

High Yield Notes

Psychology & Sociology (P/S) – Module 8 (Culture, Social Institutions, and Norms)



HIGH YIELD
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AAMC Content Category 10A & 10B: Social Inequality & Demographic Characteristics and Processes

1. What Is Culture? (Material vs. Symbolic Culture)

Definition

Culture is the shared system of beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, language, and material artifacts that define a group of people. It shapes identity, communication, expectations, and worldviews – and is learned, transmitted, and adaptable.

- **Material Culture** = Tangible objects and artifacts (e.g., tools, clothing, buildings)
- **Symbolic (Nonmaterial) Culture** = Intangible meanings and beliefs (e.g., language, values, norms)

MCAT Relevance

- Culture underpins patient behavior, health beliefs, and compliance.
- Knowing the difference between material and symbolic culture is a frequently tested distinction.

Material Culture

Definition: Physical objects created and used by a society.

Examples:

- Stethoscopes, lab coats
- Food, architecture, clothing
- Religious artifacts (e.g., crucifix, prayer mat)

MCAT Insight: These are visible but don't explain behavior without symbolic interpretation.

Symbolic (Nonmaterial) Culture

Definition: Shared ideas, beliefs, customs, values, and language that structure social meaning.

Examples:

- Health beliefs (e.g., spiritual vs. biomedical causes of illness)
- Language, gestures, gender roles
- Norms about death, authority, modesty

MCAT Insight: A white coat is material, but its symbolism (status, professionalism) lies in symbolic culture.

Culture Is Dynamic

- **Cultural Universals:** Found in all societies (e.g., family systems), but expressed differently.
- **Cultural Specificity:** Practices are unique to each group's history and context.
- **Culture Shock:** Disorientation felt in a new cultural environment.

Real-World MCAT Example

A patient distrusts ECG machines and asks for a traditional healer.

- **Symbolic culture:** Belief in spiritual healing
- **Material culture:** ECG device
⇒ Culturally competent care bridges both domains.

Key Takeaways

- **Culture = Learned system** of meaning and practices
- **Material culture** = Objects; **Symbolic culture** = Meanings, beliefs
- Symbolic interpretations drive behaviors and expectations
- Culture is not static – it evolves, spreads, and adapts

2. Cultural Transmission, Diffusion, and Lag

Cultural Transmission

Definition: The process by which culture is passed from one generation to the next through learning and socialization. It preserves group identity and continuity.

Types of Transmission:

Type	Direction	Example
Vertical	Parent → child	Teaching children manners or religion
Horizontal	Peer ↔ peer	Sharing slang, fashion among friend groups
Oblique	Adult → young non-relative	A teacher mentoring students

MCAT Tip: Think of transmission as within a culture. It explains how beliefs/norms persist over time.

Cultural Diffusion

Definition: The spread of cultural traits between different societies through interaction.

Mechanisms:

- Migration
- Media and technology
- Trade, colonization, tourism

Types of Diffusion:

Type	Description	Example
Direct	Cultures interact directly	Neighbors sharing recipes
Indirect	Through intermediaries	K-pop reaching US via YouTube
Forced	Imposed by dominant group	Colonization altering native practices

MCAT Tip: Know that diffusion is cross-cultural, and can be asymmetrical (e.g., Westernization).

Cultural Lag

Definition: When material culture (technology) evolves faster than symbolic culture (beliefs/laws), causing social disruption.

Examples:

- Social media outpacing norms around privacy
- CRISPR gene editing before ethical guidelines
- AI use outpacing regulations

MCAT Tip: Cultural lag is a high-yield concept – often tied to technological innovation vs. social values.

Summary Table

Concept	Definition	MCAT Example
Cultural Transmission	Passing cultural traits within a society	Religious education at home
Cultural Diffusion	Spread of culture between groups	American teens adopting Korean fashion
Cultural Lag	Delay in adapting symbolic culture to change	Lack of AI laws despite widespread implementation

Takeaway Insight

- Transmission preserves culture within a society.
- Diffusion spreads traits between societies.
- Lag explains why laws/values can fall behind technology.
- These mechanisms help explain the evolution of social norms, especially in modern or globalized MCAT contexts.

3. Norms, Values, and Sanctions

Norms: The Rules of Social Behavior

Definition: Norms are the shared expectations about appropriate behavior within a group or society.

They guide everyday actions and reflect cultural values. Norms can be formal (laws) or informal (etiquette).

Types of Norms:

Type	Description	Examples
Folkways	Mild norms for casual interaction	Saying “please,” casual dress at home
Mores	Stronger norms tied to morality	Cheating, lying, public indecency
Taboos	Deeply held prohibitions; violation is repugnant	Incest, cannibalism

Type	Description	Examples
Laws	Written and legally enforced norms	Theft, DUI, tax evasion

MCAT Tip: Taboos and mores often appear in passages about deviance or social regulation.

Values: The Cultural Ideals

Definition: Values are the abstract moral beliefs that a society holds as desirable. They form the foundation of norms.

Examples of U.S. cultural values:

- Individualism
- Meritocracy
- Freedom of speech
- Equality (ideal, not always reality)

MCAT Tip: Values help explain why a norm exists. For instance, the value of independence underlies the norm of moving out at 18 in the U.S.

Sanctions: Rewards and Punishments

Definition: Sanctions are the social consequences used to reinforce norms. They may be positive (rewards) or negative (punishments), and formal or informal.

Type	Description	Examples
Positive Sanction	Reward for following norms	Praise, promotion, social acceptance
Negative Sanction	Punishment for norm violations	Fines, jail time, social shaming
Formal	Issued by institutions	Grades, criminal charges
Informal	Enforced by individuals/groups	Gossip, dirty looks, peer pressure

MCAT Tip: Informal sanctions are key to social control – expect them in passages about deviance or health behavior.

Real-World Application: Norms and Health

- Mask-wearing during a pandemic became a new folkway, then law.

- Refusing vaccination may trigger informal sanctions like social exclusion.
- Cultural norms around mental health disclosure vary widely by group.

Summary Table

Concept	Definition	MCAT Link
Norms	Rules for behavior	Folkways, mores, taboos, laws
Values	Abstract ideals behind norms	Explain cultural differences in expectations
Sanctions	Enforcers of norms (rewards/punish)	Appear in deviance, health compliance, social roles

Takeaway Insight

- Norms = what people do; values = why they do it; sanctions = how society responds.
- The MCAT often tests your ability to recognize types of norms and predict cultural reactions to deviance or nonconformity.
- Focus on how norms and sanctions influence health behavior, compliance, and social harmony or conflict.

4. Social Institutions

What Are Social Institutions?

Definition: Social institutions are structured systems of norms, values, roles, and relationships that organize key areas of life. They stabilize society and influence behavior, access, and inequality.

Institutions operate at the macro-level (society-wide) and help frame the expectations individuals follow.

Major Institutions Tested on the MCAT:

- Family
- Education

- Religion
- Medicine & Healthcare
- Government & Economy

Family

Functions:

- Primary socialization (teaching norms/values)
- Emotional and material support
- Regulation of reproduction and sexual behavior

Forms:

- Nuclear family (parents + children)
- Extended family (includes relatives)
- Kinship (defined culturally, includes marriage/adoption ties)

Dysfunctions:

- Domestic violence, child neglect
- Intergenerational trauma or poverty

MCAT Tip: Watch for family structure influencing health outcomes, SES mobility, or access to care.

Education

Functions:

- Transmits knowledge and social norms
- Prepares individuals for workforce roles
- Promotes meritocracy (ideally)

Key Concepts:

Concept	Description
Hidden curriculum	Unspoken lessons (e.g., obedience, punctuality, gender roles)
Teacher expectancy effect	Expectations influence student performance

Concept	Description
Educational stratification	Systemic inequality (e.g., tracking, funding gaps)

MCAT Tip: Education can reinforce inequality through mechanisms like labeling, standardized tests, or cultural bias in curriculum.

Religion

Functions:

- Provides meaning and social cohesion
- Encourages moral behavior
- Marks life transitions (birth, marriage, death)

Types of Religious Organizations:

Type	Description	Example
Church	Well-integrated into society	Catholic Church
Sect	Reformist group branching from main religion	Early Protestants
Cult	New, often unorthodox movement (sociologically neutral)	Some new-age spiritual groups

Other Key Terms:

- **Secularization:** Decline in religious influence
- **Fundamentalism:** Strict adherence to traditional beliefs
- **Religiosity:** Degree of commitment to religion

MCAT Tip: Religion can both reinforce social norms and fuel social movements. It influences views on health, family, morality, etc.

Medicine and Healthcare

Functions:

- Treats illness and promotes wellness
- Defines and manages the “sick role”
- Distributes medical resources

Key Concepts:

Concept	Description
Sick role	Exemption from normal roles + obligation to seek treatment
Medicalization	Treating normal behavior as illness (e.g., ADHD, aging)
Social epidemiology	Studies how social conditions affect health

Inequities to Know:

- Racial, gender, and SES disparities in access, treatment, and outcomes
- Bias in pain management, diagnostics, and preventive care

MCAT Tip: Healthcare reflects broader structural inequality – don't overlook system-level barriers in passages.

Government and Economy

Functions:

- Enforce law and order
- Allocate resources
- Shape public policy (e.g., healthcare, education)

Forms of Authority:

Type	Basis of Legitimacy	Example
Traditional	Custom and heritage	Monarchies
Rational-legal	Rules and laws	Modern democracies
Charismatic	Personal appeal or heroism	Revolutionary leaders

Economic Systems:

System	Description	MCAT Implication
Capitalism	Market-based, private ownership	Inequality in healthcare, education
Socialism	Collective ownership, redistribution	Universal health coverage models

System	Description	MCAT Implication
Mixed	Hybrid of both	U.S. economy blends public/private

MCAT Tip: Government and economy influence health policy, public funding, and regulatory structures – all testable in sociological and public health contexts.

Summary Table

Institution	Function	MCAT Focus
Family	Socialization, caregiving	Abuse, SES transmission, kinship terms
Education	Knowledge transfer, roles	Inequality, hidden curriculum, tracking
Religion	Morality, cohesion, ritual	Secularization, fundamentalism, religiosity
Healthcare	Wellness, diagnosis, care access	Sick role, medicalization, structural disparity
Government	Power, law, resource allocation	Policy, economic inequality, systems of power

Takeaway Insight

- Social institutions provide structure and stability, but also perpetuate inequality.
- MCAT passages may ask you to evaluate how education, family, or religion affects health outcomes or behavior.
- Recognizing institutional-level influences is key to advanced MCAT sociology reasoning.

5. Cultural Relativism vs. Ethnocentrism

What Is Culture?

Culture refers to the shared beliefs, norms, behaviors, language, and material goods of a group or society. It is learned, passed through generations, and influences perception and behavior.

Culture is divided into:

- **Material Culture:** Physical objects (clothing, tools, buildings)

- **Nonmaterial Culture:** Beliefs, values, language, customs

Ethnocentrism

Definition: The tendency to view one's own culture as superior and to judge other cultures by one's own standards.

- **Example:** Believing another society's customs are "weird" or "primitive" because they differ from yours.
- **MCAT Application:** Ethnocentrism can lead to cultural misunderstanding, discrimination, and conflict.

MCAT Tip: Watch for ethnocentrism in questions about cross-cultural healthcare, immigration, or public health campaigns failing due to cultural mismatch.

Cultural Relativism

Definition: Understanding a culture based on its own values and standards rather than judging it through the lens of another culture.

- **Example:** Respecting traditional healing practices even if they differ from Western biomedicine.
- **Emphasis:** Tolerance, openness, and contextual understanding.

MCAT Insight: Cultural relativism is key in global health, medical ethics, and culturally competent care.

MCAT Testing Examples:

Scenario	Ethnocentric or Relativistic?	Why?
A doctor dismisses a patient's herbal remedies as "nonsense"	Ethnocentric	Judging another tradition through Western norms
A nurse inquires about a patient's cultural beliefs before offering treatment options	Cultural Relativism	Respecting different worldviews and practices

Bottom Line

- Ethnocentrism = Biased judgment

- Cultural relativism = Contextual understanding

MCAT questions will often present a social or medical scenario and ask you to identify the perspective being used. Focus on:

- Respect vs. Judgment
- Understanding vs. Dismissing
- Inclusivity vs. Cultural superiority

6. Norms, Folkways, Mores, and Taboos

What Are Norms?

Norms are the socially accepted rules of behavior that define how individuals should act in specific situations. They reflect a society's values and help maintain order and predictability in social life.

- Norms vary across cultures and subcultures.
- They may be formal (laws, regulations) or informal (manners, etiquette).
- Norms are enforced by sanctions – rewards or punishments.

Types of Norms

Type	Definition	Examples	Consequences of Violation
Folkways	Informal customs that guide everyday behavior	Saying "thank you," dressing casually	Mild disapproval (e.g., side-eye)
Mores	Norms based on strong moral values	Cheating, lying, adultery	Strong disapproval or ostracism
Taboos	Prohibited actions that are deeply repulsive	Incest, cannibalism	Extreme disgust; legal/criminal action
Laws	Formally codified rules enforced by the state	Theft, speeding, tax evasion	Fines, jail, or formal punishment

Norms vs. Values

- Norms = rules for behavior

- Values = the beliefs or ideals that justify the norms

MCAT Tip: Norms are actions, values are reasons. For example, wearing professional clothing (norm) reflects a value of respect or competence.

Sanctions: Reinforcing Norms

Sanctions are the mechanisms that enforce conformity to norms.

Sanction Type	Description	Examples
Positive Sanction	Reward for norm adherence	Praise, promotion, award
Negative Sanction	Punishment for violating a norm	Scolding, exclusion, fine
Formal Sanction	Issued by authority or institution	Jail time, expulsion, legal fine
Informal Sanction	Issued by peers or community	Gossip, dirty looks, embarrassment

Real-World Application: Not wearing a mask during a pandemic may lead to both formal sanctions (policy penalties) and informal sanctions (social judgment).

MCAT Practice Cue:

A passage describes a medical intern speaking informally to a patient in a professional setting. This likely violates a folkway (expected decorum), and the intern might receive informal sanctions from peers or attendings.

Key Takeaways

- **Folkways** = mild customs
- **Mores** = morally significant
- **Taboos** = deeply forbidden
- **Laws** = codified and enforced by state
- Sanctions (formal/informal) enforce these norms

7. Cultural Change, Globalization, and Social Movements

Cultural Change

Culture is not static — it evolves over time due to internal dynamics and external contact. Change can be slow and gradual or rapid and disruptive.

Mechanisms of Cultural Change:

- **Innovation:** Introduction of new ideas or technology (e.g., smartphones, AI)
- **Discovery:** Finding something new within an existing culture (e.g., DNA, germs)
- **Diffusion:** Spread of cultural elements across societies (e.g., cuisine, fashion)

Examples:

- Social media platforms altering dating norms
- Vaccination technology reshaping beliefs around disease

MCAT Insight: Be prepared to analyze how innovations (e.g., CRISPR, wearable tech) interact with existing values or beliefs — a common setup for cultural lag.

Globalization

Definition: The increasing interconnectedness of societies through communication, trade, technology, and migration. It leads to cultural exchange and integration but also friction and inequality.

Positive Impacts:

- Cultural exchange (e.g., music, food, language)
- Spread of medical knowledge and public health efforts
- Global collaboration on issues like climate change

Negative Impacts:

- Cultural homogenization (“McDonaldization”)
- Erosion of local traditions
- Economic inequality and labor exploitation

Key Term:

- **Cultural Imperialism:** Dominant cultures imposing their values and products on less powerful societies.

MCAT Relevance: Globalization passages may describe health campaigns, media influence, or cultural conflicts — test questions often ask about symbolic culture, values, or resistance movements.

Social Movements

Definition: Organized collective efforts to promote or resist social change. Movements arise from perceived injustice and shared grievances.

Types of Social Movements:

Type	Purpose	Example
Reformative	Change a specific area	Civil rights, climate policy
Revolutionary	Overhaul entire system	American Revolution
Redemptive	Personal transformation	Religious or spiritual revival
Alternative	Limited change in individuals	Veganism, mindfulness
Resistance	Prevent or undo change	Anti-abortion, anti-immigration

Stages of Movement:

1. **Emergence** – Recognition of a problem
2. **Coalescence** – Organizing, forming goals
3. **Bureaucratization** – Formal leadership, strategy
4. **Decline** – Success, failure, or absorption

Relative Deprivation Theory:

- Social movements often arise not from absolute poverty, but from perceived inequality between expectations and reality.

MCAT Tip: Movement questions may focus on healthcare access, rights-based language, or inequality. Look for keywords like "mobilization," "advocacy," or "resistance."

Key Takeaways

- Cultural change is driven by innovation, diffusion, and interaction with other cultures.
- Globalization facilitates the spread of ideas and technologies but may threaten cultural identity or deepen inequality.
- Social movements are collective actions to reshape society – and often arise from shared frustration.

- The MCAT may ask you to apply these ideas to public health initiatives, cultural clashes, or inequality in a modernizing world.

Module Recap

Key Themes Covered:

- **Material vs. Symbolic Culture:** Tangible objects vs. intangible beliefs and values
- **Cultural Processes:** Cultural transmission (within a culture), diffusion (between cultures), and lag (delayed symbolic adaptation)
- **Norms and Sanctions:** Folkways, mores, taboos, laws – enforced through formal/informal consequences
- **Social Institutions:** Family, education, religion, medicine, government – stabilize society but can reinforce inequality
- **Ethnocentrism vs. Cultural Relativism:** Judging others by your own standards vs. understanding cultures in context
- **Social Control:** Norms and sanctions guide behavior; institutions reinforce order
- **Cultural Change and Globalization:** Societies adapt through innovation, diffusion, and resistance movements
- **Social Movements:** Collective efforts to promote or resist change – based on shared grievance and relative deprivation

MCAT Strategy Tips

- **Terms in Context:** The MCAT often embeds cultural concepts within healthcare or policy scenarios – expect to apply ideas, not just define them.
- **Material vs. Symbolic Culture:** Symbolic culture explains *why* behavior occurs – crucial for interpreting patient beliefs or public health conflicts.
- **Ethnocentrism Trap:** When answering questions about healthcare interactions, beware of judging cultural practices – the MCAT favors cultural competence and relativism.
- **Sanctions and Norms:** MCAT passages may describe behavior violations (e.g., vaccine refusal, deviance) and ask about types of norms or consequences.

- **Institutional Influence:** Think macrosociologically. Institutions like education, religion, or medicine often reinforce inequality – expect questions about structural barriers.
- **Cultural Lag Clue:** When technology (e.g., AI, gene editing) appears in a passage, ask: “Has society caught up symbolically?” This often signals a lag-based question.
- **Movement Mapping:** Match movements to goals (e.g., reform vs. revolution) and stages (emergence, coalescence, etc.). Look for framing in terms of inequality or justice.
- **Globalization Scenarios:** Think about cultural diffusion and resistance – e.g., how Western medicine interacts with local traditions.