

**TUTORIAL**  
**4.9**

# Personal vs. societal obligations

This tutorial explores another fundamental area of culture: personal versus societal obligations, or the conflict between individual and social ethics. It defines the two poles of this dimension, *universalism* and *particularism*.

## An accident

You are in a car driven by a close friend when he hits a pedestrian. There are no other witnesses and the pedestrian is bruised but not badly hurt. The speed limit is 40km an hour, but you saw that your friend was driving at 55. His lawyer tells you that if you will testify under oath that your friend was driving under 40, he will suffer no serious consequences.

Would you testify that your friend was driving under 40kms an hour? Yes, or no? What do you think *most* people in your culture would do?

The percentage of Americans who said they would not falsely testify to help their friend is 96%. The percentage of Venezuelans who said they would not is 34%. Why do you think there is such a great difference between the Venezuelan and American percentages?

There could be many explanations for the gap here, but one of them almost certainly is a cultural difference between being a universalist (many Americans) and a particularist (many Venezuelans). Universalists tend to feel that right is right, regardless of circumstances, while particularists tend to feel you always have to take circumstances into account. The person in trouble here is your friend, so that would have a bearing on how you would behave in that situation.

The responsibilities of friendship differ from culture to culture. Think about how this exhibits itself in your culture. You will probably find examples of both universalism and particularism, but think about what would be considered the cultural norm - the "right thing" - in the community in which you live. How should a friend be treated in comparison to family members, for example?

Differing views of responsibilities or obligations is obviously an area that can cause misunderstandings or conflict in cross-cultural situations. If you are trying to make friends in a new community, it is helpful to learn to understand the expectations and responsibilities of a friend. In some cultures, friendship requires similar obligations to being a member of the family, whereas in others, friendship has little or no obligation attached.

## Universalism and Particularism

People in any culture struggle with how to balance obligations to family, friends, and colleagues on the one hand, and to the wider society on the other. Cultures differ in how they distinguish between obligations to in-group and out-group members. So when personal obligations and societal obligations conflict, different cultures handle the situation in different ways.

No culture is exclusively universalist or particularist, but cultures do tend to be *more* one than the other, and while the attitudes of individuals in a given culture will vary, the focus here as we define the two different attitudes is on the culture as a whole.

Here are brief descriptions of each way of thinking:

### **Universalism:**

*There are absolutes that apply across the board, regardless of circumstances or the particular situation. Wherever possible, you should try to apply the same rules to everyone in similar situations. To be fair is to treat everyone alike and not make exceptions for family, friends, or members of your in-group. Where possible, you should lay your personal feelings aside and look at the situation objectively. While life isn't necessarily fair, we can make it more fair by treating people the same way. High universalism countries, where there are formal rules and strict adherence to business contracts, are: US, UK, Germany, Sweden, Australia, Switzerland, Canada.*

### **Particularism:**

*How you behave in a given situation depends on the circumstances. You treat family, friends, and your in-group in the best way you can, and you let the rest of the world take care of itself. Your in-group will protect you. There can't be absolutes because everything depends on who you're dealing with in each situation. No one expects life to be fair. Exceptions will always be made for certain people. High particularism countries, where legal contracts can be changed and people deal differently with people based on how well they know them, are: China, Indonesia, Venezuela, South Korea, Russia, India.*

## Universalism and Particularism in conflict

It is important for you to become aware of the differences in these two poles of thinking if you intend to live in a cross-cultural situation. As you settle in to your new culture and community, there may be times when a conflict or offence arises and you will simply have no idea why. It is a good idea to evaluate what happened and to try to pinpoint the cause.

Many misunderstandings can be traced back to differences in fundamental values, such as the universalist and particularist view we are discussing here. It is almost impossible for a person who has never been exposed to another culture to understand that people think differently on a very deep level, and to see things from the other person's perspective. So, by becoming aware that there are deep differences, you are equipping yourself to understand 'what went wrong' in a cross-cultural situation, and to learn to communicate and behave in an appropriate way in your new community. In any difficult situation it is always good practice to ask a local friend, "How could I have dealt with that better?" and to listen carefully to what they say for the underlying values that are expressed.

Now we are going to look at some statements to help you to identify the universalist and particularist view. In each set of four statements below, one statement is the 'odd one out', and the other three reflect either universalist or particularist views. Pick out the odd statement, and decide which view it represents.

1. Objectivity, not letting personal feelings affect decision making, is possible and desirable.
2. A deal is a deal, whatever happens.
3. Principles have to get bent once in a while.
4. The law is the law.
  - The third one is particularist; the other three are universalist because, 1: particularists would say personal feelings would have to be taken into account, 2: deals change when circumstances change for particularists, 4: for particularists, the law depends on who you are.

1. You don't compromise on principles.
2. Friends expect preferential treatment.
3. Subjectivity is the rule.
4. The logic of the heart is what counts.
  - The first one is universalist; the other three are particularist because, 2: this is a key particularist principle, 3: particularists are subjective; universalists are objective, 4: universalist logic is of the head, not the heart.

1. People tend to hire friends and associates.
2. Consistency is desirable and possible.

3. Logic of the head is important.
  4. Exceptions to the rule should be minimized.
    - The first one is particularist; the other three are universalist because, 2: particularists avoid consistency because things are relative, 3: particularist logic is of the heart, 4: particularists live by exceptions; there are no absolutes.
- 
1. Friends protect friends.
  2. Life is neat, not messy.
  3. Written contracts are not necessary.
  4. This attitude is more consistent with collectivism.
    - The second one is universalist; the other three are particularist because, 1: friends can always be trusted (and you don't do business with strangers anyway), 3: particularist logic says the bond is more important than the facts of the case, 4: collectivists have the same in-group/out-group attitudes as particularists do.
- 
1. Situational ethics are the norm.
  2. A deal is a deal, until circumstances change.
  3. Deals are made on the basis of personal relationships.
  4. Justice is blind.
    - The fourth one is universalist; the other three are particularist because, 1: this is a key particularist concept; no absolutes, 2: particularists always take circumstances into account, 3: relationships, the personal side of things, are more important than cost, etc.

## How about You - Universalist or Particularist?

Now you are familiar with the two poles of this concept, you will have a chance to think of your own behaviour in the context of this important cultural dimension. Before reading further, take a moment to decide whether you consider yourself more of a universalist or a particularist.

Below are a number of paired statements (a. and b.). Note the one from each pair which best describes the action you would take or the way you feel about the particular topic. Please choose one or the other even if you think both are true. Try to get as honest an answer as you can by answering quickly without too much thinking.

**1a.** In hiring someone, I want to know about their technical skills and their educational/professional background.

**1b.** In hiring, I want to know who the person's family and friends are, who will vouch for this person.

**2a.** In society, we should help those who are the neediest.

**2b.** In society, we should help the neediest of those who depend on us.

**3a.** There are certain absolutes which apply across the board.

**3b.** There are no absolutes in life; you always have to look at the particular situation.

**4a.** I would not expect my neighbour, the policeman, to jeopardise his job and not give me a speeding ticket.

**4b.** I would be very hurt if my neighbour, a policeman, gave me a ticket for speeding.

**5a.** The courts should mediate conflicts.

**5b.** People should solve their own conflicts; it's embarrassing if it has to go to court.

**6a.** In general, people can be trusted.

**6b.** My closest associates can be trusted absolutely; everyone else is automatically suspect.

**7a.** Performance reviews should not take personal relations into account.

**7b.** Performance reviews inevitably take personal relations into account.

**8a.** Exceptions should be very rare; otherwise, you open the floodgates.

**8b.** You often have to make exceptions for people because of circumstances.

**9a.** Contracts guarantee that friends stay friends.

**9b.** Contracts aren't necessary between friends.

**10a.** Ethics are ethics no matter who you are dealing with.

**10b.** What is ethical in a given situation depends on who you are dealing with.

Now that you have made your selections, calculate whether you came out more on the universalist or particularist side. The behaviors described in the "a" statements tend to be more characteristic of universalists. The behaviors described in the "b" statements tend to be more characteristic of particularists. Is your score here consistent with your self-concept?

Having a view of which side of the pole you tend to be, should help you to know that you will definitely see things differently to someone from a culture

that tends toward the opposite view. You will need to think carefully and to work at understanding things from their point of view.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Personal vs. Societal Obligations*

1. You have an idea of both the universalist and particularist approaches to dealing with obligations. Are there features of each approach that you like or agree with? What?
2. Are there features of each approach you don't like or disagree with? What are they and why?
3. Would you describe the Biblical worldview as being more universalist or more particularist?



## ACTIVITIES

### *Personal vs. Societal Obligations*

1. Look again at the statements, characteristics and definitions in the tutorial. Can you find any specific examples or "proof" of universalist or particularist tendencies in your culture?
2. Find a person from a different cultural background and ask them to help you with a cultural exercise - explain the concepts to them - then read the pairs of statements to them to find out whether they are more universalist or particularist.