

# Culture, Identity and Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Keith Adams

This paper addresses two broad interconnected aspects of identity and intercultural communication. The first aspect looks at the nature of culture, in other words, what are some of the main features of this phenomenon we call ‘culture?’ Next, we turn to the members of a culture and examine the influences, cultural and otherwise, that shape our personal identities. In addition, the principles and perspectives raised in the discussion of these two aspects will be applied to interpret the reasons for conflict or misunderstandings in cross-cultural situations and extended to offer possible avenues for resolution of the problems.

## **What is culture ?**

The answer to this seemingly simple question is in fact extremely complex. There is no neat, unified definition because ‘culture’ has so many dimensions. Wintergerst and McVeigh (2011) state that culture is “products, practices and perspectives” (p. 3) of a group of people. Another way they offer of defining culture is “a set of basic ideas, practices and experiences shared by the people in the group” (p. 3).

One classic definition has likened culture to an iceberg (Hall, 1976). The part of an iceberg that is above the water line is easily observed ; how-

ever, the bulk of an iceberg is below the water line and is hidden from our view. In terms of culture, we can talk about visible and invisible aspects of culture.

The former would include such things as styles of dress, greetings, facial expressions and gestures, holiday customs, foods and literature. Although we may only have a superficial understanding or appreciation of these things, we can see them and build upon initial observations fairly quickly. On the other hand, the deeper or invisible aspects of culture take more time and effort to recognize and understand. In this category we encounter issues such as the importance of time, the role of the family, concepts of fairness or beauty, attitudes toward age, ideas about clothing and rules for polite behaviour.

Although developing our skills of recognizing the visible aspects of culture can be very useful, one eventually will want to investigate the deeper levels that shape the visible aspects. We can look at a pair of items related to clothing listed above to illustrate this point

While styles of dress or fashion in a culture are readily visible, they reflect the ideas about clothing a culture holds. In other words, beyond the basic human need of clothing to protect us from the environment, some cultures may view clothing as a means of self-expression and individualism. Other cultures may be quite the opposite where the purpose of clothing is to promote

*Visible*



*Invisible*

modesty or even as a means to protect women from the attentions of men. That is, the clothes people choose to wear reflect some fundamental beliefs, values or attitudes of the members of a culture. The next section of this paper will discuss these fundamental aspects and others in more detail.

### **Beliefs, Values, Norms, Attitudes and Ethnocentrism**

The way we behave and how we interpret the actions of others is driven by these closely related factors to one degree or another. Perhaps the factor with the deepest influence on us as individuals and members of a culture is beliefs, which can be defined as the feelings we have that something is true or is real (exists) (Wintergerst & McVeigh, p. 12). Beliefs are often tied to views of the world or universe, such as a belief in life after death, or that people can change their lives through their own initiative, and can also include superstitions (e.g., It's bad luck to walk under a ladder!).

Values describe our feelings about the importance of something in our daily lives. That is, values are things that people in a culture regard as good or desirable. Some examples of values are freedom of speech, family or group membership or the importance of work.

Whereas beliefs and values may consider philosophic issues, norms, attitudes and ethnocentrism are more focused on our daily lives and relationships with members of our own culture and with those from different cultures. To begin with, let us examine norms, which are simply the rules of behavior members of a culture are expected to follow. Some norms are related to politeness, such as taking shoes off inside a home. Others may be more serious and related to values, such as do not cheat on tests (honesty), or beliefs such

as not eating meat or a specific type of meat.

Attitudes also incorporate our beliefs and values and they are the feelings and emotions, both positive and negative, we have about something. Examples here include some contentious social issues, such as same sex marriage, or definitions of cruelty to animals, but also take in affirmative, self-fulfilling goals, such as the desire to learn another language.

Finally, ethnocentrism is the tendency to see one's own culture as superior to others, either consciously or sub-consciously. In some cases, ethnocentrism may be rather benign and not necessary threatening to others. Examples from the world of sports are Canadians thinking that they are the best ice hockey players in the world or Brazilians feeling the same about their superiority in soccer. While it is generally accepted that both nations are among the elite in the respective sports, apart from bruised egos when their teams are beaten, this type of ethnocentrism, based on an individual's private enthusiasm, rarely sparks serious cultural conflicts.

Unfortunately, there is another dangerous side to ethnocentrism, where feelings of racial, ethnic or religious supremacy lead to tragic conflicts.

Many of the aspects of culture discussed in this section of the paper are illustrated by the short video production entitled *Rainbow Wars*. This video was produced for Expo 86, (World's Fair) in Vancouver, Canada in 1986 and its aim was to address intercultural conflict, resolution, and eventual understanding by means of a simple, fairy-tale like story.

The story tells us of three kingdoms whose cultures were represented by a symbolic colour ; blue, red or gold (yellow). In each of the kingdoms, the people loved their colour and rejected the others. If one of the other colours

somehow appeared in a kingdom, the offending colour was always covered with paint by that kingdom's colour and removed.

We also get a glimpse into the values of the cultures through their attitudes, which allow us to construct a simple profile of the 'personalities' of the people in each society. In the Red Kingdom, red was a trusted colour, while the others were to be feared. This suggests a rather defensive, conservative culture where confrontation was to be avoided as much as possible.

On the other hand, in the Blue Kingdom, blue was considered beautiful and enjoying beauty was a central part of the culture. We see this expressed through fashionable clothes, manners, and the fun-loving nature of the people.

Finally, the members of the Gold Kingdom did not have any particular attachment to yellow in itself, such as trust or admiration, but yellow was merely a symbol of the culture's desire for dominance over others, which naturally resulted in aggressive competition within the society. It is portrayed as a very hierarchical, disciplined and austere culture.

Although the cultures were very different from each other, conflict was not an issue because they lived on different planets and there was no way to travel between the planets. Then one day, a young man from the Gold Kingdom invented a means of travel that ended the isolation of the cultures, and eventually led to the armies of the three kingdoms confronting each other in the Red Kingdom.

The 'weapons' used in the battle between the armies was paint, and the soldiers tried to win the battle by covering the other kingdoms' soldiers in their kingdom's colour. In the heat of battle, the soldiers were astonished to see a new colour – green – created when paint from yellow and red mixed.

The fighting stopped and the soldiers reveled in fascination with the new discovery and began laughing and joking with each other. Thus, we see the first step of intercultural understanding through a shared experience and recognition of a common, although perhaps suppressed, value (delight in diversity).

The truce was not acceptable to the Yellow Queen and she ordered her soldiers to resume the battle ; however, the fighting did not last long as more new colours were created as green mixed to create purple and so on, spawning a river of rainbow colours on the battlefield. Then, her own army deposed the Yellow Queen and the soldiers of the three kingdoms continued enjoying the new colours and the company of their new companions from the other cultures.

Thus, the Rainbow War ended with a resolution of conflicts and ethnocentrism and a new age of tolerance, acceptance, and the benefits of intercultural communication.

### **Personal Identity**

Up to this point, we have looked at ‘culture’ in the context of the traits and influences that characterize a social group, but now I will shift the focus on to the individual members of the group. It is quite clear that we as individuals are greatly influenced by our culture in general, but that is only one factor that shapes our personalities. In addition to our cultural identity, we must also consider the different aspects of our personal identity.

The first point to be made is the distinction between secondary and primary identities. The former is an identity that may change at different times in our lives. Often, this may be the result of growing older and having different responsibilities in life. For example, when one is in university, “university

student” is beyond doubt a central feature of one’s identity. However, that perception will fade rather quickly once one graduates and moves into a career, marriage and family.

Primary identities, however, are more consistent throughout our lives, though some of them can also change due to different circumstances in our lives. Primary identities include personal self-image, gender identity and cultural identity. First let us examine some components of the ‘image’ we form of ourselves (and others).

Age is one element and as mentioned above this is often a factor in the evolution of changes in secondary identities. In this case, however, the perspective is on self-image and whether we consider ourselves (and others) as being young, middle-aged or old. All of these labels are relative and also differ across cultures. For example, let’s consider an individual who is 30 years old. In countries where large portions of the population are under the age of 20, that individual might be considered middle-aged or even old. In other countries with an aging population, that individual may be thought of as ‘relatively young!’ Nevertheless, age is one ingredient that shapes our personal self-image.

Social class is a second factor and this is often based on income, education, family background and even the way we speak. Once again, though economic factors can elevate us to a higher income bracket or push us down the scale, our social class image, or our image of ‘our roots,’ tends to stay with us throughout life.

Finally, being (or not being) religious is a very strong influence on our personal identity. As was touched upon in the discussion of beliefs, this factor

profoundly shapes a person's view of themselves and their place in both the worldly and cosmic realms.

Gender is the next important factor to examine overall personal identity. To begin with, one must draw the distinction between biological sex and gender identity. While the former is literally something we are born with and only changes in very exceptional cases, gender identity comes from within the person and the roles that society expects from men and women. Furthermore, gender roles and "expectations can be learned and unlearned" (Wintergerst & McVeigh, p. 83) and there are significant differences in gender roles across cultures.

Finally, we come to cultural identity and in this sense the focus is on the extent of our attachment to our culture. This attachment is something that we often don't think about when we are in our home culture, but it often comes to the surface when we are abroad.

To conclude this section of the paper, I would like to offer two short case studies adapted from Wintergerst and McVeigh (2011, pp. 194 & 208) to provide a context to illustrate how gender and cultural identity can lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings and then suggest how these issues could be resolved or avoided. The first case takes place in Canada in an adult English as a Second Language (ESL) class.

The students in the class are learning the names of different types of clothing. In an effort to make the lesson more realistic, the teacher has taken the students (three women and three men) to a local department store. First, they spent some time in the men's clothing section and all of the students seemed to be enjoying 'the lesson'. However, when they moved on to



the women's section, one of the men left the group. The teacher was disappointed that he left the group and did not participate.

This is clearly an issue related to gender identity and concepts of what is appropriate behaviour for men and women. Even though the man was part of a group and the sales staff knew the reason the students were in the store, the man felt the situation was totally unacceptable. Asking him to participate not only violated his culture's concept of appropriate behaviour for men but also was likely perceived as a personal insult to his masculinity.

The second case concerns a woman from the United States who started a new job in Paris. The woman spoke French fluently and had long admired French culture, so she was very excited about her new life. However, after a few months she found herself frequently defending the actions and attitudes of her country and she often became quite upset about the criticisms. Most of all, she was very surprised and confused by her own actions and feelings.

In this case, the woman was surprised by her unexpected strength of connection to her home culture. While she did not feel very patriotic about or attached to the United States when she was living there, this connection became evident when she was abroad. Although some members of a culture may have stronger attachments to the culture than others, cultural identity is a significant influence that shapes our personal identity.

Now, how could these two cross-cultural problems be resolved or dealt with by the individuals? The first case is quite difficult to resolve as it touches upon very deep, personal feelings in the man. However, the fault behind this breakdown in cross-cultural understanding cannot be entirely attributed to the man's refusal to adjust to a different perspective in the new culture. Although

the teacher had the best of intentions, she looked at the situation through the lens of her own culture and failed to anticipate how at odds that view may have been to the sensitivities of people from other cultures. At the very least, she should have explained the goals of the lesson in greater detail before entering the department store, including an option of not participating in any part of the lesson if desired. This certainly would have prevented a loss of face for the man and the teacher.

The second case involves an internal, emotional struggle within the woman to identify the source of her confusion about her thoughts and actions. In other words, she may have been suffering from unexpected culture shock. Many studies have pointed out the various stages of culture shock in different models, usually including anywhere from four to six stages. However, they all share a basic framework of an initial period of excitement through the culture shock and adjustment stages to a final acceptance of oneself within the new culture (Schneider & Barsoux, 2003, p. 188).

Although the woman was very positively disposed to French culture and did not have a language barrier to overcome, she may have been experiencing some degree of homesickness or a subtle sense of losing her cultural identity that she did not anticipate. Such feelings may be quite intense for some people, but the fact that the woman could effectively function within the new culture may have made her feelings and reactions even more puzzling.

The first key to resolving her problem is being aware that culture shock affects most people to one degree or another and that it is a very natural reaction. In addition, one needs to remember that accepting a new culture does not mean a rejection of one's original culture. The two can exist in harmony so

that an individual benefits from both.

### Conclusion

In this paper we have looked at different aspects of culture and personal identity in the context of cross-cultural communication. Although we have just ‘touched the tip of the iceberg’ of this complex field of study, it is hoped that the fundamental elements discussed here can provide a useful platform for future readings and investigations into this fascinating subject.

### References

- Hall, E. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Garden City, NY. Garden Press.
- BRC Imagination Arts (Producer). (2003). *Rainbow War* [DVD]. Available from <http://www.pyramid.com/homepage/>
- Schneider, S. & Barsou, J-L. (2003). *Managing Across Cultures*. Prentice Hall/Financial Times. Retrieved from [http://www.northeastern.edu/nuin/pdf/gre\\_stages\\_culture\\_shock.pdf](http://www.northeastern.edu/nuin/pdf/gre_stages_culture_shock.pdf)
- Wintergerst, A. & McVeigh, J. (2011). *Tips for Teaching Culture : Practical Approaches to Intercultural Communication*. White Plains, NY. Pearson Education.