

TUTORIAL
4.8

Discovering your own culture

This tutorial attempts to help you to look at the culture that you have grown up with in a more objective way, particularly focusing on the underlying values of your culture.

Introduction

In this tutorial, we have used Australian culture as the example. If you have another cultural background, you can use the categories explored here to research your own cultural values. Just use the headings and try to research similar information about your own culture. Also, you could think about how your culture differs from Australian culture.

Any culture is made up of individual people, each one unique in their own way. So no Australian is exactly like any other Australian, but a handful of core values and beliefs do underlie and permeate the national culture of Australia. These values and beliefs don't apply across the board in every situation - and individuals may even act in ways that directly contradict or flaunt commonly shared values and beliefs - but they are still at the heart of the Australian cultural ethos. In this tutorial we will try to discover some of these values and beliefs, and the characteristic behaviours that come from them.

Our view of ourselves 1

Below is a short guide to Australian culture provided by a university. It is designed to help international students to "fit in" as they study in Australia. As you read it, think about the cultural values that are implied and how a new student contemplating living and studying in Australia might feel as they read it.

Australian Culture

(from the University of Newcastle International Students page, 2014)

There is no such thing as a 'typical Australian,' and during your time here you will come across a wide range of social customs, habits and perspectives of life

that may be very different from your own culture. Here are a few tips to help you adjust:

Addressing People

As a student it is socially accepted to greet fellow students or people the same age or younger than you by their first names. It is common in Australia for people to have nicknames, which are used amongst friends. If you are addressing people senior to you, call them by their surname with their title of Mr, Mrs or Ms, until you know them well enough to call them by their first name.

Greetings

Australia is generally a relaxed, informal society, so you might hear fellow students and friends greet each other with: 'Hello', 'Hi' or 'Hey, how's it going?' If you find yourself in a more formal environment it is customary to shake the hand of those you meet, and greet them with the formal greeting of 'good morning', 'good afternoon' or 'good evening'. However, if this is culturally unacceptable for you, let the person you are meeting know and they will generally be happy to accommodate your need. Use this as an opportunity to share your culture with the local community.

Goodbye

In an informal setting it is ok to simply say: 'See you later,' or 'See you around.' In a more formal setting or the first time you meet someone you might like to say: 'It was a pleasure to meet you,' or 'It was nice to meet you.'

Please and Thank you

When you would like something, it is customary to say 'please'. Once you receive something or when something is provided, say 'thank you'. Australians are very big users of please and thank you.

Slang

Australians insert slang into daily conversation, and it is done almost unconsciously. Don't panic! Here are a few examples:

- *G'day*: Good day/Hello
- *See ya later*: See you later/Goodbye
- *You right?:* Do you need assistance?
- *D'you reckon?:* Do you think so?
- *Good on ya!*: Well done!
- *It's my shout!*: It is my turn to buy you a meal or a drink. If someone 'shouts' you something it is customary to return the gesture.
- *Tute*: Tutorial

Eye Contact

It is customary to engage in direct eye contact with those who are talking to you, and when you are talking to them. This is not disrespectful, but a sign of interest and sincerity. Australians will make direct eye contact with everyone they come into contact with.

Personal Space

Australians like their personal space. This doesn't mean that Australians are unapproachable, but we do like our freedom. When talking to someone, be mindful of your position. Generally an arm's length is a good distance to converse with someone, any closer and both you and the person may feel uncomfortable.

Humour

Australians are known for a 'dry' or 'laconic' sense of humour, involving light hearted banter which is commonly referred to as 'stirring'. Don't panic if you don't understand Australian humour straight away; as your knowledge about the country grows, you too will be joining in on the laughs!

Social Invitations

If you receive a verbal or written invitation to an event, it is customary to RSVP to the host to inform them of your acceptance or decline of the invite. If you are asked to 'join' or 'go with' a group to a social outing you are expected to pay for your own expenses.

If you are invited to a friend's house for a meal, it is customary to ask if you could contribute to the meal. This just might be something simple, like a bottle of drink or a platter of food. Some parties maybe BYO, which means bring your own food or drink. Invitations may include 'bring a plate,' meaning bring a plate of food to share with other guests.

Dress

Dress in Australia tends to be casual with jeans and t-shirts. Some work places require business attire, while occasions marked as 'formal,' will include the type of dress required.

Queuing

If you are waiting for a taxi, a bus, a ticket, service, or a cashier, it is customary to wait your turn and not to push. Pushing and not waiting for your turn will not be tolerated.

Punctuality

While Australian society is relaxed, it is customary to keep your appointments and turn up on time. If you are running late for an appointment or occasion, always call to explain before the event.

Equality

Australians believe that everyone is equal, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or social standing. Australians enjoy equal social, legal and political rights, which are protected by the Australian Constitution.

Our view of ourselves 2

Below is the agreement called “Australian Values Statement” which applicants for an Australian visa (long term visas) are required to sign before being granted a visa (from the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship). Notice as you read it the importance that is placed on societal values in people wanting to become Australian citizens.

Australian Values Statement

You must sign this statement if you are aged 18 years or over.

I confirm that I have read, or had explained to me, information provided by the Australian Government on Australian society and values.

I understand:

- Australian society values respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, freedom of religion, commitment to the rule of law, Parliamentary democracy, equality of men and women and a spirit of egalitarianism that embraces mutual respect, tolerance, fair play and compassion for those in need and pursuit of the public good
- Australian society values equality of opportunity for individuals, regardless of their race, religion or ethnic background
- the English language, as the national language, is an important unifying element of Australian society.

I undertake to respect these values of Australian society during my stay in Australia and to obey the laws of Australia.

I understand that, if I should seek to become an Australian citizen:

- Australian citizenship is a shared identity, a common bond which unites all Australians while respecting their diversity
- Australian citizenship involves reciprocal rights and responsibilities. The responsibilities of Australian Citizenship include obeying Australian laws, including those relating to voting at elections and serving on a jury.

If I meet the legal qualifications for becoming an Australian citizen and my application is approved I understand that I would have to pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people.

Culture in casual expressions

Some insight into cultural values can be gained by examining common expressions people use in everyday conversation. These common expressions often reflect widely shared values or beliefs. Below are some common Australian sayings, with a description of the value or belief that they might be expressing.

- “He thinks he’s better than so and so”
- “She’s always putting on airs”
- “That person should be cut down to size”
- “He’s got tickets on himself”

Value/belief: Egalitarianism. Australians are sensitive and resistant to class distinctions - ‘Cut the tall poppy’ - there are consequently relatively few class differences. This can sometimes manifest itself in Australians seeming to others to be disrespectful, to resent superiors and to resist control, or to prefer to bargain with management because they assume subordinates share equal interests and capabilities.

- “You’re not wrong”
- “I don’t think much of that”
- “That’s not bad” (meaning ‘that’s good’)
- “It’s pretty ordinary” (meaning ‘it’s quite bad’)

Value/belief: These kinds of expressions using understatement are often used to indicate familiarity and a closer relationship. Some other common examples are diminutives - *arvo* (afternoon), *barbie* (barbecue), *smoko* (cigarette break), *Aussie* (Australian) and *pressie* (present/gift). This may also be done with people's names to create nicknames, e.g, *Lozza* (for Laurie or Lauren), or "Clarky" for Mr. Clark. Sometimes to others, Australians can seem terse, non-committal and understated or overly casual in conversation.

- “No worries!”
- “G’day mate”
- “Good on you”

Value/belief: Casual optimism, amiability, friendliness and an expectation of shared attitudes (a proneness to easy ‘mateship’).

- “Fair go”
- “C,mon give us a break”

Value/belief: A reasonable chance, a fair deal. Everyone is entitled to consideration and to getting a fair deal, all citizens have a right to fair treatment.

– “My mates are coming over”

– “You can rely on your mates”

Value/belief: “Mateship”. Value inherent qualities in others (rather than external achievements). Friends and membership groups take a long time to establish. Relationships are long-lasting and meaningful. Friendship involves a very strong sense of obligation - you always help your mates no matter what - expression of comradeship and equality.

– “Stand on your own two feet”

– “He’s doing it tough”

Value/belief: Respect for “battlers” - making ends meet and getting through tough times without whingeing. People who don’t pull their weight are “bludgers”.

– “You’ve got to laugh” (or you’d cry...)

– “Don’t worry - she’ll be right”

– “Such is life”

Value/belief: ‘Whatever is wrong will right itself with time’ - a philosophical acceptance of the bad things that happen in life. This could be considered to be either an optimistic or apathetic outlook.

Can you think of other common expressions, ones you use yourself or that are common in your family? Write them down and then consider the value or belief they represent.

Cultural characteristics

Below is a list of values or cultural characteristics that have been said to be common to Australians. As you read the list think about yourself - do you think all or some of these apply to you? Also, think about whether in your own case, you would tend to put these characteristics down to individual “personality” rather than a shared “culture”.

- They enjoy disagreement, and don't care what others think.
- They use humour frequently, often injecting a certain amount of cynicism or irony to any situation, and are inclined to use humour under stress.
- They are generally ‘laid back’.
- Work rarely comes between friends.
- Overtime isn’t accepted unless the reason is extremely important.

- They need to be convinced of the usefulness before the value of the work is seen.
- Evaluate their own behaviour based on their own feelings and preferences (rather than outside influences).
- Tend to be inflexible.
- Achievement is not so important; position and honours are minimized.
- More free time very important; salary less so.
- Are willing to take risks - to 'have a go' at a thing.
- Only begrudgingly give credit and don't expect praise.
- Comfortable with conflict and invite argument.

Sources of Australian Values

We have identified some of the values that are common to many Australians. In any culture, it is important to realise that values don't "just happen" - they are formed in response to real factors in the history, geography or development of a country - our values and beliefs are a result of our national experience. This is true of every country's culture. So where do Australian values come from?

The beginning of an Australian national identity dates back to the time of early European settlement. Influences on the developing culture at that time comprised a composite of British or Anglo-Saxon heritage, and the harsh conditions of settlement. So, physical toughness, mateship, and the ability to withstand hardship were foundational in the development of an Australian identity. Over time, other factors of historical significance have influenced the development of a national identity - for instance, factors related to the gold rush days; Federation; the Depression; the World Wars and the development of an ANZAC tradition; immigration; and the internationalist era of today. Trends that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s that provided an impetus for change in national identity included multiculturalism, Aboriginal nationalism, and republicanism.

Today, it is very evident that Australia's multiculturalism has influenced all aspects of Australian life, including business, the arts, cooking, sense of humour and sporting tastes. The immigration program - for skilled and family migrants and a humanitarian program for refugees and asylum seekers - has received more than 6.5 million migrants from every continent. The population tripled in six decades to around 21 million in 2010, including people originating from 200 countries. Today, more than 43% of Australians were either born overseas or have one parent who was born overseas. The population is also highly urbanised, with more than 75% of Australians living in urban centres, largely along the coast.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Discovering your own culture

1. How do you feel about increasing multiculturalism and the fact that Australia is losing a cohesive “national cultural identity” with the increase in immigration?
2. Some of the values presented in this tutorial could be called more “traditional” Australian values. Have you seen those values changing in the last ten years, and how have they changed?
3. The statement has been made, that “*Australians tend to resent any authority that takes a form in which they can have no input. If they sense that decisions are being made with no chance for them to have a say, they will react negatively, even illogically against those decisions*”. Do you see this cultural characteristic evident in the context of the local church and if so, how is it dealt with?



ACTIVITIES

Discovering your own culture

1. Imagine that you are at the airport and you start talking with a couple newly arrived from overseas who tell you they are planning to stay for two years in Australia for work. They ask you “tell us about Australia.” You’ve got time to make three points about your culture. What three things would you tell them?
2. Find someone who was born in another country and has settled in Australia. Have a conversation with them about cultural differences. Try to find out from them if there are any specific behaviours, beliefs or values:
 - that have been difficult for them to understand or accept in Australian culture.
 - that they have retained from their home culture and may be unwilling to change.
 - that they hold, but that might be difficult for Australians to accept.