2.9: Values and Norms

Values are abstract concepts that certain kinds of behaviors are good, right, ethical, moral and therefore desirable. In the United States, one value is freedom; another is equality.

These values can come from a variety of sub-cultures or social institutions. A society can have all of the values it wants, but if it doesn’t have a way to enforce those values, then having values means nothing.

So societies have developed forms of social control, which is the process people use to maintain order in group life.

There are two main categories of social control: norms and laws. A norm is a standard of behavior. At some point people in the society agree that these are standards. Some people learn by being taught, but mostly we pick them up just by being exposed to them.

There are a couple of types of norms: folkways and mores. Folkways are norms related to everyday life—eating with silverware, getting up in the morning and going to work or school for example. There are also mores, which are behaviors that are right or wrong…don’t kill people, don’t steal…

Some norms are explicitly taught, others are tacit—we pick them up through observation. We pick up forms of greeting, roles, which side of the sidewalk to walk on…the list could go on and on.

Sometimes, particularly in state-level societies, the mores are codified into laws or binding rules. So, stealing as a bad behavior becomes a crime. Murder—crime.

So, how do societies encourage compliance with norms and laws? There are rewards and punishment. For instance, if you kill someone in our society, if you’re caught, you go to trial and if found guilty, you go to prison, or you can be put to death. We have developed specific jobs and organizations that carry out enforcement of laws…police, court system,
prison, military. These are official forms of **social control** enforcement. Now these forms don’t have to be negative. Some are positive…a good example would be something like a Citizen Hero award.

There is also informal enforcement of norms and laws. As with the official forms of social control enforcement, the unofficial can be both positive and negative—giving your child an allowance for completing chores is an example of positive enforcement; spanking or time outs are examples of negative enforcement. Peer pressure and religious doctrine are other informal methods of enforcement of both norms and laws. Ostracism, or shunning, is yet another.

However, there are times when norm or even law violations don’t result in punishment, but these types of violations are very specifically defined. For instance, it is generally accepted that if you kill someone in self-defense or in a time of war, the punishments do not apply.

![Buddhist temple at Royal Palace in Luong, Prabang](image)

Now, all of these norms and laws can be organized into a set of **social institutions**. A social institution is a patterned set of behaviors developed to meet perceived needs. This way people aren’t doing whatever they want whenever they want to meet their needs. In US culture, we treasure independence, but that independence must be exercised within the constructed social institutions. That’s not to say that there aren’t people who go outside of these social constraints, they do. That is actually important behavior in an evolutionary sense as it provides variation of behaviors. It is those behaviors where social change is instigated.

Anthropologists put these patterns of behavior into some general categories, for instance, economic systems, religion, expressive culture and political organization. The exact pattern varies from group to group, but the needs that are met is pretty much the same. We’ll be looking at some of these categories later in the quarter.

As we move through the course and read about other cultures, I’d like you to think about the values and norms of your own culture. When you have a reaction, particularly a strong reaction, stop and think about what values, norms and laws are being violated. This will help you have a deeper understanding of the material we cover in the course.

**References**
