**Cultural Norms**

**Norms** are the agreed‐upon expectations and rules by which a culture guides the behavior of its members in any given situation. Members of a culture must conform to its norms for the culture to exist and function. Of course, norms vary widely across cultural groups. Americans, for instance, maintain fairly direct eye contact when conversing with others. Asians, on the other hand, may avert their eyes as a sign of politeness and respect.

Sociologists speak of at least four types of norms: *folkways, mores, taboos*, and *laws*.

* **Folkways**, sometimes known as “conventions” or “customs,” are standards of behavior that are socially approved but not morally significant. For example, belching loudly after eating dinner at someone else's home breaks an American folkway.
* **Mores** are norms of morality. Breaking mores, like attending church in the nude, will offend most people of a culture.
* Certain behaviors are considered **taboo**, meaning a culture absolutely forbids them, like incest in U.S. culture.
* Finally, **laws** are a formal body of rules enacted by the state and backed by the power of the state. Virtually all taboos, like child abuse, are enacted into law, although not all mores are. For example, wearing a bikini to church may be offensive, but it is not against the law.

What are the norms for your society?