

RESPONSES TO COVID-19: THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL CONTEXT, SOCIAL NORMS AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Preliminary: Intercultural Communication

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Syllabus Links

How culture determines the ways individuals encode messages, what mediums they choose for transmitting them, and the ways messages are interpreted

- the role of communication in maintaining social relationships and social control

Relevant concepts

Society, Culture, Power, Authority, Social Norms



Unsplash image by Swarnavo Chakrabarti @_pseudonavo

Syllabus Outcomes

- P1 identifies and applies social and cultural concepts
- P3 identifies and describes relationships and interactions within and between social and cultural groups
- P9 uses appropriate course language and concepts suitable for different audiences and contexts

Rationale

The following resource attempts to explore the role of culture in shaping the differing individual and group responses to Covid-19. As the Covid-19 pandemic and thereby the responses to it are continuing to evolve, this resource aims to encourage students to develop a 'critical eye' towards initial responses to Covid-19 during March–November 2020 and longer term implications. The importance to culture in shaping responses to Covid-19 are considered in relation to concepts such as social norms and social control. References and links to relevant resources are also provided to ensure access.

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In 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic impacted upon the lives of billions of individuals and groups from around the world. Responses to the pandemic were diverse and varied. As society and culture students it is important to attempt to understand the role of 'culture' in shaping individual, group and governmental responses to the Covid-19 pandemic throughout 2020 and beyond.

1. View the following TEDEd video *What is coronavirus?* (5.15min) By Elizabeth Cox found at: <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/what-is-a-coronavirus-elizabeth-cox#review>

What is Covid-19? How is Covid-19 spread?

2. As of October 2020, there have been over 43 million cases of Covid-19 globally according to the *World Health Organisation*. Research the current global statistics related to Covid-19 using *World Health Organisation* data found at: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Record in your notes below:

- the number of Covid-19 cases globally (take note of the date of the statistics)
- the distribution of Covid-19 cases globally (i.e. in what countries are they located)
- the distribution of Covid-19 deaths globally (i.e. in what countries are they located)

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3. With no known vaccine for Covid-19 governments, groups and individuals are attempting to navigate their way through daily life 'living with the virus'. In the table below, create a brainstorm of all of the different ways communication and social exchange has *changed* as a result of Covid-19.

e.g. rules around social distancing and behaviour, restrictions on regional and international travel etc.

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4. From the list you created in Q3, consider how social relationships at micro and meso levels have been altered due to Covid-19. E.g. norms of affectionate behaviour such as hugging, kissing, holding hands.

Social Relationships: refer to the notion that all human interactions and interrelations are *shaped* by the values and norms of the social systems in which they occur.

(Adapted from: *Sociology Guide – A Students Guide to Sociology* (2016) located at: <http://www.sociologyguide.com/social-change/>)

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5. From the list you created in Q3 consider the different ways people’s thoughts, feelings, appearance and behaviours have been ‘regulated’ or ‘controlled’. There are two broad categories of social control: formal and informal measures.

Below the following definitions, record the different methods of formal and informal social controls during Covid-19 in Australia.

<p>Formal Social Controls: are often considered as those social controls enforced by authoritative structures in society such as the government, usually in the form of laws or rules. Transgression of these laws or rules is usually met by some type of pre-defined punishment. E.g. fines, imprisonment etc.</p> <p>(Descriptions of both Formal and Informal Social Controls were adapted from: Kate Thompson, Emma Davidge, Marshall Leaver, Terry Lovat, Nicole Martirena, Phil Webster, <i>Society and Culture: Preliminary and HSC</i>, (Nelson Cengage Learning: Australia, 2015). p.90.</p> <p><i>Sociology Guide- A Students Guide to Sociology</i> (2016) located at: http://www.sociologyguide.com/social-control/)</p>	<p>Informal Social Controls: are usually less obvious and involve individuals and groups attempting to exert power over others in accordance with societal norms, customs and values. Informal controls can involve both the rewarding and disapproving of behaviours through verbal and non-verbal communication. E.g. shouting, laughing, clapping, disapproving looks, physical exclusion etc.</p> <p>(Descriptions of both Formal and Informal Social Controls were adapted from: Kate Thompson, Emma Davidge, Marshall Leaver, Terry Lovat, Nicole Martirena, Phil Webster, <i>Society and Culture: Preliminary and HSC</i>, (Nelson Cengage Learning: Australia, 2015). p.90.</p> <p><i>Sociology Guide- A Students Guide to Sociology</i> (2016) located at: http://www.sociologyguide.com/social-control/)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laws in some states of Australia to restrict movement of individuals from one place to another. E.g. Between NSW and WA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals ‘frowning upon’ or physically moving away from others who are not socially distanced.

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6. The following questions aim to consider how different societies and cultures have responded to the pandemic of Covid-19 within the broader context of culture.

Annotate the following syllabus definition of culture:

Culture refers to the shared knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that give each society its coherence, identity and distinctive way of life. Culture is demonstrated by the beliefs, customs, values, norms, rules, laws, governance, arts, technologies and artefacts that people generate and use as they interpret meaning from their world and solve present and future problems. Culture is dynamic and undergoes change, and is therefore not static.

(Source: NESA, *Society and Culture Syllabus*, (2013), p.16. Accessed at: <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/stage-6-learning-areas/hsie/society-culture>)

(Adapted from: *Sociology Guide - A Students Guide to Sociology* (2016) located at: <http://www.sociologyguide.com/social-change/>)

View the following TED Talk 'The Secret Life of Social Norms' (2018) from Michele Gelfand PhD. Michele defines culture as "a fascinating puzzle that is omnipresent but invisible...distinctly human...produces cooperation...and a lot of conflict". Accessed at: <https://ideas.ted.com/why-some-people-wear-masks-but-others-dont-a-look-at-the-psychology/>

Consider Michele's opening statements and think about how they can enhance your understanding of the relationship between culture, thinking and behaviour of individuals and groups.

7. Using points from Michele's commentary, define the term social norms.

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8. Individuals and groups adherence to social norms can be described as 'tight' or 'loose'. Use the space below to create an annotated diagram of the characteristics of 'tight' and 'loose' cultures.



9. Do you believe at a macro level, Australia can be described as having characteristics of a predominantly tight or loose culture? Give reasons for your answer.

10. How do groups with strong social norms (tight cultures) respond to people or groups deviating from norms?

11. How do groups with weaker social norms (loose cultures) respond to people or groups deviating from norms?

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12. Michele notes that a commonality between tight cultures is the presence of threats. These threats could be war, natural disasters etc. Explain how the threats of Covid-19 led to a tightening of Australian cultural and social norms during 2020.

Think About: What steps were taken by federal and state governments to regulate communicative behaviours and social interactions? How did individuals and groups respond to non-conformity to these new regulations?



United Nations COVID-19 education poster. Source: Wikimedia Commons

In the next section you will consider Australians reactions to Covid-19 restrictions in the broader context of culture, social norms and social relationships. Read the article, 'How behavioural science can help us understand human behaviour during a pandemic' by Benjamin (Ben) Voyer, (09/09/20), *The Conversation*. Accessed at: <https://theconversation.com/how-behavioural-science-can-help-us-understand-human-behaviour-during-a-pandemic-143028>

13. Explain how macro level social norms have impacted on individuals reactions to the wearing of face masks in Australia? i.e. think of those who support the wearing of face masks and those who do not

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14. In what ways do you think social norms shifted in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic?

15. Do you believe there are any longer term shifts in Australian culture and social norms due to social controls imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic? i.e. think about how people greet each other, shopping habits, video conferencing etc.



Social distancing message, Coles Supermarket Corinda QLD, May 2020.jpg. Source: Wikimedia Commons