

CUSTOMS

A custom is defined as a cultural idea that describes a regular, patterned behavior that is considered characteristic of life in a social system. Shaking hands, bowing, and kissing—all customs—are methods of greeting people. The method most commonly used in a given society helps distinguish one culture from another.

Key Takeaways

- A custom is a pattern of behavior that is followed by members of a particular culture, for example, shaking hands upon meeting someone.
- Customs foster social harmony and unity within a group.
- If a law goes against an established social custom, the law may be difficult to uphold.
- The loss of cultural norms, such as customs, can cause a grief reaction that leads to mourning.

The Origins of Customs

Customs can persist for generations, as new members of a society learn about existing customs through a process of socialization. Generally, as a member of society, most people adhere to customs without any real understanding of why they exist or how they got started.

Societal customs often begin out of habit. A man clasps the hand of another upon first greeting him. The other man—and perhaps still others who are observing—take note. When they meet someone on the street later, they extend a hand. After a while, the handshaking action becomes habitual and takes on a life of its own.

The Importance of Customs

Over time, customs become the laws of social life, and because customs are so important to social harmony, breaking them can theoretically result in an upheaval that has little or nothing to do with the custom itself—particularly when the reasons perceived for breaking it have no bearing in fact. For example, after handshaking becomes a norm, an individual who declines to offer his hand upon meeting another may be looked down upon and or perceived as being suspicious. *Why won't he shake hands? What's wrong with him?*

Assuming that a handshake is a very important custom, consider what might happen if an entire segment of a population suddenly decided to stop shaking hands. Animosity might grow between those who continued to shake hands and those who did not. This anger and unease might even escalate. Those who continue to shake hands might assume the non-shakers refuse to participate because they're unwashed or dirty. Or

perhaps, those who no longer shake hands have come to believe they're superior and don't want to sully themselves by touching an inferior person.

It's for reasons such as these that conservative forces often warn that breaking customs can result in the decline of society. While this may be true in some instances, more progressive voices argue that in order for society to evolve, certain customs must be left behind.

When Custom Meets Law

Sometimes a political group seizes on a particular societal custom and, for one reason or another, works to legislate it. An example of this would be Prohibition. When temperance forces in the United States came into a position of prominence, they lobbied to make the manufacture, transport, and sale of alcohol illegal. Congress passed the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in January 1919 and the law was enacted a year later.

While a popular concept, temperance was never accepted as a custom by American society as a whole. Consuming alcohol was never declared illegal or unconstitutional, and plenty of citizens continued to find ways to make, move, and buy alcohol despite the laws contravening those actions.

The failure of Prohibition demonstrates that when customs and laws promote similar thinking and values, the law is more likely to be successful, while laws that are not backed by custom and acceptance are more likely to fail. Congress repealed the 18th Amendment in 1933.

Customs Across Cultures

Different cultures, of course, have different customs, which means that something that may be an established tradition in one society may not be in another. For example, in the United States, cereal is considered a traditional breakfast food, but in other cultures, breakfast might include dishes such as soup or vegetables.

While customs tend to be more entrenched in less industrialized societies, they exist in all types of societies, regardless of how industrialized they are or to what level of literacy the populace has risen. Some customs are so strongly entrenched in a society (i.e. circumcision, both male and female) that they continue to flourish regardless of outside influences or attempts at intervention.

When Customs Migrate

While you can't pack them up neatly in a suitcase, customs are one of the most important things people take with them when they leave their native societies—for whatever reason—to immigrate and settle elsewhere. Immigration has a huge impact

on cultural diversity and on the whole, many of the customs immigrants bring with them serve to enrich and broaden the cultures of their new homes.

Customs that center on music, the arts, and culinary traditions are often the first to be accepted and assimilated into a new culture. On the other hand, customs that focus on religious beliefs, the traditional roles of men and women, and languages that are perceived to be foreign, are often met with resistance.

Mourning the Loss of Customs

According to the World Psychiatry Association (WPA) the impact of moving from one society to another can have deep psychological implications. "Individuals who migrate experience multiple stresses that can impact their mental well being, including the loss of cultural norms, religious customs, and social support systems," report Dinesh Bhugra and Matthew Becker, authors of a study on the phenomenon who go on to explain that such cultural adjustments speak to the very concept of self.

As a result of the trauma many refugees experience, the rate of mental illness in that population segment is on the rise. "The loss of one's social structure and culture can cause a grief reaction," Bhugra and Becker note. "Migration involves the loss of the familiar, including language (especially colloquial and dialect), attitudes, values, social structures, and support networks."