

**TUTORIAL**  
**4.6**

# Understanding Culture

This tutorial continues with the theme of 'culture' by examining how we learn cultural behaviours and how we interpret things differently depending on our culture.

## Enculturation

How do we learn all the different behaviors that are regarded as right and wrong in our society? This process, known as 'enculturation' or 'cultural conditioning', is something that is universal to all cultures. In every culture people must learn to function together effectively in order to survive, and to seek to live a comfortable, profitable existence together. People develop rules for functioning together, some of these rules are universal and others vary from culture to culture. These rules of behaviour are passed on from generation to generation, so that people learn or acquire them throughout their lives. There are many specific behaviours that people learn or acquire, and they vary greatly from group to group.

We noted in the last tutorial that behavior is always linked to an underlying value or belief. So when people are learning cultural behaviours, they are also learning and internalising the values and beliefs behind those behaviours. When you understand how this process works, you can then understand how two people from different cultures can behave in radically different ways and both be completely convinced they are right. This can be one of the most helpful things to learn if you intend to live and work effectively in another culture.

## How do people acquire their culture?

Enculturation happens mostly during early childhood. But adults also continue to be culturally conditioned as they learn new behaviours, or refine existing behaviors, throughout their life.

There are differences between adult and childhood cultural conditioning. During childhood, infants and young children learn the basic activities of life

such as eating, walking, talking, dressing, bathing, etc. But during adulthood, people learn new, more complex behaviours or new ways to perform already conditioned behaviours. For example, an adult might learn to eat with chopsticks rather than with a knife and fork, or they might learn to be less direct in the way they communicate in certain situations.

Though the steps are the same in each case, one difference in adult enculturation - especially when an adult moves from one culture to a new one - is that it often requires *unlearning* or *unacquiring* behaviour that was already acquired during childhood conditioning. This process for adults can take longer and be more difficult.

Here are five steps that have been identified in the process of cultural conditioning:

1. *Observation/Instruction*: At this stage, you are only beginning to become aware of a particular behavior but have not yet tried to do it yourself. For example - eating with chopsticks: you may have watched people doing it, or someone may have told you how to do it.
2. *Imitation*: Now you actually try to carry out the activity: you sit down at a table and begin eating with chopsticks (or trying to). At this stage, it is awkward for you, and you're trying not to make mistakes. You may have difficulty concentrating on anything else, because all your attention is focused on eating.
3. *Reinforcement*: As you eat, people encourage you when you do it right and correct you when you are wrong. You have a chance to put into practice what they tell you and you try to improve. You will also be picking up some of the associated values with this behaviour - such as how important it is for people to see that you to learn to eat 'properly'.
4. *Internalisation*: Without needing much reinforcement, over time and with practice, you now know how to eat with chopsticks. You will still have to pay attention to what you're doing, but not as much as during stages 2 and 3. You begin to feel like you fit in better in social situations that involve eating, and the attention isn't so much on you learning this skill.
5. *Spontaneous Manifestation*: Now you're able to eat 'in the right way' without paying any conscious attention to what you're doing. It comes naturally: as you eat, you're aware of other things, not the act of eating. You have expressed some of your personal values to your local friends; that it is important for you to become a real part of you new community, that you want to learn, that you enjoy and respect their culture.

## **It's all in the way that you see it**

We all observe reality - see things as they are - but then our minds interpret what our eyes see, and give it meaning. The mind of a person from one culture

is going to be different in many ways from the mind of a person from another culture, so their interpretation of what they are seeing - the meaning that they derive from the same reality - is going to be different. This is one of the most fundamental of all cross-cultural problems: the fact that two people look upon the same reality, the same example of behaviour, and 'see' two entirely different things. So any behaviour in a cross-cultural situation should be interpreted in two ways:

- the meaning given to it by the person who *does* the action, and
- the meaning given to it by the person who *observes* the action

When these two meanings are the same, then we can say that the cross-cultural communication has been successful - because the meaning that was intended by the doer, is the one that was understood by the observer. This of course also applies for spoken communication cross-culturally, but we will talk about that more later. For now, we will just think about behaviours.

## Different Interpretations

To help you to think about the real-life implications of what we have been discussing, here are a few examples of cultural differences in the interpretation of the same behaviours. You have probably come into contact with people of other cultures and may have experienced some cultural misunderstandings yourself. These examples are all from real situations that my family and I have experienced in a variety of cultures around the world.

Read the description of the behaviour, and then think about how you would have interpreted it in terms of your own cultural values, beliefs, or perception. Then read what our interpretation was at the time. Finally read the description of the intended meaning of the person who did the behaviour. The point here is that until you take time to learn to understand a culture so that you can correctly interpret the intended meaning, misunderstandings are inevitable. Learning culture to that level takes time and effort.

<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>Our interpretation</b>	<b>Intended meaning</b>
Two young women at an airport information desk looked away and didn't smile or answer my polite enquiry for directions.	For some reason they have decided to be rude. Maybe there's something about me they don't like? What did I do wrong?	They didn't speak any English so they were trying to manage an awkward situation. They wanted to 'save face' for everyone involved.
A puppy ran up to us trying to be friendly as we were sitting in a village. The people we were visiting yelled and threw stones at	How could they be so cruel?! We would never treat dogs that way!	The local dogs have rabies and other diseases, so our hosts were protecting us.

it until it ran away.

<p>We were having a friendly conversation with a guest-house manager at his front desk when an older man walked in and stood in front of us, taking the manager's attention and interrupting our conversation.</p>	<p>The older man must be a very rude person - maybe for some reason he doesn't like Westerners.</p>	<p>The older gentleman was a local government official who had supported the guest house owners over the years and so was entitled to a 'special relationship'. As an older man, and an official, he was entitled to great respect. We were just ordinary guests.</p>
<p>My husband accidentally bumped his arm on the fur hat of an older man on a crowded bus. Local friends immediately told him to apologize profusely and humbly to the older man.</p>	<p>It seemed like an over reaction - it's only a hat after all, and it was just a very slight bump. There must be something we don't understand here.</p>	<p>It is extremely offensive to show disrespect by touching the head of another person - especially an older man. Local people would be very careful not to let this happen.</p>
<p>We had travelled all day by motorcycle to visit a village and we were hungry. When we arrived we spent over an hour 'chatting' with our hosts before being offered any food.</p>	<p>This seemed inconsiderate to us because they knew we had travelled all day.</p>	<p>The interpersonal relationship was the priority and they were showing that was the most important thing to them. To serve food immediately would have been disrespectful to us.</p>
<p>A meeting was arranged for a certain time, but two local men were over an hour late. When they arrived they said they had been visiting someone else first.</p>	<p>We felt 'let down' and that they had been disrespectful of our meeting. We wondered if they felt negatively about our relationship in some way and were trying to show us that.</p>	<p>They do not have the same view of time as us. The personal relationship with the other people had to be preserved and everyone understands that sometimes you are just late - it isn't a big deal and doesn't mean anything.</p>
<p>A local family were hiking with us on a trail. The woman was carrying a very heavy load on her head and had a baby strapped to her back, while also taking care of another younger child. Her husband was walking in front of her and was only carrying a knife.</p>	<p>How about helping your wife!? You should be ashamed of letting her do all the hard work!</p>	<p>The woman is proud of her strength and ability to work hard. She is demonstrating that she is a 'good wife'. Her husband is proud of her and wouldn't interfere with her carrying out her role.</p>



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Understanding Culture*

1. This tutorial discusses how people from different cultures see things from a different point of view. Can you identify some cultural groups within the wider society in which you live - in other words, sub-groups within your country's culture - who might interpret things quite differently from you?
2. Think about some of the subgroups you identified in the question above that exist within your country's culture. How do you think their particular culture was acquired - and why do you think individuals in that particular group have acquired different cultural characteristics from those around them?



## ACTIVITIES

### *Understanding Culture*

1. Try to take note of any instances that you observe this week of misinterpretation of behaviour. What were the underlying reasons for the communication breakdown?
2. Read the definitions of culture given in the following short quotations. Then note - in around eight phrases - any idea, concept, or key word that is repeated more than once. Assemble these recurring phrases to give you a good working definition of culture. Because, while the concept of 'culture' has many definitions, most observers agree on certain fundamental characteristics.

*Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another.*

- Geert Hofstede

*Culture is the shared set of assumptions, values, and beliefs of a group of people by which they organize their common life.*

- Gary Wederspahn

*Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting. The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values.*

- Clyde Kluckhohn

*Culture consists of concepts, values, and assumptions about life that guide behaviour and are widely shared by people....[These] are transmitted generation to generation, rarely with explicit instructions, by parents...and other respected elders.*

- Richard Brislin & Tomoko Yoshida

*Culture is the outward expression of a unifying and consistent vision brought by a particular community to its confrontation with such core issues as the origins of the cosmos, the harsh unpredictability of the natural environment, the nature of society, and humankind's place in the order of things.*

- Edward Hall

*Culture is an integrated system of learned behaviour patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given society. Culture refers to the total way of life for a particular group of people. It includes [what] a group of people thinks, says, does and makes—its customs, language, material artifacts and shared systems of attitudes and feelings.*

- Robert Kohls