

**Components of Culture:
Symbols, Language, and Values**

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Unit Summary:

Culture is the combination of all the physical and behavioral aspects of a society. To study the people within a society, how they function, and what they value, gives the sociology student a more thorough understanding of society. While students do benefit from a close examination of their own culture, in order to broaden one's mindset to the world community, comparisons will be made between mainstream American culture and other cultures of the world. As a sociology teacher, it is my intention to help my students appreciate the complexity of world culture and to recognize that every culture has its own valid and authentic version of society. Furthermore, my goal here is to provide my students with the opportunity to learn about many cultures from all over the world, not just one or two. Therefore while I have included examples from New Zealand and Maori culture in this unit, I have included many other cultures as well. My purpose was not to simply teach the culture of New Zealand; that is another lesson. Instead, my focus here is to use various examples from around the world, including New Zealand, to help my students begin to appreciate the enormous variety that world cultures present.

The study of society begins with basic components of culture, including symbols, language, and values. This unit will examine each of these components in turn. Each lesson includes a power point presentation for teacher use, as well as suggestions for classroom activities which will further student learning.

Grade Level: 10-12

Unit Focus Questions:

- What are the essential elements of culture?
- How do symbols, language, and values differ from culture to culture?
- Give examples of cultural universals. How might you make the argument that all cultures are fundamentally the same?
- Why do variations within and between cultures cause conflict?
- What part does culture play in shaping individuals?
- What are the dangers of ethnocentrism?

Social Science Learning Standards for the State of Illinois:

The *Illinois Learning Standards for Social Science* were developed using the 1985 Illinois State Goals for Social Science, the National Standards for World History, the National Standards for United States History, the National Geography Standards, the National Standards for Civics and Government, other various state and national work, and local standards contributed by team members.

The integrated study of the social sciences and humanities promotes civic competence. Within the school program social science provides coordinated, systematic study of such disciplines as anthropology, economics, geography, history, law, political science, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics and natural sciences. The study of social science helps people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.

The individual disciplines that comprise social science are often taught independently, yet all of these disciplines recognize that they owe much to the others. Students who achieve the standards for social science will have a broad understanding of political and economic systems. They will better understand events, trends, personalities and movements in local, state, national and world history. They will know local, state, national and world geography. They also will grasp how the concepts of social science can help interpret human actions and prepare them for careers and lifelong learning.

APPLICATIONS OF LEARNING

Through Applications of Learning, students demonstrate and deepen their understanding of basic knowledge and skills. These applied learning skills cross academic disciplines and reinforce the important learning of the disciplines. The ability to use these skills will greatly influence students' success in school, in the workplace and in the community.

SOLVING PROBLEMS

Recognize and investigate problems; formulate and propose solutions supported by reason and evidence.

In social science, solving problems helps students to recognize that individual decisions and actions have consequences—and these consequences affect the way people, groups and nations associate with each other. Students of social science are asked to analyze information from a variety of sources and to solve problems through a rational process based on goals and criteria.

COMMUNICATING

Express and interpret information and ideas.

To gather a range of opinions and determine the best course of action, students must interpret information. To study and draw conclusions about social science issues, students need to read and interpret textual and visual information, be able to listen carefully to others, and be able to organize and explain their own ideas using various media.

USING TECHNOLOGY

Use appropriate instruments, electronic equipment, computers and networks to access information, process ideas and communicate results.

Technology today provides a channel through which students can gather knowledge of the past, search information about today and make hypotheses regarding the future. This technology includes databases, computer programs, on-line services and interactive telecommunications. It allows students to gather and process data from a variety of sources, from archives in the Library of Congress to historical art works from around the world. Students can share ideas and information not only with their classmates, but with a "virtual classroom" of students from across the world—social science in action.

WORKING AS TEAMS

Learn and contribute productively as individuals and as members of groups.

Social science is about people's interactions. Study in this field encourages students to listen carefully to the views of all members of a group and to represent their own points of view appropriately and effectively. The group benefits from the individual knowledge and skills of its members. Each individual—like each part of social science itself—holds an important relationship to the whole.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Recognize and apply connections of important information and ideas within and among learning areas.

Social science is a highly integrated set of disciplines. Understanding economics requires knowing mathematics; understanding geography requires knowledge of earth science. Students must grasp that the connections between the parts of social science—and their relations to other academic areas—are the key to better understanding how people interact. Students in social science must know data collection and analysis, library and field research, debate, discussion and decision making—all of which are key elements to successful careers.

Unit Objectives:

At the end of this unit, the student will:

- Give specific examples of cultural diversity from around the world.
- Cite 2 characteristics or examples of each of the components of culture (symbols, language, and values).
- Explain why the components of culture are often highly contested from both the inside and outside of that culture.
- Explain the role that symbols, language, and values play in the creation of culture.
- Appreciate the complexity of world culture.

Materials:

The 3 power point presentations are attached to this file. Suggestions for classroom activities are included for each lesson. Handouts are included in the appendixes.

Teaching Strategies:

Components of Culture: Lesson One: Symbols

1. Power point presentation (see attached file) to illustrate the following concepts:

Key Questions:

What are cultural symbols?

Give an example of a symbol for a country or region.

Give an example of a symbol for an idea or belief.

Are any symbols global?

In what ways can symbols be controversial?

How might a symbol have more than one meaning?

What do symbols reflect about a culture?

2. Possible classroom activities for the lesson:

- Analyze traffic symbols from around the world. Begin with the handout shown in appendix 1.
Ask students to debate: Should traffic symbols be globally consistent? What might the advantages/disadvantages be of a global system? Who would get to design the symbols?
- Give students a list of words that include both concrete and abstract concepts such as "library," "hate," "freedom," "car," etc. Ask students to design their own symbols for these things/ideas. Ask students to draw their symbols on the board and see if other students can guess what they are. Ask students to make up symbols of their own and see if their classmates can figure them out. Discuss the difficulty of designing a symbol which will be understood by other members of the culture, much less people who are not part of that culture.
- Class discussion: In what ways are clothes symbols? What do clothes tell about a person? What, if anything, can you tell about a person based on their clothing. For example, can you tell a person's occupation based on their clothing? Have students bring in photos from magazines to prove their argument.
- Arrange students into groups and have a contest to see which group can come up with most symbols in a 5 minute period.

- Have students research the symbolism of color. What do the colors black, red, white, green, etc., mean around the world? What expressions exist in English and other languages which make references to color? Have students present their findings to the class.
- Gestures are a common symbol. Have students research different gestures for “okay,” “you’re crazy,” “I don’t know,” etc. and see how they compare around the world. Alternatively, students could research different interpretations of the same gesture, such as the wink, greeting gestures, or the nod.
- Challenge students to create a gesture for a particular situation in which a known gesture doesn’t already exist. Following is an example from the book, “Gestures: The Do’s and Taboos of Body Language Around the World,” by Roger Axtell.

“Consider this setting: You are driving on a city street, country road, and the auto in front of you has its turn signal blinking. However, the other driver continues straight ahead, neither changing lanes nor turning. You conclude, correctly, that the other driver has merely forgotten to turn off the indicator.”

Challenge: How can we politely signal to another driver about his momentary forgetfulness?

Components of Culture: Lesson Two: Values

1. Power point presentation (see attached file) to illustrate the following concepts:

Key Questions:

What are values?

What values are important to people around the world?

How are values determined?

Using beauty as an example, how do values differ between countries?

Why are values so often highly contested?

How do values change over time?

Why is it important to understand the complexity of the world's cultural values?

2. Possible classroom activities for the lesson:

- Have students read the scenario in appendix A. Ask students to individually rank who is responsible for the woman's death. Then put the students into groups and ask them to arrive at some consensus regarding their values governing such topics as marital fidelity, friendship, capitalism, etc. Ask them how people of different ages, genders, and cultures might rank the participants differently, and why.
- Have students reach the description of some core American values as outlined by sociologist Robin Williams in appendix B. Ask students to consider whether they agree or disagree with the values cited on the list. Are some values missing from the list which should be included? Also ask students to examine whether there are any contradictory values included in the list, and ask them to speculate how it might be possible to value two things which actually oppose each other. Lastly, begin a discussion with student about where these values might come from.
- Students can create a panel discussion in which issues of group welfare vs. self-fulfillment are discussed. Is the American attitude of self promotion a threat to the welfare of society as a whole? Does this do harm to the family unit? Educational system? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a society in which the group is considered more important than the individual? Vice versa?

- Students can bring in magazines in order to examine how and what values are reflected in printed ads. Based upon an examination of the ads, what is important to this society? How do you know? Have students conduct research to compare American ads with ads in foreign magazines or websites. Are similar products emphasized? How do different ads reflect different values in each country?
- Students will conduct research to learn about another culture of their choosing. Students will create a visual representation of the values predominant in each culture based on what they learned. These visual projects could be in the form of posters, collages, magazines, bulletin boards, etc. Students will present their work to classmates and look for similarities and differences between cultures.
- Distribute copies of the exercise called “bomb shelter” in appendix C. This is a commonly used exercise found in many sociology textbooks. Divide the class into groups of 4 or 5 students. As the students will discover, this exercise describes a situation in which 14 people are trapped in a situation where there is only enough food for 7 people to survive. Each student group must make the difficult decision of which seven people are going to receive the food. After each group has made its decision, call the class back together to discuss the results. What justifications does each group give for its choices? As students defend their decisions, challenge them to consider which values are reflected in their choices, as well as how individuals of other ages, gender, and culture might have responded to the same challenge.
- Have students research the tradition of tattooing in the Polynesian islands. What does tattooing symbolize in these cultures? What values are associated with this practice? Students can share information gathered with classmates in a short presentation with visual aids. How might this be a source of controversy in contemporary society? How might tolerance for varying cultural practices be encouraged worldwide?
- Have students research children’s games played around world by visiting websites such as <http://www.topics-mag.com/edition11/games-section.htm>. Ask students to note how several games are played, and then to analyze the values that are reflected in the game. For example, does it seem important in this game to follow rules? What is the object of the game? Is it to win, to play fairly, or perhaps to develop a skill most important?

Components of Culture: Lesson Three: Language

1. Power point presentation (see attached file) to illustrate the following concepts:

Key Questions:

What is language?

How does language reflect culture?

How can language be a source of confusion, even among people who speak the same language?

In what ways can language be discriminatory?

Is language important in the transmission of culture? How?

2. Possible classroom activities for the lesson:

- To demonstrate the importance of language in everyday communication, have students work in groups of 4 or 5 students to play a simple card game. Each student receives 4 playing cards, and the purpose of the game is to make as many matches (such as a pair of fours or jacks) as possible. Students make matches by asking another player if he/she would like to make a trade. If it is agreeable to both players, one card is exchanged for another. Students will play 3 rounds of this game. In the first round, students may use their hands and voices as they normally would to communicate. In the second round, students are not allowed to speak, but must communicate only through the use of gestures. In the final round, students may not speak or use their hands to communicate; they must use only facial expressions. This is a vivid demonstration to students of how much we rely on language for everyday events.
- For each of the following terms, ask students for the "gender neutral" equivalent.
 - Chairman
 - Congressman
 - Policeman
 - Fireman
 - Airline stewardess

Lady wrestler
Male nurse
Janitor
Working mother

(continued)

Ask students to discuss how prevalent the gender neutral terms are in today's society. Are these terms necessary? Is there any harm in the assumption made by language that certain occupations will be filled by men or women? Why/why not? Have students research occupational terms used in other languages to see the extent gender neutrality exists there.

- Students will research proverbs from around the world in various topics, such as work ethics, relationship advice, money, etc. Ask students to find 10-15 examples of proverbs, each from a different country. Students should then write what the proverbs mean and how they might reflect the culture where they are from.
- Suggest to students that the more important an idea/object is within a culture, the more words that exist for that idea/object. For example, have students brainstorm as many synonyms as they can for words such as "money," "food," "music," and "funny." Keep a list of these terms on the board. Then ask students to do the same for another set of words, such as "honest" and "book." Is it more difficult to think of as many words for the second list? If so, why might that be? Can students think of other examples of words for which there are many synonyms in English? Are those objects/ideas important in American culture?
- Organize a debate on the issue, Resolved: The United States should pass a law that designates English as the official language of the nation.
- Invite a speaker to class to provide instruction on sign language.
- Research the advantages and disadvantages of bilingualism. Write an essay on the topic based on your research and share it with classmates.
- Investigate how members of a country feel when visitors cannot speak the native language of the country.

Assessment:

Many of the classroom activities listed above can also serve as assessments.

A possible unit assessment would return students to the unit focus questions and ask them to choose one question from each of the groups below to address in a 3-5 page formal essay.

Group 1(Choose one)

- What are the essential elements of culture?
- How do symbols, language, and values differ from culture to culture?

Group 2 (Choose one)

- Give examples of cultural universals. How might you make the argument that all cultures are fundamentally the same?
- Why do variations within and between cultures cause conflict?

Group 3 (Choose one)

- What part does culture play in shaping individuals?
- What are the dangers of ethnocentrism?

Additional Resources:

----- . *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986.

Napoleon A. Chagnon. *Yanomamo: The Last Days of Eden*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1992.

Michael Eric Dyson. *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Stephen M. Fjellman. *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992.

David Halle. *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Marvin Harris. *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures*. New York: Random House, 1977.

Gordon Toi Hatfield. *Dedicated by Blood: Renaissance of Ta Moko*. The Hague, Netherlands: Veenman drukkers, 2002.

Glenn Jowitt. *Feasts and Festivals: A Celebration of Pacific Island Culture in New Zealand*. Auckland, New Zealand: New Holland Publishers, 2002.

Nicole Sault. *Many Mirrors: Body Image and Social Relations*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

References:

----- . *Sociology*. Villa Maria, Pennsylvania: The Center for Learning, 1997. Telephone number: 1-800-767-9090

Roger E. Axtell. *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., New York, 1998.

Edward Kain. *Innovative Techniques for Teaching Sociological Concepts*. American Sociological Association, Washington, DC, 1993.

Appendix A:

American Values

These are beliefs that Americans have upheld, as revealed by surveys. These constitute the core of what is considered important and what should be the basis of our relationships as we interact with each other. These beliefs are also reflected in American literature and in the media.

1. *Action is good*. Change can be induced through individual or group action. "Getting things done" is important. Problems, once identified, can be solved.
2. *Man's environment can be controlled*. Nature is to be conquered and exploited to suit man's need.
3. *Equal opportunities*. Americans tend to value providing everyone with the opportunity to get ahead, although everyone is not expected to end up in the same situation. Americans do not believe that everyone should have the same amount of wealth or education, but we do believe that the opportunity to acquire these things should be available equally to all.
4. *The material is more real than the spiritual*. The concrete and observable are relevant. Material comfort and convenience are emphasized.
5. *A person's success is self-made*. Social status accrues to one who succeeds on his own effort and merit in the face of competition.
6. *The individual is the keystone of society*. Individual responsibility is important and "the greatest good for the greatest number" leads to a successful society. Minority rights must be protected.
7. *Man is a moral creature*. Personal conduct can be evaluated in universal moral terms. Clear-cut ethical distinctions can be made that affect all people equally.
8. *Time is money*. Time is a material thing. It should be actively mastered or manipulated to one's advantage.

9. *The world is rational.* Scientific reasoning is the unquestioned way of understanding the physical world.
10. *Racism and group superiority.* Although expressing a commitment to the values of equality and freedom, Americans often link personal worth to membership in particular social categories based on ethnicity, race, social class, or sex.

Appendix B:

In a house is a young woman married to a man who works very hard. She feels neglected. When her husband has gone off on still another trip, the young wife meets an attractive man who invites her to his house. She spends the night and at dawn she leaves, knowing her husband is coming back. Alas!

The bridge is blocked by a madman who kills everyone who comes near him. The young wife follows the river and meets the ferryman but he demands \$10 to take her over to the other side. The young wife has no money. She runs back to her lover and asks for the \$10, but he refuses. The woman then remembers a platonic friend who lives nearby. She runs to him, explains her plight, and asks for the money, but the friend refuses to help; she has disillusioned her friend with her conduct. Her only choice is to go by the bridge in spite of the danger, and the madman kills her.

In what order do you hold the principals (woman, husband, lover, madman, ferryman, and friend) responsible for the woman's death?

Source: *Innovative Ideas for Teaching Sociological Concepts*

Appendix C:

Bomb Shelter: Who Should Survive?

The following persons are in an atomic bomb shelter. An atomic attack has occurred. These 14 persons are the only humans alive on Earth. It will take two weeks for the external radiation to drop to a safe survival level. The food and supplies in the shelter can barely sustain seven persons for two weeks. Only seven persons can survive. It is the task of this group to decide which seven of the following persons should survive.

Mr. Dane: 29, white, no religious affiliation, PhD in history, college professor, good health, married, one child (Bobby), active and enjoys politics.

Mrs. Dane: 28, white, Jewish, MA in psychology, counselor in mental health clinic, good health, married, one child (Bobby), active in community.

Bobby Dane: 10, white, Jewish, special education classes for four years, mentally retarded, IQ 70, good health, enjoys pets.

Mrs. Garcia: 33, Spanish American, Roman Catholic, 9th grade education, cocktail waitress, prostitute, good health, married at 16, divorced at 18, abandoned as a child, in foster home as youth, attacked by foster father at age 12, ran away from home, returned to reformatory, stayed until 16, has one child, 3 weeks old. (Jose)

Jose Garcia: 3 weeks old, Spanish American, good health, nursing for food.

Mrs. Evans: 32, African American, Protestant, MA in elementary education, teacher, divorced, 1 child (Mary), good health, cited as outstanding teacher, enjoys working with children.

Mary Evans: 8, African American, Protestant, 3rd grade, good health, excellent student.

John Jacobs: 13, white, Protestant, 8th grade, honor student, very active, broad interests, father is Baptist minister.

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Mr. Newton: 25, African American, good health, atheist, started school last year in medicine, openly homosexual.

Sister Mary Kathleen: 27, white, nun, college graduate as English major, grew up in upper middle class neighborhood, good health, father is a businessman.

Mr. Blake: 52, white, Mormon, high school graduate, mechanic, "Mr. Fixit," married, 4 children (not with him), good health, enjoys outdoors and working in his shop.

Miss Harris: 21, Spanish American, Protestant, college senior, nursing major, good health, enjoys sports, likes people.

Father Frenz: 37, white, Catholic, college plus seminary, priest, active in civil rights, criticized for liberal views, good health, former college athlete.

Dr. Gonzales: 66, Spanish American, Catholic, medical doctor in general practice, has had 2 heart attacks in past 5 years but continues to practice medicine.

Source: *Innovative Techniques for Teaching Sociological Concepts*

Appendix D:

Identify the Signs

List the meaning of each sign on the page that follows.



Source: *Sociology*. The Center for Learning.