

Cultural Universals, Alternatives, and Specialties

We cannot participate in all aspects of our culture. We are forced to limit our participation. However, although people vary in their specific forms of participation, each of us participates in the culture on three different levels. The first level of participation is in the universals of culture.

Cultural universals. *Cultural universals* are learned behaviors that are widely accepted and required by a particular society. They are the behaviors that the society demands of its people. Culture traits that are universals in one society may be unknown in another. For example, a universal in American society is the wearing of clothes in public. This trait is unknown to the members of the Suyu tribe in the Amazon region of Brazil. Another universal in our society is compulsory education up to at least the age of 16, whereas some societies have no required formal schooling. What are some other cultural universals in our society?

Cultural universals are important to you as an individual because they indicate behaviors that are required of you as a member of your society. If you disobey the cultural universals, you are likely to be punished by your society.

Every society sets up universals, or behaviors that must be followed. But it usually gives the individual a choice about how he or she will meet these universals. Our society demands that we wear clothes in public, but it gives us a wide variety of styles and colors from which to choose. It offers us a number of alternatives. For example, a girl might go to the movies wearing jeans and a sweater, shorts and a T-shirt, a dress, a skirt and blouse, or a pantsuit. Parents are required to send their children to school, but they may choose the kind of school—public, private, or parochial—their children will attend. It is important to realize, though, that often our choices are limited. We would not go to a wedding, for instance, in jeans and a sweater or in shorts and a T-shirt. *Cultural alternatives*, then, are the

many choices open to individuals for meeting the requirements of the cultural universals. What other cultural alternatives can you name?

The third level of participation for the individual is in the specialties of the culture. *Cultural specialties* are learned behaviors shared by the members of a particular social grouping but not by the majority of the members of the society. They involve some activity, skill, or pursuit. They are determined by such factors as age, sex, economic background, occupation, and religion. For example, children have behaviors not shared by the majority of the society, such as playing hide-and-seek or hopscotch. A person's economic background often determines how that individual spends leisure time. Some persons go to the private country club. Others go to the public lake, beach, or swimming pool. Medical doctors have specialties not shared with people in most other occupations. What kinds of specialties are a part of your life?

Subcultures

As citizens of the United States, we share a common culture. American culture is a collection of traits, complexes, and patterns that overall are distinct from those of another society. We may share many traits with other societies, such as billboards, trains, holiday celebrations, shops, factories, beliefs about child rearing, and theaters. But when we become tourists in Tokyo, Paris, Rome, Athens, or Moscow, we are well aware that we are not in an American city.

At the same time, some Americans share certain traits and specialties that they do not share with American society as a whole. You might notice such traits and specialties if you go to New York City's or San Francisco's Chinatown. You might feel that you are in a different culture if you drive through Navajoland of Arizona and New Mexico, walk down the streets of Spanish Harlem in New York City, or visit a military base.

These examples give us a hint of the phe-

Cultural Universals / Alternatives / Specialties

1. What is a cultural universal?
2. Give two examples of a cultural universal.
 -
 -
3. Why are cultural universals important?
4. What is a cultural alternative?
5. Give two examples of cultural alternatives.
 -
 -
6. Explain why we do not have infinite choice when it concerns cultural alternatives.
7. What is a cultural specialty?
8. Name some examples that determine a cultural specialty.
9. Give an example of a cultural specialty.