

# CUSTOM

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## CUSTOM

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Anthropology, Sociology, Cultural Studies, Social Psychology.

### 1. Core Definition

A **custom** fundamentally refers to a persistent, characteristic action, behavior, or practice that is traditionally followed by a specific social group or culture, often serving as an unwritten rule for conduct within particular scenarios. These practices are not typically codified into formal law but are maintained through generations of observation, family instruction, and societal reinforcement, thereby gaining moral or social legitimacy. The source content emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of these practices, noting that they are conveyed "via the years and years of family members that practice it," establishing custom as a powerful mechanism of cultural continuity. Furthermore, a behavior qualifies as a custom when it is explicitly or implicitly depicted by the surrounding culture as acceptable, appropriate, or even highly desired in specific social contexts, such as greeting rituals, ceremonial attire, or dining etiquette.

In anthropological terms, customs represent the habitual actions that differentiate one group from another, providing a recognizable social pattern. While a personal habit is idiosyncratic to an individual, a custom is shared and validated communally, forming part of the collective identity. This validation ensures that the practice, though voluntary in the strictest sense, carries the weight of social expectation. Deviation from established custom, while generally not resulting in legal penalty, often incurs social friction, disapproval, or ostracization, illustrating the intrinsic link between custom and the maintenance of social order. Understanding custom is therefore crucial for interpreting the social fabric, as it reveals deeply ingrained assumptions about proper conduct that structure daily life far more frequently than formal laws do.

The definition of custom highlights its resilience and its dependence on collective memory and repetitive practice. Unlike trends or fads, customs possess depth, rooted in historical precedent and often imbued with symbolic meaning that transcends mere utility. They stabilize society by providing predictable behavioral scripts, allowing individuals to navigate complex social situations with minimal cognitive effort. Whether related to rites of passage, professional courtesy, or leisure activities, customs serve as a cultural blueprint, ensuring that the behaviors considered "adequate or wanted" are reliably transmitted across demographic shifts and temporal spans, thus defining the persistent character of a given community.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The English term **custom** derives from the Old French *costume*, ultimately tracing its roots back to the Latin *consuetudo*, which translates directly to "habit" or "usage." This etymological foundation underscores the fundamental nature of custom as something practiced habitually over time.

Historically, before the widespread codification of law, custom held immense legal and social power, forming the basis of common law systems. In medieval Europe, for instance, local customs often dictated property rights, inheritance practices, and local governance, demonstrating that in pre-modern societies, custom was often indistinguishable from law itself, enforced by tradition and community pressure rather than a centralized state apparatus.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the social sciences began to formalize, **custom** became a central object of study for pioneering sociologists and anthropologists. William Graham Sumner, in his seminal 1906 work *Folkways*, introduced the concept of *folkways*, which are essentially societal customs--the accepted ways of doing things that guide daily life without carrying moral weight. Sumner differentiated folkways (customs) from *mores*, which are customs with strong moral sanctions. This academic distinction formalized the understanding that not all traditional behaviors are equally weighted, establishing custom as a broad category encompassing behaviors ranging from trivial habits (e.g., specific dinner times) to highly ritualized proceedings.

Further historical development saw the concept integrated into the functionalist school of anthropology, where scholars like Bronisław Malinowski viewed customs as crucial social institutions designed to fulfill fundamental human needs, whether biological, psychological, or social. The maintenance of specific customs was seen as necessary for the stable operation of the social structure. In contemporary analysis, particularly within cultural studies, the concept has evolved to examine how customs are not merely relics of the past but are actively negotiated, reproduced, or resisted in modern, globalized contexts. This modern perspective acknowledges the fluidity of customs, recognizing that they can change rapidly in response to technological advancement, migration, and intercultural contact, even while retaining their fundamental role as transmitters of cultural heritage.

### 3. Key Characteristics and Mechanisms

Customs exhibit several defining characteristics that distinguish them from fleeting behaviors or strictly enforced rules. The first is their high degree of **persistence and generational continuity**. As noted in the source material, customs are transmitted across "years and years," relying heavily on informal education within the family unit and close community. This long-term persistence means customs often possess an element of antiquity, justifying their continued practice simply because "it has always been done this way." This reliance on tradition imbues customs with perceived legitimacy, making them resistant to sudden changes in societal preference.

A second defining characteristic is **cultural endorsement without formal sanction**. Customs operate in the space between personal choice and mandatory law. While the culture endorses them as "adequate or wanted," the sanctions for non-adherence are typically social (shame, ridicule, exclusion) rather than legal (fines, imprisonment). This distinction is critical because it

highlights the voluntary nature of custom adherence, even though social pressure often makes that choice feel mandatory. The effectiveness of a custom relies on the internalized belief that conforming to the expected behavior is beneficial for maintaining one's social standing and group belonging.

The third key element is **situational specificity**. Customs are context-dependent; they dictate proper behavior only in certain predefined scenarios. For example, a specific custom regarding gift-giving might be mandatory during a wedding ceremony but entirely irrelevant during a business meeting. This specificity allows individuals to switch between behavioral scripts smoothly, moving from one social context to another. Furthermore, customs often exhibit an interesting duality, where public practice may differ significantly from private reality. The source provides a salient example: "The customs of certain cultures are not always adhered to or accepted by members of that culture when in the privacy of their own home," highlighting that while the collective portrayal demands adherence, private space allows for negotiation and occasional rejection of the expected behavior, especially when the custom imposes personal inconvenience or discomfort.

#### 4. Custom vs. Law, Norms, and Mores

To fully grasp the concept of **custom**, it is necessary to differentiate it clearly from related social regulatory concepts, specifically social norms, mores, and formal law. While all three govern behavior, they differ primarily in their degree of moral intensity and the mechanism of enforcement. Custom is the most general and often the least rigid of these categories, encompassing habitual behaviors that, if violated, usually result in minor social discomfort. Examples include the custom of exchanging handshakes or the custom of waiting in line.

Mores (or moral norms), by contrast, are customs imbued with a strong sense of moral obligation or ethical imperative. Violating a mos, such as an injunction against infidelity or excessive public intoxication, is viewed as offensive to the moral foundations of the community, resulting in severe social condemnation, ostracization, or deep shame. While customs relate to the acceptable way of performing an action, mores relate to the essential rightness or wrongness of the action itself. If a custom is a choice of procedure, a mos is a dictate of conscience.

Formal law represents the highest level of codified social control, distinguished by its origin, enforcement, and consequence. Laws are established by a recognized governmental authority, formally written down, and enforced by specialized state institutions (police, courts). Violation of law results in formal, standardized penalties, regardless of the individual's social standing or the specific community's emotional response. Although many laws originate from deeply rooted customs or mores (e.g., laws against theft), law provides an external, coercive structure that customs inherently lack. Custom is self-regulating through social pressure; law is externally regulated through institutionalized power.

## 5. Transmission and Socialization

The effective and long-term transmission of customs relies heavily upon the process of socialization, the lifelong process through which individuals acquire the norms, values, and behaviors appropriate for their social roles. The family unit serves as the primary agent of socialization and is the crucial conduit mentioned in the source material for conveying customs "via the years and years of family members." Within the family, customs are learned implicitly through observation, imitation, and participation in routine activities, such as specific holiday rituals, methods of food preparation, or patterns of interaction between different age groups.

Beyond the family, secondary agents of socialization--including schools, religious institutions, and community groups--reinforce cultural customs. For example, religious customs surrounding prayer, dress, or dietary restrictions are explicitly taught and modeled within the institutional context. Schools often transmit customs related to civic behavior, courtesy, and collective organization. These institutions formalize what the family begins, ensuring that the individual understands the broader societal expectation for customary adherence. The consistent reinforcement across multiple social strata solidifies the custom's power and perceived permanence.

Crucially, transmission is not always passive acceptance; it involves interpretation and performance. As individuals age, they learn not just the custom itself, but also the situational rules for its application and the acceptable boundaries of variation. For example, a custom of deference to elders is transmitted, but the individual also learns that the level of deference may vary depending on the elder's status or the privacy of the setting (as seen in the capacity for customs to be abandoned in private). This active negotiation ensures that while customs provide stability, they retain a necessary degree of flexibility that prevents them from becoming obsolete cultural artifacts.

## 6. Psychological Functions of Custom

Customs serve significant psychological functions for the individual and the group, contributing to cognitive ease and emotional security. From a psychological standpoint, customs act as behavioral heuristics, reducing the need for continuous, effortful decision-making. If a social situation has a prescribed custom--such as the expected greeting upon arrival--the individual does not have to invent a response, significantly decreasing cognitive load and anxiety associated with navigating uncertainty. This automaticity makes social interaction smoother and more predictable.

Furthermore, adherence to group **customs** is highly reinforcing, fulfilling the fundamental human need for belonging and group affiliation. Engaging in shared, traditional practices solidifies in-group identity and distinguishes the collective from external groups. This psychological reinforcement is critical in forging social cohesion; when people perform the same rituals or adhere to the same practices, they reinforce their shared understanding of reality and their mutual commitment to the group's structure. Deviation, conversely, triggers psychological discomfort--both for the violator

(guilt, anxiety) and the observers (disapproval, uncertainty)--serving as a robust internal mechanism for behavioral regulation.

## 7. Custom and Cultural Change

While the defining feature of custom is its persistence and generational continuity, customs are not static and are subject to cultural change, though often slowly. The inertia inherent in tradition means that customs frequently resist rapid transformation, a phenomenon often described as **cultural lag**, where social practices lag behind technological or environmental advancements. For instance, customs surrounding formal written correspondence persisted long after email rendered them functionally obsolete, illustrating the power of established practice over efficiency.

However, customs do evolve through several mechanisms. They can be diluted through continuous contact with diverse cultures (acculturation), where the practices of different groups merge or weaken. They can also be consciously reformed or abandoned when they become functionally incompatible with modern life or are deemed unethical by emerging moral standards (e.g., customs related to caste systems or gender roles that are challenged by human rights movements). The gradual erosion of customs often begins privately, reflecting the observation in the source content that private non-adherence precedes public abandonment. As more individuals quietly cease practicing a custom, its social utility diminishes until the collective tacitly agrees to let the practice fade into history.

### Further Reading

[Custom \(Sociology and Anthropology\)](#)

[Culture](#)

[Mores](#)

[Socialization](#)