

## The Flag, Symbolism, and Patriotism

Flags have become pervasive symbols of nations, helping to create a national identity (Billig 1995). National loyalty becomes sacred, and that sacredness is embedded in the flag as a symbol of patriotism.

Care of the U.S. flag is an interesting example of symbolism and respect for that symbol. Flag etiquette instructions make it clear that flying a flag that is faded, soiled, or dirty is considered an offense to the flag.

Other aspects of the U.S. Flag Code, which specifies what is considered official respect for or desecration of the flag, are interesting precisely because many people violate this code while they believe themselves to be displaying their patriotism (Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War 2010).

1. The flag should never be used in any form of advertising. It should not be embroidered on cushions, handkerchiefs, or scarves or reproduced on paper napkins, carry-out bags, wrappers, or anything else that will soon be discarded.
2. No part of the flag—depictions of stars and stripes that are in any form other than that approved for the flag itself—should ever be used as a costume, a clothing item, or an athletic uniform.
3. Displaying a flag after dark should not be done unless it is illuminated, and it should not be left out when it is raining.
4. The flag should never be represented flat or horizontally (as many marching bands do). It should always be aloft and free.
5. The flag should under no circumstances be used as a ceiling covering. (U.S. Flag Code 2008)

According to the standards established by U.S. military representatives and congressional action, any of these forms of display may be considered a

desecration of the flag, yet the meaning that most citizens give to these acts may be quite different. Symbolic interactionists are interested in the meaning people give to actions and how symbols themselves inform behavior.

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### Engaging With Sociology

1. Do you think wearing a shirt or sweater with the U.S. stars and stripes in some sort of artistic design is an act of desecration of the flag or a statement of patriotism? Why?
2. Is it disrespectful to use a flag in advertising, to put stars and stripes on disposable napkins, or to have a flag flat, covering a football field? Why might the military personnel who developed the flag code think that it is disrespectful?

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This man no doubt feels he is expressing his patriotism, yet technically, he is violating the U.S. Flag Code and “desecrating” the American flag. During the Vietnam War, protesters risked being attacked for dressing this way and “disrespecting” the flag and the country.