



27 Examples Of Folkways In Sociology

By Chris Drew (PhD) / January 31, 2023



Folkways are a category of norm that is roughly translated to a ‘social or cultural custom’. Examples of folkways include covering your mouth when you cough or wearing covered shoes to a restaurant.

Folkways are norms of etiquette that are not very serious if broken. They are mostly customary and polite. They differ from other [types of norms](#) that you might learn about in AP Sociology classes like [taboos](#), [mores](#), and laws because they tend to be less serious. They’re not illegal (like laws) and often not even norms of morality (like mores).



Folkway norms can be learned through school (via the hidden curriculum) and our parents. If you break a folkway norm, you'll probably be seen as a little strange and impolite.

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Examples Of Folkways

1. Covering Your Mouth When You Cough Or Sneeze

We consider it polite to cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze to prevent the spread of sickness.

Usually, our parents teach us this norm when we are young. But you'll often see young children who don't do this because they haven't learned this norm yet. We usually forgive children for this.

You might also see adults who don't cover their mouth or nose and you might get a little annoyed by their rudeness. Chances are you won't say anything to them though. You might just take a few steps back.



2. Dressing Appropriately At Work

We have a term called ‘business attire’ to explain what we consider to be appropriate dress wear in a business environment.

This is, of course, for [‘white collar’ industries](#) like law and accounting. In these environments, the norm is to wear a collared shirt for men or maybe high heels for women.

For ‘blue collar’ industries, there is another set of folkways altogether. If you’re a plumber or a carpenter, you might instead wear a cotton collared shirt where the collar is to protect you from sunburn. These shirts are more comfortable and less constricting so you can do physical labor.

If you don’t dress appropriately, your boss might have a word with you, but you’re definitely not doing something worth shunning you for (a ‘taboo’), immoral

(what we call a 'more norm') or illegal (a 'legal norm'). You're just breaking a custom or 'folkway'.



3. Wearing A School Uniform

This is an interesting folkway because it differs so much between countries.

In the UK, the folkway is to wear a uniform in public schools, while in the USA, the folkway is to simply dress comfortably at school.

If you don't wear your school uniform in a school that enforces a [school uniform policy](#), you might get in trouble off your teacher and a letter might be sent home to your parents. But you're not going to get in trouble off the police or even told you're immoral because this is just a *customary folkway* and not a taboo, more, or law.

4. Raising Your Hand To Speak

For society to function in a fair and civil way, we need to take turns. We have folkways for this, too!

Usually, we expect people to raise their hands for their turn to speak. The person in control of the discussion (a moderator or teacher) will select you and allow you to talk.

We learn to raise our hands first at school, but we still use the hand-raising system in adulthood (such as during a presentation at work or a journalist press pack).

5. Only Having Hard Drinks After 5 PM



The famous Jimmy Buffet song ‘five o’clock somewhere’ points toward a folkway among adults in Western societies: don’t drink alcohol before 5pm!

For Buffet, he is singing about how he wants to break that folkway by saying “well, it’s not 5pm here yet, but it is somewhere, so I’ll have a drink anyway”.

But for most of us, the idea here is that you shouldn’t have alcohol until you have finished work for the day and you’re ready to relax after having a productive day.

6. Not Placing Your Elbows On The Table

This folkway stems all the way back to medieval times.

According to [this source](#), there are two possible origins of this folkway. One is that elbows on the table signify that you’re slouching, which was against polite custom in high society in England.

The other theory is that elbows take up too much table space. Feasts used to be enjoyed at large tables with people squished together on a bench seat. If you place your elbows on the table, you’re taking up too much space from people around you.

So, no matter the origins, it’s clear that this folkway isn’t too serious if broken, although we still try to adhere to it customarily to be polite.

7. Not Spitting On The Sidewalk



Spitting can spread diseases and is simply unpleasant to look at.

I often see people spit on the sidewalk on the main street in my town. And I do think it's a little bit gross. But, I don't call the police or get upset about it because ... well, it's not like that person has done something outrageously offensive. They've just crossed a customary line and made themselves look a little impolite.

But then again, Singapore even *bans* spitting! Here, Singapore is turning a folkway norm into a legal norm. Most of us would consider this to be incredibly authoritarian, but it's [not uncommon](#) for these sorts of laws in Singapore.

8. Working A 5 Day Week

Since the industrial revolution, most people around the developed world have worked Monday to Friday.

But, why did we decide that Monday to Friday were the work days? It may be linked to traditional religious observances that take place on Sunday (and in some cultures Saturday).

And therefore, it seems this folkway was out of convenience and to cater to religious groups.

But recently, there have been many people arguing that a 4-day work week might even [increase productivity](#). Here's an example of how cultures can evolve and folkway norms can change with cultural evolution.

9. Saying Please And Thank You



As children, we're taught to say please and thank you in order to show gratitude and politeness.

But it's certainly not *law* to say please and thank you. Rather, people should use their manners because it's customary and makes people feel good.

If you don't use these customary manners, people might be taken aback or even dislike you. So, using manners helps you be a welcome participant in society.

10. Tucking In Your Shirt

Tucking in your shirt sends a message to others that you care about your appearance and are an upstanding person.

Society tends to consider people who tuck in their shirt to be of higher social status and even [more self-organized](#). It might help you to get a job if you're well-dressed!

As a child your parents might chastise you for not tucking in your shirt. You might *appear* dirty or unhygienic. While this is just a custom, it's one worth sticking to in order to help you fit in, especially in a business environment.

11. Wearing A Shirt And Covered Shoes To A Restaurant

Restaurants usually expect us to wear a shirt and covered shoes.

You might even see in a restaurant a bar that reads "No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service".



Usually, establishments want to preserve a sense of decorum and even classiness inside. This can attract patrons. It also attracts the *right type* of patrons. It is designed to attract families and business people who usually conform to these same folkways at their own establishments.

12. Brushing And Flossing Your Teeth Daily

Some folkways are good for our health, and this is one of them.

You're clearly not going to get into any trouble off anyone if you haven't brushed your teeth today (except, maybe, your dentist). But most people in society are in the habit of brushing daily so we don't have bad breath and to prevent issues with our teeth over time.

People might even avoid you in social situations if you've got particularly bad breath. (Maybe don't eat that garlic!)

13. Wearing Deodorant And Perfume

Wearing deodorant and perfume are customary for other people's comfort and even to attract potential dates!

People didn't used to bathe as much as we do today, and they didn't have access to good soaps. So, before the late 19th Century, upper-class people would wear perfume to cover up their bad smells.

But by the turn of the 20th Century, deodorants specifically designed to kill odor-producing bacteria emerged. The main one among them was the brand Mum, trademarked in [1888](#).

Today, if you don't wear deodorant and you smell bad, people will avoid you, because it's customary to cover up any bad smells.



14. Sending An RSVP

RSVP is a French acronym for “respond please”.

People will often ask you to RSVP to a party or wedding. This is to help people to prepare for the event. They need enough seats and food but don't want to be wasteful, either.

It's customary to reply because it is polite, but it's not illegal or immoral to not respond, so it's a folkway rather than a 'taboo', 'more', or 'law'.

15. Calling Ahead If You're Late

Calling ahead if you're late is polite so people know you still value their time.

This folkway is another one that does change from place to place. Some societies like Germany value punctuality. Turning up on time (or early) is a sign of efficiency and respect. Other societies, such as Spain, tend to place less value on punctuality and more on taking it slow and enjoying life.

16. Using A Knife, Fork, Or Chopsticks

This is an interesting folkways example because different societies have different customs around cutlery.



Many Asian societies use chopsticks, while many European societies use knives and forks. There's no real right or wrong here, and people's snobbery toward one type of cutlery over another is usually simply down to [ethnocentrism](#).

Nevertheless, different societies have [different social norms](#) about what cutlery we use, making this a great example of a folkway.

17. Eating Pizza With Your Hands

While it is often expected of us that we eat using cutlery, we have a fun exception in pizza – or what we'd call 'finger food'.

Here's a folkway that might be a little confusing to an alien landing on Earth. Why do we eat nearly everything with knives and forks, but pizza with our hands?

18. Giving Personal Space

How much personal space we give others differs depending on which culture we're from.

A 2017 [study](#) looked at 42 countries and found that Argentina, Peru and Bulgaria are the countries where people stood closest to strangers, while Romania, Hungary and Saudi Arabia gave maximum personal space. But of course, this study didn't look at every country.

19. Shaking Hands And Hugging

Sometimes I'm still not sure whether I'm expected to hug or shake hands with my partner's extended family.



So, this is an example of a folkway that even changes from family to family. In some families, the men are all hand-shakers. In others, the men hug. It's so confusing!

Fortunately, women in the United States tend to universally be huggers within family units, so that makes things a little easier.

20. Writing Salutations In Emails

An email salutation is the first and last lines that often start with “Dear ...” or end with “Sincerely”.

It is generally considered polite and professional to use salutations in emails. But a lot of my millennial and Gen Z students write emails to me without salutations as if they're writing a text message! It comes across a little unprofessional. These students have broken a folkway norm here. And of course, they're not doing anything *immoral* or *inexcusable*, but it's still a sign that they're misunderstanding cultural customs.

21. Picking Your Nose In Public

Nose picking is considered inappropriate in most cultures even though it's also considered a [natural thing to do](#).

It's not something you'll get arrested for, it's not even immoral. It's just a custom because – let's face it – it looks pretty gross. But isn't it funny that people still lick sauce off their dirty fingers and it's not such a *faux pas*? Our culture seems to have drawn the line somewhere and nose picking was it.

22. Talking To Yourself In Public



There's a saying 'talking to yourself is the first sign of madness'. In other words, people in American culture think talking to yourself is a little strange.

You're probably not mad if you talk to yourself. It's a simple way to help yourself think through things that are going around in your head. But we usually avoid doing it so people nearby can't hear our inner thoughts.

This is a folkway because it's customary to refrain from talking to yourself, but not a moral issue or a legal issue.

23. Walking On The Right Side Of The Footpath

In the United States, people usually walk on the right-hand side. But in Australia and Japan, people walk on the left-hand side.

It is simply custom, or 'folkway', that determines which side of the footpath that you should walk. This is often linked to whether cars drive on the left or right.

In the United States, where people drive on the right, we generally also walk on the right-hand side and let people pass on the left. But in Australia, both driving on the road and walking on the footpath are on the left.

24. Waiting In Line

Waiting a line is a sign of respect for others, but not all cultures follow the same folkway norms here.

British people are famous for waiting in lines (known by the Brits as queues).



But while British lines are a sign of orderliness and respect, others might have different ideas.

For example, some cultures might prefer to give preference to women, disabled people, or elderly people, rather than waiting in lines on a first-come-first-served basis.

25. Swearing In Formal Contexts

If you swear in your backyard with your friends, that's one thing. But swearing in the workplace or at school will get you in a bit of trouble!

This folkway is verging on taboo, depending on [the context](#). For example, swearing at a funeral or in a job interview is really going to get you into a lot of trouble and maybe even cause some shock!

This also differs between cultures and even social classes. Working-class people swear more often than upper class people, for example. [This article](#) says they say some swear words twice as often!

26. Keeping A Well Mown Lawn

Mowing your lawn is respectful to your neighbors (who have to look at it!) but an unkept lawn is rarely something you'll get in trouble for.

That's why it's a folkway – or customary – rather than a law.



The exception is when you live in an area belonging to a Home Owner's Association ([HOA](#)) or if there are strict city by-laws requiring a well-kept lawn.

These bylaws are often put in place to keep property prices high and maintain a sense that the area is upper or middle-class.

27. Making Your Bed In The Morning

Making your bed in the morning is something you're expected to do, despite the fact it's not going to cause serious problems if you don't.

We make our beds for a number of reasons, but primarily because it ensures you home looks neat and tidy. But, there's also the concept that it makes you [more disciplined](#) and helps you to pay attention to detail.

If you don't make your bed, people won't be mad at you (maybe your mother will!), but some might judge you for not 'keeping your house in order'.

Go Deeper: [Mores vs Folkways](#)

Conclusion

There are countless examples of folkways in this world. They're any social or cultural norms that are not written in stone via laws and are not moral norms, which we would call mores.

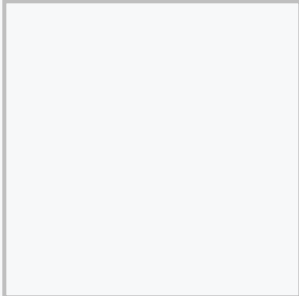
But it's also important to note that sometimes you might be unsure whether something is a folkway, taboo, more, or law. And that's because folkways differ depending not only on the culture, but also your family, your town, or even your

friendship groups. So, don't get too hung up on categorizing norms and remember that something might fit into multiple different categories of norms.



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