Chapter Activities

# Chapter 3: Society and Culture: Hardware and Software of Our Social World

## Is It Ethnocentric?

**Objective:** This activity is intended to get your students considering the difference between ethnocentric and culturally relative perspectives on social issues.

**Directions:** The instructor should divide the class into groups and assign the groups to debate that the action, belief, or policy is either “ethnocentric” or “culturally relative.” The groups should then be allowed 10–20 minutes to make and outline of their main points. The groups can then spend three to five minutes each presenting their argument to the class. Classmates should be allowed to ask questions of the groups before voting to decide which group wins the debate. At the end of the activity and after all the groups have presented, the instructor should lead a discussion about the difference between ethnocentric and culturally relative perspectives.

**Debate Topics**

1. In 1997, two Iraqi brothers moved with their wives from Iraq to Montana. The couples legally wed in Iraq before relocating to the United States. The brothers, 28 and 34, worked, and the women, 14 and 16, respectively, attended school. All were participating in the naturalization process to become U.S. citizens. However, after being alerted by a teacher at the wives’ school, the two brothers were arrested and charged with statutory rape. Was their arrest ethnocentric or culturally relative?
   1. *Note to instructors*: The brothers’ defense was that the law was ethnocentric, and they were not convicted.
2. Multiple states are now discussing an “English-only” policy that would make all government-sponsored activities conducted solely in English. This would make all court proceedings, public school classes, and licensing examinations exclusively in English. In some states, the laws make it impossible for an individual to work with a translator in these settings. The laws would also make government documents, such as tax forms, the census, and discrimination grievance forms, available only in English. Is this policy ethnocentric or culturally relative?
3. Immigrants from many African nations that practice female circumcision are being arrested in the Western nations they relocate to for performing female circumcisions on their daughters. The immigrants argue that female circumcision is a culturally important practice that many women in their cultures have performed. Many nations consider female circumcision child abuse, and the UN is considering making the practice a violation of global law. The UN even refers to the action as FGM, or female genital mutilation. Is the arrest of these immigrants ethnocentric or culturally relative?
   1. *Note to instructors*: You could also ask whether the UN policy to prohibit female circumcision is ethnocentric or culturally relative.
4. In the United States, many schools and businesses are closed on the Christian celebration days of Easter, Christmas, and Good Friday. In fact, Christmas Day is one of only 10 federally recognized holidays. However, the same schools and businesses are not closed during the holidays celebrated by Americans with other religious affiliations, such as Rosh Hashanah, Ramadan, or Vesak. Is this practice ethnocentric or culturally relative?

## Connecting Nonmaterial and Material Culture

**Objective:** This assignment is designed to show students the interrelation among elements of nonmaterial and material culture. After completing this activity, they should see how material and nonmaterial culture work together to emphasize the overall cultural values of a society.

**Directions:** This activity can be conducted in small groups or with an entire class. The instructor will state the importance of values and beliefs, norms and behaviors, and material goods in a culture. Then the instructor will ask students to think of characteristics that would define “American culture.” The instructor should first ask students to come up with a list of values and beliefs that are important in American culture. After a list is compiled, the students are then asked to list norms and behaviors in our culture that reinforce those values. Then the students should make a list of material goods the culture creates to reinforce those norms and values. This activity should be followed up with a discussion on the importance of material and nonmaterial culture in a society.

* *Note to instructors*: You could also ask students to list culturally important symbols that reinforce values and norms. Students could use symbolic material goods as support for the importance of norms and values.

**Here is an example table of potential responses:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Value or Belief** | **Norms and Behaviors** | **Supportive Material Goods** |
| Importance of Material Success/Comfort | Long work hours to earn enough money to support a desired lifestyle | Any material status symbol would work here (i.e., luxury cars, large homes, and electronics) |
| Importance of Physical Fitness | Many diet norms control fat and caloric intake; fitness norms emphasize physical activity | Exercise equipment, health food, diet soda, gyms, and so forth |
| Importance of Success | Turn something into a competition unnecessarily; trying hard to be “the best” | Trophies, blue ribbons, and Employee of the Month plaques |
| Importance of Democracy | Tendency to make decisions in groups; generally allowing individuals to voice own opinion | Political buttons, yard signs, bumper stickers, newspapers, and other media |

## Does the United States Have a Real Culture?

**Objective:** In this activity, you want students to understand the importance of culture in a society.

**Directions:** Tell the class that it is their job to use objects to describe the United States’ culture to someone who has no knowledge of their society. If they could only use five objects to explain the culture what would they be? Have them make a list of the five most important objects. Have students list their objects and tally the responses as they read them out loud. Is there a general consensus on the most important objects to use? Do these objects represent our real culture or the ideal culture? Do some of the objects listed represent a subculture and not the culture as a whole?

## Mainstream Culture, Subculture, or Counterculture?

**Objective:** This activity should get students to understand the difference among subcultures, countercultures, and mainstream culture.

**Directions:** Ask students (or small groups of students) to consider whether any of the following groups are subcultures, countercultures, or mainstream cultures:

* + - 1. Al-Qaeda
      2. Soccer moms
      3. Fraternity members
      4. Traveling carnival workers
      5. Amish
      6. Gang members
      7. American Medical Association members
      8. The band at your college or university
      9. Deadheads
      10. Hamas
      11. Congress
      12. The Hell’s Angels

Ask them to keep in mind the authors’ definitions of the groups when doing this activity. What are (or may be if the students are unaware) some of the group’s norms, values, and beliefs? Are there particular symbols associated with these groups? Are there elements of material culture associated with these groups? What artifacts do they create? Do they have a cultural icon? Do they subscribe to the culture at large? In what context could they be a subculture, a counterculture, or a mainstream culture?

## Subcultural Show and Tell

**Objective:** The objective of this activity is to get students to understand the importance of symbols and artifacts in subcultures. It will also show students how objects that are commonplace to many people hold special value to members of subcultures.

**Directions:** Ask each of your students to bring in an object that they feel is an artifact or symbol of a subculture they belong to. Then have each student stand up with the object and describe what the object is and how it is important to their subculture. The students should highlight if there are norms and values associated with the object. After each student has shared his or her object, they can discuss in small groups or as a class how the subcultures they are a part of vary. They should also discuss similarities and differences of the groups.

For a larger class, students could submit a picture to the instructor of an object that they believe is an artifact or symbol of a subculture they belong to along with an explanation about the object, the subculture, and the importance of the object to the subculture. In class the instructor shows a few of the pictures and asks the class their thoughts on the object, subculture, its importance, and associated norms and values. This can provide a good lesson on how group membership influences the members while outside group members may not share in the meaning of symbols and artifacts.

## Global Connections Through Products

**Objective:** The activity will show students how the global economy connects individuals in different cultures, often without our knowledge.

**Directions:** Ask students to take a minute or two and make a list of where different objects they brought to class were made. They can look at their clothing, jackets, electronic devices, backpacks, pencils, pens, and so on. After they make a list, ask them to think about what they know about each of these national cultures. Would the product be useful to people who live in this culture, or is it produced mainly for individuals living in other cultures? How may the cultural value of the object differ between the two cultures? What values and norms are these products associated with, and how does that differ between the two cultures? You can also debate whether material or nonmaterial culture plays a greater role in global culture.

## Norms, Values, and Beliefs on Display in Important Life Events

**Objective:** This activity will give students an idea about the importance of shared cultural values in their lives.

**Directions:** First, you will want to collectively create a list of important norms, values, and beliefs in a brainstorming session. This will work best if you brainstorm for each separately. Spend about 2 or 3 minutes generating each list. Then break students into groups of three or four and have them tell a story about an important event in their lives. Here are some suggested topics:

* Getting their driver’s license
* Attending prom
* Turning 18
* Going to college or moving out
* Graduating high school
* Making the decision about which college to attend

Give each student in the group 3–5 minutes to tell their story. While they are telling their story, have the other students make a list of the norms, values, and beliefs that are central to each student’s story, allowing them to extrapolate these based on what the student says. After each student is finished with his or her story, have them compare their lists to see what beliefs, norms, and values they share and which were different. Have them come to a consensus about which cultural elements were most important to them. Then lead a group discussion on their findings.

## Connecting Symbols to Ideal or Real Culture

**Objective:** This activity allows students to better understand the importance of objects and shared meaning in a society.

**Directions:** Select 10 objects that represent traditional ideal American culture (i.e., the American flag, a mortarboard, and a single-family home). Present a photo of each object to the class and ask them to write whether the object represents ideal or real culture in our society. Jot down what the associated values are with that particular object. You can also discuss with the class whether the meaning of the symbol has changed over time.

## Thinking About Other Cultures

**Objective:** This activity will help students identify items from other cultures and understand the significance of these items.

**Directions**: Have the students bring in an item that is from another culture (i.e., food item, clothing, and artifact). Have the student do some research on the background of that item (from another culture) and discuss the significance of this item for the class as a “show and tell” activity.