

Africa is not a Country



This curriculum was designed to help you, the Early Childhood Educator, learn more about the cultures in Africa. It is critical that we understand that Africa is not a country. It is a vast continent comprised of many countries and many peoples. To assume that someone from one country from Africa will react in the same way as someone from another country would be the same as assuming that people from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Spain would all react in the same way because they speak Spanish.

The city of Worcester has seen increasing numbers of immigrants from various African nations come to our city to live and work. Their children are increasingly entering our Early Childhood Education Programs. As you are aware, acceptance and respect for cultural differences is critical to providing the best educational experience for our children.

The term “Cultural Competence” refers to the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that allow us to provide services across cultural lines in the best possible way. Cultural competency allows us to respond with respect and empathy to people of all cultures, classes, races, religions, and ethnic backgrounds in a manner that recognizes, affirms and values the worth of individuals, families and communities.¹

Cultural competency requires an understanding of one’s own cultural background, acknowledgement of others culture, value system, beliefs and behaviors, recognition that cultural difference is not synonymous with cultural inferiority, learning about other’s cultures and adapting programs within a cultural framework.

While this curriculum focuses on African cultures, much of the material is relevant to work with families from any culture. Each of the major themes is introduced by an exercise to help you identify your own cultural characteristics. This will help you to see where genuine cultural differences are the basis for judgments and interpretations of the families you work with every day.

This short training program cannot possibly address all of the issues that may arise in your work with diverse families. It is designed to help you think about and discuss the way cultural biases may affect your perceptions of families. If you have further questions after completing this program, please feel free to contact Edward Street Child Services at 508.792.0220 or director@edwardstreet.org.

¹ From George Washington University “Cultural Competency”, 2000

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 a half an hour after the stated starting time.
This person is late and should at least apologize or give an explanation.

2. Someone kicks a dog.

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

4. Someone makes the OK gesture at you.

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

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

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

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

9. When a teacher is speaking to him, a child will not look her in the eye.

10. A child arrives at school without having had a bath.

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.

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 the 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**
- **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.

In this second part of the activity, you are asked to imagine how these same ten behaviors would be perceived or interpreted by someone from a culture different from 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 time?

- By someone from a culture where meetings never start until at least an hour after the stated time?

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

- By someone from a country where dogs always carry disease?

- By someone from a country where most dogs are wild and vicious?

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

- By someone from a country where belching is the normal way to compliment the food?

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

- By someone in whose culture this gesture is obscene?

- By someone in whose culture this gesture has romantic connotations?

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 carrying wood is never done by men?
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-

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

- By someone from a culture where men never clean up after a meal?
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-

- By the hostess from this same culture?
-
-

7. A young man and 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?
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-

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 educational system?
-
-

- By someone from a culture where it is shameful not to help your friend if you can do so?
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9. When a teacher is speaking to him, a child will not look her in the eye. How would this act be interpreted

- By someone from a culture that believes that lack of eye contact indicates a child is lying?
-
-

- By someone from a culture (like most in Africa) where a child looking directly into the eyes of an adult is considered disrespectful and defiant?
-
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10. A child arrives at school without having had a bath. How would this act be interpreted

- By someone from a culture where hot running water is plentiful?
-
-

- By someone from an African country where drought is a reality and the nearest water source (a small stream) is 5 miles away from the village?
-
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Observation or Interpretation?

Below you will find 11 pairs of statements. In each case, one of the statements is an observation, a mere description of the facts or behavior you are witnessing, and the other is an interpretation, your explanation or opinion of what those facts or that behavior means. Put an **O** next to each observation and an **I** next to the interpretations.

- That man is very angry.
- That man is talking quite loud.

- My boss doesn't trust his subordinates.
- My boss doesn't delegate responsibility.

- That woman always wears a veil when she goes out in public.
- That woman is quite conservative.

- That woman stands three feet away when she speaks to me.
- That woman is cold and reserved.

- That man is afraid of his boss.
- That man never contradicts his boss in public.

- She doesn't have strong opinions.
- She never speaks up in meetings.

- That worker never does anything unless he is told.
- That worker is lazy.

- He lied to me.
- He said yes when the real answer to my question was no.

- She wasn't listening to me.
- She didn't look me in the eye when I was talking to her.

- He stood very close and spoke loudly.
- He's very aggressive.

- She is insecure and power hungry.
- She doesn't share information with her subordinates.

It is important to remember when working with children and families from different cultures that the meaning we give to behavior is based on our own perspective. To someone from a different culture, the identical behavior has a very different meaning.

If a child in your classroom does not ask questions, puts his head down and does not make eye contact when being asked a question, and introduces three different women as his mother, what do you think?

Do you think he is not as bright as the other children in your classroom?

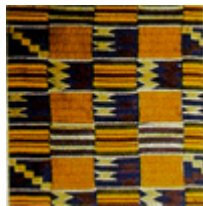
If that child is from a country in Africa, he is merely being respectful. In many parts of Africa, if a child looks an adult directly in the eye he is showing disrespect. Asking questions is also viewed as a sign of disrespect in many parts of Africa. Family is particularly important in most African countries. It is impolite to give your aunts and uncles less status than your parents, so they will be introduced as mother and father.



Meanings are found in many items used by people in Africa. History, philosophy, and religious beliefs are represented in ceremonial cloth.

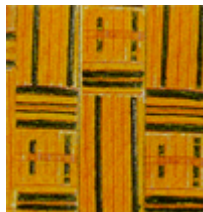
ASANTE KENTE

The Asante are one of the Akan peoples who live in parts of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire. Kente is an Asante ceremonial cloth. Cloths come in various colors sizes and designs and are worn during very important social and religious occasions. In a total cultural context, kente is more important than just cloth. It is a visual representation of history, philosophy, ethics, oral literature, moral values, social code of conduct, religious beliefs, political thought, and aesthetic principles.



ABUSUA YE DOM

Literally means “the extended family is a force.” Among the Akan peoples, the extended family is the foundation of society. The cloth was designed to celebrate and reinforce such positive attributes of the extended family system. In its many variations and background colors, the cloth symbolizes strong family bond, the value of family unity, collective work and responsibility and cooperation.



WOFRO DUA PA A NA YEPIA WO

Literally means “one who climbs a tree worth climbing gets the help deserved.”

ANDRINKA

Adinkra is one of the highly valued hand-printed and hand-embroidered cloths. Its origin is traced to the Asante people of Ghana and the Gyaman people of Cote' d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). Adinkra cloths were made and used exclusively by the royalty and spiritual leaders for very important sacred ceremonies and rituals.

In modern times, however, adinkra cloths are used for a wide range of social activities. In addition to its sacred usage, it is also used to make clothing for such special occasions as festivals, church-going, weddings, naming ceremonies and initiation rites.

Each of the motifs that make up the corpus of adinkra symbolism has a name and meaning derived either from a proverb, a historical event, human attitude, animal behavior, plant life, forms and shapes of inanimate and man-made objects. In its totality, adinkra symbolism is a visual representation of social thought relating to the history, philosophy and religious beliefs of the Akan peoples of Ghana and Cote' d'Ivoire.



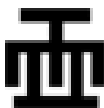
NYAME BIRIBI WO SORO (God is in the heavens)
A reminder that God's dwelling place is in the heaven, where he can listen to all prayers.



AKOKONAN (the leg of a hen)
Mercy, nurturing.
The full name of this symbol translates to "The hen treads on her chicks, but she does not kill them." This represents the ideal nature of parents, being both protective and corrective. An exhortation to nurture children, but a warning not to pamper them



FUNTUNFUNEFU DENKYEMFUNEFU (siamese crocodiles)
The Siamese crocodiles share one stomach, yet they fight over food. This popular symbol is a remind that infighting and tribalism is harmful to all who engage in it.



HWEMUDUA (measuring stick)
This symbol stresses the need to strive for the best quality, whether in production of goods or in human endeavors.



MATE MASIE (what I hear, I keep)
The implied meaning of the phrase "mate masie" is "I understand". Understanding means wisdom and knowledge, but it also represents the prudence of taking into consideration what another person has said.



NKONSONKONSON (chain links)
A reminder to contribute to the community, that in unity lies strength

The Concept of the Self

This exercise introduces the first of the four fundamentals of culture: the concept of the self. The two poles of this concept, individualism and collectivism, are defined and explored.

Sharing the Rewards

For six weeks, you and three other colleagues have been working on an important project. Now the work is done and the four of you have been awarded a cash prize of \$20,000.00. How should this money be distributed? In answering this question, you may find the following information useful:

1. Person A did 25% of the work.
2. Person B did 40% of the work.
3. Person C did 25% of the work.
4. Person D did 10% of the work.

In the blank spaces below, write the cash prize you think each person should receive:

Person A \$ _____
Person B \$ _____
Person C \$ _____
Person D \$ _____

How did you reach your decision?

Now turn the page to see how the same team would often be rewarded in a collectivist culture.

Person A	\$5,000.00
Person B	\$5,000.00
Person C	\$5,000.00
Person D	\$5,000.00

People in collectivist cultures, like many in Africa, seek the good of the group over the good of themselves. They are not indifferent to their own welfare. They believe the surest way to guarantee personal survival is to make sure the group thrives and prospers. Hence, it would be more important and comforting to me for everyone in my group to benefit as much as possible from this bonus, getting the maximum each person could get, than for me personally to get more because I happened to do more work. If the person who was only able to do 10% of the work (not that we would ever bother to do these calculations, mind you) only received \$2,000.00 I would worry about that person's financial well-being. If that person suffers from financial need, then his or her performance at work might slip, and then we would *all* be in trouble.

This is a very different way of looking at the world for people who have been raised in the American culture. Even with sports teams, where all must work for the good of the group, Americans value "superstars." Because of the difference in culture, we may see African children work well with the group and not seek to win in competition.

Did You Know?

When you enter a Ghanaian's home the first thing you are offered is a glass of water. This is a sign of welcome.

If a Ghanaian woman marries a man who lives in the ancestral home, she will move in with the brothers and sisters. The whole family eats together out of an earthen pot. The men eat first. The children eat by age group.

99.8% of the people in Ghana are Black African. They are divided into more than 100 ethnic groups, each with its own language and culture. Violence between these groups is rare, although social interaction is rare.

Personal versus Societal Obligations

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 miles per hour. His lawyer tells you that if you will testify under oath that your friend was driving 20 miles per hour he will suffer no serious consequences.

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

- The percentage of Americans who said they would: 4%
- The percentage of Kenyans who said they would: 66%

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

The responsibilities of friendship differ from culture to culture.



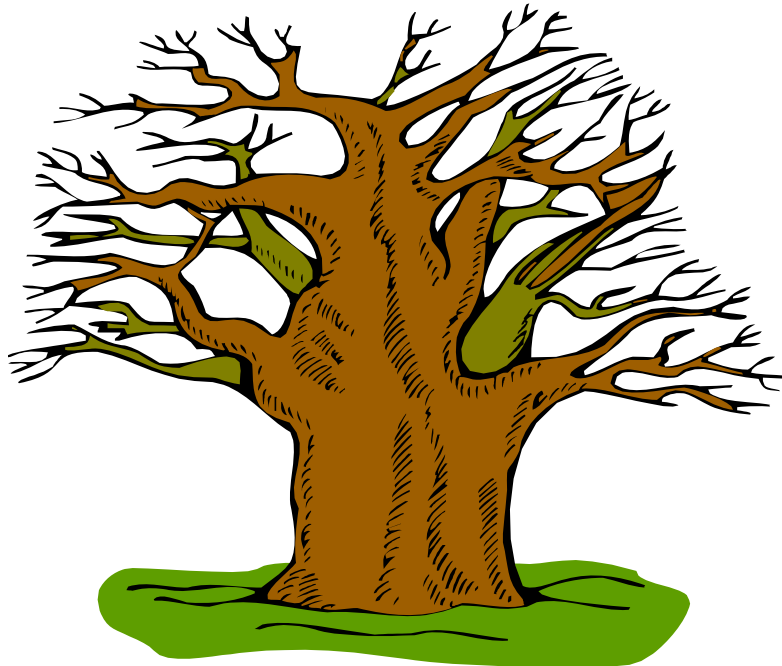
The Importance of Friends and Family

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, people of different cultures often make different choices.

No culture exclusively places importance on friends and family versus the larger society, but cultures do tend to lean more one way than the other. 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:

In cultures where the good of the whole society is most important (like the United States) certain absolutes apply across the board. Whenever 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 fairer by treating people the same way.

In cultures where friends and family are most important, how you behave in a given situation depends on the circumstances. You treat family, friends, and your in-group the best you can. You let the rest of the world take care of itself. There cannot be absolutes because everything depends on whom you are dealing with. No one expects life to be fair. Exceptions will always be made for certain people.



The following examples show differences you might find between cultures

In the United States	In Many African Countries
Objectivity, not letting personal feelings or relationships affect decisions is possible and desirable.	People tend to hire friends and associates.
A deal is a deal, whatever happens.	A deal is a deal until the circumstances change. Deals are made on the basis of personal relationships.
The law is the law.	Written contracts are not necessary.
Logic of the head is important.	The logic of the heart is what counts
You do not compromise on principles.	Friends expect and deserve preferential treatment.



Score Yourself –

Having become familiar with the two poles of this concept, you now have the chance to think of your own behavior in the context of this important cultural dimension.

Below are a number of paired statements. 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 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 that apply across the board.

4a. I would be very hurt if my neighbor, a police officer, gave me a ticket for speeding.

4b. I would not expect my neighbor, a police officer, 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 is embarrassing to have to go to court.

6a. In general, people can be trusted.

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

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

7b. Performance reviews should take personal relations into account.

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

8b. Exceptions should be rare; otherwise, you open up the floodgates.

9a. Contracts are not 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 whom you are dealing with.

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



A Question to Ponder

At your center, parents must sign a contract stating consequences for late pick-up of children. You have several children from Kenya in your classroom. A Kenyan mother is late in picking up her child.

From your learning thus far, you know that:

In Kenya, personal relationships are primary. How a person behaves in a given situation depends on the circumstances. Written contracts are rarely used. Saving face is particularly important in that culture. Conflict is avoided because it could damage harmony.

You are also aware that:

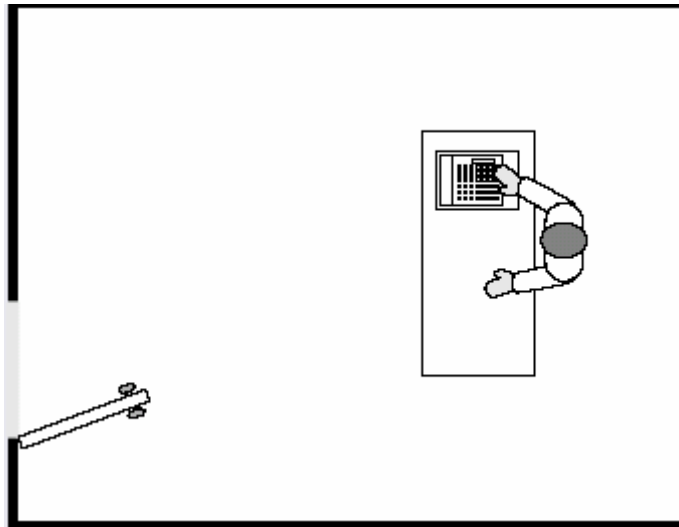
Smooth operation of the center and your classroom requires that all families follow the rules.

How can you best approach this mother to minimize conflict, allow her dignity, and assure that she understands the need to comply with center rules?

The Concept of Time

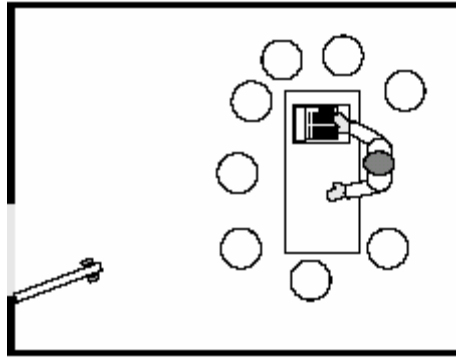
This exercise introduces the third of the four fundamentals of culture: the concept of time.

The drawing below represents a shopkeeper standing behind the counter in his shop. Imagine 6 patrons ready to check out. Using circles to represent them, draw a diagram of how the patrons should arrange themselves in front of the counter.



On what basis did you decide to put the people where you did?

Lining up and not lining up are culturally determined behaviors.



This is how many people from Africa would complete the drawing.

Concept of Time

Cultures differ in how people conceive of and handle time, and how their concept of time affects their interactions with each other. There are two poles – or extremes- of this dimension.

In the United States, time is the ruler. The needs of people are adjusted to meet the demands of time – schedules, deadlines etc.

In many African cultures, time is the servant and tool of people. Time is adjusted to suit the needs of people.

Time is a cultural phenomenon.



Characteristics and Behaviors

In the blank space before each of the behaviors or characteristics listed, put an A if you think it applies to **American** attitudes and beliefs and an O if you think it belongs to an **Other** culture.

1. ___ Time is money
2. ___ To be late is rude
3. ___ Schedules are sacred.
4. ___ The focus is on the task, getting the job done.
5. ___ Being made to wait is normal.
6. ___ Interruptions are life
7. ___ Plans are fixed once agreed upon.
8. ___ The focus is on the person, establishing a relationship.
9. ___ Deadlines are an approximation.
10. ___ To be late is to be late.
11. ___ Focus on the internal clock.
12. ___ Plans are always changing.
13. ___ Having to wait is an insult.
14. ___ People are never too busy.
15. ___ Interruptions are bad.
16. ___ People stand in line.

Suggested Answers:

1. A Time is money
Time is just time in many other cultures.
2. A To be late is rude
Being on time is important for many Americans.
3. A Schedules are sacred.
Americans rely on schedules.
4. A The focus is on the task, getting the job done.
Time sensitive Americans think less about people, more about goals.
5. O Being made to wait is normal.
Waiting isn't bad in cultures where being on time is less important.
6. O Interruptions are life.
Upsetting schedules doesn't matter where schedules aren't that important anyway
7. A Plans are fixed once agreed upon.
Changes in plans upset many Americans who live by their plans.
8. O The focus is on the person, establishing a relationship.
People count more than schedules in many other cultures.
9. O Deadlines are an approximation.
Being on time (adhering to deadline) is not as crucial in many other cultures.
10. O To be late is to be late.
Late matters less where time matters less.
11. O Focus on the internal clock.
Americans tend to live by the external clock.
12. O Plans are always changing.
Other cultures tend to change plans more easily since they have less reliance on schedules.
13. A Having to wait is an insult.
Because being late is considered rude in the United States.
14. O People are never too busy.
There is always enough time when time does not rule.
15. A Interruptions are bad.
Because they upset the schedule.
16. A People stand in line.
Being waited on one at a time is an American custom.

Score Yourself

This exercise can help you discover how you view time. After reading the pair of statements circle the one that best describes the action you would take or the way you feel about the particular topic.

1a. People wait in line so they can be waited on one at a time.

1b. There's no need to stand in line. People will be waited on, as they are ready for service.

2a. Interruptions usually cannot be avoided and are quite often beneficial.

2b. Interruptions should be avoided wherever possible.

3a. It's more efficient if you do one thing at a time.

3b. I can get as much done if I work on two or three things at the same time.

4a. It's more important to complete the transaction.

4b. It's more important to stick to the schedule.

5a. Unanticipated events are hard to accommodate and should be avoided where possible.

5b. Unexpected things happen all the time; that's life.

6a. You shouldn't take a telephone call or acknowledge a visitor when you are meeting with another person.

6b. It would be rude not to take a phone call if I am in, or to ignore a visitor who drops by.

7a. You shouldn't take deadlines too seriously; anything can happen. What's a deadline between friends?

7b. Deadlines are like a promise; many other things depend on them, so they should not be treated lightly.

8a. It's important, in a meeting or a conversation, not to become distracted or digress. You should stick to the agenda.

8b. Digressions, distractions are inevitable. An agenda is a piece of paper.

9a. I tend to be people oriented.

9b. I tend to be task-oriented.

10a. Personal talk is part of the job.

10b. Personal talk should be saved for after hours or during lunch.

The following behaviors tend to be more characteristic of Americans:

1a, 2b, 3a, 4b, 5a, 6a, 7b, 8a, 9b, 10b.

The following behaviors tend to be more characteristic of people from many parts of Africa:

1b, 2a, 3b, 4a, 5b, 6b, 7a, 8b, 9a, 10a.

In American cities, five minutes is the basic unit of time. Time in Africa is built on considerably longer meaningful units. Waiting thirty to sixty minutes for a well-placed official is normal. Highly valued time is, after all, a byproduct of industrial society.

Consider This

Our feeling about time is often dependent on our activities.

You are driving to the mall with a friend who you haven't seen in some time. The trip to the mall is an excuse to get together. You are enjoying each other's company. As you drive along you get to an intersection. The traffic signal is red. How do you feel about the few seconds you need to wait? Do you even notice them?

You are driving down the same street on your way to work. One of your children was slow in getting ready for school this morning, and, therefore you are running late. You arrive at the same intersection and the traffic light is red. How do you feel now?



Who is in Charge?

This exercise introduces the fourth and last of the four fundamentals of culture: the locus of control.

Which of the following two statements do you most agree with?

- A. What happens to me is my own doing.
- B. Sometimes I feel like I don't have control over the direction my life is taking.

Percentage of Americans who chose A = 89%

Percentage of Africans who chose A = 35%

There could be many explanations but one most certainly is the fact that many Americans believe in the power of the individual to prevail against all obstacles, that there is nothing people cannot do or become if they want it badly enough and are willing to make the effort. This is best exemplified in the classic American expression, "Where there is a will there is a way."

In many African cultures, many people believe that while you can shape your life to some extent, certain external forces, things beyond your control, also play an important role. What happens to you in life is not entirely in your hands.

Did You Know?

In some parts of rural Ghana, you might see young children with scars covering their faces. Some peoples believe that children are a gift from the Ancestral Mother. If a mother loses a child to death, she believes that the Ancestral Mother is angry with her. To protect her other children she will scar their faces so that the Ancestral Mother will not recognize them and take them back.



The Locus of Control

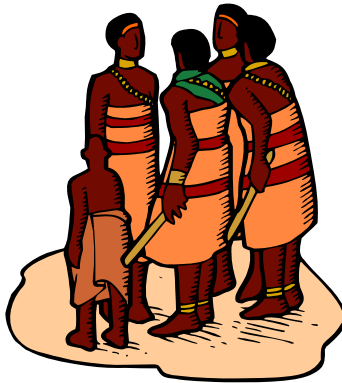
Cultures differ greatly in their view of a person's place in the world, especially the degree to which human beings can control or manipulate forces outside themselves and shape their own destiny. The two sides of this dimension are described below.

Internal:

The locus of control is largely internal. There are very few givens in life, few circumstances that have to be accepted as they are, that cannot be changed. There are no limits on what I can do or become, so long as I set my mind to it and make the necessary effort. Life is what I do.

External:

The locus of control is largely external to the individual. Some aspects of life are predetermined, built into the nature of things. There are limits beyond which we cannot go and certain givens that cannot be changed and must be accepted. Life is in large part what happens to me.



Score Yourself –

Below are a number of paired statements. Immediately after reading each pair, circle which of the two best describes the action you would take or the way you feel about the particular topic.

1a. If I'm unhappy, I should do something about it.

1b. Nothing's broken if I am unhappy, it's just part of life's ups and downs.

2a. The external world is a system like other systems; its workings can be discovered, predicted, even manipulated.

2b. The external world is complex, dynamic, and organic. It cannot be ultimately known.

3a. You should see life as it really is.

3b. It is important to have a positive attitude about life.

4a. If I try hard enough and want something bad enough, nothing can stop me from getting what I want.

4b. Some things are beyond my reach, no matter what I do.

5a. I make my own luck.

5b. Many things happen because of chance or luck.

6a. Every problem has a solution if you look hard enough.

6b. Some problems don't have a solution.

8a. I tend to accept what life hands me.

8b. I tend to try to improve my circumstances.

9a. If a friend is depressed, I would try to cheer him/her up.

9b. If a friend is depressed there is no need for me to do anything.

The following choices tend to be more characteristic of Americans:

1a, 2a, 3b, 4a, 5b, 6a, 7a, 8b, 9a.

The following choices tend to be more characteristic of people from other cultures:

1b, 2b, 3a, 4b, 5a, 6b, 7b, 8a, 9b.

A Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco relates this story:

The scene is a café in Tangiers. Tomorrow is Saturday. I've just invited a Moroccan friend to a picnic at the beach. Will he come? "Perhaps," he says in English, translating from the Arabic, N'Shallah, which literally means if God is willing. I'm feeling hurt. What does he mean, perhaps? Either he wants to come or he doesn't. It's up to him. He doesn't understand why I seem upset and I don't quite grasp, "Perhaps." Our two cultures confront each other across the teacups.

Only several years later, reading a book about culture, did I understand. He would come, he meant, if Allah willed it. His *wanting* to come and his being permitted to come were not one and the same. In Morocco, unlike America, where there's a will there is not necessarily a way. So, who was I to demand an answer to my question? And who was he to give one?

It was an exciting moment. I had stumbled upon a parallel universe; one founded on a different auxiliary verb, on may rather than will.



Differences in Values

Traditional American Values	Other Cultures Values
Personal control over environment	Fate, Destiny, “God’s Will”
Change and Variety	Tradition
Competition	Cooperation
Individualism	Group Welfare
Future Orientation	Past orientation
Directness	Indirectness
Informality	Formality
Time Importance	Human Interaction Importance
Duration of Life	Quality of Life
Nuclear Family	Extended Family

Examples of potential differences in values:

- Participants and staff may differ on the value of time. If “being on time” and “not wasting time” are not familiar concepts to the family then a 9:00 appointment may not be kept until 10:00 or 11:00. Many cultures mark time by major events – births, deaths, marriages etc. Most western cultures mark time in a precise linear system that is oriented toward work, future, and money.
- For some groups, respect for authority and politeness in public may prevent a person from raising questions or a parent may make an effort to “please” staff.
- Some cultures do not speak in positive terms about a spouse, children, or possessions because they believe it brings bad luck.
- Oral communication is frequently the most important mode of information transfer. A participant may not be literate in English or his/her native language.
- A participant may have different standards about the appropriateness of being asked for certain types of information (e.g., income data). ***Emphasize that questions have to be asked of everyone.***
- Direct questioning may be considered an inappropriate means of questioning. ***Information may need to be gathered indirectly.***
- You may view silence as awkward, however, other cultures are quite comfortable with periods of silence.

- The most comfortable physical distance between you and another person varies from culture to culture.
- The amount of eye contact that is comfortable varies from culture to culture. Many Americans have been brought up to look people directly in the eye. Some cultures have been taught not to make eye contact. Staring is considered impolite. However, if you avoid eye contact or break eye contact too frequently it may be misinterpreted as disinterest. ***Sitting next to someone, rather than directly across from them will reduce eye contact.***
- Expressions of emotion between people of different cultures vary from very expressive, as with Hispanics, to total non-expressiveness, as with Asians. Many Americans have a tendency to regard people who are more expressive as immature and those with less expression as unfeeling.
- The position, gestures, and motion of the body can be interpreted differently depending on the culture. The use of hands is a common vehicle for non-verbal expression. A firm handshake may be a positive gesture of goodwill in the American culture, but some other cultures prefer only a light touch. Standing with hands on hips may imply anger to some participants. Pointing or beckoning with a finger may appear disrespectful to some cultures. ***Conservative use of body language is wise when you are uncertain as to what is appropriate within a cultural group.***
- How you speak is as important as what you say. Often we mistakenly assume that a louder voice is clearer and therefore more easily understood. ***Speak in a normal tone of voice. Avoid slang and technical jargon.***
- Americans tend to be informal in their verbal communication, but many other cultures prefer to keep a relationship more formal. Many cultures may view being addressed by their first name as too familiar and may infer disrespect. ***Asking how someone prefers to be addressed is the easiest solution, or assume formality when in doubt.***

Culture helps us to interpret our environment. It shapes how we see the world. Culture shapes our values and attitudes. If we want to provide service to diverse groups, it is important that we understand the cultures of those groups. We have explored the four building blocks of culture. It is important to remember, however, that culture is only one dimension of human behavior. The other two dimensions are the universal and the personal.

Universal refers to the ways in which all people in all groups are the same

Cultural refers to what a particular group of people have in common

Personal describes the ways in which each one of us is different from everyone else, including those in our group.

This is important to remember

- Because of **universal behavior**, not everything about people in a different culture is going to be different and
- Because of **personal behavior**, not everything you learn about a new culture is going to apply equally, or at all, to every individual in that culture.



FAQ's

After looking at the differences across many cultures you may still have some questions specific to African cultures. Here are some frequently asked questions and answers.

Q. I have heard that African men beat their wives. Is this true?

A. Here is a sampling from the World Health Organization of the percentage of women in each country reporting Domestic Violence:

Britain - 25%

Canada – 20%

Egypt – 35%

India – 30%

Israel – 32%

Kenya – 42%

South Korea – 38%

Switzerland – 20%

Thailand – 20%

Uganda – 41%

United States – 28%

While the two African countries represented do have higher rates of violence against women, non-governmental agencies like UNICEF are working to reduce the incidence. Domestic Violence is not an accepted practice among the more educated people living in cities in Africa. In fact, in many areas, a man who is known to hit his wife, or any woman, is shunned.

Q. What about polygamy? Do all Africans practice that?

A. The practice of polygamy still exists in certain parts of Africa. It is seen mostly in rural areas. Again, non-governmental agencies have been addressing the issue, particularly because there is a direct linkage between polygamy and the incidence of HIV/AIDS. This is an ancient traditional practice that, while in conflict with American practices, will change slowly.

Q. I have heard about female genital mutilation. What is that?

A. Like the Jewish practice of circumcision, this rite is a traditional religious ritual. UNICEF, whose overall goal is to contribute to the survival, development, participation, and protection of women and children, is also addressing this practice which can be dangerous. U.S. Federal Law specifically forbids it. Additionally, many states have passed legislation outlawing the practice. (Massachusetts has not passed legislation.)

Q. I have noticed that the African children in my program seem to be shielded from issues like the death of a family member. How should I handle this?

A. Like any issue, many families choose what they want their children exposed to in life. It is important to learn directly from the parent what the child is being told so that the messages at home and at school are consistent.

Q. Do they have childcare in Africa?

A. Africa is a large continent. Educational opportunities vary by country as well as rural and urban areas. Rural areas may have fewer resources for families than cities (similar to the U.S.). Early Childhood Education is common in cities. Like the United States, it is evolving from daycare to education. Initiatives in several countries are working to increase the educational opportunities for girls. Particularly in rural areas, mothers are often actively involved in farm-work all day. Older children, particularly young girls, take care of their younger children. This deprives them of educational opportunities. It also does not provide the younger children with a basis in early childhood education. Like the United States, the government and other agencies struggle to pay for these services.

In some rural areas, women play an important role in farming activities. They are often in the fields and absent from the household. Older children, more often girls, look after their young brothers and sisters at home, on the farm, or in the marketplace. This work prevents these girls from attending school. Of equal importance, because they lack education, they are unable to educate their young siblings. The outcomes for these children are poor. The problems that we know cause difficulty in school, lack of good health, lack of concentration, low learning ability, and poor self-esteem, are generally rooted by the age of four.



Many of the exercises in this manual are based on the “Culture Matters” curriculum developed by the Peace Corps. There are many web-based resources to help you gain an understanding of specific African countries as well as diversity training materials.

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This brief curriculum cannot answer all of the questions you may have. If there is an issue that is of importance to you that was not covered here, please contact Edward Street Child Services at 508.792.0220 or director@edwardstreet.org. While we may not have an immediate answer for you, we will investigate the issue and respond as soon as possible.