

FOLKWAYS

Authored by
Mohammed looti

November 19, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Mohammed looti (2025). *FOLKWAYS*. Encyclopedia of psychology. Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=18722>

Folkways: Definition and Conceptual Origin

The concept of **folkways** represents the foundational, habitual, and traditional behaviors, customs, and practices that characterize a specific social group or society. These are the expected, customary procedures for daily life, handed down through generations, and generally accepted as the 'right' way to conduct oneself in various mundane and social situations. The term itself was formally introduced into sociological and anthropological discourse by William Graham Sumner in his seminal 1906 work, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*. Sumner defined folkways as the habits of the individual and the customs of the group which arise from efforts to satisfy needs, often unconsciously and spontaneously, evolving into established routines that provide stability and predictability in social interaction. They represent the accumulation of routine behaviors that have proven useful or convenient over time, gradually hardening into accepted social standards without necessarily being backed by intense moral sanction or formal legal enforcement.

Folkways are fundamentally rooted in the notion of utility and convenience, acting as practical guidelines for navigating the complexity of communal living. They dictate how people eat, dress, greet one another, celebrate minor holidays, or conduct casual conversation. Unlike more stringent social controls, folkways are not deliberately legislated or planned; rather, they emerge organically from repeated collective action and implicit agreement. They are the unconscious, traditional modes of behavior that, while seemingly trivial in isolation, form the dense fabric of everyday culture. When folkways are challenged or violated, the resulting sanction is typically mild, manifesting as ridicule, social awkwardness, or mild disapproval, rather than formal punishment or moral condemnation. This distinction is crucial for understanding the hierarchy of social norms within any given cultural context, highlighting folkways as the most fluid and least binding layer of social expectation.

The original intent behind studying folkways was to understand the deep, underlying mechanisms of social order that exist prior to, and independent of, formal governmental structures or ethical codes. Sumner emphasized that these traditional behaviors are so deeply ingrained that members of a society often follow them automatically, without conscious reflection or critical evaluation of their origins. They are perceived simply as the natural, normal, and efficient way of doing things. Furthermore, the collective nature of folkways means that they reinforce group identity; adhering to the established customs signals membership and conformity, contributing to the internal cohesion of the community. The universality of folkways across human societies, even while their specific content varies drastically, underscores humanity's reliance on standardized, handed-down procedures for the management of social life and the reduction of cognitive load associated with constant decision-making.

Characteristics and Function of Folkways

Folkways possess several defining characteristics that distinguish them from other forms of social regulation. Primarily, they are **implicit norms**, meaning they are rarely written down or explicitly taught through formal instruction. Acquisition of folkways occurs primarily through observation, imitation, and socialization within the family and immediate community environments. They are pervasive, influencing even the smallest details of daily routines, such as standing distance during conversation, appropriate attire for specific settings, or the order in which meals are served. Their function is overwhelmingly pragmatic and utilitarian; they exist primarily to enhance social efficiency and minimize friction. By providing a common set of expectations for routine interactions, folkways allow individuals to anticipate the behavior of others, thereby reducing uncertainty and promoting smoother social coordination.

A key characteristic is their relative lack of moral weight. Violating a folkway does not typically imply moral turpitude or severe ethical failure. For example, wearing mismatched socks or using the wrong fork during a formal dinner might elicit a mild rebuke or an internal sense of embarrassment, but these actions do not threaten the foundational values or safety of the group. This mild punitive response is critical; it demonstrates that while folkways are necessary for decorum and convenience, they are not deemed essential for the survival or moral integrity of the society. This contrasts sharply with violations of mores, which carry significant moral opprobrium. Folkways are thus highly flexible and adaptable, shifting relatively easily in response to new technologies, environmental changes, or external cultural influences, because the emotional investment attached to them is comparatively low.

The functional significance of folkways extends beyond mere convenience; they are fundamental to establishing and maintaining **social predictability**. When individuals share a common understanding of appropriate conduct, the energy spent on negotiating simple interactions is minimized, freeing up cognitive resources for more complex tasks. Furthermore, the adherence to these traditional patterns serves as a powerful, albeit subtle, mechanism for inclusion and exclusion. Those who consistently follow the folkways are seen as trustworthy and properly socialized, while those who deviate significantly may be subtly marginalized or perceived as outsiders. In this way, folkways subtly define the boundaries of the in-group, reinforcing a shared identity and collective consciousness without the need for formal declarations or regulations. They are the invisible rules that govern the flow of shared experience, making the collective culture recognizable and habitable for its members.

Folkways vs. Mores and Laws: The Hierarchy of Norms

To fully appreciate the sociological significance of folkways, it is imperative to distinguish them clearly from **mores** and **laws**, which represent progressively stricter levels of social control. This

distinction, also formalized by Sumner, places folkways at the base of the normative hierarchy. Mores (pronounced MOR-ays) are norms that embody the essential moral views and principles of a group. They are tied directly to the community's survival and welfare, including prohibitions against behaviors like incest, murder, or gross dishonesty. The violation of a mos (singular of mores) results in strong social sanctions, deep moral condemnation, and often ostracization, because these actions are perceived as a serious threat to the collective good. The emotional intensity surrounding mores is significantly higher than that associated with folkways.

Laws represent the highest, most formalized level of social regulation. They are norms that have been consciously codified, enacted by political authority, and enforced by specialized state agencies (police, courts, penal systems). Laws may or may not align directly with mores, though frequently they do (e.g., laws against theft or assault). The distinguishing factor is formal, structured enforcement and explicit sanction, including fines, imprisonment, or other state-imposed penalties. While folkways are traditional habits and mores are moral obligations, laws are mandatory statutes. Sometimes, folkways that are deemed critically important to public safety or order may be formalized into laws, such as traffic rules or public health regulations, thereby elevating their status and severity of punishment for non-compliance.

The relationship between these three categories is dynamic and reflects the evolving priorities of a society. Folkways are the customary practices; mores are the essential ethical codes; and laws are the legally enforced regulations. A failure to adhere to the folkway of shaking hands upon introduction might lead to awkwardness, but a violation of the mos against infidelity could lead to the dissolution of a family unit and social shame. Conversely, a violation of a law, such as tax evasion, leads to state prosecution. This normative gradient ensures that a society allocates its enforcement resources effectively, dedicating the most severe sanctions to behaviors that genuinely jeopardize the collective structure and minimizing intervention for minor deviations in customary behavior. The pervasive nature of folkways ensures that the social machinery runs smoothly, even without constant governmental or moral oversight.

Mechanisms of Transmission and Socialization

The transmission of folkways is intrinsically linked to the process of **socialization**, the lifelong process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and habits necessary to participate effectively in society. Unlike the explicit teaching required for mastering academic subjects or legal codes, the learning of folkways is predominantly implicit, occurring through observation, imitation, and indirect instruction. Children learn the appropriate use of cutlery, the etiquette of waiting in line, or the customary ways of expressing gratitude simply by watching family members and peers and adapting their own behavior to match the prevailing expectations. The continuous, subtle reinforcement provided by the social environment solidifies these behaviors into automatic responses, making them appear natural rather than learned.

Oral traditions, legends, and shared stories also play a crucial, if often overlooked, role in reinforcing folkways. While these narratives may focus on grander themes, they embed subtle lessons about appropriate decorum, gender roles, hospitality rituals, and community expectations. For example, traditional tales often subtly emphasize the importance of greeting elders respectfully (a folkway) or the proper procedures for preparing for communal feasts. These narratives provide a cultural context and justification for the behaviors, linking them to the historical identity and wisdom of the group. This method of transmission ensures that the folkways are not just random habits, but behaviors invested with cultural meaning and historical continuity.

Furthermore, the mechanism of negative sanction, even if mild, is highly effective in transmission. When a child commits a social blunder--speaking too loudly in a library, interrupting an adult, or improperly addressing a visitor--the gentle correction, the slight frown, or the whispered reminder serves as immediate feedback that guides the individual toward normative behavior. This constant process of adjustment, often involving minor embarrassment or slight disapproval, reinforces the boundaries of acceptable conduct without requiring formal discipline. This continuous, low-level feedback loop ensures the fidelity of the folkways across generations, making them incredibly resilient even in the face of rapid external change, because they are constantly being practiced and corrected within the intimate settings of daily life.

Examples of Common Folkways Across Cultures

Folkways manifest in nearly every aspect of human interaction, providing a structure for routine behaviors that are considered appropriate or necessary within a specific cultural milieu. Examples are vast and demonstrate the principle that while the function of establishing order is universal, the specific execution is entirely culture-specific.

Dining Etiquette: The use of specific utensils (or lack thereof), the custom of waiting for the host to begin eating, the appropriate volume level for conversation during a meal, and the designated seating arrangements are all classic folkways. In many Western cultures, it is a folkway to keep one's elbows off the table, whereas in certain Eastern cultures, slurping noodles loudly is a folkway signaling appreciation for the meal.

Greeting Rituals: Methods of acknowledging others vary widely, ranging from the handshake (firmness, duration, eye contact), the cheek kiss (number of kisses, side preference), the bow (depth and duration), or specific verbal salutations. These rituals are essential for signaling respect and initiating interaction, yet violating them typically only results in mild social awkwardness, such as offering a handshake when a bow was expected.

Dress and Appearance: Unwritten rules regarding the appropriate degree of formality in clothing for various occasions (work, religious services, leisure time) constitute powerful folkways. While extreme deviations might approach the level of violating a *mos* (e.g., public nudity), minor

deviations, such as wearing casual attire to a formal event, primarily violate folkways, incurring judgment regarding taste or social awareness, but not moral failure.

Temporal Expectations: Folkways also govern the perception and use of time, known as chronemics. In some cultures, arriving exactly on time for a social gathering is a strong folkway; in others, arriving 15 to 30 minutes late is the accepted custom, and being precisely on time might even be considered rude or overly eager.

These examples underscore the concept of **cultural relativity** inherent in folkways. What is considered a polite and expected behavior in one society can be deemed inappropriate or even offensive in another. The strength of the folkway is derived purely from its status as tradition within the specific group, not from any inherent universal logic. This relativity is why individuals moving between cultures experience significant difficulty adjusting to the new environment, as they must unconsciously retrain themselves to adhere to a completely new set of ingrained, unwritten social rules governing minor interactions.

Variation and Cultural Relativity

The observation that "the folkways of all indigenous groups are different," as noted in the original conceptualization, highlights the profound cultural specificity of these norms. Folkways are inherently **ethnocentric** phenomena; they are viewed by the members of the society that practices them as the only logical, natural, or efficient way to proceed. This inherent ethnocentrism means that cross-cultural interactions often involve a clash of folkways, where misunderstandings arise not from malice or disagreement over core values, but simply from divergent customary procedures. A common folkway in one nation might dictate that direct eye contact signals honesty and respect, while in another, it might signal aggression or insubordination, demonstrating how a simple behavior can carry radically different social meanings depending on the context.

This variation necessitates the sociological concept of **cultural relativity** when analyzing folkways. To understand why a specific custom exists--for instance, why certain societies eat communally from a single dish while others insist on individual plates--one must examine the custom within the context of that society's history, environmental conditions, and socio-economic structure. Folkways often reflect historical necessities that have outlived their original practical purpose but persist due to the inertia of tradition. The sheer diversity of human folkways serves as powerful evidence against the notion of universal, instinctual social behavior, proving instead that most daily social patterns are culturally constructed and learned.

Furthermore, variations exist not only between different national or indigenous cultures but also within subcultures and specific social strata of a single large society. Professional groups, regional populations, ethnic enclaves, and age cohorts often develop their own unique sets of folkways regarding language use, dress codes, humor, and leisure activities. These subcultural folkways

serve to reinforce group identity and internal cohesion within the smaller unit. While the national culture may share broad mores and laws, the daily texture of life is dictated by these localized folkways. This internal variation demonstrates the adaptability and constant emergence of customary behavior wherever small groups interact consistently over time, proving that the creation of new folkways is an ongoing process essential to human social organization.

The Role of Folkways in Social Stability and Identity

While folkways may appear superficial in comparison to laws or mores, their collective power is instrumental in maintaining **social stability** and reinforcing collective identity. They act as a massive, subtle infrastructure that governs billions of micro-interactions daily, creating a sense of order and predictability that reduces anxiety and interpersonal conflict. When individuals adhere to shared folkways, they are performing a continuous, low-key validation of the social contract. This constant conformity builds trust and mutual understanding, which are essential preconditions for larger, more complex social cooperation. Without the foundation provided by accepted folkways, everyday life would become exhausting, requiring constant negotiation over simple procedural matters.

Folkways are intimately tied to the construction of **group identity**. Practicing the traditional greeting, participating in the established holiday rituals, or adhering to the customary ways of dress signals loyalty to the group and reverence for its history. These behaviors act as symbolic markers that differentiate one group from another, solidifying the boundaries of the collective consciousness. When immigrants or external groups fail to adopt local folkways, they may be perceived as failing to integrate, not because of moral deficiency, but because they disrupt the comfort and predictability provided by shared custom. The shared rituals, even minor ones, imbue group life with meaning and emotional resonance, transforming a mere collection of individuals into a coherent community.

Moreover, folkways function as an essential buffer zone against anarchy. Because they govern the majority of non-critical social interactions, they ensure that the formal mechanisms of control (laws and legal systems) are not overburdened by trivial infractions. Society can reserve its most serious sanctions for actions that truly undermine core values, knowing that the basic framework of interaction is managed through customary behavior. This structural efficiency allows the formal institutions to focus on critical matters. Thus, the gentle pressure of folkways provides the lubricating oil for the social machinery, ensuring smooth operation and preventing the escalation of minor differences into major conflicts.

Evolution and Adaptation of Folkways

Despite their grounding in tradition, folkways are the most pliable category of social norms and are

constantly undergoing processes of evolution and adaptation in response to changing societal conditions. Technological advancement is a primary driver of folkway change. For instance, the advent of ubiquitous mobile phones has rapidly generated new folkways regarding communication etiquette: when and where it is acceptable to take a call, the appropriate speed for replying to text messages, or the custom of silencing a device in public settings. These new behaviors emerged organically as society negotiated the use of a disruptive technology. Similarly, the rise of remote work has shifted folkways regarding professional attire and meeting protocol, demonstrating how quickly habitual behavior can adjust when required by circumstance.

Globalization, migration, and increased cultural exchange also accelerate the adaptation of folkways. When diverse groups interact, a process of cultural borrowing or syncretism occurs, where elements of one group's folkways are selectively adopted by another. This can result in the blending of greeting rituals or the popularization of foreign dining customs. In some cases, established folkways may be entirely discarded if they prove inconvenient or incompatible with modern life. For example, traditional folkways surrounding strict gender segregation in public spaces have diminished significantly in many Western societies as a result of broader socio-political shifts toward equality.

The evolution of folkways is typically gradual and often unconscious, reflecting a collective social consensus that certain habits are no longer serving a useful function or have become obsolete. This slow, organic process distinguishes the change in folkways from the sudden, intentional changes that characterize legal reform or shifts in mores driven by intense moral campaigns. The resilience of folkways lies in their non-critical nature; they can bend and shift without causing societal collapse, allowing the underlying structure of mores and laws to remain stable while the daily patterns of life accommodate new realities. This continuous adaptation ensures that the customary behavior of a society remains relevant and practical for the satisfaction of contemporary needs.