

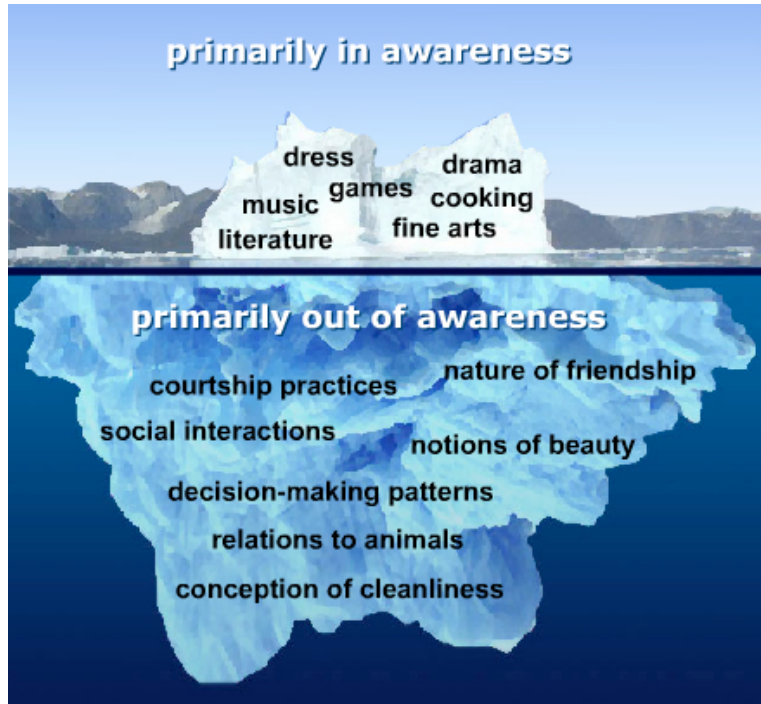
## Culture Resources

### **About Culture**

#### **Culture is like an Iceberg**

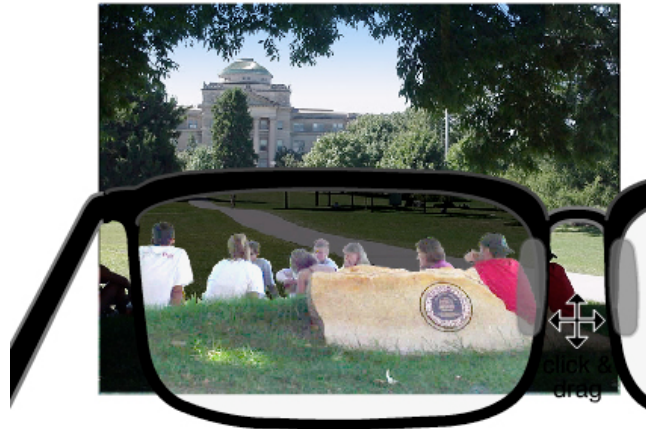
Just as 90% of an iceberg is below the water line (and therefore not visible), in any given culture there are some things that visitors may perceive immediately.

But there are many more that may not be easily perceived or understood. The out of awareness part of culture has been termed "deep culture".



### **Culture Influences Perceptions**

Our culture influences the way we see and perceive the world. In other words, we see the world and react to it in ways that our culture has taught us to see and react. However, the way you perceive the world (we call that your worldview) is not necessarily the way other groups perceive the world. We each see the world through different filtering lenses, so to speak.



### **Defining Culture**

Culture is not an easy concept to grasp. In fact, the late British writer, Raymond Williams, thought of culture as one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.

There are many definitions of culture but this is what is important to remember: Culture is the way of life of a given society. It includes the way people think, act, interact with each other, and make decisions. It also defines what individuals eat, what they wear,

what they think is right or wrong, and much more. Culture is passed down from one generation to another. What individuals learn from their parents and those individuals they grew up with, such as teachers, uncles, aunts, and neighbors, is passed down to future generations.

### **Culture Influences Perceptions - Greetings**

From an early age, individuals learn the proper way to greet each other. However, greetings differ considerably from one culture to another. In the U.S., individuals are taught to shake hands; in Japan, individuals bow; in India, "namaste" would be the proper way to greet each other.

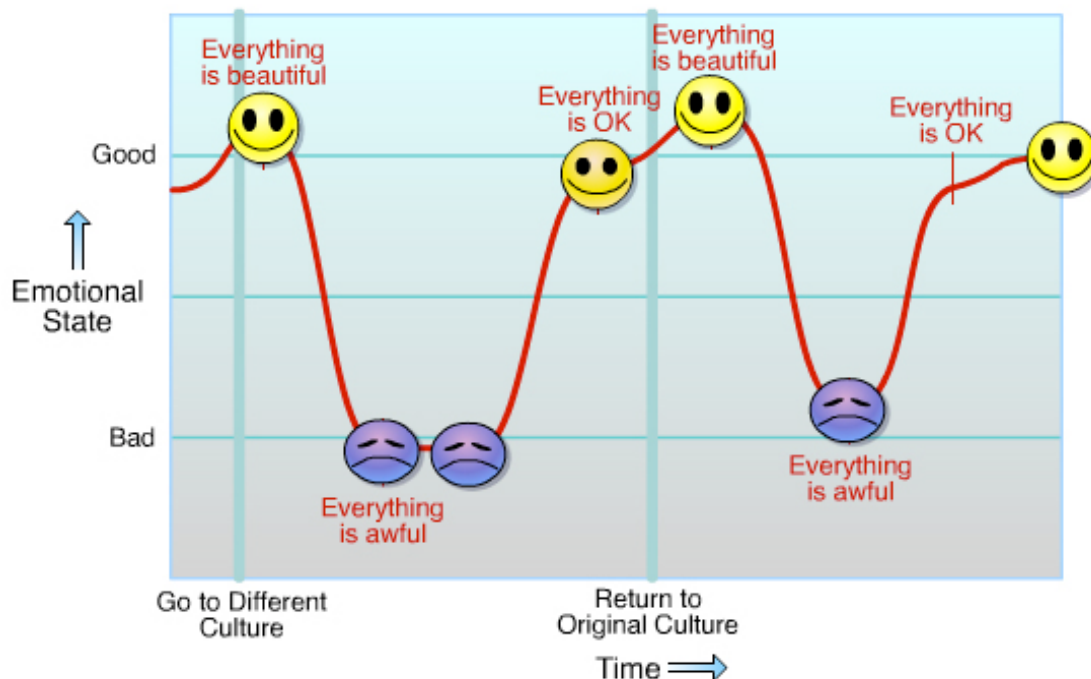
### **Bottom Line**

When visiting another culture, be prepared for the fact that there will be some things that you won't immediately perceive such as your hosts' nonverbal behavior, the way superiors and subordinates interact in that culture, their courtship practices, how they treat the elderly, and a lot more. These things you will learn only after you have spent some time in that culture.

Never assume individuals in the host country will see things the same way you do. This will only cause misunderstandings. We all see the world through our own cultural lenses. To fully understand another culture, you must see the world from their perspective.

### **Cultural Adjustment**

Research shows that individuals go through distinct phases when they go through a life transition such as finding a new job, leaving home to attend college, moving to a new house, or moving to a new country.



## **Going to a different culture**

### **Everything is beautiful**

During the first phase, everything is wonderful: the food, the people, the neighborhood, and the weather. The university is beautiful, and you are certain you made the right choice.

This is also known as the honeymoon stage; you are ecstatic! You can expect this phase to last from a couple of weeks to six months.

### **Everything is awful**

Then, the honeymoon is over, and things have definitely turned the wrong way. This is known as the irritability stage or the culture shock stage. Your sense of excitement is gone, and you begin to grow more anxious, restless, and impatient. You might have difficulty expressing what you want or need (if you are communicating in a second language). You know the rules and regulations are different, but you don't quite know what they are.

Don't be surprised if you go through an identity crisis during this phase and start questioning your decisions regarding your choice of institution or host country. This stage can last from a few weeks to several months. The intensity of the symptoms varies. Some individuals may never experience them, while others will be affected more seriously.

### **Everything is OK**

At this stage you are seeing things in a balanced manner. You realize that the host culture has both positive and negative aspects. You have also learned more about your host culture, and you are more used to the foods, sights, sounds, smells, nonverbal behaviors, and language of the host culture. You start noticing that you are not as confused as before. You also have fewer headaches and stomachaches, and you have started making some new friends.

## **“Intercultural reentry” stage**

You will be going back home, and you can hardly wait.

### **Everything is beautiful**

It is great to be home again. A word of caution, though. You will very likely go through the same emotions you experienced when getting ready for your trip abroad.

### **Everything is awful**

Despite the fact that you have returned to what is already familiar to you (i.e., family, friends, food, surroundings), you soon realize that things are not the same. You have changed, and so have your family, your friends, and your culture. Soon, you may start longing for the country you left. The reason why this phase will be particularly hard on you is because it's unexpected. But this too shall pass!

## **Everything is OK!**

Finally you can put things into perspective. . .

Remember, this chart depicts the typical phases of cultural adjustment. The phases that you go through may be very different.

## ***Cultural Differences***

### **Time orientation**

There are cultural variations in how people understand and use time. Researchers have found that individuals are divided in two groups in the ways they approach time.

**Monochronic** individuals are those who prefer to complete one task at a time. For them, task-oriented time is distinguished from socio-emotional time. In other words, there is a time to play and a time to work. These individuals value punctuality, completing tasks, and keeping to schedules. They view time as if it were linear, that is, one event happening at a time. Examples of monochronic cultures include the U.S., Israel, Germany, and Switzerland.

**monochronic**



**polychronic**



**Polychronic** individuals, on the other hand, are more flexible about time schedules; they have no problem integrating task-oriented activities with socio-emotional ones. For them, maintaining relationships and socializing are more important than accomplishing tasks. These individuals usually see time in a more holistic manner; in other words, many events may happen at once. Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa are places where the polychronic orientation prevails.

In certain cities in the U.S., it is not uncommon for us to find timetables or daily schedules for buses or trains. If the bus is to be at a certain stop at 10:09 PM, for example, one can expect that to happen at the designated time, give or take a minute.

For polychronic individuals such precise timetables are mind-boggling, as many of them are simply used to going to the bus stop and waiting — not knowing whether they will be waiting for five or forty-five minutes. That is just the way things are.

This difference in time orientation is reflected in the complaints of U.S. business people conducting business in Saudi Arabia or in Mexico, for example. A big source of frustration for them is the difficulty of getting through a meeting's agenda. That is because in these countries meetings begin with an extended socializing time in which time is spent establishing social rapport — usually over many cups of coffee or tea.

## The context of communication

This dimension has to do with the way people communicate with each other. Some cultures value a **high context** communication style while others value a **low context** style. In high context cultures, information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person. Behavioral rules are implicit; in other words, the context is supposed to give you the cues you need to behave appropriately. In these cultures, members tend to use a more indirect style of communication. Examples of societies that value this communication style include Japan, Korea, China, and many of the Latin American countries.

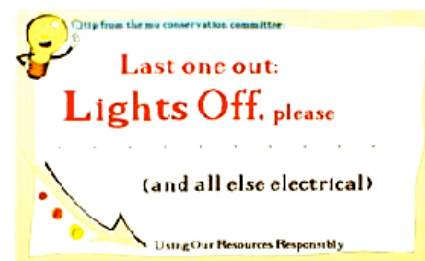
In low context cultures, information is part of and conveyed through the verbal content of the communication. The rules and expectations are explained and discussed; individuals tend to prefer a more direct communication style. Examples of countries that would prefer this communication style include the United States and most European countries.



In the U.S., for example, it is very common for college students to receive a course syllabus at the beginning of the semester. In it, students find detailed information such as the course description and learning objectives. It is not uncommon for the syllabus to also provide the instructor's policies regarding attendance, course assignments, course preparation, how grades will be determined, and even a tentative course schedule. That is because, in a low context culture such as the U.S., expectations are often communicated directly to the individual. In a high context culture, students may not be given all this information directly. As a student, it is your job to find out what the rules and expectations are.

Need another example? A quick look around campus will reveal signs such as the one at right.

In high context cultures, this type of information is less likely to be displayed. There is no need for them to post a sign telling you to turn off the lights. The expectation is that you should know what to do in situations like this.



Given the differences between high context and low context individuals, can you think of other potential sources of conflict or misunderstanding between them?

## **Individualism versus Collectivism**

This cultural dimension is concerned with the extent to which the welfare of the individual or that of the group is more valued in a society.

In **individualistic** societies, the goals of individuals are valued more highly than the goals of the group. Individuals are rewarded for behaving independently, making their own plans, and working toward achieving their personal goals. In these societies, individuals are hired and promoted largely based on individual achievement and qualifications. Examples of individualistic societies include the United States and Northern and Western European countries.

In **collectivistic** societies, on the other hand, the needs of the group are considered more important than those of the individual. In these societies, kinship ties are much stronger and may take precedence over expertise in matters of appointments and promotions. Collectivism is a value in Asian, African, as well as South American cultures.

Take, for example, the case of arranged marriages, still common in countries such as India or Pakistan. In those cultures, marriages are times to form family alliances. You marry whomever your family chooses or whoever is best for the family. In the U.S., on the other hand, you marry whomever you choose, the implication being that it's your decision and you choose the one best for you. In this case, the welfare of the individual takes precedence over the welfare of the family. The same can happen in your professional life. A student from a collectivistic culture may be sent to the U.S. to study whatever his/her government or company needs and not necessarily what he/she wants to pursue; whatever the group needs (i.e., country or company) takes precedence over what the individual wants.

Given the differences between individualistic and collectivistic individuals, can you think of potential sources of conflict or misunderstanding between them?

## **Differences in value orientation or “cultural baggage”**

When you visit another country, you take along a lot more than what is in your suitcase. You will also be carrying your “**cultural baggage**”.

Your cultural baggage (or culture) is the collection of all the values, beliefs, concepts, and behaviors that you learned as a child and that will have a great effect on the way you see the world. Keep in mind that your cultural baggage is unique and will most certainly differ from that carried by members of your host culture.

Cultures vary in many ways; we have discussed just a few of those ways. It's important that you realize, though, that the cultural dimensions presented here do not apply to all individuals within a culture. An individual's behavior may also vary depending on the situation. In other words, treat the differences discussed here as general guidelines and understand that there will always be individuals who don't fit the dimensions discussed here.

## **Stereotypes**

According to Robert Kohls and John Knight (1994), the most common stereotypes internationals have of Americans are:

- Outgoing, friendly
- Informal
- Loud, rude, immature
- Hardworking
- Extravagant, wasteful
- Think they have all the answers
- Not class-conscious
- Disrespectful of authority
- Racially prejudiced
- Know little about other countries
- Women are promiscuous
- Wealthy
- Generous
- Always in a hurry
- Disregard the elderly

Now, think for a moment.

How many of these stereotypes are true?

How many are positive, and how many are negative?

How could these stereotypes have started? Through the media (e.g., (American movies, TV, newspapers)? Through tourists? Could YOU have reinforced some of these stereotypes? What you need to keep in mind as a study abroad student is that, even if these stereotypes are untrue, undeserved, or have nothing to do with who you really are, you will be included in them. This is the problem with stereotyping ó stereotypes lump everybody together and allow no room for individuality.

Stereotypes are generalized statements we make about people in certain groups. “African-Americans are athletic,” and “Asians are good in math,” assume all individuals from the same group fit into the same category or have the same characteristics. These are generalized statements on stereotypes.

Generalizations are a necessary part of the way our brain functions. We are bombarded with a tremendous amount of information on a daily basis and our brain, to function effectively, creates categories to help us organize all the data being received.

Generalizations become a problem when people don't fit our stereotypical images. In this case, our stereotypes prevent us from seeing the person for who he/she really is; invariably, we end up seeing only who we expect to see, thus negating the individual.

Furthermore, when people don't fit our stereotypes, we often assume they are an exception to the rule rather than questioning our stereotypes.

Stereotypes are pervasive in our society. We all stereotype and are all subject to being stereotyped by others. The stereotypes we use can be both positive and negative. The negative ones, though, have more devastating consequences. We need to become aware of the stereotypes we have so we can see people for who they really are. Stereotypes should never influence the way we deal with or treat others.

In order for you to eliminate the stereotypes you have, you need first to become aware of them. Here is an opportunity for you.

On a piece of paper, make a list with the following three columns. You don't need to share this list with anyone. The point of this activity is to help you become aware of the stereotypes you have of other groups.

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Your Stereotypes</b>	<b>Source</b>
e.g., Hispanics, men with earrings, women over 40, Arabs, etc.): List as many groups as you can think of.	Without thinking too much about it, start writing down the stereotypes that come to mind. Don't analyze; just write.	Think of the source of each stereotype. Was it from a movie? Something you heard your parents saying when you were a child?

### **Sources**

Kohls, L. R. and Knight, J. M. (1994). *Developing Intercultural Awareness: A Cross-Cultural Training Handbook*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

### **Authors**

Learning materials developed by Rex Heer, Yaoling Wang, and Lori Brunner for International Community Resources: <http://www.celt.iastate.edu/international/>

### **Acknowledgments**

Material adapted from: Iowa State University Study Abroad Center. Study Abroad Predeparture Orientation. Retrieved November 27, 2005, from [https://webct.ait.iastate.edu/public/Study\\_Abroad/](https://webct.ait.iastate.edu/public/Study_Abroad/)