

*Lecture 1: An
Introduction to Culture*

- **Communicating with strangers is more difficult. If the strangers come from our own culture, we can at least base our messages on shared attitudes, beliefs, and life experiences; but if the strangers are from another culture, we may be at a loss.**
- **In cross-cultural settings even simple interactions can become complex. Imagine for a moment that you're working in Morocco. A colleague has invited you to his family home for dinner, but he is a little vague about when dinner will be served, and you have to ask several times before fixing the time. That evening, when you enter your host's home, his wife is nowhere to be seen, and when you ask when she'll be joining you, the host looks flustered and says that she's busy in the kitchen. When his little boy enters, you remark on how cute and clever the child is, but rather than being pleased, your Moroccan colleague looks upset. Before dinner is served, you politely ask to go to the washroom to wash up. During the meal you do your best to hold up your end of the conversation, but it's hard going. Finally, after tea and sweet, you thank the host and politely leave. You have a feeling the dinner party wasn't a success, but you don't really know what went wrong.**

- Everything you did in this social situation was **inappropriate**.

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- In Morocco an invitation to dinner is actually an invitation to come and spend time. At some point food will be served, but what's important is being together. Therefore, discussing the specific time you should come to dinner is like asking your host how long he wants you around, and it also implies that your major concern is to be fed. Your questions about his wife and your compliments to his son were similarly inappropriate. It is not customary for a Moroccan wife to eat with guests or even to be introduced, and praising a child is considered unlucky because it may alert evil spirits. Washing up in the washroom was also impolite. If you'd waited, your host would have arranged for water to be brought in to you in an expensive decorative basin that would have shown his good taste as well as his concern for your comfort. Finally, it was rude to carry on a conversation during dinner. Talking interferes with the enjoyment of the meal and can be interpreted as a slight against the food.

- An isolated incident such as this is not terribly serious.
- You can imagine how they might seriously affect complicated business or diplomatic relations.
- Although cultural differences can sometimes cause misunderstandings, intercultural communication need not be doomed to failure. As Harry Hoijer has remarked, “No culture is wholly isolated, self-contained, and unique. There are important resemblances between all known cultures . . . Intercultural communication, however wide the differences between cultures may be, is not impossible. It is simply more or less difficult . . .” Intercultural communication is possible because people are not “helplessly suspended in their cultures.” developing an openness to new ideas and a willingness to listen and to observe, we can surmount the difficulties inherent in intercultural interaction.

What is culture?

- It is the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.
- Culture, of course, is a very broad term, used in various ways, so often that it has come to mean anything and everything to some people.
- The word “culture” is from the Latin “*cultura*,” which is from the verb *colere*, meaning “to till” (as in soil or land). The word shares etymology with such modern English words as agriculture, cultivate, and colony.
- To till and cultivate the soil is to stimulate its growth.
- It is a process that irrevocably alters the soil’s present form in order to make it achieve a certain potential.
- One of the dictionary definitions of culture is “the cultivation of intellectual/moral faculties” - a process of “civilizing.”
- Culture shares the same root as the word *colony*. The process of colonization (a violent process of uprooting societies and forcing them to adopt new modes of being in the world) was always portrayed by the colonizers as something being done for the good of its victims. Civilizing them, raising their moral or intellectual capacity to the level of the colonizer.

- **Culture must be understood as a *communicative* process. It inevitably involves the use of symbols to shape social reality. Edward T. Hall, the “father” of intercultural communication studies, points this out in what is known as “Hall’s identity”: “Culture is communication and communication is culture.”**

- **Different Definitions of Culture**

- **1. Anthropological definition**

Clifford Geertz: “an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life.”

- **2. Psychological definition**

Geert Hofstede: “a programming of the mind” - a set of patterns of thinking that you learn early on and carry with you in your head.

- **3. Ethnographic definition**

Gerry Philipsen: “a socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules.”

• **4. Intercultural Communication Studies definition**

- This one comes from Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starosta: “a negotiated set of shared symbolic systems that guide individuals’ behaviors and incline them to function as a group.”
- *negotiated*: brings in the cultural studies notion of culture as a zone of contestation. Symbols are not self-evident; they can only make meaning within particular contexts, and those meanings are negotiated or struggled over.
- *shared symbolic systems*: the symbolic process depends on intersubjective agreement. A decision is made to participate in the process of meaning making.
- *guide behavior*: culture is persuasive. It doesn’t literally program us, but it does significantly influence our behavior.
- *function as a group*: people form cultural groups - note the dynamic of identity and difference at work when this occurs; to form one group and identify with some is always to exclude others and differentiate oneself from them.

- **Functions of Culture**

1. to provide the *context* for 3 aspects of human society: the linguistic, the physical, and the psychological
2. 2. Culture provides the stability and structure necessary for a group to maintain a group identity.

- **Characteristics of Culture**

1. Culture is holistic: a complex whole that is not the sum of its parts. You might, for example, analyze a particular cultural belief or a kinship system as a specific cultural formation, but all of the aspects of culture are interrelated.

- Culture affects language, religion, basic worldview, education, organization, technology, politics, and law, and all of these factors affect one another.

2. Culture is learned: It is not inborn or biological. Americans act like other Americans not because we are innately predisposed to do so, but because we learn to do so. Much of our early training is an attempt to make us fit cultural patterns. We may even be imprisoned or labeled insane for acting in ways that would be perfectly acceptable in other cultures.

3. Culture is shared: Another important characteristic of culture is that it is shared. Cultures are group understandings rather than individual ones, and belonging to a culture means acting according to group norms.

- Being like others provides security, perhaps because we equate being alike with being right and being different with being wrong. Because cultures are shared, we are not entirely free to act as we wish. Indeed, we spend a good deal of time proving who we are and living up to the expectations of others.

- People who frequently move between cultures are often more sensitive to the fact that culture is shared.

- Lawrence Wieder and Steven Pratt give an interesting example of the importance of shared cultural identity and the difficulties it presents for minority group members. In an article entitled “On Being a Recognizable Indian Among Indians,” Wieder and Pratt discuss ways in which Native Americans of the Osage people let one another know that they are “real Indians” rather than “White Indians.”

- **One of the primary differences between the communication styles of European Americans and Native Americans is the value the latter place on being silent. “When real Indians who are strangers to one another pass each other in a public place, wait in line, occupy adjoining seats, and so forth, they take it that it is proper to remain silent and to not initiate conversation.” Once Native Americans do engage in conversation with one another, they take on substantial obligations, among them the necessity of interacting whenever their paths cross. For students and businesspeople, this obligation may be problematic, for it takes precedence over attending class or keeping appointments.**
- **Talking like a “real Indian” also means being modest and not showing oneself to be more knowledgeable than other Native Americans. Being asked by a European-American teacher to volunteer information in a group discussion where other Native Americans are present puts a well informed Native-American student in a difficult bind. To avoid appearing arrogant, he or she may simply refuse to participate.**

- The desire to avoid seeming immodest occurs in public speaking situations as well, where speaking is reserved for tribal elders. Only certain individuals are entitled to speak, and they often speak for someone else rather than for themselves. It is customary to begin a speech with a disclaimer such as “I really don’t feel that I am qualified to express [the wishes of the people I am speaking for] but I’m going to do the best I can, so please bear with me.”
- Compare this custom to the rule taught by most European-American communication teachers that a speaker should build his or her credibility at the beginning of speech and you will see how communication styles across cultures can conflict.

4. Culture is dynamic: It is constantly changing over time, not fixed or static. As economic conditions change, as new technologies are developed, and as cultural contact increases, old ways of doing things change, people must learn new things and behaviors. This important fact is one reason why memorizing list of do’s and don’ts is just not the right way to prepare for intercultural contact. A better way to prepare for intercultural communication is to become sensitive to the kinds of differences that occur between cultures and to develop the ability to learn by observation.

- One example of such a change is the status of women in United States culture. After World War II, women began to work outside the home and started to share the previously male role of family provider. At the same time, family roles shifted to accommodate the working wife and mother, and men had to assume more responsibility for maintaining the home, like helping to cook, clean, and care for children.