

CHAPTER TWO

AMERICAN CULTURE AND AMERICAN DIVERSITY



The essence of cross-cultural understanding is knowing how your own culture is both similar to and different from the local or “target” culture. For this reason, those who pursue cross-cultural knowledge must sooner or later turn their gaze on themselves. People from other cultures, after all, aren’t different by nature, but only different *in relation* to a particular standard they’re being measured against. To even see those differences, therefore, you have to examine that standard. In the case of the Peace Corps, that standard is the American culture that Volunteers come from. This chapter contains a series of activities designed to reveal that American culture.

You might wonder why people from the United States would need to have their culture revealed to them—isn’t it pretty obvious?—but the fact is that people *from* a culture, as you learned in Chapter 1, are in many ways the least able to see it. They embody the culture, of course, but they would in fact have to get out of that body if they wanted to see what it looked like. In that sense, you might want to think of this chapter as an out-of-body experience, courtesy of Peace Corps training.

As was noted earlier, no one American is quite like any other American, but a handful of core values and beliefs do underlie and permeate the national culture. These values and beliefs don’t apply across the board in every situation, and we may, on occasion, even act in ways that directly contradict or flaunt them, but they are still at the heart of our cultural ethos. It is some of these beliefs, with the characteristic behaviors that come from them, that are the focus of this chapter.

Remember as you do these exercises that whether or not you personally can identify with or believe in the typical American being constructed here, this is the image that many host country people have of Americans.

It is shocking for me to see how the father and mother in America kick their own children out when they become eighteen years of age. The most surprising thing about it all is that the young people do not seem to mind or think it is too cruel to be thrown out of their own family but accept it as the natural and normal way of behaving.

**—HCN from Cameroon,
in Robert Kohls & John
Knight, *Developing
Intercultural Awareness***

2.1—DEAR TODD

It's time to catch up with Jan, who is now nearing the end of her training program and about to take up her Peace Corps assignment. At right is a letter Jan has written to her friend Todd back in the United States. In her letter, Jan makes a number of statements that reflect deeply held, characteristic American values or cultural assumptions. Underline any statements of this kind you can identify and then go on to the rest of the activities in this chapter.



Dear Todd,

1. Please excuse me for not answering your letter sooner, but we're nearing the end of our training program here and life is quite busy as I prepare to take up my assignment. After all these months of anticipating—years, if you count all the time I've been thinking about joining the Peace Corps—it's finally going to happen: I'm going to walk into a village, find a place to live, and start saving the world. Well, maybe not the entire world. And maybe not on the first day. But I'll do my best.

2. Actually, if we have learned anything during this training—and we have learned a lot—it's to have realistic expectations of what we can actually accomplish here. Some of us, and I count myself among this group, were probably a bit ambitious about our work and the difference we could make, but I'm much more grounded in reality now. Thank goodness.

3. I know that making changes and improvements takes time, so I don't expect to see any results for the first few months. You've got to get people to trust you, after all, but once they do, then you can start to have influence. I think that once they're aware of my training and experience in the field, I'm bound to become more credible to them. People are basically well-intentioned, after all. You just have to give them time and the benefit of the doubt.

4. I know there will be obstacles, but I also know I'll be able to overcome them. If you put your mind to something, and it's something that means as much to you as this does to me, then nothing can stop you. I can give you an example of this from a recent incident here at the training program. We [trainees] wanted to set up a little co-op inside the training center, where we could buy soft drinks, snacks, etc., because the closest store is about half an hour from here, and we don't have time to go there and back on our breaks. When we approached the people who run this place, they said the stores in town wouldn't sell directly to us but only to the training center, i.e., to them, and they would arrange it for us. But we told them we wanted to do all the talking and arranging ourselves, so we could practice using the language in real situations and probably have a few cross-cultural experiences along the way. They said nothing like that had ever been done before and they didn't think it was a good idea.

(continued)

I'm not English. I'm American. We see all things as possible.

—Norman Mailer,
The Times of London

5. But I wasn't willing to give up so soon, so I approached some merchants in town. And found there was no problem at all! They were happy to sell to anyone, and they would give us a bulk discount! It's a small example, but it shows you that you don't have to take no for an answer, and that the way things have always been done doesn't have to be the way they're done hereafter.

6. Maybe I was lucky this time, but I think a positive attitude (along with my stubborn streak) can get you a long way.

Well, there's a lot more I want to tell you, but it's time for class. You probably won't hear from me for two or three weeks now, until I get moved and set up in my town. But don't use that as an excuse for not writing! We LIVE for our mail around here.

Love,

Jan

2.2—THE THINGS WE SAY— CULTURE IN CASUAL EXPRESSIONS

PART ONE

A useful way to understand a culture is by examining the expressions people use in everyday conversation. These common expressions, after all, reflect what most people in a given society believe in or value. What cultural value or belief do the following expressions reveal? Write your response in the space provided. The first group of expressions is done for you.

1. He thinks he's better than so and so.
2. She's always putting on airs.
3. That person should be cut down to size.
4. It's gone to his head.

Value/belief: Egalitarianism

1. Talk is cheap.
2. Put your money where your mouth is.
3. He's all talk and no action.

Value/belief: _____

4. She's always beating around the bush.
5. Tell it like it is.
6. Straight talk, straight answer, straight shooter.

Value/belief: _____

7. She did something with her life.
8. Nice guys finish last.

Value/belief: _____

The people who are not pleased with America must be those whose sympathies are fossilized or whose eyes have no power of observation. Such delightful and entertaining schemes for hoodwinking nature you never saw, such ingenuities for beating the terrible forces of the seasons, such daring inventions.

—Edmond Gosse
The Life and Letters of Sir Edmond Gosse, 1884

All kinds of tourists are fair game for [con artists] but Americans seem their favorite targets, not just because of their careless ways with money and instinctive generosity, but also their non-European innocence about the viler dimensions of human nature...

**—Paul Fussell,
Abroad**

9. Every cloud has a silver lining.

10. Look on the bright side.

11. Tomorrow is another day.

Value/belief: _____

12. Where there's a will there's a way.

Value/belief: _____

13. Stand on your own two feet.

Value/belief: _____

14. Don't judge a book by its cover.

15. All that glitters isn't gold.

Value/belief: _____

16. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Value/belief: _____

[For suggested answers, see page 235.]

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

1. _____

Value:

2. _____

Value:

3. _____

Value:

Informant Activity**PART TWO**

Just as expressions common in the U.S. reveal aspects of the national culture, so do host country expressions reveal certain host country values or beliefs. Using a host country informant or a PCV who knows the local culture well, try to come up with at least five common host country expressions, and then identify the cultural belief behind them. You may use proverbs, if you like, but in many cases, you may find that the same proverb exists in one form or another in many cultures, so that the value it reveals is probably universal and not specific to your host country.

1. _____

Value/belief:

2. _____

Value/belief:

3. _____

Value/belief:

4. _____

Value/belief:

5. _____

Value/belief:

—INSIGHT—

Common expressions become common because they reflect core cultural values.

I was so surprised and confused when, on leaving Whittier Hall, the provost, in person, held the door for me in order to let me pass. I was so confused that I could not find the words to express my gratefulness, and I almost fell on my knees as I would certainly do back home.

A man who is by far my superior is holding the door for me, a mere student and a nobody.

—A visitor from Indonesia in John Fieg & John Blair, There Is A Difference

Informant Activity



2.3—THIRTEEN CULTURAL CATEGORIES—AMERICAN AND HOST COUNTRY VIEWS COMPARED

This activity looks at 13 categories or aspects of culture and compare the typical American position on these matters with that of your host country. In each case, the American view has been summarized and illustrated for you as adapted from the work of several intercultural experts including Edward Stewart, Milton Bennett, Gary Althen * and several authors in the Interact series from Intercultural Press. It is your task to get together with an informant, either a host country national or someone else who knows the host culture well, and try to construct the host country position. You may, if you wish, do this activity with another trainee. After you have made notes on or constructed the host country position, try to get together with other trainees in your group and compare observations.

1. ATTITUDE TOWARDS AGE

-  Emphasize physical beauty and youth.
-  Fire older people to hire younger people for less money.
-  Judge a worker’s worth based on production, not seniority.

American View—The American emphasis on concrete achievements and “doing” means that age is not highly valued, for the older you are the less you can accomplish. Age is also suspect because new is usually better in American culture, and the elderly are generally out of touch with what’s new.

Host Country View:

**Based on concepts developed by Edward Stewart and Milton Bennett, American Cultural Patterns, Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, ME, 1991; Gary Althen, American Ways, Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, ME, 1981.*

2. CONCEPT OF FATE AND DESTINY

- ☞ You can be whatever you want to be.
- ☞ Where there's a will there's a way.
- ☞ The American dream is rags-to-riches.

American View—The concept of self-determination negates much of the influence of fate and destiny. Parents tell their children they can be whatever they want to be when they grow up. There are few givens in life, and people have little sense of external limits. Lack of success is their own fault.

Host Country View:

For me, there was only one place to go if I couldn't live in my own country: America. It is a country of immigrants. There is such tolerance for the foreign and unfamiliar. America continues to amaze me.

—*Milos Forman*

3. VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

- ☞ Courts consider a person innocent until he/she is proven guilty.
- ☞ People should be given the benefit of the doubt.
- ☞ If left alone, people will do the right thing.
- ☞ We need to discover how a vicious killer “went wrong.”

American View—People are considered basically and inherently good. If someone does an evil deed, we look for the explanation, for the reason why the person turned bad. People can and should be trusted; and we are fairly open to strangers, and willing to accept them.

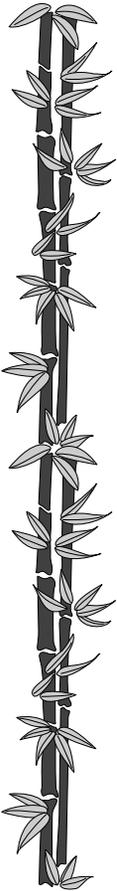
Host Country View:

4. ATTITUDE TOWARDS CHANGE

- ☞ New is better.
- ☞ A better way can always be found; things can always be improved upon.
- ☞ Just because we've always done it that way doesn't make it right.

American View—Change is considered positive, probably because Americans believe in the march of progress and the pursuit of perfection. Improvements will always move us closer and closer to perfection. Traditions can be a guide, but they are not inherently superior.

Host Country View:



5. ATTITUDE TOWARDS TAKING RISKS

- ☞ A low level of personal savings is typical.
- ☞ You can always start over.
- ☞ Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
- ☞ A high level of personal bankruptcies is common.

American View—There will always be enough opportunity to go around, so taking risks, involves no real danger. For the truly ambitious, failure is only temporary. Experimentation, trial and error are important ways to learn or to improve your product or service.

Host Country View:

6. CONCEPT OF SUFFERING AND MISFORTUNE

- ☞ People rush to cheer up a friend who's depressed.
- ☞ If you're unhappy, take a pill or see a psychiatrist.
- ☞ Be happy.

American View—Because we are ultimately in control of our lives and destiny, we have no excuse for unhappiness nor misfortune. If you are suffering or unhappy, then just do whatever it takes to be happy again. If you're depressed, it's because you have chosen to be.

Host Country View:

7. CONCEPT OF FACE

- ☞ It's important to tell it like it is, be straight with people.
- ☞ Confrontation is sometimes necessary to clear the air.
- ☞ Honesty is the best policy.

American View—In individualist cultures, no premium is put on saving face because people can take care of themselves. What other people think is not so crucial to survival or success. We can say what we think without worrying about hurting people's feelings, and we likewise appreciate directness.

Host Country View:

You have to be very subservient to people: "Ma'am, can I take your bag?" "Can I do this?" Being subservient to people made me very resentful.

—Supermarket box boy in Working by Studs Terkel

8. SOURCE OF SELF ESTEEM/SELF WORTH

- ☞ People judge you by how much money you make.
- ☞ First question at a party is, “What do you do?”
- ☞ Material possessions are a measure of success.

American View—In an individualist culture, you are what you’ve achieved; that is, you create your own worth rather than receiving it by virtue of birth, position, seniority, or longevity. Your self-esteem comes from what you have done to *earn* self-esteem.

Host Country View:

9. CONCEPT OF EQUALITY

- ☞ People try to treat everyone the same.
- ☞ While jogging, the President stops at McDonald’s for morning coffee.
- ☞ Putting on airs is frowned upon.

American View—In a strong reaction to the repressive class structure in Europe, Americans created a culture virtually built around egalitarianism: the notion that no one is superior to anyone else because of birth, power, fame, or wealth. We are not all the same, but we are all of equal value.

Host Country View:

10. ATTITUDE TOWARDS FORMALITY

- ☞ Telling someone to help themselves to what's in the refrigerator is common.
- ☞ Using first names with people you've just met is fine.
- ☞ Using titles like "Dr". for someone with a Ph.D. is presumptuous.

American View—Because of the strong egalitarian ethos, Americans tend to be casual and informal in social and professional interactions. Informality is also more necessary in a mobile society where people are always meeting new people. We don't stand on ceremony, nor use titles or rank in addressing each other.

Host Country View:

Bold Talent shook his head. How like children the Americans were, with their pranks and easy warmth. Men who offered their hands for strangers to shake, ladies who sat and chatted at dinner with gentlemen they had never seen before, children who threw snowballs at adults no matter what their station. He would miss them.

—**Bette Bao Lord,**
Spring Moon

11. DEGREE OF REALISM

- ☞ Things will get better.
- ☞ Bad things happen for a reason.
- ☞ It can't get any worse.
- ☞ Tag line of fairy tales: "They lived happily ever after."

American View—Largely because of the notion that the individual is in control, Americans are generally optimistic. We don't see things the way they are, but as better than they are, particularly if they're not so good. We feel it's important to be positive and that there is no reason not to be.

Host Country View:

—INSIGHT—

Behaviors reflect deeply seated values and world views.

12. ATTITUDE TOWARDS DOING

- ☞ Doing is preferred over talking.
- ☞ The absent-minded professor, the ivory tower reflect anti-intellectualism.
- ☞ Be practical.
- ☞ Arts are an adornment of life but not central to it.

American View—Individuals survive because they get things done, generally on their own. Words and talk are suspect and cheap; they don't put food on the table or a roof over your head. Pursuits not directly related to the creation of concrete results, e.g., academia, the arts, are less highly valued. What is practical and pragmatic is favored over what is beautiful and inspiring.

Host Country View:

13. VIEW OF THE NATURAL WORLD

- ☞ Building dams to control rivers.
- ☞ Seeding clouds to produce rain.
- ☞ Erecting earthquake-proof buildings.
- ☞ Spending billions annually on weather prediction.

American View—The natural world is a kind of mechanism or machine that can be studied and known and whose workings can be predicted, manipulated, and ultimately controlled. It is not to be feared.

Host Country View:

2.4—THINKING ABOUT MY JOB

In the previous exercise, you discovered a number of differences in the way American and host country people view certain key topics. These differences are bound to show up now and again as you go about working at your Peace Corps assignment. Below are five of the categories from the previous exercise, with examples of typical work-related problems. Read each incident and note what you would do.

1. ATTITUDE TOWARDS AGE

The American emphasis on achievements and doing means that age is to be feared and not respected; the older you are, the less you can do or contribute to society. Age is also suspect because new is usually better in American culture, and the elderly are generally out of touch with what is new.

Suppose you're a technical expert in crop rotation assigned to a co-op of village farmers. You discover they do not consult you or even pay much attention to you because they think you're too young to know what you're doing.

My response: _____

2. ATTITUDE TOWARDS CHANGE

Change is considered positive, probably because Americans believe in the march of progress and the perfectability of man. Improvements will always move us closer and closer to perfection. Traditions can be a guide, but they are not inherently superior.

You want to introduce a new teaching technique to your colleagues. It is a faster and more efficient way of presenting certain concepts. When you approach them, they respond: "This is the way we have always been taught." You say, "But this is faster and more efficient." They say, "No doubt."

My response: _____



Americans ignore history....The national myth is that of creativity and progress....They believe in the future as if it were a religion; they believe that there is nothing they cannot accomplish, that solutions wait somewhere for all problems, like brides.

—Frances Fitzgerald,
Fire in the Lake

3. CONCEPT OF EQUALITY

In a strong reaction to the repressive class structure in Europe, Americans created a culture built around egalitarianism: the notion that no one is inherently superior to anyone else because of birth, power, fame, or wealth. We are not all the same, but we are all of equal value.

It has turned cold the last few days and you feel sorry for the teaboy who is stationed just outside the entrance to your building. He doesn't seem to have any warm clothes and huddles over his charcoal fire to keep warm. You approach your boss and ask if you can tell the boy to move into the hallway out of the cold. "Certainly not," he replies. "This building is for faculty, not teaboys."

My response: _____

4. ATTITUDE TOWARDS TAKING RISKS

There will always be enough opportunity to go around, so taking risks involves no real danger. For the truly ambitious, failure is only temporary. Experimentation, trial and error are important ways to learn or to improve your product or service.

You want to try a new way of filtering drinking water for the village. The environmental engineer asks you if this technique has been tried anywhere else in the country, to which you answer, "No." "And what if we fail?" he asks you. "Then we go back to the old way," you respond. "And what happens to my job?" he replies.

My response: _____

5. VIEW OF THE NATURAL WORLD

The natural world is a kind of mechanism or machine that can be studied and known and whose workings can be predicted, manipulated, and ultimately controlled. It is not to be feared.

Books need to be ordered now to arrive in time for the start of classes in the fall. You go to the head librarian to put in your request, and she asks you how you know how many students you're going to have. You don't of course, but you're projecting, based on previous class size. "It's better to wait," she says, "so we don't waste money buying extra books." You know that if you don't order now, you'll have to teach for several weeks without the books while you wait for them to arrive.

My response: _____

[For suggested answers, see page 235.]

—INSIGHT—

Cultural differences are bound to show up in workplace interactions.



But the firemen; you actually
see them produce. I used to
work in a bank. You know,
it's just paper. It's not real.
Nine to five and it's s____.
You're lookin' at numbers.
But now I can look back and
say, "I helped put out a fire. I
helped save somebody." It
shows something I did on
this earth.

—Tom Patrick,
fireman, in
Studs Terkel,
Working

2.5—SOURCES OF AMERICAN CULTURE

In this exercise, you reexamine some of the American values you have identified thus far, trying to understand where they come from. While it is useful to know *what* it is Americans value and believe in, it is also helpful to know *why* they believe what they do—to understand that our values and beliefs are a result of our national experience. Once you understand this fact about your own country's culture, you can begin to appreciate that it must be true of your host country as well.

Below are four defining features of the people who came to the United States, followed by a numbered list of American traits, many of which you have come across earlier in this chapter. Place the number of the trait in the space beneath the defining feature/s you feel is the likely source of or reason behind the trait. An example from the list of traits is given for each of them. (Please note that these features describe the people who originally settled the United States and may not describe many Americans of today.)

DEFINING FEATURES

PROTESTANTISM—

A strong work ethic—work is intrinsically good—and the notion of predestination, that salvation is apparent through worldly success.

7. The cult of celebrities; biographies of the rich and famous.

AMERICAN GEOGRAPHY—

The frontier, unlimited resources and opportunity, isolation, sparse population, distance from Europe.

1. Limited sense of fatalism, of accepting things as they are.

ESCAPE FROM REPRESSION—

From religious and economic repression and rigid class system and social stratification.

2. Tolerance for differences.

THE NATURE OF THE AMERICAN IMMIGRANT—

Out of the mainstream in home country, dissatisfied with lot in life, willing to take risks, adventuresome.

8. Little fear of failure.

The happy ending is our national belief.

—Mary McCarthy

TRAITS

1. Limited sense of fatalism, of accepting things as they are
2. Tolerance for differences
3. Historic low level of savings
4. Self-reliance
5. A president, not a king
6. Informality: “Call me Bob.”
7. The cult of celebrities; biographies of the rich and famous
8. Little fear of failure
9. Modest limits on immigration
10. Acceptance of criticism or disagreement with the boss or authority figures
11. Emphasis on achievement
12. Checks and balances in the U.S. Constitution
13. Identification with work or job
14. Idea of a second chance, of starting over
15. Minimal supervision from bosses
16. Egalitarianism
17. Virtue of change, of newness
18. Rags to riches syndrome: the self-made man or woman
19. Waste: the disposable society; little conservation of resources
20. Frequent job and career changes
21. Big cars, big houses, sprawling malls
22. Desire to be own boss, self-employed
23. Optimism
24. Mobile society; frequency with which people move

—INSIGHT—

Many American traits are the direct result either of our geography or of the nature of the immigrants who first settled our country.

[For suggested answers, see page 236.]

2.6—HOW NON-AMERICANS SEE AMERICANS

PART ONE

In this two-part activity, you look at how Americans are perceived by people from other cultures. Knowing how we come across can be helpful in understanding why foreigners react to us the way they sometimes do.

Newsweek magazine showed the list of qualities given below to people in six countries— Brazil, France, Great Britain, Japan, Mexico, and Germany—and asked them to pick those they associated most and least with Americans.

What do you think were the four qualities most associated with Americans?

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| 1. _____ | 2. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 4. _____ |

What do you think were the four qualities least associated with Americans?

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| 1. _____ | 2. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 4. _____ |

QUALITIES		
Decisive	Energetic	Honest
Industrious	Sexy	Self-indulgent
Sophisticated	Intelligent	Friendly
Greedy	Nationalistic	Inventive
Lazy	Rude	

[The survey results are on page 236.]

Informant Activity

PART TWO

In the second part of this activity, you need to get together with a host country national or a PCV to stand in as HCN and ask this person which of the qualities from Part One he/she associates most and least with Americans. Write the answers in the spaces provided below. Then ask your informant why he/she selected those particular qualities.

What qualities do you associate most with Americans?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

—INSIGHT—

Host country nationals may have a number of preconceptions about Americans.

What qualities do you associate least with Americans?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



2.7—LEARNING ABOUT AMERICA

Living in another culture can make you more aware of your own culture. In the space below, name two or three characteristics of American life or of Americans that you did not realize before you came here. How did you come to these realizations?



2.8—NOW WHAT?

DIVERSITY CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Trainees and Volunteers who come from minority or distinctive populations in the United States are often faced with special issues in the Peace Corps. Some of these issues are illustrated in the incidents presented below. After reading each incident, describe what you would do if you had this experience, or what you would advise if it happened to someone you knew who came to you for help.

COME WITH US

You are a strong Christian whose religious beliefs are an essential part of your identity. You have been posted in a country with an entirely different religious tradition. Recently, some of your closest friends at work have been pressuring you to attend one of their religious services and asking you if you would like to learn more about their religion. You have politely declined their invitations and would, in fact, feel uncomfortable attending one of these events. Now, one of these individuals, your counterpart at work, explains that he believes you are prejudiced against his religion. What do you say or do?

AREN'T YOU NORMAL?

You are a gay Volunteer serving in what you have heard is a somewhat homophobic country where unmarried young men regularly patronize prostitutes. For some time, your male colleagues at work have been pressuring you to “have fun” with them on their Friday night outings, but you have declined. Now one of them has asked you if you are “normal.” What do you say or do?



Being an African American in Africa has its frustrations and rewards. I have been challenged to define my identity as a person of African descent and as an American. I had to come to terms with many personal issues, like my whiteness in the eyes of Africans and in my own eyes.

—PCV West Africa

NATIVE SPEAKER

You are a Volunteer of Hispanic background whose family is third-generation American. You do not speak Spanish and have a normal American accent. You teach English at a high school in your country. After you have been at your site one month, some of your students complain to the headmaster that they want a different teacher, someone who is a native speaker of English. What do you say or do?

HELP

You are a blind PCV. You are a self-sufficient individual and value your independence. You have adjusted well at your post, but you are concerned about all the “help” you are getting from host country friends and colleagues. It is apparent that many HCNs regard people with disabilities as being unable to function without considerable assistance from those around them. At work and out in public, you are being helped to do all manner of things you are quite capable of doing on your own. While you appreciate people’s concern, you are frustrated by being the focus of so much attention and support. What can you do or say to change this dynamic?

DOUBT

You are an African American serving in a country where prejudice against Black people is traditional. At a teacher training college, you notice that the students you are assigned to teach do not seem to respect you. One day, as you are explaining a concept, one of the students raises her hand and asks a question, “Are Black people allowed to go to college in the United States?” What do you say?

MANUAL LABOR

You are an older Volunteer in excellent physical condition. You work as project manager on a school construction site. You are not especially impressed with the work of some of the subcontractors, especially the carpenters, and have on several occasions tried to show them how to do their work better. But every time you try to climb on the building or do any manual work, your assistant steps in and says it's not appropriate for you, an older man and the project manager, to do strenuous physical labor. He says you will lose the respect of the real manual laborers if you continue to do this work. Now what?

*They had too much energy,
even for Americans.*

—**John LeCarre**

YOUR OWN STORY

You may have already had your own critical incident in country. Reflect on it here and note down any lesson you learned or advice you would give someone else who had the same experience.



[For brief notes on these incidents, turn to page 236.]

2.9—ON BEING DIFFERENT

Whatever your background, you're not like the host country nationals in the place where you serve. All of us have been in situations before where we were different, and we adjusted our behavior accordingly. Think of how you behaved or spoke on such occasions and write your observations here.

[For suggestions, see page 237.]



2.10—PARTING ADVICE

As you look back on what you've learned or been reminded of about the United States in this chapter, what stands out? Suppose you are at the airport one day and you meet a host country friend who's about to depart for a two-year stay in the United States. Your friend asks you to "tell me about America." You've got time to make three points about your culture. What would you tell your friend? (Feel free to draw your ideas instead.) When you have finished, show your list or drawings to at least one other member of your group and compare your answers.

1.

2.

3.

The American seems very explicit; he wants a Yes or No. If someone tries to speak figuratively, the American is confused.

**—HCN from Ethiopia in
John Fieg & John Blair,
There Is A Difference**



INTERVIEW WITH A PCV

Friend: Were there any real surprises?

*Peace Corps
Volunteer:*

Not really. I mean, you're not prepared for every little thing, for all the particulars. But you know the people are going to be different, so you expect that. You may not know all the ways they're going to surprise you, but you do know you're going to be surprised when you go to a foreign culture.

Friend: How did the host country people react to you?

PCV: It's funny you should ask that, because that was surprising.

Friend: What do you mean?

PCV: Well, we thought we were prepared for that, but we weren't. After all, if you go in knowing these people aren't like you, then of course you also know that you aren't like them. But we had trouble believing that they found us strange sometimes. Doesn't make sense, does it?

Friend: So it's easy to accept that other people might be strange but hard to believe you could be?

PCV: That's what I experienced, anyway.

Friend: I wonder why.

PCV: I think it has to be that while *you* are actually having the experience of their strangeness, *they* are the ones having the experience of yours. You never really experience yourself as strange, of course, so it just doesn't seem real. You know it must be, but you have to take their word for it.

Friend: So you think Volunteers go around never quite convinced that the local people don't always understand them?

PCV: If you listen to some of the complaints PCVs make, I think that's at the bottom of a lot of them.



DEAR TODD—AN ANALYSIS

Now that you've completed this chapter, read Jan's letter to Todd again and note any examples of typical American attitudes or values; then continue reading below.

Paragraphs 1 & 2—

Jan's opening is encouraging. She has perspective on herself and what she can accomplish in country. Even more hopeful, she has a good sense of humor and is able to laugh at herself.

Paragraph 3—

Jan's talk about making improvements reflects a basic American assumption: that things can always be better. Some cultures may not be quite so optimistic. While she's right about needing to be trusted before you can expect anyone to listen to you, it may take more than "training and experience in the field" to impress people. What also establishes credibility in many cultures are age, gender, who you know, and what important people think of you or your ideas. Jan may also be off track when she says that people are well-intentioned and should be given the benefit of the doubt. Not all cultures believe that human nature is basically good or that people can automatically be trusted; some cultures think just the opposite.

Paragraphs 4 & 5—

Jan's belief that she will be able to overcome obstacles reflects her basic optimism. There's nothing wrong with optimism, but it doesn't always reflect reality, nor would people in many cultures believe that all you have to do is put your mind to something, and then it will happen. Jan's story is likewise instructive. It does demonstrate that you don't always have to take no for an answer, but she may not be aware of all that was happening in this incident. It's entirely possible that the people who ran the training center knew quite well that merchants would sell to anyone—What merchant wouldn't?—and the real reason they discouraged Jan and company was because they themselves wanted to buy the merchandise, make a small profit, and be loyal to the people they knew. It was not necessarily wrong for Jan to persist, but by following Jan's example, going outside the system and doing what "has never been done before," you are normally taking a risk. Usually things are done the way they are for a *reason*, and you should probably learn that reason before you proceed. In this case, the reason was rather mundane and Jan has probably not done any damage. But imagine that she was at her workplace and did something similar, thereby alienating an important local figure.

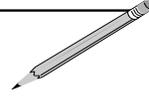
Paragraph 6—

"A positive attitude" is Jan's optimism showing through again. Some cultures would say it's more important to have a realistic attitude.

In England, if something goes wrong—say, if one finds a skunk in the garden, he writes to the family lawyer who proceeds to take the proper measures; whereas in America you telephone the fire department. Each response satisfies a characteristic need: In the English, love of order and legalistic procedure; and here in America what you like is something vivid and swift.

—A.N Whitehead

JOURNAL ENTRY 2



In this chapter, you've had a chance to reflect on and analyze some of the differences between Americans and host country nationals. How has this process helped you to understand or explain anything you've seen or that has happened to you thus far in country? Did anything you learned surprise you? Do you have questions you wish to explore further?

FUNDAMENTALS OF CULTURE II PERSONAL VS. SOCIETAL OBLIGATIONS



This exercise introduces the second of the four fundamentals of culture: personal versus societal obligations, or the conflict between individual and social ethics. The two poles of this dimension, universalism and particularism, are defined and explored in the activity that immediately follows this one.

II.1—AN ACCIDENT

You are riding 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 in this part of town is 20 miles an hour, but you happen to notice that your friend was driving 35. His lawyer tells you that if you will testify under oath that your friend was driving 20, he will suffer no serious consequences. (Adapted from Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture*)

Before reading further, circle the “Yes” or “No” in answer to this question:

Would you testify that your friend was driving 20 miles an hour? Yes No

Percentage of Americans who said they would not: 96%

Percentage of Venezuelans who said they would not: 34%

What do you think accounts for the great difference between Venezuelan and American percentages?

—INSIGHT—

The responsibilities of friendship differ from culture to culture.

After writing your answer, turn to page 238 for a brief discussion.

II.2—PERSONAL AND SOCIETAL OBLIGATIONS— UNIVERSALISM & PARTICULARISM

Resting and gossiping under a tree, the medical aides would sometimes refuse treatment, saying the clinic was “closed for cleaning.” It was a lie; no cleaning ever went on in that miserable mud-brick clinic. But having been appointed by relatives, the aides knew no work was required of them to keep their jobs.

—PCV Senegal

As was suggested by the preceding activity, people struggle with how to balance obligations to family, friends, and colleagues on the one hand and to the wider society on the other. In cases where these obligations conflict, the people of different cultures often come down on different sides of this dichotomy.

The exercise that appears below helps you to define the two sides of this dimension of human experience—universalism and particularism.* 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 is on the culture as a whole. Brief descriptions of the two poles follow.

Universalism—

Certain absolutes apply across the board, regardless of circumstances or the particular situation. Wherever possible, you should try to apply the same rules to everyone in like 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.

Particularism—

How you behave in a given situation depends on the circumstances. You treat family, friends, and your in-group the best you can, and you let the rest of the world take care of itself. Their in-groups will protect them. There can't be absolutes because everything depends on whom you're dealing with. No one expects life to be fair. Exceptions will always be made for certain people.

**Based on concepts developed by Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture*, Irwin, NY 1994 and Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars, *The Seven Cultures of Capitalism*, Doubleday Currency, 1993.*

In the following exercise, circle the statement that does not belong in the group of four, either because it reflects a universalist attitude and all the others are particularist, or vice versa:

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.
-
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.
-
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.
-
1. Friends protect friends.
 2. Life is neat, not messy.
 3. Written contracts are not necessary.
 4. This attitude is more consistent with collectivism.
-
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.

—INSIGHT—

Cultures differ on how they distinguish between obligations to in-group and out-group members.

[For suggested answers, see page 238.]



ERNIE

Ernie, Harry, Gordon, and I commuted for years together in the 1980s. Ernie, we found out, spoke Czech before he spoke English, but he had never set foot outside America. He and his brother and sister grew up in the Czech-speaking Valach family in Montana, his father having immigrated to the States in 1910.

I called Ernie excitedly when I found out the Peace Corps was assigning me to what was then Czechoslovakia. He supplied me with a list of his Czech first cousins, none of whom he'd ever met or spoken to, and the name of the village where his father was born, in 1892.

I went to that village one cool, sunny day. When I got off the bus I spotted the town hall. In Czech, I explained to the competent-looking, wide-eyed woman and young man in jeans that I had a friend in Oregon whose father was born in Rostin and had left for the United States as a young man. I timidly added that I was looking for my friend's cousin, Antonin.

It turned out the man in jeans was the mayor; he knew cousin Antonin and everyone else in town. We went to the family cottage on the outskirts of the village. The family was a bit surprised to see the mayor—and even more surprised when he explained I was from Oregon and knew Ernie.

They all literally grabbed me, stroked my arms, wiped tears from their eyes, and hustled me into the cottage where Ernie's father was born. I had planned to spend two hours in Rostin, which proved to be impossible. They sent out word somehow that I was there, and from 11 a.m. that day until noon the next, I saw cousins from four cities and a good number of Ernie's nieces, grand-nieces, nephews, and grand-nephews. Antonin's wife gave me a beautiful lace tablecloth she had made. I said I would take it to Ernie's family. She said, "No, it's for you. They get one when they come."

—PCV Czech Republic

II.3—SCORE YOURSELF— UNIVERSALIST OR PARTICULARIST

Having become familiar with the two poles of this concept in the previous exercise, you now have a chance to think of your own behavior 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.). Circle the one 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 be as honest as you can by answering quickly and 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 no absolutes in life; you always have to look at the particular situation. | 3b. There are certain absolutes which apply across the board. |
| 4a. I would be very hurt if my neighbor, a policeman, gave me a ticket for speeding. | 4b. I would not expect my neighbor, the policeman, to jeopardize his job and not give me a speeding ticket. |
| 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. |

II.3

—INSIGHT—

The relationship between individual and social ethics is influenced by culture.

- 7a. Performance reviews should not take personal relations into account.
- 7b. Performance reviews inevitably take personal relations into account.
- 8a. You often have to make exceptions for people because of circumstances.
- 8b. Exceptions should be very rare; otherwise, you open the floodgates,
- 9a. Contracts aren't necessary between friends.
- 9b. Contracts guarantee that friends stay friends.
- 10a. What is ethical in a given situation depends on who you are dealing with.
- 10b. Ethics are ethics no matter who you are dealing with.

Now that you have made your selections, turn to page 239 for results, and then calculate whether you came out more on the universalist or particularist side. Is your score here consistent with your self-concept?



11.4—THINKING IT THROUGH

Look again at the statements in the preceding exercise and at the characteristics in the exercise before that. Can you see any examples or “proof” of universalist or particularist tendencies in your host culture?

Are there features of each approach that you like or agree with? What?

Are there features of each approach you don't like or disagree with? What?

