

Culture-Specific and Culture-General Learning

Imagine students preparing to come study in the U.S. There would be some *culture-specific* things that would be helpful to know – common greetings, what expectations teachers have of students, and maybe something about patterns of friendship. Of course, you say, but there are so many variations, how would we prepare the students for these? We could do so by helping them understand the ways cultures can differ, so when they encounter a visible difference they can better get at what's underneath this difference. They would be learning the culture from an insider's perspective, and they could begin thinking about how to adapt. This is *culture-general* learning (i.e., principles that apply regardless of the setting). In your own preparation, you'll need a balance of culture-specific and culture-general learning.

Differentiating Cultural from Personal and Universal

It was really hard to tell in the beginning if something was cultural or just personal. I remember one time asking my host parents out to dinner at what for me was kind of an expensive restaurant. When we were getting ready to go I was a little frustrated when I saw my host father's brother and his family had arrived to join us. I didn't say anything because I know family is important in Mexico and what would I say anyway?

When the bill came I figured that my host father would help out – after all, he was the one who invited his brother and his brother's family. As it turns out, I got stuck with the bill and felt really taken advantage of. I had found Mexicans to be so generous and then this really made me think my host father was a jerk. ~ Kelly Lavin, Mexico

Kelly's experience brings up an issue that can be challenging: How do you sort out what's normal cultural behavior and what's not. In this case, is the host father really a “jerk,” or is he following some cultural rule or norm? How can you figure this out?

Let's start with some definitions from the *Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook*:

Cultural: refers to what a group of people have in common with each other and how they are different from other groups.

Personal: refers to ways in which each person is different from everyone else, including those in the same group.

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

(Storti and Bennhold Samaan, 1997.)

Some important points to remember:

- Personal preferences exist everywhere. Oftentimes a preference may very well have cultural and historical roots. The longer you are in the country the better you can distinguish between what is cultural and what is more personal.
- When something is cultural, this means there is a recognizable pattern of behavior. When you have learned the patterns, then you know when something is out of the norm. You'll be better able to know, for example, when someone is being unusually friendly.
- Awareness of cultural patterns also helps you figure out your own perceptions of events and your adaptation strategies.

Kelly found out several weeks later that an invitation to one family member is, in fact, an invitation to other family members who know about the upcoming event. This became clear when she saw her host father in a similar situation when people who she knew hadn't been directly invited showed up to the restaurant, and he paid the bill for everyone.

She also learned something important about distinguishing between a universal (in this case, hosting a social event) and culturally specific patterns – the details that differ between cultures during such events.



Differentiate cultural from personal and universal

Read the list of behaviors below. Indicate if you think the behavior is universal, cultural, or personal. If you feel that there is more than one answer, think of some examples to show how this may be true (you don't have to write these down).

- U = Universal**
- C = Cultural**
- P = Personal**

1. ____ Eating with chopsticks
2. ____ Women walking five steps behind men
3. ____ Walking rather than riding the bus
4. ____ Feeling sorry after accidentally stepping on someone's foot
5. ____ Respecting your elders
6. ____ Making a slurping sound when eating soup or noodles
7. ____ Wearing warmer clothing when it is cold
8. ____ Being depressed after the death of a loved one
9. ____ Sleeping with a light on
10. ____ Shaking hands with someone you first meet

(Adapted from Storti and Bennhold Samaan, 1997).

Suggested answers

Cultural

1. Eating with chopsticks
2. Women walking five steps behind men
5. Respecting your elders
6. Making a slurping sound when eating soup or noodles
10. Shaking hands with someone you first meet

These statements are considered to be cultural because there are places in the world where a majority of the people would engage in the behavior. While it can also be true that these are personal behaviors, there are often rules regarding the behaviors – suggesting personal variation is the exception, not the rule. For example, in the Midwest, some may make a slurping sound when eating soup or noodles; however, by general Midwest standards, it is considered to be improper etiquette.

Universal

4. Feeling sorry after accidentally stepping on someone's foot
5. Respecting your elders
7. Wearing warmer clothing when it is cold
8. Being depressed after the death of a loved one

The above represent behaviors and beliefs found in all cultures. Of course, this does not mean that you respond exactly the same way in each culture – you may apologize profusely in one culture for stepping on someone's foot and in another you simply say “excuse me” or nothing at all. Notice that “Respecting your elders” is on both the cultural and universal list because while this belief is common throughout cultures, the extent to which respect is shown varies so greatly that it can seem to differ across cultures.

Personal

3. Walking rather than riding the bus
9. Sleeping with a light on

These reflect individual preferences, rather than cultural norms. Of course, there are some cultures where riding the bus is the only realistic option given distances between sites. Whether one walks or rides the bus may still be a matter of choice.