Prohibition. Now, Americans more commonly value moderation in alcohol use over total abstention; for most communities, alcohol is okay to use in certain amounts and at certain times.

Values also vary from culture to culture. While we just said that most American communities adopted a new value of moderation in alcohol use after the Prohibition era, this is certainly not true of all American communities. Several religious communities, including many Muslims and Mormons, abstain from alcohol completely, while the recovery community of people who have a challenging relationship with alcohol also

abstain for reasons of safety. An example of nonmaterial culture, any given individual's relationship with alcohol carries great symbolic differences across time, place, or community.



Self and Social Awareness: Skill in Action

Individuals who work in careers related to human behavior, such as psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, or even economists, closely examine the values and beliefs of themselves and others. Values and beliefs are both individual and cultural. While many individuals in a culture may share the same values, there may also be a lot of variance. Consider your own values and beliefs. To what extent do you think your values and beliefs have been influenced by your culture?



BIG IDEA

Values help shape a society, but they are not static, and they vary from culture to culture.



TERMS TO KNOW

Values

A culture's standard for discerning what is good and just in society. Values are deeply embedded and critical for transmitting and teaching a culture's beliefs.

Beliefs

Tenets or convictions that people hold to be true.

2. Ideal Culture and Real Culture

Living up to a culture's values can be difficult. Values often suggest how people should behave, but they don't accurately reflect how people actually do behave. Values portray an **ideal culture**, the standards society would like to embrace and live up to. But ideal culture differs from **real culture**, the way society actually is, based on what occurs and exists. In an ideal culture, there would be no traffic accidents, murders, poverty, or racial tension. But in real culture, activists, lawmakers, educators, and social workers constantly strive to prevent or repair those accidents, crimes, and injustices. Cultural diversity and equal opportunities for all people are valued by many in the United States, yet the country's highest political offices have been almost exclusively dominated by wealthy white men for the country's entire history.



THINK ABOUT IT

Can you think of another example of a value that has changed over time? Can you think of another example of a value that many people hold but fail to live up to?



Self and Social Awareness: Skill Reflect

Consider your values and beliefs, as well as the values and beliefs of others. What have you learned? Reflect on the value of the self and social awareness in the context of values, and how it ties into various topics you have learned about. How confident/strong do you think you are in this skill?



TERMS TO KNOW

Ideal Culture

The standards society would like to embrace and live up to, as defined by commonly shared values.

Real Culture

The way society actually is, based on what occurs and exists.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about how **values and beliefs** can underpin norms. You also compared **ideal culture and real culture** and saw how values can vary within a culture and across time, and how just because a culture or a person holds a certain value, it doesn't necessarily mean that they live by that value all the time.

Best of luck in your learning!

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