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SOME CULTURAL CONCEPTS

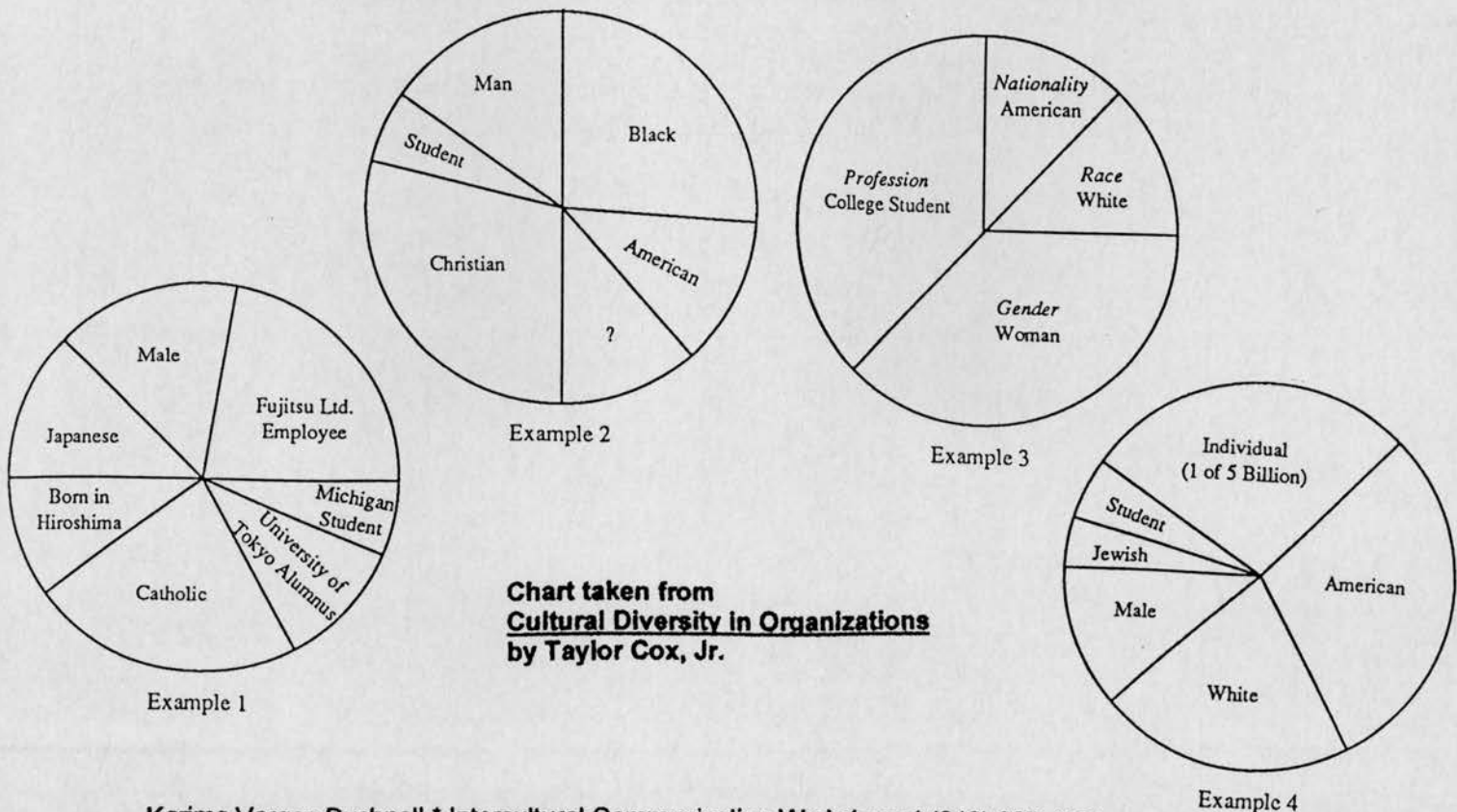
CULTURE – a group of people who share common values, beliefs, behaviors and assumptions—a common worldview and common ways of acting. The group may be large or small, and may be united by nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, ability, interests or other attributes. (There are over 150 definitions of culture currently in use by scholars.)

NORMS – ways of behaving that are considered normal and central: what 'everybody does'. Those who violate group *norms* are condemned as 'mad or bad', or at least strange, not part of the approved in-group. They are seen as occupying, not the center, but the outside edges, the 'fringe'.

VALUES – beliefs about right and wrong, the nature of life, what people should desire, and how they should make decisions. Those who express disagreement with group *values* are treated the same ways as those who violate *norms*.

CULTURE CLASH – Problems can arise when people or groups with different norms and values try to interact. They are playing different games with different sets of rules, and are likely to judge each other negatively. They may conceal their negative reaction through good manners, but this may drive the problem underground, to emerge in subtle ways later.

IDENTITY STRUCTURE – (or Identity Salience Hierarchy). A list or visual representation of the cultural identities *within one person* and their relative importance to that person. Cultural diversity is inside as well as outside.



**Who's Multicultural?
(More of Us than You Might Think)**

Fill in the blanks with one word or a short phrase. Do them one by one, and make each one different.

1. I am a _____.
2. I am a _____.
3. I am a _____.
4. I am a _____.
5. I am a _____.
6. I am a _____.

Now arrange them in order of their importance to you.

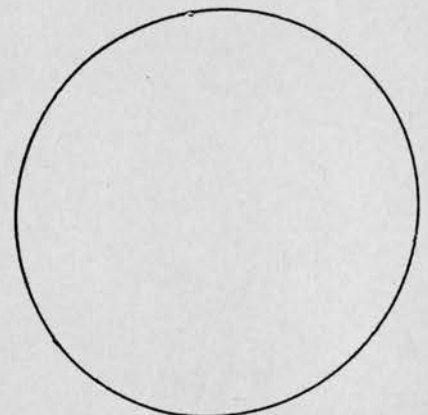
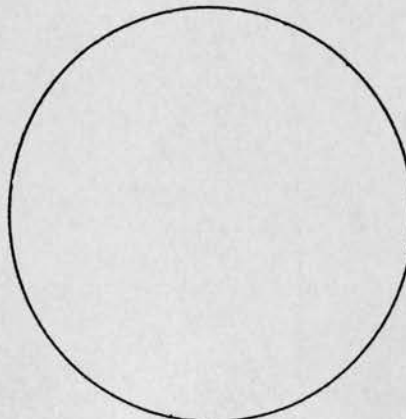
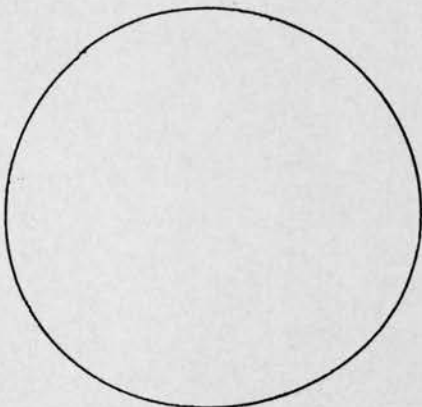
- | | |
|----|----|
| 1. | 4. |
| 2. | 5. |
| 3. | 6. |

Finally, fill in the pies with your identities, showing their relative importance in different situations. (Make each slice as big or small as you like.)

AT HOME

AT WORK OR SCHOOL

OTHER



Some General Principles of Communicating Across Cultures

1. Sometimes we think of culture in terms of things like music and dance, colorful costumes, and distinctive foods. While these are important, the far greater part of culture is hidden, affecting everything about how people view the world, how they act, and what they believe in. Culture includes geography, history, language, religion and science, but it also includes values, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions and context. From these influences come the particular behavior we attribute to any given culture. An individual may not be aware that these influences are at work, shaping him or her.

2. A culture is a grouping, large or small, where there are shared behaviors, values, and assumptions. Cultural groupings are based on different factors such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, ability, shared interests, and membership in business, communal, or family networks.

Sometimes people help choose and define their own cultural affiliations, and they sometimes move in and out of cultures, or participate in several of them at once.

Also, cultures themselves do not stand still. While there may be time-honored values and behaviors, things may change in reaction to outside influences or internal pressures.

3. When people who have learned opposing definitions of what is 'polite' or 'normal' behavior interact, misunderstandings result. Suppose I have been taught to talk with a lot of energy, expression and enthusiasm, gesturing with my hands. Nobody told me to do this, but most people around me always did it.

Now suppose *you* have been taught to stand quietly with your hands at your sides, listen respectfully and carefully, and express yourself very subtly, in little ways. It's quite possible that you'll think I'm rude, noisy, insensitive—maybe even angry (because I'm loud) or stupid (because I don't notice the small signals you're giving me.)

On the other hand, I may think you're cold, boring, only half alive—maybe even angry (because you seem so withdrawn) or stupid (because you don't seem able to express yourself.)

If I've been taught it's respectful to modestly look down and you've been taught it's honest to look people in the eye, you'll think I'm sneaky and evasive, and I'll think you're aggressive and rude. Even if we're both good people with good intentions, these kinds of misunderstandings make working together very difficult.

4. Not only ways of behaving, but goals and values vary from culture to culture. According to the modern, 'mainstream' values many are taught at home or school, people should help themselves, control their time, see change as positive, compete, be individualistic, look toward the future, be informal, and be practical and efficient.

Other world cultures, and many cultures in the U.S., teach otherwise. We should depend on family and friends and help them in turn, give more importance to people and what's actually going on than to following a strict schedule, honor our rich traditions (look to the past), work together cooperatively, be ceremonious and polite, and center on the spiritual and the idea.

These differences create the same kinds of problems as the differences in manners. Thus one group might look down on an other as lazy, dependant, and impractical, while to the others they may seem soulless and machine-like, without sensitivity to beauty or meaning, without concern for others.

5. In many situations, injustice, oppression and bigotry are powerful forces which determine systems, attitudes and outcomes. These things are real; they range from a lynching to a sneer, from denial of education, housing and good jobs to an unspoken judgment that the other person isn't quite a full human being. These things need to be exposed and challenged, but removing the cultural awareness and communication problems makes it easier to see what is real evil and what is only misunderstanding.

7. There's no magic pill to make intercultural communication perfect. People are complex, and each is individual as well as cultural. Here are some things you can try: **A) Take time;** avoid jumping to the conclusion that someone is ignorant or ill-intentioned. Behavior or ideas that seem odd to you may be cultural. **B) Get in tune** with the other person or group. Watch what they do, and see if you can mirror their behavior subtly and come into harmony with it. **C) Ask.** Try asking politely about what you don't understand. **D) Ask around.** If asking directly doesn't feel comfortable, try one of the many ethnic associations. Part of their purpose is to provide information about their communities. Consult the phonebook, or the Ethnic Resources Directory of the International Institute of Minnesota. **E) Investigate** books and films created by the people you're interested in.

People can rise above cultural misunderstandings to form wonderful, deep friendships and working or family relationships, both by avoiding the intercultural traps shown above and by finding common goals. In India, Hindu and Muslim musicians (whose cultures are often embattled) have played wonderful music together and mixed freely, joined by their skill and love of music. Goals like saving the environment, honoring the Divine, and bringing peace and justice for all our children can bring us together; but it helps to know where the pitfalls are.

DIGGING INTO CULTURE: WHAT'S DOWN THERE, ANYWAY?

There is certainly more general awareness of cultural differences than there was even a few years ago. Still, many people think of culture as a kind of superficial gloss over basically similar individuals, as though identical dolls were made in different colors and dressed in different clothes.

A friend of mine, confronted with a tee shirt that said, "Love sees no color," responded by saying, "Love sees *all* colors." At any diversity workshop, it's likely that someone will say, "I don't care what color or religion people are. I just treat everyone as an individual."

What's wrong with this attitude? In one sense, nothing. It's an attempt to treat everyone fairly and judge people on their own merits, not on preconceptions or stereotypes. But it can be subtly insulting, if it assumes that the other person's difference from oneself is a *bad* thing to be politely ignored. Also, the concept of individuality itself is a western cultural concept. Consider this:

"When confronted with people who do not locate the self within the individual, most Americans are bewildered. That the self can be centered in a role or a grouping of some sort is to them a culturally preposterous idea. American foreign student advisors may display impatience with Chinese and other Asian students whose actions are guided by family considerations, especially when these students make career and life decisions that are detrimental to themselves but in compliance with the desires of others in their identity network. The advisors may be impelled to counsel them on the virtues of individuality—on watching out for themselves. To the Asian students, the family members *are* themselves."

American Cultural Patterns, Steward and Bennett

In the movie *Milo and Otis*, the cat asked the dog, "But deep down inside, we're all cats, right?" To which the dog replied firmly, "No. Deep down inside—I'm a dog." Too often, "We're all human, right?" means, "We're all white, middle class, secular or Protestant U.S. Americans, right?" This becomes an invisible norm, and people are ranked by how far they fall from the center of that norm. Their *own* cultural norms, which may be equally valid and beautiful, are ignored.

Culture determines the way people structure their reality. As in the old example, Inuit (Eskimos) and skiers see many types of snow. Others less interested see only "snow." Where inland people may see only water, some Pacific Islanders see current patterns which give definite information. Thousands of stimuli reach us every second. We can't attend to them all, so unconscious mental processes filter out the unimportant things. ***But what is important and what is unimportant varies drastically from culture to culture.*** My foreground may be your background. My "trivia" may be your "matter of life and death."

High and Low Context Cultures

Social scientists sometimes divide cultures into **high context** and **low context**. In low context cultures, most of the communication is stated explicitly, spelled out. In high context ones, most of the information is in the situation, the environment, and the people involved. Some world cultures in order from highest to lowest context: Japanese, Arab, Greek, Spanish, Italian, English, French, European-American, Scandinavian, German, German-Swiss.

In low context cultures the main responsibility for good communication is on the speaker or writer, to communicate clearly and persuasively. In high context cultures, the main responsibility is on the listener, to listen subtly and draw meaning from small clues and nuances, and from the situation as a whole. This is like a meeting of a person with a soft voice and acute hearing with a person who speaks loudly and clearly, but is partially deaf. The Japanese (or Native-American) is apt to find the Black or White American aggressive and unaware of subtleties, while the American may find the Japanese person, as in the old cliché, "inscrutable." Mutual stereotyping is a likely result.

Action Chains

Different types of interactions contain sets of steps embodied in unwritten rules which 'everybody knows'. Unfortunately, these do not translate across cultures.

One example comes from a story told about American GIs and British girls during World War II. The girls, from their experience of current British cultural rules, saw the kiss as several steps closer to actual sexual activity than did the soldiers. This resulted in misunderstandings for which each group blamed the other. The girl thought the boy "fresh" (because he tried to kiss her too soon) and the boy thought the girl "fast" (because if he *did* manage to kiss her, there was little more resistance).

Another example: According to sociologist Edward T. Hall,

"In Anglo-American disputes, one progresses by steps and stages—from subtle innuendo and coolness (one must be polite) to messages via a third party, to verbal confrontation, then legal action, and finally force—if nothing else has worked and the law is on your side. For Spanish-Americans, another system is used."

Hall says the Spanish-American action chain in a dispute starts with brooding and proceeds directly to some show of strength. The law courts are much further down the chain. But this show of strength, intended as a communication, is interpreted by Anglos as the final step in communication *breakdown*, as it would be in the Anglo chain. Thus the Anglos respond as to a crisis, though probably no crisis exists.

These concepts and stories offer just a glimpse behind the curtain of culture. Their lesson: Our common humanity is shaped and molded into different forms by our cultures. Love sees all colors.

Community Profiles

The Hmong (pronounced "Mong")

The Hmong are an ancient, agrarian people who gradually migrated down from Central Asia into Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Burma. After suffering great losses aiding the CIA's "secret war" in Laos, over 150,000 refugees fled reprisals, coming to the U.S. According to a local Hmong community representative, the Hmong lost one third of their men fighting for the U.S. cause.

Minnesota and California are the largest Hmong states. Previously an oral culture, Hmong traditionally passed on wisdom through folk songs and embroidery ("flower cloth"). Education is highly valued, as is collective decision-making.

Hmong society is made up of large clans who share a last name and are deeply bonded as family. Traditionally, clans are headed by elder males, and gender roles are strongly differentiated. Children are loved and valued, and they care for parents in old age or illness. Currently, the stresses of acculturation are causing family upheavals which manifest as divorce, domestic violence, and breakdown of parent/child relationships.

The many strong Hmong community organizations helping Hmong in Minnesota include the Hmong-American Partnership, Lao Family Community, Women's Association of Hmong and Lao, and the Association for Advancement of Hmong Women. Burgeoning Hmong media include two community newspapers, a television program and a radio program.

Adapted and condensed by from the *Hmong Community Profile*, Center for Cross Cultural Health, located on the U of M campus, (612) 624-0996

The Somalis

Springing from the Horn of Africa, Somalis are a monocultural people with one ethnic group, one language and one religion. Traditional occupations are herding (camels, sheep, cows), small industries, and trade. Through sea trade they have a history of contact with other cultures.

The ongoing civil war in Somalia relates to colonial divisions between British and Italian areas, as well as weapons and confusion left over from the Cold War. Refugees have fled to many countries, including the U.S, often becoming separated from family members.

With an estimated 18,000-20,000 Somalis, Minnesota is the largest Somali state. Like other refugee groups, the Somalis have been severely traumatized, and children in refugee camps may have missed years of education.

Somalis are Sunni Muslims, many very religious and some less so; this is an individual choice. Their religion requires that unrelated men and women do not touch, and that men and women dress modestly. Somalis ask to be judged by their actions, not their clothes. As observant Muslims, they pray five times a day and abstain from pork, alcohol and drugs.

Somalis are an expressive, friendly people who have strong clan and family loyalties and love children. They are also independent, energetic entrepreneurs who have started 62 businesses in Minnesota. Many strong community organizations exist in Minnesota, including the Somali Community of Minnesota and the Federation of Somali Communities. Somali media offerings include three television and three radio programs, two journals, and three newsletters.

Sources: Numerous Somali individuals and organizations encountered by Karima Bushnell while conducting the *Immigrant and Indigenous Communities Project*, 1998-99.