

Cultures of the World

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe examples of how culture influences behaviour.

Explain why sociologists might favour cultural explanations of behaviour over biological explanations.

Culture



As this evidence on kissing suggests, what seems to us a very natural, even instinctual act turns out not to be so natural and biological after all.

Instead, kissing seems best understood as something we learn to enjoy from our *culture*, or the symbols, language, beliefs, values, and artefacts (material objects) that are part of a society.

Because society, refers to a group of people who live in a defined territory and who share a culture, it is obvious that culture is a critical component of any society.

Culture

- If the culture we learn influences our beliefs and behaviours, then culture is a key concept to the sociological perspective.
- Someone who grows up in the United States differs in many ways, some of them obvious and some of them not so obvious, from someone growing up in China, Sweden, South Korea, Peru, or Nigeria.
- Culture influences not only language but the gestures we use when we interact, how far apart we stand from each other when we talk, and the values we consider most important for our children to learn, to name just a few.
- Without culture, we could not have a society.

Culture

- The profound impact of culture becomes most evident when we examine behaviours or conditions that, like kissing, are normally considered biological in nature. Consider morning sickness and labour pains, both very familiar to pregnant women before and during childbirth, respectively.
- These two types of discomfort have known biological causes, and we are not surprised that so many pregnant women experience them. But we *would* be surprised if the husbands of pregnant women woke up sick in the morning or experienced severe abdominal pain while their wives gave birth. These men are neither carrying nor delivering a baby, and there is no logical—that is, biological—reason for them to suffer either type of discomfort.

Culture

- And yet scholars have discovered several traditional societies in which men about to become fathers experience precisely these symptoms. They are nauseous during their wives' pregnancies, and they experience labour pains while their wives give birth. The term *couvade* refers to these symptoms, which do not have any known biological origin. Yet the men feel them nonetheless, because they have learned from their culture that they *should* feel these types of discomfort (Doja, 2005). And because they should feel these symptoms, they actually do so. Perhaps their minds are playing tricks on them, but that is often the point of culture.
- As sociologists William I. and Dorothy Swaine Thomas (1928) once pointed out, if things are perceived as real, then they are real in their consequences. These men learn how they should feel as budding fathers, and thus they feel this way. Unfortunately for them, the perceptions they learn from their culture are real in their consequences.

Culture

- The example of drunkenness further illustrates how cultural expectations influence a behaviour that is commonly thought to have biological causes. In the United States, when people drink too much alcohol, they become intoxicated and their behaviour changes.
- Most typically, their inhibitions lower and they become loud, boisterous, and even rowdy. We attribute these changes to alcohol's biological effect as a drug on our central nervous system, and scientists have documented how alcohol breaks down in our body to achieve this effect.

Culture

- Culture affects how people respond when they drink alcohol. Some societies often become louder and lose their sexual inhibitions when they drink, but people in some societies studied by anthropologists often respond very differently, with many never getting loud or not even enjoying themselves.
- This explanation of alcohol's effect is OK as far as it goes, but it turns out that *how* alcohol affects our behaviour depends on our culture. In some small, traditional societies, people drink alcohol until they pass out, but they never get loud or boisterous; they might not even appear to be enjoying themselves. In other societies, they drink lots of alcohol and get loud but not rowdy. In some societies, including our own, people lose sexual inhibitions as they drink, but in other societies they do not become more aroused. The cross-cultural evidence is very clear: alcohol as a drug does affect human behaviour, but culture influences the types of effects that occur. We learn from our culture how to behave when drunk just as we learn how to behave when sober (McCaghy, Capron, Jamieson, & Carey, 2008).

Culture and Biology

- These examples suggest that human behaviour is more the result of culture than it is of biology. This is not to say that biology is entirely unimportant. As just one example, humans have a biological need to eat, and so they do.
- But humans are much less under the control of biology than any other animal species, including other primates such as monkeys and chimpanzees. These and other animals are governed largely by biological instincts that control them totally. A dog chases any squirrel it sees because of instinct, and a cat chases a mouse for the same reason. Different breeds of dogs do have different personalities, but even these stem from the biological differences among breeds passed down from one generation to another. Instinct prompts many dogs to turn around before they lie down, and it prompts most dogs to defend their territory. When the doorbell rings and a dog begins barking, it is responding to ancient biological instinct.

Culture and Biology

- Because humans have such a large, complex central nervous system, we are less controlled by biology. The critical question then becomes, how much does biology influence our behaviour? Predictably, scholars in different disciplines answer this question in different ways. Most sociologists and anthropologists would probably say that culture affects behaviour much more than biology does. In contrast, many biologists and psychologists would give much more weight to biology. Advocating a view called *sociobiology*, some scholars say that several important human behaviours and emotions, such as competition, aggression, and altruism, stem from our biological makeup. Sociobiology has been roundly criticized and just as staunchly defended, and respected scholars continue to debate its premises (Freese, 2008).

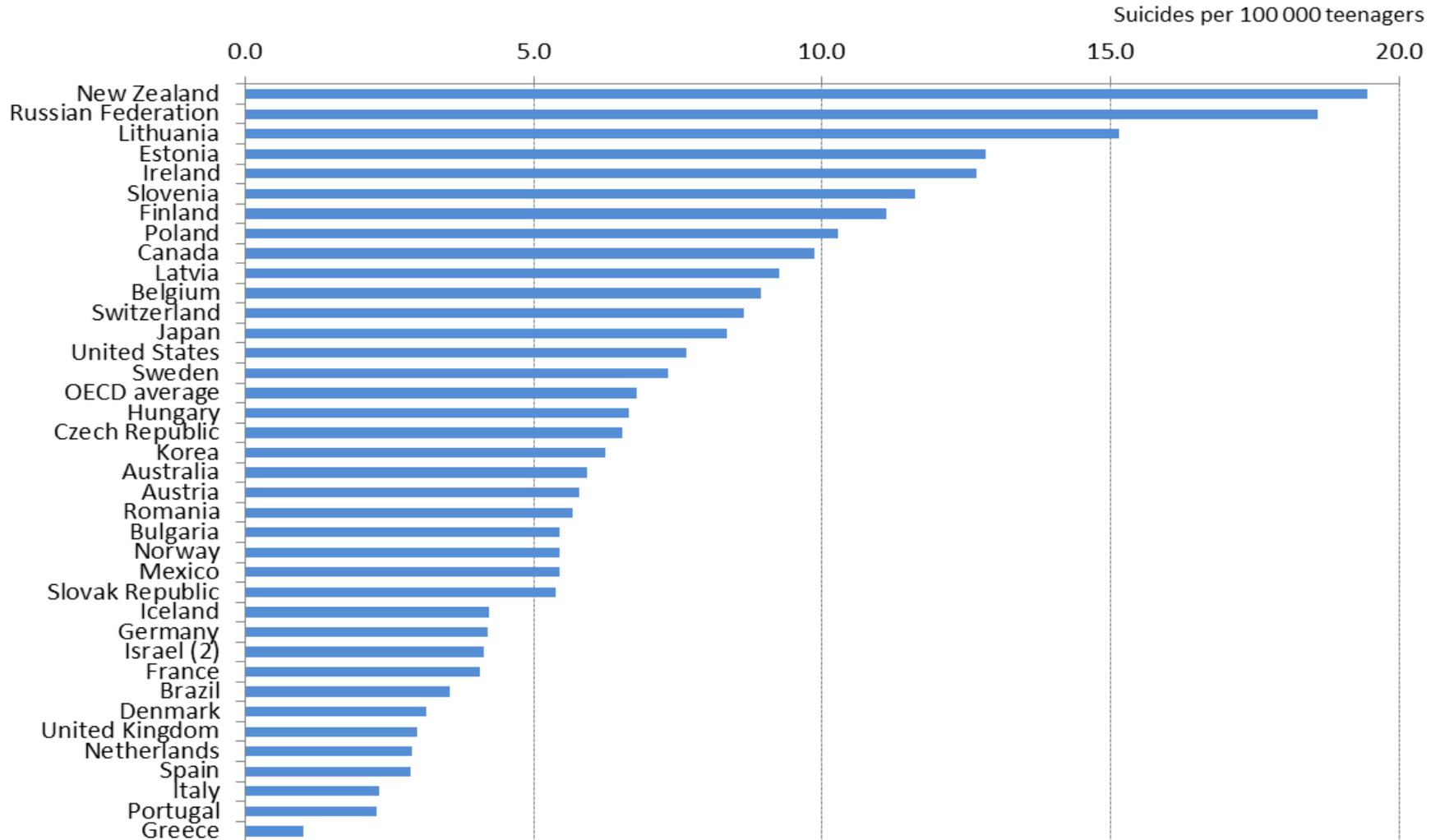
Culture

- Why do sociologists generally favour culture over biology? Two reasons stand out.
- First, and as we have seen, many behaviours differ dramatically among societies in ways that show the strong impact of culture. Second, biology cannot easily account for why groups and locations differ in their rates of committing certain behaviours.
- For example, biology cannot easily account for why groups and locations differ in their rates of committing certain behaviours. For example, what biological reason could explain teenage suicide rates or what biological reason could explain why the U.S. homicide rate is so much higher than Canada's? Various aspects of culture and social structure seem much better able than biology to explain these differences.

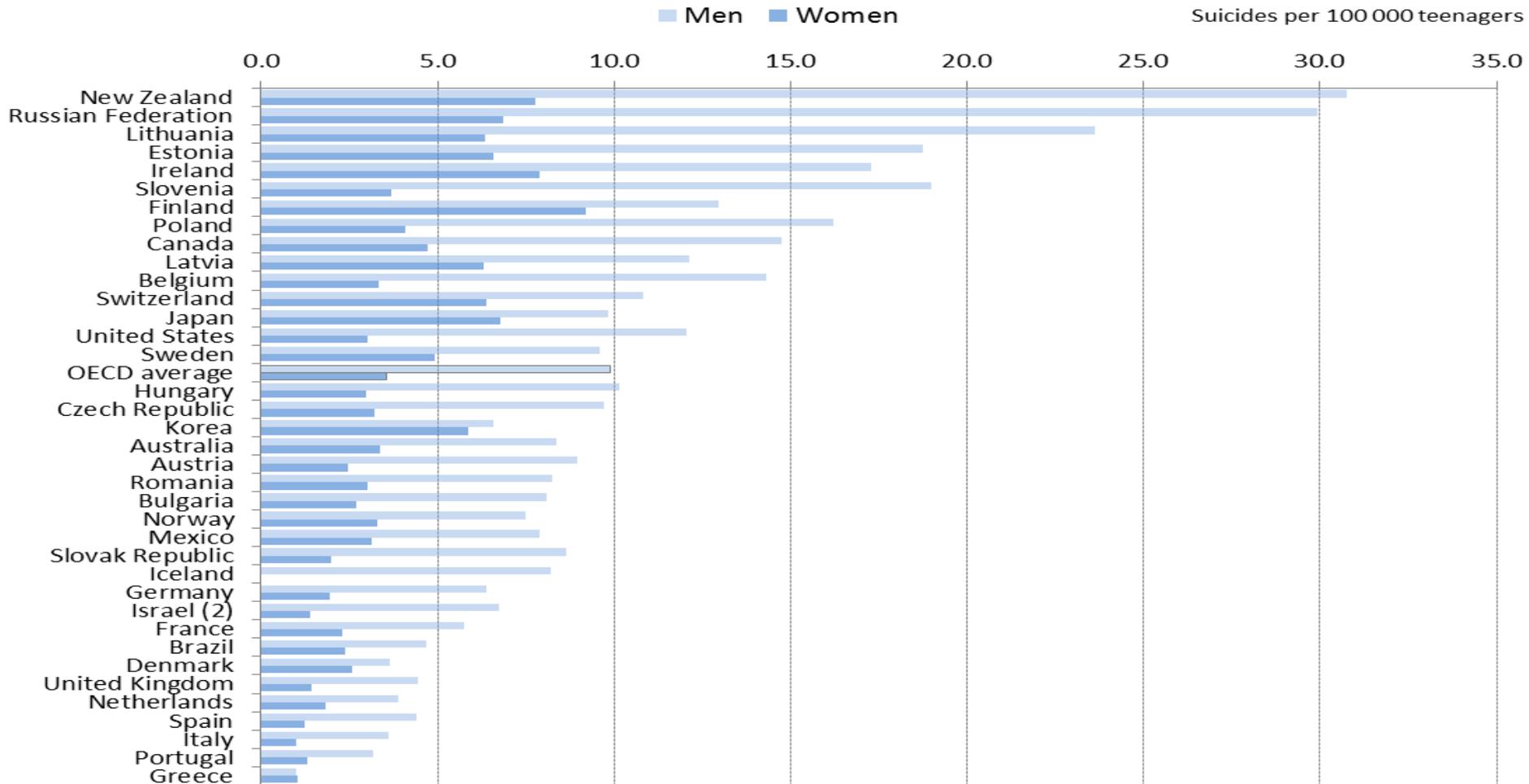
Suicide among teenagers

- OECD Data presented here on suicide rates of adolescents aged 15 to 19 are based on official registers on “causes of death” per person per year. The suicide rate reflects the number of teenage suicides per 100 000 of the age group population.
- **Key findings**
- There is considerable variation in teenage suicide rates across countries. At nearly 20 suicides per 100 000 teenagers, suicide rates in New Zealand and the Russian Federation are much higher than elsewhere. By contrast at less than 3 suicides per 100 000 young people, suicide rates are lowest in Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal.
- There has been little change in average teenage suicide rates across the OECD in the past two decades, although the number of suicides among young men has declined since the early 1990s
- On average, teenage suicides were just over 6 deaths per 100 000 teenagers in 2007, with suicides much more likely among young men (about 9 per 100 000 young men) than young women (just over 3 suicides per 100 000 young women).

Suicide Rates among teenagers



Suicide among teenagers



Culture

- Culture refers to the symbols, language, beliefs, values, and artifacts that are part of any society.
- Because culture influences people's beliefs and behaviours, culture is a key concept to the sociological perspective.
- Many sociologists are wary of biological explanations of behaviour, in part because these explanations implicitly support the status quo and may be used to justify claims of biological inferiority.

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