

# Cultural Awareness Supplement to *Law Enforcement I*

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## Defining Culture

What is meant by culture? Culture represents the values and assumptions that are at the core of a society.

You can compare a culture to an iceberg—you can see a small part, but a much larger part remains beneath the surface. A culture has many features. Like an iceberg, some of these features are visible, while many others are not visible and must be imagined (based on an individual's behavior) or learned. Some of these features of a culture include:

- Religious beliefs and observances/rituals
- Communication styles
- Gestures and facial expressions
- Etiquette rules
- Concept of time
- Concept of self
- Eating habits
- Meanings of words
- Sense of humor
- Holidays and customs
- Values
- Concept of fairness
- Gender roles
- Child-raising beliefs
- Tone of voice and emotions
- Work ethic
- Ideas about modesty
- Nature of relationships
- Styles of dress
- Concept of personal space
- Silences in conversation



**Discussion:** Which features of a culture might be observable (above the surface)? Which features might be hard to detect (below the surface)?

The values and beliefs of a culture are the foundation for how people from that culture behave. To better appreciate why people act as they do, you must know more about what they believe and value. The values and beliefs of a culture can include respect for age, importance of family, directness and indirectness, formality and informality, saving face, and respect for authority, among others. The reason that any person's behavior—including yours—makes sense to that person is because the behavior is consistent with what that person believes in and values.

Below are some features of culture and how they compare in traditional American culture and in some other cultures.

Cultural Feature	In American Culture	In Other Cultures
Concept of self and personal space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The individual is most important. Being self-sufficient is important to the well-being of the group. This is the individualist concept of self.</li> <li>• Individuality is respected. Individuals control their own futures. (“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”)</li> <li>• Personal space is large.</li> <li>• Greetings are informal, including handshakes.</li> <li>• Titles are less important than accomplishments.</li> <li>• Challenging authority is acceptable and directness is a virtue.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The group is more important than any individual. The success of the group is important to the well-being of the individual. This is the collectivist concept of self.</li> <li>• Conformity with the group is expected. Individuals accept their roles in society.</li> <li>• Greetings are formal and may include bowing and handshakes.</li> <li>• Authority and hierarchy are to be respected.</li> <li>• Conflict is avoided and harmony is valued.</li> </ul>
Communication styles and meanings of words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct with focus on content; words have meaning (“say what you mean, and mean what you say”).</li> <li>• You do not have to “read between the lines.”</li> <li>• What a person says and how a person feels are often very similar.</li> <li>• It’s okay to say “No.”</li> <li>• Conversation may include few gestures; gestures may attract unwanted attention.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indirect with focus on context; words alone are not enough to determine meaning.</li> <li>• People may only suggest what they really mean; you must read between the lines.</li> <li>• What a person says and how a person feels may be very different.</li> <li>• Saying “No” is difficult; may say “Yes” but mean “No” (to maintain harmony and “save face”).</li> <li>• Gesturing may be a very common feature of conversations.</li> </ul>
Concept of time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time moves in a straight line.</li> <li>• Being prompt is important.</li> <li>• “Time is money.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time is flexible.</li> <li>• Time spent on relationships is most important use of time.</li> <li>• Punctuality is not expected.</li> </ul>
Nature of relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus is on the immediate (“nuclear”) family.</li> <li>• Youth has value; age becomes a handicap.</li> <li>• Responsibility is to the self.</li> <li>• Friendships can form quickly; the word “friend” can relate to many people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus is on the extended family.</li> <li>• Age is valued with greater status and respect.</li> <li>• Responsibility is to the family.</li> <li>• Friendships take time to establish; specific words may exist to refer to close friends or more casual friends.</li> </ul>

Cultural Feature	In American Culture	In Other Cultures
Work ethic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work itself has value.</li> <li>• Focus is on work-related tasks.</li> <li>• Career rewards reflect personal accomplishments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work is a necessary part of life.</li> <li>• Focus is on relationships.</li> <li>• Career rewards stem from relationships and seniority.</li> </ul>
Gender roles	Men and women are considered equal.	Men and women have different roles in society.
Eating habits	Eating is a necessary activity that benefits from convenience. Time saved at mealtimes can be put to use on other tasks.	Eating is a social experience that requires time. Time spent eating with other people is important in itself.



**Discussion:** For each of the behaviors and characteristics below, decide if the statement more likely applies to someone in an individualist culture or in a collectivist culture. Discuss your choices.

1. People answer the phone by giving the name of the organization.
2. People give cocktail parties.
3. Rivalry (competition) within a group is strong.
4. "Employee-of-the-year" awards are offered.
5. People follow tradition.
6. People receive promotions based on production and results.
7. Contracts are important in business.
8. There is a need for autonomy (getting things done by yourself).
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.

Answers: Individualist behaviors – 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 20; collectivist behaviors – 1, 3, 5, 11, 14, 17, 18, 19

Source: *Culture Matters—The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook*, reprinted August 2012

It is important to remember that the members of a culture are also individuals. Some behaviors are unique to an individual, no matter which culture they belong to. This is because people within a culture still grow up differently. They develop different personalities. Even though the majority of the people within a culture share the same beliefs and core values—or the “centerline”—individuals develop on either side of that line. Building your cultural awareness depends very much on generalizations about other cultures. Generalizations are broad statements that are based on a large sample of a group. However, generalizations still respect the fact of individual differences. (On the other hand, stereotypes give a single, inflexible image of all of the members of a group.)

**EXAMPLES:**

Stereotype: “All Americans are superficial.”

Generalization: “Americans approach other people as equals and make friends easily.”

A helpful way to think about people may be the following:

Each person is like no other—every person is a unique individual; this is your personality.

Each person is like some others—every person shares certain values and beliefs with some people and not with others; this is your culture.

Each person is like all others—every person shares certain needs and behaviors with other human beings.



**Discussion:** For each of the behaviors below, decide if the behavior is personal, cultural, or universal.

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.

Answers: Personal behaviors – 1, 6, 7, 15; cultural behaviors—3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 14; universal behaviors – 2, 8, 12, 13

Source: *Culture Matters—The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook*, reprinted August 2012

## Value of Cultural Awareness to Law Enforcement

Cultural awareness is the basis for successful communication between people of different cultures. It involves being able to step back from yourself and become aware of the values and beliefs that affect behavior—your behavior and the behavior of others.

Cultural competence is the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures. It includes awareness of your own cultural worldview, your attitude towards cultural differences, your knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and your skills that can bridge cultures.

### Did You Know?

Although maintaining eye contact is a sign of respect in some cultures, Mexicans may interpret it as a challenge or intimidation. In China, shaking hands is a common way to greet people, but a nod or slight bow is acceptable. Like many Asian cultures, the Chinese typically communicate indirectly and rarely say no directly. Instead, they may nod politely to avoid confrontation. Silence may be difficult to interpret, because it can convey respect, disagreement, or lack of understanding.

Source: *Promoting Cultural Sensitivity*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008

By knowing another person's values and beliefs, you can anticipate their behaviors. What people say and how they behave are a product of their culture (the American culture is no different). What people say and do are not spontaneous and arbitrary; they reflect what people in that culture value and what they believe in. Knowing more about the values and beliefs of a culture will help you to anticipate and even predict the behavior of individuals from that culture.



**Discussion:** Some behaviors are universal—they are the same, regardless of culture. What is an example of a universal behavior?

By recognizing that people behave as they do for a reason, you can learn to work with a person's behavior instead of simply react to it. You do not have to accept or like a person's behaviors. However, knowing where those behaviors are coming from means that you are no longer surprised by those behaviors—this is a good starting point for interacting successfully with people from other cultures!



**Discussion:** Discuss this traditional American view of human nature; is it how you think most Americans view human nature today? Why or why not?

*Most people are basically good. If someone commits an evil act, we need to find the explanation, the reason why the person "turned bad." People should be trusted. Americans are fairly open to strangers and are willing to accept them.*

## Handling Issues in Cross-Cultural Communication

Personal space and contact—Everyone has a “space bubble” around them that defines their personal space. This is your comfort zone. Your personal space is usually the same for most people, except for people you are very close to emotionally (relatives, partners, close friends); you might allow those people to get physically closer to you. In some cultures, the personal space is smaller—people from that culture feel comfortable being physically closer to other people. If you are the person with a larger personal space, you may feel that your space is being invaded; you may feel annoyed that the other person is not respecting your personal space. If you are the person with a smaller personal space, standing farther apart may make you feel disrespected. Physical contact might be common in one culture—such as during a daily greeting—while it may be avoided in other cultures. What can you do as a law enforcement officer?

- Pay attention to how close you are to another person. Give the other person more space if you notice that you startle the person as you approach, or if the other person steps back.
- If someone from another culture enters your personal space, try not to assume that they intend to be aggressive toward you. Try to re-establish your personal space by slowly taking a step back as you communicate.
- Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Body language and gestures—Body language is interpreted differently in different cultures. In some cultures, direct eye contact means you are paying attention to the other person and that you care about what the person is saying. In other cultures, eye contact is actually disrespectful or even aggressive. Smiles can mean friendliness, or can mean that one person is trying to take advantage of another person. Smiles can also serve to hide emotions that should not be displayed in public, such as anger or embarrassment. An inappropriate topic, such as the death of a loved one, may be greeted with a smile. Similarly, gestures have different meanings in different cultures and in different parts of the world. For example, pointing at someone may be acceptable or it may be rude. Using the “OK” sign or the “thumbs up” sign—which have positive interpretations in the United States—may have negative or even obscene meanings in specific cultures. What can you do as a law enforcement officer?

- Explain what you meant, if somebody reacts in an unexpected way to a gesture that you make. If you are unsure what another person means by their gesture, ask the person for clarification.
- Learn about gestures and body language in other cultures. Many books and websites cover this topic.
- Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Sense of humor—Cultures vary greatly in what people consider to be funny. What might get a laugh and build a sense of rapport between people of the same culture could be considered rude or out of place between people of different cultural backgrounds. What can you do as a law enforcement officer?

- Avoid using humor with people from a different cultural background, unless you are familiar with the culture. If the other person makes a joke that you consider bad, try not to react immediately and in a negative way (such as feeling hurt or embarrassed). Their joke was probably not meant to be insulting.
- Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Abbreviations, acronyms and slang—People from different cultures may not abbreviate the same words as you do. They may not understand the abbreviations that you use. Slang in one culture may mean something else somewhere else, or may not mean anything at all. Sports-related terms that are popular in the United States—where the sports are well-known—may be confusing to people from another culture or country—where the same sport is unknown or is not popular. Different versions of English can also produce different meanings. For example, “striking out” could mean to fail, or it could mean to pursue an opportunity. What can you do as a law enforcement officer?

- Define any abbreviations or acronyms that you use or that appear on official documents.
- Avoid sports-related terms.
- Be patient. Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Conversation styles—In some cultures, the pause between when one person stops talking and another begins talking is short. For example, this is generally true in the United States and indicates that one person is listening carefully to the other person. In other cultures, the pause is longer. A long silence does not mean that the listener is ignoring the speaker; it means that the listener is carefully thinking about what the speaker has said. In some cultures, people often speak at the same time. This would be viewed as rude in the United States, but in another culture, it shows that listeners are paying attention. In some cultures, being direct in conversation is appreciated. In other cultures, being direct is viewed as impolite. What can you do as a law enforcement officer?

- If someone from a different cultural background starts to speak before you are finished, ask that the person wait until you are done speaking.
- Allow more time than you normally would for the listener to respond.
- Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.



Learn more about customs and etiquette in other countries at the following website: [www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/country-profiles.html](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/country-profiles.html).

# ASSIGNMENT SHEET

## Practice Indirect Communication Skills for Cross-Cultural Understanding

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Directions:

1. For each direct statement in Part A below, come up with at least two ways to say the same thing in a less direct way.
2. For each indirect statement in Part B below, “decode” what you think the statement really means.
3. Discuss your answers with the class.

Part A—Practice Indirectness	
I don't think that's a good idea.	
That's not what I meant.	
What do you think, Tracy?	
You misunderstood the traffic sign.	
I don't agree with what you're saying.	

### Grading Rubric

Criteria	Points	Comments
Provided at least two alternatives for each statement in Part A		
Provided at least two alternatives for each statement in Part B		
Contributed to discussion in a positive way		

**Part B—Decode Indirectness**

What you've said is very interesting.	
That may be one possibility.	
It is possible to make an appointment for tomorrow.	
I'll think very carefully about what you said.	
I know very little about this, but...	

**Grading Rubric**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Points</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Provided at least two alternatives for each statement in Part A		
Provided at least two alternatives for each statement in Part B		
Contributed to discussion in a positive way		

