
UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY – A StudentAffairs.com Shortcourse

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LESSON 3: What is culture – Your, Mine and Ours

Culture literally has dozens of definitions. The most general description is that culture is the human part of the environment, the history, traditions, belief systems, language and rituals of a group of people who have a long-standing common experience.

Traditionally their common experience has occurred in the same geographic location. That is, culture typically refers to a group of people who have lived together for a long time. Some common ideas about culture include:

- Culture includes all aspects of human life and is a process by which groups impose order on and meaning of their life experience.
(Erchak, 1992)
- Culture is verbal, visual, rhythmic, spatial, temporal and symbolic (Agar, 1994). It involves communication between all the senses in patterns that are recognizable even though members of any given culture may not be able to express an awareness of the patterns to which they are responding. For example, individuals recognize intonation and speech patterns which are their native patterns.
We call these patterns “accents.”
- The most effective method for understanding one’s own culture is to compare it to other cultures. This process forces a person to perceive the various systems embedded in different cultures and to use this understanding of systems which order and impose meaning, to revisit his or her own cultural system.
- Members of a specific culture typically do not experience their culture as a human constructed system. The experience their culture as “the way things are and the way things should be”. This phenomenon is generally referred to as ethnocentrism.

There are two important dimensions on which all cultures can be described: the individualism /collectivism continuum and the high context/low context continuum.

Cultures which value individualism give people maximum opportunity for self-determination and autonomy. They value freedom of choice, place commitment to autonomy over commitment to family and prize individual achievement. They minimize the importance of informal interpersonal obligations.

Collectivist cultures value the welfare of the group over the autonomy of the individual. Obligations to family take precedence over all other commitments. Roles and social obligations are more important than personal desires. Group achievement and membership is highly prized.

High context cultures tend to be homogeneous, The culture is filled with subtle cues about appropriate behavior which all members understand because they have had similar kinds of upbringing. Verbal communication is not as significant as nonverbal communication. "Everybody" knows what is expected of them in social situations and understands the rules of polite behavior.

Low context cultures tend to be heterogeneous. Because there is less common understanding about what is expected of people, what words and gestures mean and the relative importance of the individual or the group in any particular situation, low context cultures tend to value specific verbal communication. Rules are explicit. When conflicts occur, legal resolutions tend to be used rather than informal understandings. The dominant culture in the United States tends to be individualistic and low context.

Historically cultures have taken long periods of time to develop their common understandings, behaviors, values and beliefs. Recently transitory cultures have begun to develop quickly when a group shares a common experience and needs to develop some kind of cohesion in order to function effectively in a specific environment.

For example, sports teams tend to develop cultures related to interpersonal relationships, rituals for celebrating victory or managing defeat, identifying and following the intergroup leaders and the coaches and so forth.

Schools and individual classrooms within them tend to develop a culture over the course of the school year shaped by the expectations of the teacher and the reactions of the students to his or her methods and expectations.

Gay/lesbian/bisexual culture in the United States has developed symbols, nonverbal cues, venues for socializing and helping each other and a common language to discuss the problems which are unique to that group. Many of these cultural attributes have developed in response to the need to hide sexual orientation for reasons of personal safety, job security or social ostracism, a common experience for gay, lesbian and bisexual persons in the U.S.

How do you know when you are operating in a culture which is not your primary system?

1. Nobody laughs at your jokes and you don't understand other folks' sense of humor.
2. You think you're using good manners but other people think you're rude or you don't understand their behavior or expectations of you.
3. People use idiomatic expressions that don't make sense to you.
4. You begin to get uncomfortable because you don't know how to act (culture shock) and nobody is coaching you.

EXERCISES

1. Go to a place where people from different cultural groups gather. Observe people who seem to be different from your cultural group. Look for the differences in
 - a) tone of voice and loudness of speech
 - b) distance people take when speaking with each other
 - c) gender mixing – are men and women talking to each other, touching each other, avoiding each other
 - d) Non-verbal behavior – hand gestures, facial gestures, body movements, eye contact

Ask yourself how the people you are observing are similar to and different from the behavior you expect from people you consider members of your cultural group.

2. Find a person from another country and ask them what they like about Americans and what they find hard to deal with. Get as specific as you can.

Pay attention to your own feelings as you hear feedback about your cultural group. The dominant culture in the United States tends not to value difference and often finds a need to rank – to decide which way is better.

If you are a member of this culture, how do you react to a discussion of difference?

REFERENCES

Agar, M. (1994) Culture Shock: Understanding the Language of Conversation. New York: Morrow

Erchack, G. (1992) The Anthropology of Self and Mind. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press

Thanks for reading ! The next lesson, “Please Speak Up – Variations in Verbal Communications,” will be delivered on December 8

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