



# Understanding Your Own Culture

**After completing this lesson you will be able to:**

- ➊ Describe why it is important to understand your own culture.
- ➋ Describe some of the most important influences that are part of your culture.
- ➌ Identify how your culture affects daily choices and interactions.
- ➍ Describe how your culture is similar to, and different from, other cultures.
- ➎ Identify biases that you may have toward other cultures.



# The Importance of Understanding Your Own Culture

As you learned in the first lesson, your culture is a lens through which you see the world. It is like a guide book inside you that helps you understand and know what to do. It helps you make choices about what to eat, when to sleep, and who to talk to and how to say it. This internal guide helps you understand what to pay attention to and what to ignore. It helps you decide what is right and what is wrong.



As a direct support professional, it is part of your job to try to understand how the people you support view the world. It is the DSP's role to help people know what they want and how to live their lives in more meaningful and satisfying ways. In this process, DSPs get to know many personal details about the people they support. You need to learn to use this important, personal information to help people make good decisions. It is difficult to do this well without these factors: a good attitude, knowledge, and understanding of the culture of the people you support.

## Reflection on the Direct Support Professional role and culture

One responsibility area for a DSP is supporting people to have a high “quality of life.”

Think about the statement above and respond to the following questions.

- 1) How do you define "quality of life"? Outside of the basics (food, shelter, clothing), what is most important to you? (Money? Status? Giving to others? Relationships? Time for prayer? A nice car? Travel? Independence? Living close to family? Education? A high paying job? Good health? Time to be creative?) What life style would be ideal?
  - 2) What methods do you use to help you understand how the people you support define quality of life? List them.
  - 3) Do you assume people have a view of quality of life similar to yours or do these methods include an understanding of different cultures? In what ways are other cultures considered?

As you may have noticed, people often have differing opinions of what a high “quality of life” consists. Listen to the two stories presented in Lesson Two, page 6. Each person is describing their views of the “right life” and their dreams for their future. Respond to the following questions based upon the tales you have just heard.

- 1) How are these two descriptions of the “right life” similar to each other?
  - 2) How are they different?
  - 3) Which of these views is most like yours?

## Reflection on the DSP role and culture:

Every day, DSPs help people they support make decisions.

Reflect on the statement above as you answer the following questions regarding decision-making and culture.

- 1) Think about a difficult decision you made recently (For example, buying your first home, ending a long-term relationship, etc.). How did you finally make the decision? What guided you? (Did you talk to someone? Did you read something? Was it based on emotion, tradition, analysis? )

2) Looking back, do you think you made a good decision? Why, or why not?  
Would you do anything differently now?



3) Would your decision have been different if you had more or less money?  
More or less education? More or less support from family or friends? More or less physical strength or ability? List other things that could have made a difference in your decision and describe why or how it would have changed the decision.

4) What methods do you have for exploring decision-making with the person(s) you support?

5) Do you assume others make decisions in a way similar to yours? Or, do you have methods to understand different cultures? If so, how do you use them?

Whether we consciously acknowledge it or not, our culture oftentimes plays a role in our decision making process. Listen to the next three voice clips as people describe how they make their decisions. Once finished, answer the following questions.

- 1) If you were part of a support team working with these people, how would decision-making and planning be different? How would they be similar?
  - 2) Do any of these three methods for making decisions seem especially “wrong” or “right” to you?
  - 3) Would you be comfortable with someone you support using these as methods for decision-making? Why, or why not?



## Your Cultural Roots

This reflecting and learning will just be the beginning of a cultural journey. It will help you complete the other lessons in the course. Hopefully you will continue on this journey after the course is done. You can do this by continuing to learn more about your own culture. You can also do this by learning more about the cultures of the people you support.

To learn more about culture and decision-making, you can read and complete the exercises in *Your Values, My Values* by Lilah Morton Pengra, pages 89-114. (See the resources section in the course introduction for more information about this resource and others.)

American culture values self-determination, equality, and individualism. You may share these values. You may believe that people self-determine their life paths. However, what you do today is influenced by the decisions and life experiences of your parents. It is also influenced by the lives of your grandparents and by their ancestors. Your choices are also influenced by the people around you and your current life situations.

You may choose how much to affiliate with your current or past life situations. But, these cultural elements can, and do, influence your perspectives, views, and decisions.

Read these statements and respond to the questions:

- 1) American social services systems have common laws, policies, and expectations focused on how to protect “vulnerable” people. Some African languages do not have a translation for the word “vulnerable.” Do you think it would be more difficult for a person to apply a law that protects vulnerable people if they do not have a word that means the same thing? Why or why not?
  
- 2) In English the word “seizure” is seen as a term that describes a medical condition. Some languages have no word for this medical term. Some languages describe the symptoms of a seizure as a spiritual imbalance. How could the reaction to a “seizure” be different based on the differences in vocabulary?



- 3) In some Native Alaskan languages, there are dozens of words to describe snow. People from these cultures recognize differences in the texture and consistency of snow. How does the number of different words available to describe the same thing, influence the scope and richness of language? How do you listen or pay attention to the language(s) used by the people you support?

Play the voice clip on screen 11 in Lesson 2, and listen as a man describes his experience of bringing his fiancée home for the first time. Once you are done, respond to the questions:

- 1) What does the person in the story mean by having to “translate” for his future wife?
  
- 2) Have you ever experienced a similar type of situation when you have brought a partner or friend into your family home and had to “translate?” If yes, describe the situation and the types of things you had to help your friend understand about your family? You may have expected some of these “cultural conflicts” but others may have surprised you. Which was the most surprising? (Think about something that you just thought “everybody knew” and your friend was surprised by it.)
  
- 3) The person in the story expects that he and his fiancée will have the same views because they have similar backgrounds. How, or why, does this happen? How much do you expect people who look like you or have similar backgrounds to you to act more like you?

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- 4) The male in this story chooses not to “affiliate” with some of the values and beliefs of his family. Does that mean they don’t affect him? Does just having the ability to “translate” behaviors or expectations give you a different view than someone who can’t, even if neither of you participates in the behavior? Why, or why not?

Regardless of your adult choices, your childhood is when you first learned about yourself and the world. The most “invisible” parts of your beliefs were developed when you were very young. By thinking about your family communication style and values, you can begin to see why some things seem “right” to you while other things seem “wrong.”

Please note, if you are adopted, use your best judgment in answering these questions. If you were adopted when very young and have had little exposure to your blood relatives or their ethnic or family roots, answer the questions from the perspective of your adoptive parents. If you were older when you were adopted, or your parents have made efforts to connect you with your ethnic, racial, or family roots, then you will want to reflect on both sets of information.

### *What is Family?*

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

- 1) When you were growing up, who lived with you as part of your family? List all the family members and their relationship to you; for example, sister, father, cousin, brother-in-law, uncle or friend.
- 2) Did you have any family members who were NOT related by blood, legal adoption, or legal marriage? Describe how they became part of your family? Is this traditional for families in your culture or not? Please explain.

- 3) Did you have any family members who WERE related by blood, legal adoption, or legal marriage but were not recognized as part of the family? Describe why they were not part of your family? Is this traditional for families in your culture or not? Please explain.
- 4) Is it expected that everyone in your family must get married? Why, or why not? Is it expected that anyone in your family should never get married? Why, or why not?
- 5) What are your family customs for finding a suitable partner for marriage or a life long commitment?
- 6) Does your family recognize out of wedlock partnerships? Does it recognize gay and lesbian life partners in a similar way to heterosexual partners? Why, or why not?

### ***Meals***

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

- 1) Who prepares meals in your family?

2) What are the most common foods you eat? Are there special foods your family eats on holidays or for other special events? What makes the food special? What makes the event special?



3) Does the family eat together or separately? Describe this.

4) Does the family talk during a meal? Who usually talks? What is the focus of the conversation?

5) What rules are there for eating and meals? (describe expected manners, behaviors that are part of your household.) Where do people eat their meals (on the floor, at a table, at a kitchen counter, in the car?) Are these rules different when you have a guest sharing the meal? If so, how?

6) What is the rudest thing you could do when you are eating a meal with your family?

7) Rituals are a part of eating meals (a prayer of thanks, lighting candles, waiting for one person to begin or until everyone is seated?) Are these observed at every meal? Describe what rituals are for everyday and what rituals are special days.

- 8) How do meals end? Do family members excuse themselves from the table? Do people “clear the table?” What other options are there for “after meal” clean up?

### *Holidays, Celebrations, and Religion*

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

- 1) What holidays do you celebrate? How do you observe them?
- 2) What other kinds of events does your family celebrate? (births, deaths, birthdays, marriages, engagements, promotions, graduations, achievements, anniversaries?)
- 3) Are some celebrations just for family? Which ones, and why? Do some celebrations include others? Which ones, and why? Who is part of these celebrations?
- 4) Are the holidays and celebrations you observe religious or not?

5) Do you identify with any religion(s)? If so, which one(s)? If you practice a religion, is it a primary focus of your life? If so, in what way? If not, why not?



6) If you have a strong affiliation with a religion, do all your activities and choices flow from your religious understanding, or are some things kept separate from religion, such as schooling, friendship, or work? Why, or why not?

### *Social Customs and Manners*

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

1) What is the proper way to greet someone? How do you know who to greet and who not to greet? Is there only one way to greet people or different ways depending on the person you are greeting? Describe any differences.

2) Is it OK to drop in on someone unannounced? Are there some exceptions to this social custom? To whom do the exceptions apply, and why? Is it necessary to bring something (e.g., food, a gift, wine) to the people you visit? If so, what do you need to bring, and why?

3) Do celebrations, events, or gatherings start, and end, at a specific time? How do you know? If you cannot arrive at a designated time for a gathering, what should you do? Does it mean something different if you are late to a work meeting? How are these situations different?

- 4) How does someone in your family show disapproval of the behavior of others?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 5) How does someone in your family show approval of the behavior of others? Does this vary depending on the situation and who is involved? How?

### *Status*

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

- 1) What characteristics are valued or convey status in your family (Wealth, age, gender, education level, profession or job choice, being married, not being married, the status of a marriage partner, special abilities, special circumstances)? List the most important ones.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2) Are there actions, behaviors, or circumstances of individuals that would bring status to the whole family? What are they?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3) Are there actions, behaviors, or circumstances of individuals that could lower the status of the whole family? What are they?

4) Is there any action or behavior of a family member that would cause your family to “disown” this member? If so, please explain.



5) Do you believe that, in general, all people must be treated the same regardless of achievement, age, race, gender, disability, etc., or do you believe you must treat people differently based on these differences? Why or why not?

### *Family Decision-Making*

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

1) Does your family encourage individual members to make their own choices? In what situations? Does your family encourage shared decision-making in some situations? When? Do marital or parental partners share equally in decision-making? Why, or why not? What about children?

2) What is most important in your family when it comes to decisions: emotions and feelings; ethnic or religious traditions; or analysis and logic? Are there other things that influence decision-making in your family?

- 3) Does any family member have the “last word” in your family? If so, does any family member’s status in the family affect how or whether they make decisions in the family (For example, do people defer to the wisdom of older members or does a family member with a disability have the same influence)?

### *Gender Roles*

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

- 1) Describe expectations for boys or men in your family. Describe expectations for girls or women in your family. In your family are expectations for men (boys) and women (girls) different or the same? How? (Some things to think about include: the types of household responsibilities; roles in care-taking of children in the family; educational, marital, or professional expectations; who they can or cannot talk to or interact with; role in religious practice; roles in decision-making; curfews or restrictions; expectations on how to dress; financial responsibilities; etc.)
- 2) What things bring boys or men status in your family? What things bring girls or women status in your family? How are these things similar and how are they different?
- 3) Are there undesirable behaviors that boys or men can “get away with” that girls or women cannot? List them. Are there undesirable behaviors that girls or women can “get away with” that boys or men cannot? List them. How are these things similar and how are they different?

- 4) Would you say that generally your family view is that men and women are (1) similar and equal; (2) different and equal; or (3) different and unequal? Give an example of how this works in your family.



### *The Influence of Geography*

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

- 1) Did your parents, (with or without you) or family members before them, immigrate from another country to the United States? (Unless you are from a Native American or American Indian family, your family DID emigrate from another country). List the primary country(ies) of origin that make(s) up your family roots.
  
- 2) If your family immigrated, how long have you or your family members lived in the United States?
  
- 3) Do you have strong ethnic, religious, or language ties to the country(ies) from which your family emigrated? If so, describe what things from your “pre-American” roots are the most important to you.

4) When you were growing up, did you live in one place most of the time or did you move around a lot? What place, if any, do you consider your childhood “home.” ?

5) What was the primary language spoken where you grew up? What language(s) do your parents or grandparents speak? Is this your native language? What was the primary religion practiced by people where you grew up? Is this your religion?

6) Was your family an accepted part of the community in which you grew-up? Why or why not? In what ways did your family reflect the values and expectations of the community? In what ways do your family values and expectations differ from the community’s?

## **Your Current and Adult Influences**

You have now gathered a lot of information on your family history, customs, rituals, and life experiences. This is a good starting point for understanding your culture. Even if you don’t appreciate or understand your upbringing, you have an awareness of family language, rituals, behaviors, and beliefs. This information can influence your decisions and perspectives today.

### *Family Customs and Rituals*

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

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1) Do you live with family today? If not, where do you live? Are you in the same community or region as your family of origin or not? Is your living situation typical for your culture or not? Are you happy with your choice? Why, or why not?



2) Do you practice the same religion as your family of origin? Why, or why not? If you practice the same religion, do you do it the same way as your parents did and through the same place.

3) Do you celebrate the same or different holidays as your family of origin? Why, or why not?

4) Do you meet your parent's expectations of you as an adult? Why, or why not?

5) Do you still speak the same language that you learned as a youngster? Have you learned to speak a second language? How has this experience affected your life?

## *New Experiences*

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

- 1) Do you have about the same amount of education as other family members? As other men and women in your family? If not, what is different? Is your family comfortable with your amount of education? Why, or why not?
  - 2) Do you work in a job where most people are similar to you or very different from you? In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? With whom do you spend most of your time at work?
  - 3) Is your job typical of the expectations your family had for you? Is your family supportive of your job and career? Why, or why not? Have you had to change your behavior in order to fit in better at your job? In what ways?
  - 4) What are the biggest influences on you outside of your family (communities, partners, friends, coworkers, etc.)? Do these people have similar or different cultures to your family culture? Describe the similarities and differences?



- 5) Have you had any experiences that have changed your relationships with your family in a profound way? Some examples that may create a change in the family relationship include a physical change such as disability, a sudden change in financial situation (more or less money), a change in religious practices, rejection of partners, or breaking or developing a substance abuse or addiction pattern. Describe any of these important changes.



### *Family Affiliation*

Answer the following questions based upon your own knowledge and experiences. Feel free to click on the “Did You Know” button to learn more about some aspects of a specific culture.

- 1) Do you keep secrets from your parents or other influential family members? If so, why do you continue this behavior?
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2) What decisions have you made about changing any family values or patterns of behavior? Describe your decision and why you made it. How has your family handled your choice? What has been the impact of your family's reaction on your life?
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3) Have you found that you see things differently than other family members do without ever making a conscious choice to do something differently? Why do you think this has happened? Have you changed or have others changed and why?

4) Is there anyone in your family that you are estranged from? If so, why?

5) Do you consider yourself close to your family? Why, or why not?

6) What is the one thing that your spouse/partner or closest friends find the most difficult to understand about your family? Why? What difference does their opinion have on your life?

### Comparing Culture and Identifying Biases

You have learned a lot about your family and how it can influence your life, your experiences, your beliefs, and your traditions. Likewise you have learned more about the culture which has helped shape your life. You have also heard or read some information about other cultures. Comparing your culture with other cultures is an important part of becoming culturally competent.

Learning about other cultures and comparing them to your own can help you:

- ➊ Identify how culture affects daily choices and interactions.
- ➋ Understand how cultures are similar to and different from each other.
- ➌ Identify personal biases about other cultures.

What is rude and what is polite is a part of culture that differs from place to place. For example, it's often RUDE to .....

- .....hang your wet bath towel over the shower rod or throw it in the hamper (in Columbia).
- .....smile at customers (in Russia).
- .....look someone in the eye when they are speaking (in parts of Africa).
- .....strongly admire another's possession (in some Middle Eastern countries).
- .....not let your friend smell your breath (in some Arab cultures).
- .....brag about your credentials in a job interview (in the Netherlands).
- .....assist someone with a physical disability, without getting his or her permission first (the USA).
- .....bring white flowers to a host's house (in China).

Reflect on these and answer the following questions.

- 1) Do you ever participate in any of these “rude” behaviors? Are they considered rude in your culture?
- 2) Many Americans consider smiling a sign of friendliness. In some cultures smiling at strangers or during important business is considered informal, silly, or insulting. How would you feel if you were waited on by a person in Russia? When people do not smile at you, do you assume they are serious and thoughtful or unfriendly?
- 3) Where do you put your bath towel when you are done with it? Have you ever lived with someone who thought you were too “sloppy,” even when you were trying to be neat? Why do you think they thought you were sloppy?



Sometimes, we are not always aware of how our culture affects others. Read the scenario below and answer the following questions.

## Scenario:

Raina goes to a graduation ceremony for a schoolmate. While there, she sees another schoolmate who often teases her. This makes her feel upset. Her friends try to cheer her up by complimenting her on her beautiful dress. They show her all the wonderful food being served on the buffet. Raina helps herself to the food and dances with her friends. The next morning Raina wakes up with a stomach ache and a fever.

1. Briefly describe your opinions about why you think Raina is ill.

Now, take what you have read and your own opinions to answer the following questions:

- 1) Which of these responses was most like your own?
  - 2) Did any of the responses seem “foolish” to you? Which one(s)?
  - 3) How would you handle it if someone you supported or a coworker made decisions based on the approach that seemed most foolish to you?

# Comparing Your Culture to Others

You have learned a lot about your family and how it can influence your life, your experiences, your beliefs, and your traditions. Likewise you have learned more about the culture which has helped shape your life. You have also heard or read some information about other cultures. Comparing your culture with other cultures is an important part of becoming culturally competent.

There are many cultural aspects to food and meals. Culture shapes what is eaten. It shapes how food is prepared. There are usually many rules around serving and sharing food. Listen to the voice clip on page 29 of Lesson 3, as three people describe how meals are conducted in their homes and answer the questions below.

- 1) What things were similar about these meals? What things were different?
  - 2) Food rituals and gender roles are often mixed together. Which of these examples displays gender roles that are most like your own? Would you find any of these eating patterns offensive? Why or why not?
  - 3) Helping people with meals is often part of direct support work. Direct support professionals may help people shop for food. Direct support professionals may help prepare food. They may participate in meals with the family or person. They help a child or an adult with developmental disabilities learn meal time manners and social skills.

4) Would shopping and preparing food be the same in each of these cultures?  
Why, or why not?

5) In the United States it is common to teach the use of utensils and sitting at the table very early in life. Describe how early teaching of table manners might be different depending on culture.