

## What is a Society?

### Society and Social Norms

Before we try to assess the role and context of Business in Society, we should first try to have a clear understanding of what society is. Different scholars, asking different questions and using different approaches, have produced a variety of definitions (see <https://www.yourdictionary.com/society>), but for our purposes we can simply define a society as being made up of people and groups who share common norms and rules of engagement, and who interact based on their shared understanding of these.

For any society to persist, a significant majority must agree on what is, and what is not, acceptable social behavior. Of course, as time passes, social norms and rules of engagement will change as the majority consensus evolves based on developing material circumstances and on shifts in economic and social interactions.

In most societies we will find people who, for a variety of different reasons, refuse to adhere to the rules imposed by the social consensus. The stability and evolution of a society will then depend on (1) how disruptive the rule breakers are and (2) on how successfully that society can deal with its disruptive nonconformists, dissenters, and rebels.

In some cases, dissenting views are eventually eradicated, while in other cases we have seen minority norms from the past become the majority norms of the present. For example, consider changing attitudes towards sexuality and gender identities across different countries over time. Thus, [classical Greek and Roman societies](#) had a very different attitude towards sexuality than did most of [medieval Europe](#). Similarly, majority attitudes in the [USA](#) are currently quite different from those of countries such as [Iran and Yemen](#).

Societies often rely on informal social sanctions and rewards to keep people in line. As explained in Lieberman's *Social* (one of our optional readings for this course), we are social animals, and we respond both instinctively and subconsciously to cues from our social environment. Even relatively innocuous informal social sanctions can have a very powerful effect. Thus glares and frowns and other facial expressions can make us quite uncomfortable. When these are followed by exclusion, ridicule, humiliation, and the knowledge that there is disapproval and/or gossip about us, this can have a very compelling impact on us. Moreover, in many cases, people actually impose social sanctions on themselves through their own sense of shame or guilt and remorse if and when they break social rules.

When deviations from social norms of acceptable behavior are deemed to be particularly egregious, societies also rely on formal sanctions, usually through their legal systems. These can include things such as fines, removal of privileges, exile, imprisonment, or corporal punishment, including even a death penalty in some cases.

In this context, society changes when its consensus on norms and rules of acceptable behavior change. It also changes when the nature of formal and informal sanctions changes. This will happen over time for a

variety of different reasons. For one thing, our norms change as our means of production and exchange have evolved. Thus, in a simple hunter-gatherer society, where everyone depends on the rest of their communal group for survival, the rules of reciprocity will be very different from what they are in a society made up of specialized industrial commuters, or from what they will be in a society where a significant portion of the workforce works online from their homes, etc. The rules will also change with technology and modes of communication. Thus people tend to adhere to different rules of etiquette in face-to-face conversations than they do when exchanging tweets.

As Capitalism has made our society more and more affluent, we have also changed our attitudes on a variety of different things. At the dawn of the industrial age minor property crimes, such as the theft of a sheep, were punished with a death penalty. At that time, society also had a taste for public whippings, public pillories, and public hangings, etc. Today, these are unthinkable to most of us. Yet, at the time, these kinds of punishments were considered both righteous and just. It is a testament to how much things have changed that today most of us would think of these kinds of punishments as being far more offensive than most of the wrongdoings that gave rise to the punishments in the first place. The point is that social norms will not only vary from one society to another, they will also change over time.

### **Culture and Society**

Sociologists and cultural anthropologists tend to see culture and society as separate concepts. For our purposes though, let us just note that culture is and must be an integral part of all societies. Culture can be defined in terms of the behavior and norms of members of specific groups in terms of their traditions, beliefs and behavior. It can express itself in a variety of different ways through religious practices, moral beliefs, hairstyles, dress and decorations, etc. And, as cultures and cultural norms change, so will societies and social norms.

Multi-cultural societies, or societies that have successfully accommodated different cultures, have generally done so after either (1) developing a social consensus to the effect that cultural differences should be accepted, if not respected, or (2) by setting up specific rules for inter-cultural engagement. The multi-cultural society works best when members of different cultures agree to the same rules of engagement with each other. Some scholars have suggested that multi-cultural societies tend to be more open and dynamic, while others have argued that a uniform culture will make social interactions more cohesive and thus tend to reduce social frictions.

For another illustration of changing cultural norms consider: In some cultures, it was considered inappropriate for a woman to walk side-by-side with a man. Thus, in Japan, there used to be a saying that the wife should walk 3 steps behind her husband (for those of you who can read Japanese ☺, I am told that this is written: 女は三歩下がって). In most Western cultures, by contrast, this very idea would be deemed offensive. In fact, traditionally, when a man and a woman arrived at a door at the same time, in Western cultures it used to be expected that the woman would always enter first and that the man should open the door for the woman.



But social rules do change over time, and today many feel that this door opening etiquette idea is both outdated and offensive in and of itself. That the rule should just be that whoever reaches the door first should open it for the next person.

Informal cultural and social norms include:

- Rules of politeness and civility: respect for personal space, eye contact, handshakes or bows, greetings, forms of address.
- Expectations about general honesty, truthfulness, and decency
- Expectations about personal freedoms, obligations, and accountability
- Acceptance, or rejection, of cultural differences

Formal social rules include

- Laws and regulations on guaranteed individual and group freedoms
- Laws on regulations on legal obligations
- Laws and regulations on commerce and business processes, etc.