

CHAPTER ONE

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE



This workbook begins by defining a few terms and inviting you to consider some of the key processes and concepts embodied in this word, “culture.” Before you look at any culture in particular, it is helpful to understand what culture in general is and how it works.

The central focus here is on the relationship between culture in the abstract—the underlying values and assumptions of a society—and culture in the flesh—the specific behaviors that derive from those values. It is important to understand that what people do and say in a particular culture, whether it be yours or that of your host country, are not arbitrary and spontaneous, but are consistent with what people in that culture value and believe in. By knowing people’s values and beliefs, you can come to expect and predict their behavior. Once host country people are no longer catching you off guard with their actions and once you are no longer simply reacting to their actions, you are well on your way to successful cultural adjustment.

Moreover, once you accept that people behave the way they do for a reason, whatever you may think of that reason, you can go beyond simply reacting to that behavior and figure out how to work with it. Knowing where host country behavior is coming from doesn’t mean that you have to like or accept it, but it should mean that you’re no longer surprised by it—and that is a considerable step toward successful interaction.

Finally, in this chapter, you discover what this workbook is *not* going to be about—that is, the universal behaviors that are common to all cultures and the personal behaviors that are specific to every individual. These are important topics, but they are beyond the scope of this book—except to remind you that because of universal behaviors, you may not be surprised nor confused by many of the ways host country people act, while because of individual differences, you may not expect nor understand what someone says or does even after you’ve learned about the host country culture in general.

Note— Trainees who are living with host families may want to read and complete Exercise 5.3, p. 156, “The Rules of the House,” in Chapter Five, before continuing further in this workbook. This exercise has information useful at this stage of your experience.

What I say is this, and this I do not say to all Englishmen. God made us different, you and I, and your fathers and my fathers. For one thing, we have not the same notions of honesty and speaking the truth. That is not our fault, because we are made so. And look now what you do? You come and judge us by your own standards of morality. You are, of course, too hard on us. And again I tell you you are great fools in this matter. Who are we to have your morals, or you to have ours?

—**Rudyard Kipling,**
East and West

1.1—INTRODUCING JAN

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

—Geert Hofstede

In this workbook, you meet a fictitious Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) named Jan, whom you follow via letters and extracts from her journal through the various phases of her Peace Corps experience, from pre-service training to the end of her service. You catch up with Jan at the beginning of each chapter, where you get an update on what's happening in her life.

In each of these excerpts, including the one that follows, Jan makes some observations or reaches some conclusions about the experience of living and working overseas that may not be altogether complete or accurate, however real and heartfelt they may be to her. These observations or comments are keyed to the information covered in that particular chapter, and your task in each case is to read this latest communication from Jan and mark any passages that seem suspect or dubious to you. After you work through the various activities in the chapter, you are asked to look at Jan's remarks again, in light of what you have now learned, and see if you would mark the same passages or add any others. The paragraphs are numbered for ease of reference.



Sunday, June 27

1. It has been so hectic in the 10 days we've been here. I've only had time to make notes for this journal. Now, at last, I can write a real entry. It's Sunday afternoon and for once we have nothing official scheduled. My clothes are drying on the line (I have to sit here and watch them, my host mother told me, because "bad people" may come and steal them) and I'm sitting in the shade of some kind of fruit tree.

2. I'm not so sure about those bad people, for I've certainly not met anyone yet who fits that description. Everyone we've met so far, from the training staff to our host families, has been remarkably kind and nice. It's a cliché, I know, but the people really are exceptionally nice; they can't do enough for you, and, much to my surprise, they understand us much better than I thought they would.

3. Maybe understand isn't the word. Maybe the real point is that they just aren't as different as I thought they would be or was led to believe they would be. Or maybe it's that in spite of a few superficial differences, in clothes, food, dress, that underneath they are more like us than I thought. Why do I say this? It's just that there haven't been any real disasters yet; I haven't done anything that has shocked or offended anyone. I suppose it's because I learned a lot of the do's and don'ts from that culture-shock book I read before coming here that I can get by without making any major mistakes. And I certainly haven't observed anything that really shocked or offended me.

4. I really do understand more than I expected to (not the language, of course, but the things people do) and recognize a lot of common behaviors. I watched people in a restaurant the other night, and there was nothing they did that I wouldn't do back home. On the other hand, come to think of it, I did see someone kick a dog the other afternoon and was shocked at such casual cruelty.

5. I have a lot to learn, I'm sure, but if these first few days are any indication, this is not going to be quite as hard as I had expected.

1.2—BETWEEN THE LINES

To begin thinking about culture, read carefully the following statement that describes a classroom in a developing country as seen by an American observer.*

Teachers' frequent use of corporal punishment discourages students from actively participating in the classroom. Students are expected to sit rigidly in their seats and speak only when spoken to. Conditioned in this way, it's not surprising they don't feel free to speak out in the classroom; their shyness, however, should not be mistaken for lack of interest.

If you read between the lines, you see that the writer makes a number of assumptions about children, students, teachers, and the way people learn. Before reading further, list as many of these beliefs or assumptions as you can in the space below.

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

—Gary Wederspahn

1. *that student participation in class is good.*

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

*The source for this exercise is Dr. Robert Kohls.

You could have found some or all of the following beliefs:

1. that student participation in class is good.
2. that corporal punishment of young people is bad.
3. that sitting rigidly is bad for young people.
4. that speaking only when spoken to is bad.
5. that speaking freely is good.
6. that students who don't speak are shy.
7. that lack of interest is bad.

Now imagine for a moment a culture in which people do not share these beliefs, whose people, in fact, believe the opposite. How would they view the same classroom? How would they view a classroom in the United States? That people from two different cultures can view the same behavior differently is precisely what makes cross-cultural encounters so challenging and problematic.

—INSIGHT—

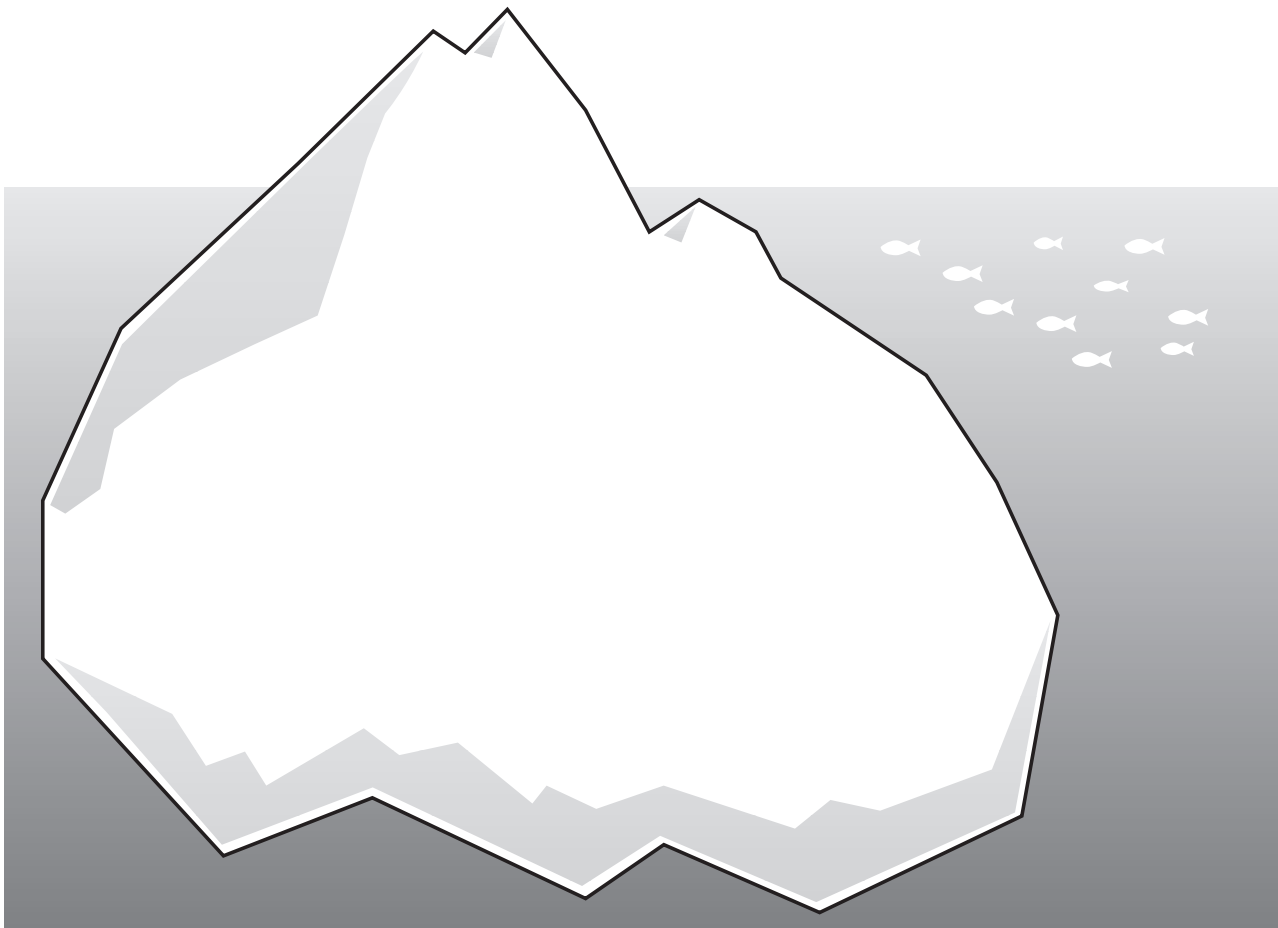
When we look at behavior, we interpret what is happening through the filter of what our culture *tells* us is happening.



1.3—WHAT IS CULTURE?

THE ICEBERG

Culture has been aptly compared to an iceberg. Just as an iceberg has a visible section above the waterline, and a larger, invisible section below the water line, so culture has some aspects that are observable and others that can only be suspected, imagined, or intuited. Also like an iceberg, that part of culture that is visible (observable behavior) is only a small part of a much bigger whole.



The numbered items that appear below are all features of culture. In the drawing of the iceberg on the opposite page, write above the waterline the numbers for those features you consider observable behavior; write the remaining numbers beneath the line.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1. facial expressions | 14. notions of modesty |
| 2. religious beliefs | 15. foods |
| 3. religious rituals | 16. eating habits |
| 4. importance of time | 17. understanding of the natural world |
| 5. paintings | 18. concept of self |
| 6. values | 19. work ethic |
| 7. literature | 20. concept of beauty |
| 8. childraising beliefs | 21. music |
| 9. concept of leadership | 22. styles of dress |
| 10. gestures | 23. general world view |
| 11. holiday customs | 24. concept of personal space |
| 12. concept of fairness | 25. rules of social etiquette |
| 13. nature of friendship | |

—INSIGHT—

Surface behaviors are influenced by beneath-the-surface values and assumptions.

You can see that there is a relationship between those items that appear above the waterline and those that appear below it. In most cases, the invisible aspects of culture influence or cause the visible ones. Religious beliefs, for example, are clearly manifest in certain holiday customs, and notions of modesty affect styles of dress.

[Suggested answers to the exercise appear on page 233.]

1.4—A TOUGH MOMENT

Think of the worst experience you've had in country so far—either a moment when you've been most frustrated, embarrassed, confused, or annoyed, or something that bothers you on a daily basis. What in your cultural background made you react so strongly? Is there a cultural explanation? Do you think local people would have reacted the same way? Why, or why not?

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

1.5—LINKING VALUES TO BEHAVIOR

In the iceberg exercise, you saw how certain aspects or features of culture are visible—they show up in people’s behavior—while many other aspects of culture are invisible, existing only in the realms of thought, feeling, and belief. The examples in this exercise show how these two realms, the visible and the hidden, are related to each other, how the values and beliefs you cannot see affect behavior.

To understand where behavior comes from—to understand *why* people behave the way they do—means learning about values and beliefs. The behavior of people from another culture may seem strange to you, but it probably makes sense to them, and vice versa. The reason *any* behavior makes sense is simply because it is consistent with what a given person believes in or holds dear. Conversely, when we say that what someone has done “makes no sense,” what we mean is that that action contradicts what we believe that person feels or wants.

In the exercise below, match the value or belief in the column on the left to a behavior in the column on the right.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1. Directness | ___ Use of understatement. |
| 2. Centrality of family | ___ Asking people to call you by your first name. |
| 3. External control | ___ Taking off from work to attend the funeral of an aunt. |
| 4. Saving face | ___ Not helping the person next to you on an exam. |
| 5. Respect for age | ___ Disagreeing openly with someone at a meeting. |
| 6. Informality | ___ Not laying off an older worker whose performance is weak. |
| 7. Deference to authority | ___ At a meeting, agreeing with a suggestion you think is wrong. |
| 8. Indirectness | ___ Inviting the teaboy to eat lunch with you in your office. |
| 9. Self-reliance | ___ Asking the headmaster’s opinion of something you’re the expert on. |
| 10. Egalitarianism | ___ Accepting, without question, that something cannot be changed. |

[For suggested answers, see page 233.]

Culture consists of concepts, values, and assumptions about life that guide behavior 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

—INSIGHT—
Behavior makes more sense when you understand the value or belief behind it.



BATTERIES

I hadn't timed it right. The village I had to get to was still an hour away when night fell. Walking in the dark was a nuisance; also, it had been raining since early afternoon. Worst of all, as I leaned against the wall of the chautara and felt the blessed release from the weight of my backpack, I discovered my flashlight batteries were dead. The hour ahead was shaping up poorly.

As I stood there in the rain, my glasses fogged, drinking from my water bottle, an old woman came around the bend, bent over under a stack of firewood. She headed for the chautara, her eyes down, and nearly walked into me, looking up suddenly when she saw my feet. "Namaste," she said, shifting her load onto the wall. "Kaha jaane?"

"To the village," I said.

"Tonight? It's dark and your shirt is wet." Then, more urgently, "You're the American, aren't you?"

"My son is in America," she said. She didn't look like the type whose son would be in America. "He joined the army, the Gurkhas, and they sent him there for training. Three months ago. He's a country boy. I worry. You need some tea before you go on."

After ten minutes, we were at her small house beside the trail. She doffed the firewood and turned to me, "Take off your shirt." I looked surprised. "I'll dry it by the fire in the kitchen. Put on this blanket."

A few minutes later she came out of the kitchen with two mugs of tea, swept a hapless chicken off the table, and pulled up a bench for me. The tea worked wonders, bringing back my courage for the walk ahead. She offered me food, too, but I declined, explaining that I didn't want to be on the trail too late at night. "It's OK," she said. "You have a flashlight."

She fetched my shirt. I put it on, revived by the warmth against my skin, and went outside to hoist my pack. I turned to thank her. "Switch on your flashlight," she told me.

"The batteries are dead." She went inside and came back with two batteries, a considerable gift for someone of her means.

"I couldn't," I said. "Besides, I know the trail."

"Take them." She smiled, showing great gaps where teeth had once been.

"You've been very kind to me," I said.

"My son is in America," she said. "Some day, on the trail, he will be cold and wet. Maybe a mother in your land will help him."



—PCV Nepal

1.6—UNIVERSAL, CULTURAL OR PERSONAL

Culture is only one category or dimension of human behavior, and it is therefore important to see it in relation to the other two dimensions: the universal and the personal. The three can be distinguished as follows:

- ☞ **universal** refers to ways in which all people in all groups are the same
- ☞ **cultural** refers to what a particular *group* of people have in common with each other and how they are different from every *other* group
- ☞ **personal** describes the ways in which each one of us is different from everyone else, including those in our group

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

These are two important points for you to remember:

1. Because of universal behavior, not everything about people in a new culture is going to be different; some of what you already know about human behavior is going to apply in your host country.
2. Because of personal behavior, not everything you learn about your host culture is going to apply in equal measure, or at all, to every *individual* in that culture.

This next exercise contains a list of behaviors. In the underlined space preceding each of them, put a “U” if you think the behavior is universal, “C” if it is cultural, or “P” if it is personal.

1. _____ Sleeping with a bedroom window open.
2. _____ Running from a dangerous animal.
3. _____ Considering snakes to be “evil.”
4. _____ Men opening doors for women.
5. _____ Respecting older people.
6. _____ Liking spicy food.
7. _____ Preferring playing soccer to reading a book.
8. _____ Eating regularly.
9. _____ Eating with knife, fork, and spoon.
10. _____ Being wary of strangers.
11. _____ Calling a waiter with a hissing sound.
12. _____ Regretting being the cause of an accident.
13. _____ Feeling sad at the death of your mother.
14. _____ Wearing white mourning robes for 30 days after the death of your mother.
15. _____ Not liking wearing mourning robes for 30 days after the death of your mother.

—INSIGHT—

Some behaviors are shared by us all, while some others are unique to individuals.

[For suggested answers, see page 233.]

Observation Activity

1.7—UNIVERSAL, CULTURAL, OR PERSONAL—MAKING OBSERVATIONS

The differences between universal, cultural, and personal behaviors occur in all cultures. Try to find examples of each in your host country. Spend some time in the streets observing the people around you and try to note four examples of each category of behavior. For personal behaviors, you may find it easier observing people you know well, such as people at your training site or in your host family. When you have completed this exercise, it may be helpful to show your list to someone else to get that person's reactions.

UNIVERSAL

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

CULTURAL

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

PERSONAL

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



Culture is an integrated system of learned behavior 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

1.8—THE PROCESS OF CULTURAL CONDITIONING

How do people *acquire* their culture? How do they learn all the behaviors that are regarded as right and wrong in their society? This process, known as cultural conditioning, goes on in all cultures, but the specific behaviors that people acquire, the precise content of their conditioning, varies considerably from group to group. Keep in mind also that while it is behaviors that people learn through this process, they are automatically learning and internalizing the values and beliefs behind those behaviors. 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.

While conditioning occurs mostly in early childhood, adults continue to be conditioned as they acquire new behaviors throughout their life. The differences between the two are these:

1. In **Childhood** conditioning, infants and young children learn such basic activities of life as eating, walking, talking, dressing, bathing, etc.
2. In **Adult** conditioning, people learn new behaviors or new ways to perform already conditioned behaviors, as, for example, learning to use a Turkish toilet or eat with your hands rather than with silverware.

Though the steps are the same in each case, one difference in adult conditioning, the kind most PCVs experience, is that it often requires *unlearning* or *unacquiring* behavior that was already acquired through childhood conditioning, and this can take longer. Here are the five steps 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. Taking the example of eating with your hands, you may have observed how it is done, or someone may have told you how it is done.
2. **Imitation**—Now you actually try to carry out the activity; you sit down at a table and begin eating with your hands. At this stage, it is awkward for you, and you're conscious all the while of what you're doing, trying not to make mistakes. You may have difficulty concentrating on a conversation, for all your attention is on the act of eating.

3. **Reinforcement**—As you eat, people encourage you when you do it right and correct you when you are wrong. Over the course of several meals, you naturally try to do what they tell you.
4. **Internalization**—Without needing much reinforcement, over time and with practice, you now know how to eat with your hands. You may still have to pay attention to what you're doing, but not as much as during stages 2 and 3.
5. **Spontaneous Manifestation**—Now you're able to eat "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.

Now try to think of various behaviors you are in the process of learning or relearning as you adjust to your host country and what stage you are in vis-a-vis that behavior. Try to write down a behavior for each of the five stages as you think of the following:

1. Something you are just becoming aware of and perhaps observing closely but not yet doing.

2. Something you have just begun to try doing.

3. Something you've done once or twice but haven't mastered yet.

4. Something you have recently mastered.

5. Something you now do without thinking.

—INSIGHT—

While people have to learn most of their behavior, after they learn it they come to regard that behavior as natural and normal—for everyone.

1.9—IN THE MIND OF THE BEHOLDER

We all believe that we observe reality, things as they are, but what actually happens is that the mind interprets what the eyes see and gives it meaning; it is only at this point, when meaning is assigned, that we can truly say we have *seen* something. In other words, what we see is as much in the mind as it is in reality. If you consider that 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, then you have the explanation for that most fundamental of all cross-cultural problems: the fact that two people look upon the same reality, the same example of behavior, and see two entirely different things.

Any behavior observed across the cultural divide, therefore, has to 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

Only when these two meanings are the same do we have successful communication, successful in the sense that the meaning that was intended by the doer is the one that was understood by the observer.

PART ONE

In the first part of this exercise, read the description of the eight instances of behavior given below and write down your immediate response to or interpretation of that behavior in terms of your own cultural values, beliefs, or perception. The first one has been done for you.

1. A person comes to a meeting half an hour after the stated starting time.

Your interpretation: *This person is late and should at least apologize or give an explanation.*

2. Someone kicks a dog.

Your interpretation: _____

3. At the end of a meal, people belch audibly.

Your interpretation: _____

4. Someone makes the OK gesture at you.

Your interpretation: _____

5. A woman carries a heavy pile of wood on her back while her husband walks in front of her carrying nothing.

Your interpretation: _____

6. A male guest helps a hostess carry dirty dishes into the kitchen.

Your interpretation: _____

7. A young man and a young woman are kissing each other while seated on a park bench.

Your interpretation: _____

8. While taking an exam, a student copies from the paper of another student.

Your interpretation: _____

PART TWO

In the second part of this activity, you are asked to imagine how these same eight behaviors would be perceived or interpreted by someone from a culture different than your own. The particular cultural difference is described in each case. Read each behavior and the description of the culture, and then write in the space provided how you think a person from such a culture would interpret that behavior.



1. A person comes to a meeting half an hour after the stated starting time. How would this act be interpreted:

☞ by someone from a culture where people always arrive half an hour after the stated starting time

Interpretation: _____

☞ by someone from a culture where meetings never start until at least an hour after the stated time

Interpretation: _____

2. Someone kicks a dog. How would this act be interpreted:

☞ by someone from a country where dogs always carry disease

Interpretation: _____

☞ by someone from a country where most dogs are wild and vicious

Interpretation: _____

3. At the end of a meal, people belch audibly. How would this be interpreted:

☞ by someone from a culture where belching is the normal way to compliment the food

Interpretation: _____

4. Someone makes the OK gesture at you. How would this be interpreted:

☞ by someone in whose culture this gesture is obscene

Interpretation: _____

☞ by someone in whose culture this gesture has romantic connotations

Interpretation: _____

5. A woman carries a heavy pile of wood on her back while her husband walks in front of her carrying nothing. How would this be interpreted:

☞ by someone from a culture where women are proud of their strength and ability to work hard

Interpretation: _____

6. A male guest helps a hostess carry dirty dishes into the kitchen. How would this act be interpreted:

☞ by men from a culture where men never clean up after a meal

Interpretation: _____

—INSIGHT—

A given behavior has no built-in meaning; it means whatever the observer decides it means.

I believe that participant observation is more than a research methodology. It is a way of being, especially suited to a world of change.

—Mary Catherine Bateson

☞ *by the hostess from that same culture*

Interpretation: _____

7. A young man and a young woman are kissing each other while seated on a park bench. How would this act be interpreted:

☞ *by someone from a culture where men and women never touch in public*

Interpretation: _____

8. While taking an exam, a student copies from the paper of another student. How would this act be interpreted:

☞ *by someone from a culture where exams are not fair and are designed to eliminate students at various stages of the education system*

Interpretation: _____

☞ *by someone from a culture where it is shameful not to help your friend if you are able to*

Interpretation: _____

1.10—DEFINING CULTURE

Reading through this chapter, you notice a number of definitions of culture presented in the form of short quotations in the margins. Take a minute to reread these quotations and then note, in the spaces below, any idea, concept, or key word that is repeated more than once. Assembling these recurring phrases gives you a good working definition of culture.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

—INSIGHT—

While culture has many definitions, most observers agree on certain fundamental characteristics.

[For one possible list, see page 233.]



INTRODUCING JAN— AN ANALYSIS

Now that you have completed the activities in this chapter, look again at Exercise 1.1, the excerpt from Jan’s journal. In light of what you have read in this chapter, do you find other passages you want to mark as questionable or inaccurate, or passages you underlined previously that now strike you as acceptable? Mark the text as necessary and then continue reading.

The purpose of these introductory excerpts from the writings of PCV Jan is to teach you about culture and cultural differences through the “actual” experiences—and in particular, the mistakes—of a typical Peace Corps Volunteer. For this technique to work, and especially for these lessons to have maximum impact, you are presented with more of Jan’s errors than her triumphs. If Jan’s experiences leave you with the notion that the Peace Corps experience is nothing more than a steady progression of cultural “faux pas”, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations, remember that you haven’t seen all the letters and journal entries Jan wrote that contained *no* cultural mistakes.

Jan will do fine. And so will you.

Paragraphs 1 & 2—

Jan is at the beginning of a dynamic process—getting to know how she, as an American, fits in with another culture. In this excerpt, she is full of enthusiasm, delighted with people’s kindness, and understandably uncritical of the few host country nationals she has met. Nevertheless, she is right to listen to her host mother and keep an eye open for “bad people,” even though she hasn’t met any—yet.

Paragraphs 3 & 4—

At this stage, she is relieved to see that people “aren’t as different as I thought they would be.” Recognizing similarities (universal behaviors) is reassuring for anyone beginning a new adventure in a new country.

She is not taking her surroundings for granted, however. She is already experiencing some of the contradictions of living in a new culture, and she is conscious of the potential for disaster or for shocking people. She may have made a few cultural “faux pas,” but no one may have told her so, not wanting to embarrass her. On the one hand, the people in the restaurant behaved as they would “back home.” On the other hand, she was shocked at the “casual cruelty” of seeing someone kick a dog. Recognizing her feelings and reactions is important, but was that kick really casual

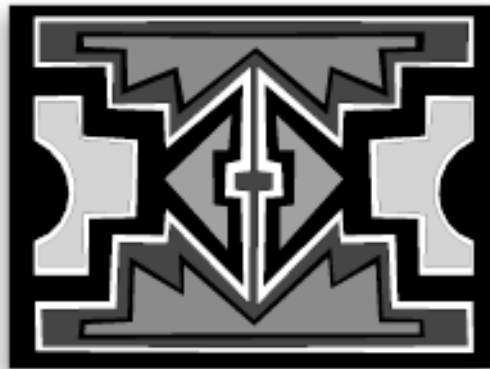
cruelty? It's possible that it was self-protection, not wanting to be infected by the bite of a diseased animal.

Her book of do's and don'ts has probably provided her with a useful security blanket for her first few days. For Jan to have a deep understanding of her host culture and her interactions with people around her, however, it will be important for her to go beneath the surface, and learn the reasons and the values behind the do's and don'ts.

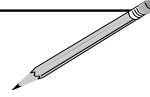
Finally, when Jan says she recognizes "a lot of common behaviors," she may indeed recognize the behaviors, but she may not be interpreting them correctly. At this stage, she cannot have experienced the many ways these people may act differently from what she is accustomed to. Her world is full of common behaviors because for the moment, these are the only ones she can see.

Paragraph 5—

"I have a lot to learn," says Jan. Her openness to new experiences and her willingness to reflect on her learnings in her journal are signs that she has started out well.



JOURNAL ENTRY 1



Use this space to react to or reflect on anything you might have learned in this chapter. Write whatever you like—notes to yourself, questions, feelings, fears, doubts. These are some questions you might want to consider: What did you learn about culture in this chapter that you didn't know before? What was the most important fact you learned? Do you now understand something about the local people that you didn't before? If answering these questions helps you, good; otherwise, ignore them. This space is for you.

FUNDAMENTALS OF CULTURE

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a complex concept, with numerous dimensions and facets. This workbook presents and examines many of these, but singles out for more extensive treatment the four most important, the building blocks of culture:

I	THE CONCEPT OF THE SELF
II	PERSONAL VS. SOCIETAL OBLIGATIONS
III	THE CONCEPT OF TIME
IV	THE LOCUS OF CONTROL

The most significant ways in which cultures differ are in how they view and react to these four concepts. Not everything people do can be explained through them, but because they are so fundamental, they are often the source of or ultimate reason behind a wide range of thought and behavior. They give you a structure for thinking about and analyzing culture that can help you explain why host country people think and behave the way they do, and why you think and behave the way you do.

Each of these concepts, with related activities, is presented in a separate section between the workbook's regular chapters. A final section contains an exercise that asks you to compare and contrast your personal views on these topics with those of your own and of the host culture.

To have your eyes widened and your organ of belief stretched, whilst remaining discreetly submissive, seems to me a faculty the [traveler] ought to cultivate. When you have submitted to looking about you discreetly and to observing with as little prejudice as possible, then you are in a proper state of mind to walk about and learn from what you see.

—**Philip Glazebrook,**
Journey to Kars

I.2—THE CONCEPT OF SELF— INDIVIDUALISM & COLLECTIVISM

You had a taste of what the concept of self entails in the previous activity, “Sharing the Rewards.” Here you are given a general description of the two poles of this dimension, individualism and collectivism,* and asked to assign a list of behaviors to one side or the other. The two concepts are described briefly below. While no culture is exclusively individualist or collective—not to mention individuals within each type—most tend to be *more* one than the other.

Individualist—

The individual identifies primarily with self, with the needs of the individual being satisfied before those of the group. Looking after and taking care of oneself, being self-sufficient, guarantees the well being of the group. Independence and self-reliance are greatly stressed and valued. In general, people tend to distance themselves psychologically and emotionally from each other. One may *choose* to join groups, but group membership is not essential to one’s identity or success. Individualist characteristics are often associated with men and people in urban settings.

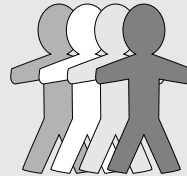


Koreans were Confucian and therefore lived their lives according to the five Confucian relationships, while I lived my own life pretty much according to the personal pronoun “I.”

— PCV Korea

Collectivist—

One’s identity is in large part a function of one’s membership and role in a group, e.g., the family or work team. The survival and success of the group ensures the well-being of the individual, so that by considering the needs and feelings of others, one protects oneself. Harmony and the interdependence of group members are stressed and valued. Group members are relatively close psychologically and emotionally, but distant toward nongroup members. Collectivist characteristics are often associated with women and people in rural settings.



*Based on concepts developed by Triandis, *The analysis of subjective culture*, NY, Wiley-Interscience, 1972; Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language*, Anchor-Doubleday, 1959; and Geert Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences*, Sage Publications, CA, 1980.

Now look at the list of behaviors or characteristics given below. If you decide the statement is *more likely* to apply to people living in an individualist culture, write “I” in the underlined blank space; if you think it is characteristic of a collectivist culture, write “C.”

CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIORS

1. ___ People answer the phone by giving the name of the organization.
2. ___ People give cocktail parties.
3. ___ *Intergroup* rivalry is strong.
4. ___ Employee-of-the-year awards are offered.
5. ___ People adhere to tradition.
6. ___ People are promoted based on production and results.
7. ___ Contracts in business are used frequently.
8. ___ There is a need for autonomy.
9. ___ People change jobs frequently.
10. ___ People believe that conflict clears the air.
11. ___ There is a need for affiliation.
12. ___ Short-term relationships are common.
13. ___ It’s okay to stand out.
14. ___ Face saving is important.
15. ___ It’s common for mothers to ask their preschoolers what they want to wear today.
16. ___ Self-help books are popular.
17. ___ Decisions are made by consensus.
18. ___ The language has one word for mother’s brother, another for father’s brother.
19. ___ Marriages are arranged.
20. ___ People have potluck dinners.

—INSIGHT—

The concept of personal identity differs greatly from culture to culture.

[For suggested answers, see page 234.]



THE ELECTRICIAN

The electrician turned out to be a young newlywed who lived just down the street. He showed up at my door late one afternoon with a screwdriver and a roll of electrical tape, and started taking things apart. That evening he could not find or fix the flaw, but he came back early the next day. When he was done I asked him, “How much do I owe you?”

The reply was standard. “Nothing. Just your thanks.” No money. No goods in trade. Not even a beer or a soda. This is something I have experienced many times here in Alubaren, and it always leaves me stumped. Doesn’t he realize what he just did for me is considered work? Doesn’t he know that his time and effort have value? Doesn’t he need every penny he can get to provide for his new wife and baby?

I think over some of the other times when I’ve experienced this same phenomenon: the bus driver who hauled my furniture over from the next village when the Volunteer there left; the seamstress who took in the waist of my shorts; the carpenter who carried my new bookshelf down the mountainside on his back. And there are more. What is it with all of these people who are so kind and do so much for me but never accept any payment or ask for anything in return? Is it because I’m the “gringa,” an outsider, and they want to give a good impression of their people and their country?

That’s what I thought at first, but now I’ve been in Alubaren long enough to have a truer perspective on how things work here. It’s their sense of community, the great importance they attach to looking after each other. There’s something very special about a place where the primary value placed on goods and services is the people’s regard for one another.

—PCV Honduras



I feel my neighbors are rude, coming and asking for things from my garden. They believe I’m selfish keeping my first harvest to myself.

—PCV Fiji

I.3—SCORE YOURSELF— INDIVIDUALIST OR COLLECTIVIST

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 think of yourself as more individualist or collectivist.

Below are a number of paired statements. Read each pair (a. and b.) and circle the one that 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 not analyzing your response.

*I had more than one
Senegalese friend who owned
only two pairs of pants but
gave one away to someone
whose only pair had become
too ragged to be decent.*

—PCV Senegal

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1a. Managers should be hired from within the organization, based mainly on their seniority. | 1b. Managers should be hired on the basis of the skills they have and previous experience in similar jobs. |
| 2a. It takes a long time to make a new friend. | 2b. Friends can be made relatively quickly. |
| 3a. If I took a job with a new company, I would expect my old employer to wish me well. | 3b. If I took a job with a new company, I would be afraid that my employer might lose face. |
| 4a. I expect people to judge me by my achievements. | 4b. I expect people to judge me by my affiliations. |
| 5a. Before making a decision, it is best to make sure everyone agrees with it. | 5b. Before making a decision, you should get at least half of the people to agree with it. |
| 6a. I am embarrassed by individual recognition. | 6b. If I do a good job, I feel I have earned individual recognition. |
| 7a. Making sure people don't lose face is more important than always being completely honest. | 7b. Being straight with people is always best in the end. |

- 8a.** If my brother or sister did wrong, I would admit this to other people.
- 8b.** If my brother or sister did wrong, I would defend them to other people.
- 9a.** Confrontation is sometimes necessary to clear the air.
- 9b.** Confrontation almost always causes more problems than it solves.
- 10a.** In the end, you can always rely on other people.
- 10b.** In the end, you can only rely on yourself.

Now that you have made your selections, turn to page 235 for results, and then calculate whether you came out more on the individualist or collectivist side. Is your score here consistent with your self-concept?

Keep in mind that this exercise is not scientific. Most of the paired statements are taken out of context; you might select one alternative in one set of circumstances and the opposite in another. The exercise, however, has exposed you to some alternative behaviors and ways of thinking that you might want to consider as you continue your Peace Corps experience.



—INSIGHT—

Culture influences whether you act more like an individualist or a collectivist.

I.4

*This independence is something
Guineans cannot understand.
Making it on your own is not
valued.*

—PCV Guinea Bissau.

I.4—PLEASSED TO MEET YOU

One way in which people suggest whether they are more individualist or collectivist is in how they introduce themselves. The idea of an introduction, of course, is to establish who you are, to fix your identity. Think for a moment what you usually say about yourself when you meet someone you don't know, or what the other person usually asks about you. How do you introduce yourself to a group, before giving a presentation? Write down two or three things you would mention about yourself.



Now listen to a few host country people when they introduce themselves. What information do they provide? What do other people ask them? What do they say when introducing themselves to a group before giving a presentation? In the space below, write what you've noticed, and then reflect on any differences between what these people say and what people in the U.S. would say.

