Civic Systems

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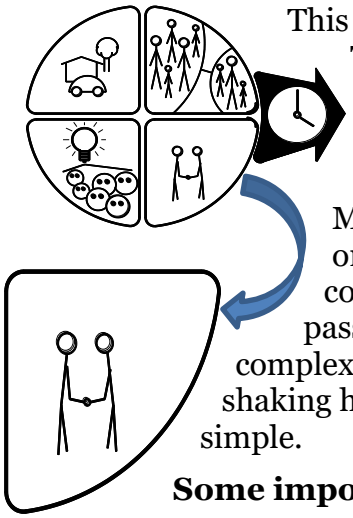
4: Action Patterns & Shared Ideas

A closer look at Action Patterns



This section focuses on Action Patterns as a part of the Model. They're a major characteristic of every society. The patterns are "picked up" mostly by casual interaction with parents and others. They differ from society to society, and tend to change very slowly.

Most Action Patterns develop as "standard" ways of solving ordinary problems of everyday life— avoiding conflict and confusion, making a living, making sure essential knowledge is passed along to the young, and so on. Some patterns are huge and complex—your nation's economic system, for example. Others, such as shaking hands or nodding to acknowledge another person, are very simple.

Some important sub-categories—Action Patterns for:

- Work (Who does what kind of work? With whom? When? Where?)
- Exchanging goods and services (trading, buying, selling, etc.—the *economic* subsystem)
- Teaching the young. This may include both formal education (such as school) and informal learning (such as learning from other children and from watching adults)—the *socialization* subsystem
- Controlling behavior considered wrong, including mild controls (e.g. shaming or loss of privileges), moderate controls (e.g. fines), and control and punishment by police, courts, and prisons
- Making important group decisions (the *political* subsystem)
- Religious practices.

Some of these pattern categories overlap. For example, patterns for work closely relate to economic subsystems, teaching the young is part of controlling behavior, and political subsystems establish laws that also deal with wrong behavior.

This list could be very long. Other patterns are associated with greeting, marriage, birth, death, dealing with nature, establishing how time is used, and so on.

Investigation: Action Patterns in the Target Area

RHRN Project

Within the boundaries of the Target Area, there are a multitude of Action Patterns followed by everybody. Most of the time, people follow the patterns automatically, without thinking. For example, even if teachers don't assign seats, learners generally sit the same place every class. People follow patterns in the ways they use time, the way they go from place to place, and in greeting each other.

1: Identify and list as many Target Area Action Patterns as you can. Consider patterns in the way time and space is used, patterns in movement of people, patterns in ways of communicating, etc.

2: From the patterns you've listed, choose two you think are important, describe them in detail, and tell why they're important.

3: What do you think might be little-noticed but important long-term changes in your society of each of the following pattern changes in formal schooling? Discuss these possibilities with others, and (in your journal) hypothesize about possible effects.

- Segregation by gender
- Classes of fifteen students each, all ages mixed
- Parents rotating weekly as teachers
- All classes held in auditoriums, with about 200 people in each class
- Home schooling of most young people, with groups of families combining to share facilities and responsibilities
- All schooling done via computer—no textbooks, no teachers, just people monitoring your computer use to make sure you were working.

http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/education/article/Funding-shrinks-so-classes-grow-4155001.php

Investigation: Action Pattern importance

When most of the people in a group share many important Action Patterns, they form a **society**. Most of the people who live in the United States share important action patterns, so these people are part of "American society."

The members of a society may share many different action patterns, but not all are equally important. For example, the fact that most female members of a society wear earrings isn't as important as the fact that most people leave their parents and set up separate homes when they become adults.

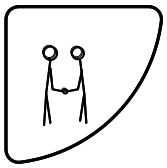
Generally, a pattern is important if (1) the pattern affects, in some way, almost everyone within the society; (2) adults model the pattern to the young and expect them to follow it; and (3) those who don't follow the pattern are considered "odd," or are the object of irritation, anger, or legal action.

Here's a list of patterns followed by at least some people in American society. ***Work with your team, and use the three characteristics of an important pattern to decide which of these would be considered important, and why. Record your results in your journal:***

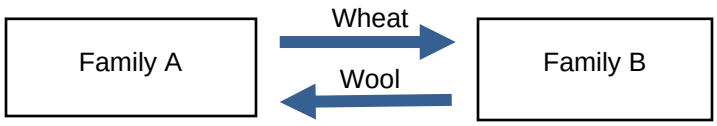
1. Attending school during childhood and teenage years
2. Playing team sports
3. Being tattooed
4. Having the same last name as your father
5. Raising family food in a garden
6. Being able, someday, to choose your own husband or wife
7. Being personally clean
8. Voting in a national election
9. Using powered vehicles for transportation
10. Men opening doors for women.

Economic system patterns

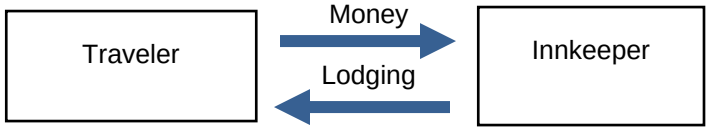
All societies have important patterns of action for exchanging goods and services. Together, these patterns make up its "economic system." These systems are often complex and difficult to understand, but underlying all economic systems are action patterns called "exchanges."



An example from the past: Let's suppose one farm family raised more wheat than it needed for its own use. Another raised sheep and produced more wool than it needed. The two families could *exchange* wool for wheat. Each gets something it lacks. This kind of simple exchange is the beginning of an economic system.

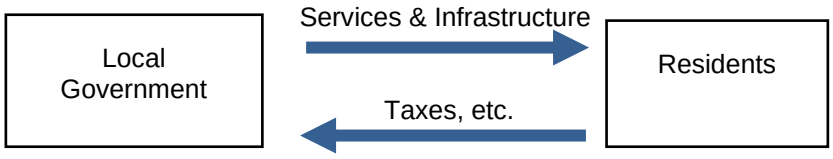


Here's another, somewhat different exchange pattern:



Money with value that is accepted almost anywhere makes it easier to make economic exchanges. For example, the innkeeper, in turn, can use the money to buy food from farmers.

Economic exchanges form large, important patterns. You've already seen evidence of what is likely the most important civic exchange pattern:



Investigation: A first look at economic exchanges

What economic exchanges are involved in the food you eat? That's nearly impossible to figure out for food eaten away from home, but at home, you can find evidence. Of course, the most obvious exchange is the purchase of the food from a local supermarket or other source. Food labels will give other clues.

Choose a dozen or so food items with labels—even bananas and apples may have them—and diagram (with blocks and arrows) as many transactions as you can infer. Clue: Don't forget that transportation is part of the economic exchange network.

Alternatives: The same kind of investigation of economic exchanges can be done for the clothes you wear, the electronic equipment you use, and much more.

Investigation: Funding local government

Working with others, identify the various kinds of taxes, fees, and other funds that pay for your local government. Investigate how each source of funding is calculated and collected, and its relative importance to the government, and report this information in a presentation.

Investigation: Target area cost analysis

RHRN Project

Working with others, make a reasonably accurate approximation of the total cost of getting everybody in your classroom to and from your school today.

Political system patterns

Investigation: Local government

Government is all about Action Patterns—standardized ways of solving many of the problems that occur when people live and work in the same general area. The patterns grow out of decisions—many of them made years earlier.

Earlier you found or made an organization chart for your local government. Each official and department shown on your chart is responsible for some decisions and other patterned actions, some of them important (e.g. Should the city annex additional property on the northeast?), some trivial (e.g. Should we mow the grass in this park today?).

1: ***Choose one or two major departments, and write a brief paragraph describing the main Action Patterns and their purposes. Identify possible problems being solved. If possible, illustrate each main Pattern with photographs and/or diagrams.***

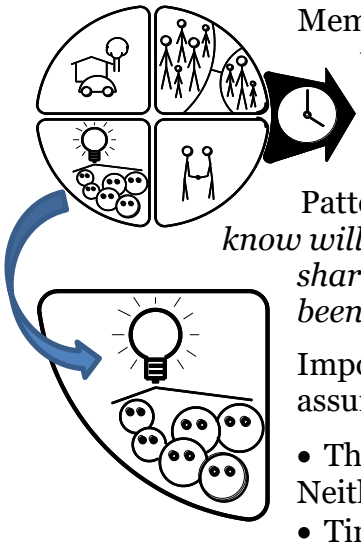
2: Local government uses "ordinances" to specify what's legal and what's not legal, how land is used, and much more. The process for making local ordinances is usually specified by the state government. ***Summarize the process for passing ordinances used by your local government.***

3: ***Identify patterns that occur when ordinances are violated.***

4: ***Identify relationships between the decisions or actions of officials or departments, and public feelings about the government activity.***

5: ***Identify problems you think should be solved by local government, but aren't—or are solved inadequately.***

A closer look at Shared Ideas



Members of groups share a worldview—important ideas, beliefs, values, and assumptions. These shared ways of thinking are also sometimes called societal "premises," or "cognitive systems." Ways of thinking, of course, are invisible, so must be inferred from what group members say and do. Important Action Patterns are generally motivated by Shared Ideas. *Nothing you can know will be of more practical use to you than an understanding of the shared states of mind that shape the society within which you've been reared and those with whom that society interacts.*

Important subcategories of Shared Ideas include beliefs and assumptions about:

- The basic nature of humans: Are people "naturally" good? Evil? Neither? Do people differ in inherent value? By age? Sex?
- Time: Was the past different? If so, how? In the future, will things get better? Worse? Stay about the same?
- "The good life:" What kind of life do people want for themselves? For their children? What makes them happy?
- Ownership: What are the rules for owning? What does "owning" mean? Who can own what? Is individual or group ownership better? What kinds of things are owned? How is ownership transferred?
- Acceptable action: What's OK and not OK to do?
- Authority: Who should make important decisions affecting many people? How do officials get their power? How is it transferred to others?
- Status: Who has it? How do they get it? What can they do with it? How important is it? Why?
- Causality: Why do things happen? What causes events? Disasters? Change?
- Outsiders: Who's considered "them"? "Us"? Why?

As you work your way through investigations, you'll probably raise other questions and create other categories.

Shared Ideas generate Action Patterns

Within every society, including your own, shared ideas affect almost everything people say and do. Sometimes it's hard to identify your own important ideas because they're so familiar and "natural" you rarely think about them. However, if you carefully analyze what people around you are doing and saying, (especially when they're trying to influence you), you'll often find important themes.

Sometimes a single Shared Idea creates vast patterns in a society. For example, most North Americans believe:

> It's good to be young. The best years of most people's lives are between the ages of 18 and 35 or so.

As the "baby boomers" get older, this idea is changing, but it still results in billions of dollars being spent on cosmetics, surgery, and physical conditioning (Action Patterns!). Advertisements show happy people in the "ideal" age range, or acting like people in that age range.

The TV commercials, billboards, and newspaper ads you see all reflect important ideas of your society and some important societal sub-groups. Often, they're buried, but they're there. An advertisement in a magazine for teens probably won't say, "Buy this and you'll be more popular." An advertisement in a magazine read by middle-aged people won't say, "Buy this and you'll look younger." You have to read between the lines ("infer").

Besides these ideas, there are others many Americans share—ideas that create large, important Action Patterns. (Most people who study the "character" of people come up with between six and a dozen or so main ideas for each society.)

Want to...

...take control?
...leave the crowd behind?
...get away from it all?

Investigation: Target Area Shared Ideas

RHRN Project

Figuring out Shared Ideas can be difficult, because many of our "assumptions" are so common among all around us that we believe them to be true without thinking about them. Here's a chance to dig deeper into some Shared Ideas.

Work with others to find and record answers to these questions:

What's the school's purpose? Who says so? Is it succeeding in doing what it's supposed to do? Why or why not? How do shared ideas differ between sub-groups? How do ideas differ between students and parents and other adults? Why does each student sub-group exist? To what extent does each sub-group solve problems? To what extent does each create problems?

Important Shared Ideas and Action Patterns

Investigation: Shared Ideas in local government

Some local government actions satisfy basic needs such as water and waste removal. Other actions solve or prevent problems, but also are based on Shared Ideas of people who live there. For example, speed limits on residential streets are mostly based on the simple idea: Residential areas must be safe, particularly for children.

Four Action Pattern rules (charter principles or ordinances) from a typical city are below. Identify the Shared Idea or ideas that explain why the rule was written.

All powers of the city shall be vested in an elected council, except as otherwise provided by law or by this Charter. The council shall consist of seven members, including the mayor, elected by the qualified voters of the city. Members of the city council other than the mayor shall be residents of and maintain their principal place of domicile in the district for which they seek to qualify and shall have been residents of said district for at least six months prior to the date of qualification for office.

***

No officer or employee of the municipality shall knowingly accept any valuable gift, whether in the form of service, loan, thing, or promise, from any person, firm or corporation which to his knowledge is interested directly or indirectly in any manner whatsoever in business dealings with the governmental body by which he is employed.

***

The maximum height of a residential fence is four feet within the front yard setback and 50% opaque. Beyond that point, towards the rear of your property, the height of the fence can be up to six feet and 100% opaque.

***

The curfew law prohibits any person under the age of 16 from being out and about between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. Sunday through Thursday, and between 12:01 a.m. and 6 a.m. on Saturday, Sunday and legal holidays, unless they are accompanied and supervised by an adult 21 years old or older.

Investigation: Taxation and Shared Ideas

1. ***Engraved on the exterior of the IRS Building in Washington D.C.: "Taxes are what we pay for a civilized society." Explain.***
2. ***Write questions useful in finding out the level of citizen understanding of what either local or national government does, how much it costs, and how people feel about government services and their costs.***
3. ***Use the questions to interview two or three adults.***
4. ***Discuss the results. Identify and describe patterns in the responses.***

Investigation: Summarizing ideas of people in your society

List some of the main pattern-forming ideas for your society:

1: ***Check the idea categories in your Model summary (page 2), and begin your list.*** This isn't easy, and you should try to improve the way you state the ideas as you proceed with this investigation.

2: ***Collect a half-dozen magazine advertisements that you think would appeal to many people, and attach them to sheets of paper. For each ad, ask yourself, "What basic shared idea is the advertiser using to get people to buy what's being advertised?" Circle the appropriate words and write the idea in the margin. (The photos or graphics may also suggest Shared Ideas.)***

3: ***Other clues will be indicated by your answers to a few questions:***

- What situations make most people in this society angry? What Shared Idea or Ideas are being violated in these situations? (Letters to the editor of local newspapers can be a source of this information, but you'll have to figure out the underlying idea that is making someone upset.)
- What motivates people to move to new places?
- When people are faced with major problems, who or what do they believe is the cause? How do they try to solve the problem?

The direct answers to the questions may not be "deep" enough to show a really fundamental Shared Idea. ***Check each answer by asking yourself "why?" then "the 'why' for the 'why,'" to see if you can get an even deeper idea or belief.***

Investigation: Shared Ideas that shaped the U.S. Government

The two most important documents in American history each begin with general statements about the purposes for government.

The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed…

…it is the right of the people…to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

The Constitution of the United States, September 17, 1787 (Preamble):

We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Some of the most important Shared Ideas you'll ever study underlie these two statements.

1: ***Study the statements, working and discussing them with others, to identify the meaning of each phrase. If necessary, look up word meanings***. Yes, the statements are a bit difficult to understand.

2: ***Translate each statement into your own words, and record them in your journal. Do your best to understand as fully as possible the meaning of these statements.***

3: ***Identify and record the underlying Shared Ideas. For example, what Shared Ideas are suggested by:***

- ***"all men are created equal?"***
- ***"deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed?"***
- ***"their Creator" (second line of the Declaration of Independence)?***
- ***"unalienable right" and "blessings" of "liberty?"***

Several other Shared Ideas are suggested by these statements. Identify as many as possible.

(Continued next page)

Additional excerpts from the U. S. Constitution:

1.1 All legislative powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and a House of Representatives.

1.7.2 Every bill which shall have passed the House of Representatives and the Senate, shall, before it becomes a law, be presented to the President of the United States; If he approves he shall sign it, but if not he shall return it, with his objections…

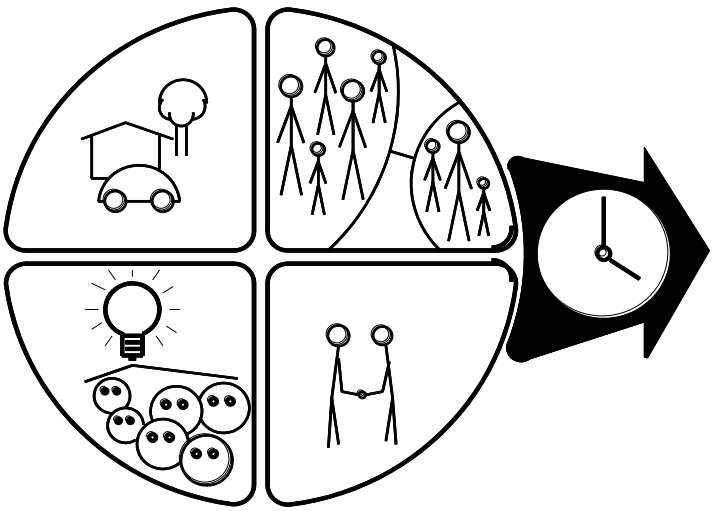
2.1 The executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America. He shall hold his office during the term of four years…

2.2.2 [The President] shall have power, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, to make treaties, provided two-thirds of the senators present concur; and he shall nominate, and by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, shall appoint ambassadors…judges of the Supreme Court, and all other officers of the United States…

3.1 The judicial power of the United States shall be vested in one Supreme Court, and in such inferior courts as the Congress may from time to time ordain and establish.

What main attitude or feeling about power is suggested by the parts of the Constitution in the box above? (This is an essential Shared Idea held by those who wrote the Constitution.)

Why might those who wrote the Constitution have shared this feeling and idea?



For teacher/mentor:

Action Patterns, writ large, become such things as political and economic systems. These are actually subsystems of the larger system formed by the whole society, because underlying them in powerful ways are the society's Shared Ideas and assumptions.

For example, the economic systems of most developed countries rely on the principle of investment, which only makes sense if the society believes the future is important and likely to be better than the present. Political systems based on democratic government rely on the assumption that, in the long run, citizens are knowledgeable and altruistic enough to make decisions that will benefit their society. These are extremely important patterns and relationships.

Investigation: Patterns in the Target Area

Some additional pattern questions:

What patterns do students follow while waiting to enter a closed door? What patterns are followed while eating lunch? What behavior patterns are associated with good news (e.g. unexpected free time)? Bad news (e.g. an unexpected test)? What greeting patterns are followed at various times and places in the target area? What patterns are associated with various levels of noise generated by students? Which patterns differ between males and females? Who runs the school? What do they do? Who makes which decisions? Should they or somebody else be making those decisions? Why? Who makes the formal rules? Who enforces the rules? What happens if some people think a rule is unfair?

Communications follow significant patterns. What communication systems are used by the school? Are links bidirectional or unidirectional? How effective are they? Are they adequate? How might they be improved? Note that communications may be spoken, written, graphic, direct, at a distance, etc. Don't overlook such things as bulletin boards and handouts as part of communications systems.

Investigation: Action Pattern importance

This should be a simple, straightforward activity at this point.

Investigation: A first look at economic exchanges

Learners may tend to overlook some of the exchanges necessary for food production. For example, producing and selling a head of broccoli will require acquiring farmland (and paying property taxes), purchasing equipment and supplies by the farmer (or, more likely, the farming corporation), paying wages to workers involved in planting and harvesting, paying for trucking or other transport equipment and its fuel and maintenance, paying wages to truck drivers, payment by wholesalers to producers, costs associated with warehousing, paying for warehouse equipment and workers, costs associated with the retail store (building depreciation, taxes, electricity, workers and more), etc.

And all of it depends on infrastructure—roads, bridges, currency, etc.—supplied by various levels of government and paid for with tax money.

Investigation: Funding local government

For municipalities and counties in the United States, the primary source of funds is property tax, with the amount generally proportional to the property value. Other local taxes may also be collected, and often state and federal funds are a significant part of local budgets. User fees (e.g. bus fares), license and permit fees, etc. are also significant. Most of this information can be gleaned from the on-line budget likely published by local government.

Investigation: Target area cost analysis

Cost analysis is difficult but important, and this seemingly-simply activity is a really challenging project. However, the thinking involved makes it important and beneficial to learners. (Those working with learners who aren't part of conventional classrooms will need to modify this to fit the learning situation, but it's important enough that it should be done some way, if at all possible.)

Learners working on this task will soon realize that they need to answer a long list of ancillary questions. The investigation's first step is to generate those questions, such as:

> How many arrived by school bus? What does a bus cost? How long does it last—for how many miles? What are fuel and maintenance costs per mile? Does the bus make more than two trips per day, or serve more than one school? How can the average cost per student attending the school be computed? (Do school authorities have the information available? If not, why not?)
>
> How many arrived by private car? How many miles were driven? What percentage of the car's total use does this represent? What's the average cost per mile to operate a car, including vehicle cost, insurance, fuel, maintenance, and so on? Are there costs associated with the time used by the driver? What do roads, streets, and parking lots cost?
>
> How many people walked or biked to school? With what associated costs—for example, for sidewalks, crossing guards, and cars waiting with idling engines?
>
> If students arrived by public transport such as a city bus system, similar questions should be generated. For example: Does the fare cover the cost of transportation, or is public transport subsidized by taxes? How does the cost of fuel affect the pattern?

Cost computations barely begin a list of possibilities. For example, if students arrive by private automobile, is that their only option? If there's a choice, what values shared by parents or students motivate them to choose to arrive by car instead of, say, by school bus or on foot? What changes are occurring in the patterns associated with transporting students? Why?

Working to solve these kinds of puzzles, learners give thought to a great deal of practical math, statistical analysis, economics, sociology, and other fields of study. Just the first step—developing a list of questions that must be answered—

requires a great deal of thought. And, of course, questions invariably generate more questions.

The familiarity of the everyday and the mundane hides inherent complexity. As study proceeds, the familiar gradually becomes "strange enough to see," radically broadening learner perspectives, chipping away at the lack of awareness and the superficiality of understanding that contribute to and intensify real-world problems.

Investigation: Local government

This may well be the most important investigation in the whole course. Done adequately, the investigation is likely to require weeks of class time. This activity is an extension of the local government organization chart prepared previously, focusing on the question, "What do each of these officials/departments *do*?" The extent of the responsibilities of the local government can be an eye-opener for some learners—a major course goal. Streets, traffic lights, streetlights, sidewalks, bridges, drainage, water supply, sewage disposal, building code enforcement, fire protection, police protection, courts, growth management, public transportation, tax collection, parks and recreation, perhaps schools and health services, administration and more. In most communities, the daily impact of local government on citizens is greater than that of the state or nation.

To keep the task from being overwhelming, we've suggested that work groups focus on one or two significant org chart blocks. Ideally, each work group would be investigating different parts of the organization, and eventually presenting the information they collect to the remainder of the class. Done with adequate detail, this can be a powerful civics lesson.

Ideally, this would be extended to identifying budgets, anticipated changes in any part of the local government's responsibility, along with (as we suggested) problems that need attention. There's no limit to the possible extensions, such as finding out how the water and sewer systems work, how this local government compares with others in the region, how the planning department functions, etc.

The traditional civics focus on "how a bill becomes a law" is included here, focusing on local government. If possible, learners should follow up by checking with local officials to verify local procedures.

Local courts and court procedures should be a significant focus, including mock trials.

At some point, of course, local officials could become learning resources, perhaps coming to be questioned, or visited by one or more class members. This investigation will likely be spread over considerable time, and run concurrently with other activity.

Optionally, the economics of local government could be investigated further in some classes. An earlier investigation looked at sources of funding. Most local governments post their budgets online, but these tend to be complex and difficult to understand (along with boring), but a quick look to identify distribution of

expenditures may be worth doing, if learners aren't overwhelmed with this investigation.

Investigation: Possible pattern changes in your Target Area

An exercise in hypothesizing. We've chosen a minimal RHRN exercise because of the scope of the local government investigation learners are doing.

Shared Ideas: As your own background for this section, we suggest reading Appendix B of the teacher's guide for *Investigating American History,* available free for download: https://www.marionbrady.com/documents/AHHandbook.pdf. That appendix discusses the dominant ideas that characterize much of American society.

Investigation: Target area Shared Ideas

This investigation is a bit difficult, but it's likely that by this time work teams will have developed effective methods for attacking investigations like this one. The central thrust is the relationships between Shared Ideas in the larger society and the existence and operation of the Target Area. Moving beyond individual to shared motivation is one key to this, e.g.:

If the Target Area is a school, why was it built? Yes, to educate young people, but why educate young people? Besides making money in a job, what other reasons for educating are important? Why does the school have a gymnasium? Yes, for exercise and sports, but why exercise? What is the significance and purpose of games and sports?

Investigation: Taxation and Shared Ideas

This investigation focuses on either extreme of government, local or federal. It may expose (1) the inability of many adults to adequately summarize the many services they receive from government, and (2) The assumption of many people that taxes are unnecessarily heavy, and government is unnecessarily inefficient.

Of course, inefficiencies ARE always present at every level of government (and private enterprise, as well.) In most cases, the perception of the level of inefficiency is at least partly a reflection of the individual's political viewpoint.

Investigation: Shared Ideas in local government

The important Shared Ideas associated with popular elections, and with representative government will be elicited by the first statement. The belief that "responsible people should have significant control of the decisions that affect their lives" is central to democracy, of course.

The second statement is lifted from the "ethics" section of a city charter. The Shared Idea is that representatives must make decisions based entirely on good judgment about what is publicly and economically beneficial and sound practice, uninfluenced by personal benefit.

The third statement, about fences, points to deep assumptions about property ownership and relationships with neighbors. Unfortunately, in a civics class, we

aren't free to use documents from contrasting societies. In our *Introduction to Systems* course (https://www.marionbrady.com/IntroSystems/3Societies.pdf) we use quotations from past Native American societies that illustrate how they find the idea of individual land ownership and boundaries to be appalling. The cultural contrast makes it easier to surface the Shared Idea that's a near-universal assumption in American society. The statement also suggests assumptions about the "proper" appearance of residences, which can raise questions worth discussing about the pressures of conformity in our society.

The final statement suggests shared assumptions about the nature and behavior of young people of various ages. (In some municipalities, the curfew age is 18.)

Investigation: Summarizing ideas of people in your society

Improved status/prestige, increased autonomy, a quest for novel experiences—these are some of the big Shared Ideas that motivate people to spend money on advertised products and services. Other Shared Ideas may be more subtle.

Deep assumptions, such as the view that the future will be better than the present ("progress"), lead to such patterns as investment for future gain. This and similar ideas are so intrinsic that those who hold them tend to assume that everyone everywhere shares those ideas. Traditional societies may believe that the future is simply a circular repetition of the past, or that their society has degraded from a mythical "golden origin."

Identifying these Shared Ideas is difficult if there are no alternatives for contrast. "Tell us what your life will be like in 30 years," followed by, "How does this compare with now?" may be a way to elicit ideas about the future.

Learners may be part of the learning group who come from families with distressed economic conditions; these learners may not share the idea of "progress," but will probably be reticent about expressing their views. Closely allied optimism may change abruptly for many, of course, in times of economic distress.

Political differences: We live in an era of increasingly polarized views. Here's a recent analysis by noted biographic author Walter Isaacson:

> "On most great moral issues, there are two competing perspectives. One emphasizes individual rights, personal liberty, and a deference to personal choice. Stemming from John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers of the seventeenth century, this tradition recognizes that people will have different beliefs about what is good for their lives, and it argues that the state should give them a lot of liberty to make their own choices, as long as they do not harm others.
>
> "The contrasting perspectives are those that view justice and morality through the lens of what is best for the society and perhaps even (in the case of bioengineering and climate policy) the species. Examples include requirements that schoolkids be vaccinated and that people wear masks during an epidemic. The emphasis on societal benefits rather than individual rights can take the form of John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism, which seeks the greatest amount of happiness in a society even if it means trampling on the liberty of some individuals. Or it

can take the form of more complex social contract theories, in which moral obligations arise from the agreements we would make to form the society we want to live in.

"These contrasting perspectives form the most basic political divide of our times. On the one side are those who wish to maximize individual liberty, minimize regulation and taxes, and keep the state out of our lives as much as possible. On the other side are those who wish to promote the common good, create benefits for all of society, minimize the harm that an untrammeled free market can do to our work and environment, and restrict selfish behaviors that might harm the community and the planet."[1]

As we know, elevated emotions on either side are common, and can impede communication and learning. Careful moderating of discussions by those in charge is essential, to help learners maintain mutual respect and openness.

Investigation: Shared Ideas that shaped the U.S. Government

There's meat here for unlimited investigation and discussion.

It's trite but true: When Jefferson penned the phrase, "all men are created equal," he (and his cohorts) didn't mean, "all humans…" Women, Native Americans and slaves weren't included, and slaves turned out to be considered only 3/5ths human by the unamended Constitution. It's almost certain that Jefferson wouldn't have included free people of color as his "created equals," even if they were male.

However, the phrase has resonance; it became and remains an ideal, a value for inspiring the best of our nature and society. It has generated vast and important patterns in our society—voting and representative government, women's suffrage, civil rights, and elimination of most *de jure* segregation in the U. S.

Jefferson's concern in the Declaration was to proclaim that people in what had been the English colonies had rights equal to those of people in England, of course.

"…their Creator…:" Belief in a higher power was and is a major Shared Idea that creates major patterns in American and other societies. Jefferson included it to add strength to his argument; rights given by God shouldn't be taken away by humans.

"Liberty" is a Shared Idea that is nearly universal among humans; virtually all people desire control over their own fate to the greatest extent possible. The form of that desire will vary from society to society, and with age—young people are generally limited in the amount of freedom they are allowed, because their judgment is less developed.

"…the pursuit of happiness…" See https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/06/the-pursuit-of-happiness-what-the-founders-meant-and-didnt/240708/

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[1] Walter Isaacson, *The Code Breaker; Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2021) 356-7.

As we stated in the previous unit, *the overarching concern of the framers of the government was the desire to prevent the abuse of power*. This concern isn't evident in the preamble, but it underlies the remainder of the entire Constitution—a major Shared Idea that led to separation of powers and "checks and balances," as indicated by the brief excerpts from the body of the Constitution. This essential principle for controlling power is the foundation of governmental stability. When it's violated, the nation is threatened and weakened.

Note: The auxiliary materials for our American history course include a unit that investigates the Constitution and the Bill of Rights in more depth, including excerpts of the debates that led up to the drafting. In the teacher's materials, we said, "The subject matter in this unit is unavoidably abstract…" This is the main reason we've not included more of the Constitution in this course—it's hard for learners to grasp much more, and much of what might be learned will be soon forgotten. We feel that an understanding of the most fundamental principles is so important, it's best not to dilute that understanding with excessive detail.

However, that unit is, of course, available for use with advanced classes. See https://www.marionbrady.com/Americanhistory/Constitution.pdf.

(HLB August/September 2019, added taxation investigations May 2021, Isaacson quote (pp 19-20) added April 2022. Minor modifications May 2023.