

Cultural communication



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

If you are to work effectively with people who are culturally different, you need to become aware of your own culture and how that impacts on others. As one textbook on professional communication puts it: ‘... we need to become more aware of the cultural basis of our own behaviours, perceptions, beliefs, and values. This enables us to see an interaction from a cultural perspective.

It is not just the other person who is displaying culture-specific attitudes and behaviours; we are also doing just that’ (Peter Putnis & Roslyn Petelin, ‘Professional Communication – principles and applications’, Prentice Hall, Sydney, 1996, p. 76). Personal values Understanding your own values may not be easy, however. You have probably taken your cultural identity for granted, as you have grown up with it. You have never had to soul search or ask yourself about that identity.

Your personal values may, in fact, constitute a barrier to cross-cultural communication. Consider this list of common attitudes that may affect your ability to communicate. Two of the key elements from the list – prejudice and ethnocentrism – are discussed below. Prejudice Prejudice arises from the ‘pre-judging’ of someone’s characteristics simply because they have been categorised as belonging to a particular group. It is usually associated with negative attitudes to that group. Prejudice often has ethnic or racial overtones.

Jan Elliott, a retired US school teacher, has developed an interesting approach to challenging such prejudice, with her ‘blue-eyes/brown-eyes’ simulation game. In this game, children learn to experience the impact of prejudice and thus begin to understand the nature of racism. Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is the assumption that the culture of one's own group is moral, right and rational, and that other cultures are inferior. When confronted with a different culture, individuals judge it with reference to their own standards, and make no attempt to understand and evaluate it from its members' perspective.

Sometimes ethnocentrism will be combined with racism – the belief that individuals can be classified into distinct racial groups and that there is a biologically-based hierarchy of these races. In principle, however, one can reject a different culture without in any way assuming the inherent inferiority of its members (Online Dictionary of the Social Sciences, Athabasca University). Since ethnocentrism is often an unconscious behaviour, it is understandably difficult to prevent in advance. Fortunately, it is possible to deal with the problem if you reflect on your practice in a new environment such as a practicum placement.

As an example, consider this report from a social work intern in the US about how his opinions about 'lower-class' clients changed over time. An example of ethnocentrism can be seen in western journalists' comments during the recent events in Afghanistan, in particular regarding the wearing of the burkha, a full-length gown and hood which women wear in public according to Islamic tradition. Many western commentators assumed that the burkha was merely a symptom of women's oppression and expressed surprise when women continued to wear it after Kabul was liberated from the Taliban regime.

Many Islamic women make their own choice to wear the burkha and some have expressed exasperation with what they see as Western feminists'

<https://assignbuster.com/cultural-communication/>

preoccupation with it. These news reports and Islamic women's opinions on wearing the burkha illustrate the differences in cultural interpretations. Cultural relativism Cultural relativism is in stark contrast to ethnocentrism – it is the refusal to make any judgement on the cultural values of other individuals, institutions or cultures. While it avoids the problem of prejudice, it is inadequate, since it involves a denial – or at least a suspension – of your own values.

You will find this more comprehensive discussion of cultural relativism and ethnocentrism helpful. Culture shock If the experience of contact with cultural differences is too challenging, this can result in culture shock, a response characterised by physical and emotional symptoms: ' Culture shock is more than your initial mental adjustment to strange customs, new language, and perhaps water that isn't safe to drink. It is a very real set of symptoms that may include depression, anxiety, increased incidence of minor illnesses, and a sense of helplessness' (Kathryn A.

Wilson <http://international.monster.com/workabroad/relocation/followspouse/>). Although culture shock occurs most often when in a foreign country, it can occur after spending time in any new environment that challenges our cultural expectations and assumptions. Consider, for example, the previously described reactions of the university lecturer confronted with factory life (Lodge, 1988, ' Nice Work') and the teacher confronted by the realities of life in the outback (Cook, 1967, ' Wake in Fright').

How do you think you would react if you found yourself working in an overly-bureaucratic system, or isolated as the only female in an all-male

<https://assignbuster.com/cultural-communication/>

environment or the only male in an all-female environment? If you did suffer problematic effects of culture shock in such a situation, you would need to protect yourself in the short term by:

- Keeping the problems in perspective (e. g. by spending time outside the workplace environment).
- Talking with your workplace supervisor or course coordinator.
- Seeking moral support from peers, friends and family (the telephone is your friend!).