

**Course Name (Course Number):***SOC 210- Introduction to Sociology*

This course includes the scientific study of human society, culture, and social interactions. Topics include socialization, research methods, diversity and inequality, cooperation and conflict, social change, social institutions, and organizations. Upon completion, students should be able to demonstrate knowledge of sociological concepts as they apply to the interplay among individuals, groups, and societies. This course has been approved to satisfy the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement general education core requirement in social/behavioral sciences. **(3 credit hours, 3 contact hours)**

No prerequisites, no co-requisites, no entry test requirements. The ability to comprehend college-level reading and express through written assignments is imperative for success in the course.

**Activity and Author Name:**

*What is a cultural universal? Developed by Cate Shiles, Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute  
(correspondence: cshiles@cccti.edu)*

**Activity Description:**

Cultural universals are best described as concepts, social constructs, or patterns of behavior that are common to ALL human cultures; meaning every society in existence exhibits some form of the universal. Some examples of other cultural universals include: gift-giving, marriage, bodily adornment, incest taboo, and rules of hygiene. That said, how a cultural universal is expressed varies widely according to the given society. For instance, some form of bodily adornment is exhibited in every culture and society, but how this is accomplished varies widely. Some societies adorn their bodies with tattoos and body piercings; others adorn their body with scarification or elaborate costume. Social institutions can be described as large-scale patterned behaviors or ideas of a society that heavily structure and influence the everyday lives of individuals in the given culture. Some commonly cited social institutions are: Family, Religion, Government, Education, and the Mass Media. This activity will introduce students to the concept of cultural universals and identify some cultural universals.

**Objectives:**

This activity is constructed to help students demonstrate understanding of key sociological terms and concepts; specifically, how cultural universals related to the social institution of religion are exhibited in a particular country.

The larger goals of these modules are to help students develop a sociological perspective and knowledge pertaining to....

- a. The world that exists outside of America
- b. The examination of social phenomena from another's perspective
- c. How cultures appear very different, but in many ways, are quite similar
- d. The social patterns that exist within various cultures
- e. How the everyday, lived experiences and larger culture of a society are patterned and influenced by the social structure and constraints within that given society.

**Global Learning Outcome(s):**

**Global Learning Outcome 2 is specifically addressed in *this* activity.** Other outcomes are achieved through related activities that can be used in successive order, as standalone activities, or as a cumulative project.

**Global Learning Outcome 1:**

Students will identify the demographic profile of a particular country, including standing on various measures of

human development.

- a. *Level of learning:* IDENTIFICATION/KNOWLEDGE
- b. *Recommended prerequisite knowledge/Assign this activity AFTER having taught:* METHODS

**Global Learning Outcome 2:**

Students will examine how specific cultural universals related to the social institutions of family, religion, and the criminal justice system are conceptualized and expressed in a particular country.

- a. *Level of learning:* IDENTIFICATION/KNOWLEDGE
- b. *Recommended prerequisite knowledge/Assign this activity AFTER having taught:* CULTURE

**Global Learning Outcome 3:**

Students will interpret the norms that are reinforced by specific cultural universals related to the social institutions of family, religion, and the criminal justice system.

- a. *Level of learning:* INTERPRETATION
- b. *Recommended prerequisite knowledge/Assign this activity AFTER having taught:* CULTURE

**Global Learning Outcome 4:**

Students will justify how variations in the expression of cultural universals are influenced by the larger social structure.

- a. *Level of learning:* EVALUATION/JUSTIFICATION/ANALYSIS
- Recommended prerequisite knowledge/Assign this activity AFTER having taught:* All previously mentioned prerequisites AND social INSTITUTIONS.

**Time:**

30-40 minutes, but expandable

**Materials:**

1. Internet access (preferably computer-based but may be able to access some resources using mobile device).
2. Index Cards
3. Cultural Universals List and handout

**Procedure:**

1. Hand out index cards to students. Ask them to take two – three minutes to brainstorm and write down five elements of culture they think exist across all societies.
2. Have students break into group of three – five (depending on the size and setup of your classroom). In their small groups students should compare the five elements they have written on their index cards. Allow students to discuss and/or defend their guesses for approximately ten minutes with the goal of deciding the five most likely elements of culture that are universal. During this time the instructor should listen in to each group.

3. The instructor should make a list on the board of each groups “top five” identifying any similarities, and asking group members for further explanation if necessary.
4. After this activity, the instructor should give a mini-lecture in which he/she tells the students the sociological definition of a cultural universal, and gives students a brief list of cultural universals. During this time, the instructor should clearly identify family, religion, and penal sanctions/law as the three universals that will be studied in-depth.

#### **Resources:**

- Suggested Cultural Universals list as identified by Murdock
  - Family (including marriage)
  - Incest Taboos
  - Laws
  - Games
  - Myths (including religion)
  - Music
  - Art (including bodily adornment)
  - Visiting
  - Funeral Rites

See handout below for brief descriptions of some of these.

#### **Assessment:**

As this is an in class activity, without “right” and “wrong” answers, the best way to assess students learning is simple credit for completing the task. For example, give students who successfully generate five potential cultural universals points for the day. This is a way to reward students for attending and being actively engaged in class. Students who do not come to class do not get the points for that day.

## Cultural Universals Handout

### What are cultural universals?

*Traits that are a part of every known culture, but may take varying forms from place to place.*

#### **Examples include:**

**Family** – *in many Western societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the definition of family tends to be parents and their children (the nuclear family) living in the same household. In other societies, family may be defined as a man with his parents, siblings, and their children; others it may be a woman, her parents, siblings, and their children. Still others have a more fluid definition of family, in which children are viewed as belonging to the group as a whole – everyone cares for (and disciplines) children, and their successful socialization is viewed as the task of the entire society.*

**Laws** - *not all societies have a formal legal system as the United States does. In some places rules about repercussions for breaking social norms are determined by the victim of a crime. In other places, punishment decisions are made by a council of elders, or other authority figures in the society.*

**Myths** – *all societies have a story which tells the origins of their society, or the human race. A familiar example may include the Greek creation myth, which tells the story of the birth of Zeus. Also included in creation myths is the monotheistic religions stories of the origin of humankind.*

**Art** – *while archeologists see evidence of art in ancient societies, many argue that the definition of art has changed drastically over time. For example, many now consider art to be an end in itself, while many of the examples of arts from ancient civilizations were utilitarian.*

**Funeral Rites** – *it appears all societies have some way of “sending off” their dead. These custom range from the familiar funeral of western societies, to Antyesti practiced by Hindus, to mummification in ancient Egypt.*

**There are many other cultural universals! For a more complete list, see:**

**Wilson, E.O. (1998). *Consilience: The unity of knowledge*. New York: Knopf. Retrieved from [http://www.unc.edu/world/2011Partners/Speaker\\_materials/Ashburn\\_Universals%20of%20Culture.pdf](http://www.unc.edu/world/2011Partners/Speaker_materials/Ashburn_Universals%20of%20Culture.pdf)**