

# 2

## Do You Understand Your Own Culture?

*"The future of America 'In a globalized economy without a cold war will rest with people who can think and act with informed grace across ethnic, cultural, and linguistic lines. And the first step lies in acknowledging that we are not one big world family, or ever likely to be...in the world that is coming, if you can't navigate differences, you've had it.'"*

ROBERT HUGHES

To begin a journey across cultures it is first important to take a look at yourself. You have a culture, learned values and behaviors taught by your family and community, but how do you know what about yourself is influenced by culture? If you were born in the United States, your cultural values will be influenced by the dominant U.S. culture. The extent to which you adhere to those values will be determined primarily by which part of the United States you and your family were reared, and your religious, ethnic and racial background. For the purpose of cultural research, the U.S. dominant culture is based on the U.S.-born, Anglo-Saxon middle class. Even if you fit that description, you might find that you are culturally different from the dominant U.S. cultural archetype.

Each culture has its ideal behaviors, its accepted or actual behaviors, and its unaccepted behaviors. The closer the accepted behaviors are to the ideals of a culture, the more static the culture, and in reverse, the farther the accepted is from the ideal, the more

dynamic is the culture. In other words, static cultures are more uniform and change slowly, and dynamic cultures have more variations, or more microcultures (often referred to as subcultures or co-cultures), and will change more rapidly. Cultural anthropologist Darrell Whiteman illustrates this concept in figure 2.1.<sup>1</sup>

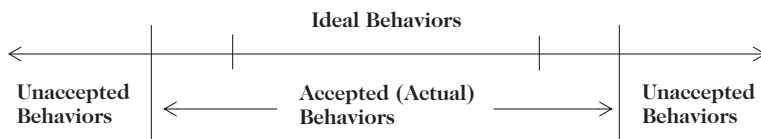


Figure 2.1. The correlation between ideal cultural behavior and cultural change

My neighbor, who was born in the United States, as I was, has physical characteristics and a language like mine, yet we do not have the same culture. Our cultural distinctiveness is not immediately visible, but it is profound. Neither of our cultures has an official name, but we acknowledge that we have different values, beliefs, and even to some extent, a different worldview. In general terms we are both part of the dominant U.S. culture, but in reality we belong to different subcultures within the larger U.S. culture. These more subtle subcultures or microcultures exist to some degree in almost all cultures, but cultures that have a steady flow of immigrants or large geographic areas are more apt to have greater cultural variation.

Our differences and stereotypes came to light when my neighbor and I began our first conversation. Our differences were noticeable from the moment we opened our mouths to greet each other. The way we sounded to each other shaped the way we received what the other was saying. My Texas speech pattern immediately indicated to my neighbor that I probably was not very bright and rather backward in my thinking. Her New York speech pattern told me that she was cold and aloof. We were both using stereotypes to make misattributions.

As people, we share a common human nature. Beyond that, our unique genetic makeup determines much of who we are. That is the

“nature” part of us, or our birth characteristics. Our life experience, the “nurture” part, is just as complex as our genetic code. It involves our culture, gender, spiritual development, socioeconomic status, personal history, generational concerns, geography, phase of life, personality type and many other factors.

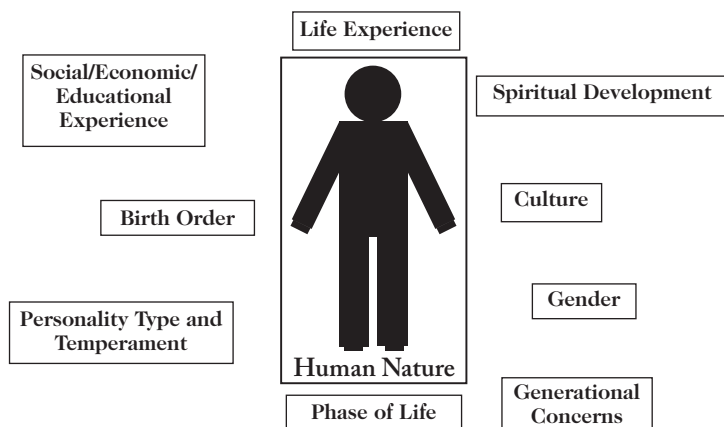


Figure 2.2. Culture box: Human nature and life experience

To understand ourselves, and ultimately our fellow humans, we must understand the influence of our culture on every aspect of who we are, how we think, how we interpret our experiences and what we value. It is as if you placed the culture box (see figure 2.2) and overlaid it on everything else in your life. Cultures have preferred personality types. The Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory is a self-testing instrument designed to reveal one's personality type in four categories: introvert-extrovert, intuitive-sensing, feeling-thinking, judging-perceiving. Studies done with this instrument indicate that cultural influences can be so strong that the percentages of personality types within a culture will vary, due in part, to what the culture values.<sup>2</sup> For example, in Australia the type ISTJ comprised 8.6 percent, while in Singapore it was 17 percent. In New Zealand the ESFJ type was 8.2 percent and in Pennsylvania, USA, the percentage was 13.97.<sup>3</sup>

Some cultures have preferred birth order and preferred genders. One's culture even shapes how we view our phase of life (single, married, married with children, empty nest, retired and so on).

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**Culture is not the only influence that shapes our behavior and values, but it is the lens through which all of life is seen and interpreted.**

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The following questions from Paul Pedersen and Allen Ivey's book *Culture Centered Counseling and Interviewing Skills*<sup>4</sup> will help you discover specific characteristics about your culture. Take time to answer each question by marking the number on the scale that most identifies your position between the two answers. Remember there are no right or wrong answers.

1. A person's identity lies within  
the individual   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   the family
2. A person should place reliance on  
others   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   self
3. A person learns from  
personal experience   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   the wisdom of others
4. I am motivated by the need to  
improve myself   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   be liked
5. I view other people's motives as  
suspicious   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   basically trustful
6. I define friendship as including  
many people   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   few people
7. In a social situation I feel that friendly aggression (teasing,  
one-upmanship and so on)  
is acceptable and fun   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   embarrassing
8. I deal with conflict  
directly   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   indirectly through others
9. I approach activity with a concern for  
doing things together   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   being together

10. My usual pace of life is

fast, busy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 slow, relaxed

11. I solve problems by

goal-based analysis 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 past knowledge or experience

12. I define time in terms of the

future 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 past

13. Nature is

mystical and fateful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 physical and knowledgeable

14. I feel ultimately that what is desired can be achieved

if one works hard 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 in very limited measure

15. Youth should

show deference to wiser elders 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 lead progress

16. Feelings should be

suppressed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 freely expressed

17. Personal beliefs should

conform 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 be asserted

18. In your life direction you should

follow a self-determined course 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 do what is needed of you

19. Problem solving should be

deliberate and logical 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 instinctive and impulsive

20. Manual labor is good for

the lower classes 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 anyone

21. With regard to the family

other relationships can 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 there is a strong  
be just as important loyalty and priority

22. Authority is

resented and rebelled against 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 respected and valued

23. The style of communication preferred is

tactful, indirect 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 open, direct

24. For the underdog, there is a feeling of

empathy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 scorn

25. Elders receive

respect 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 disregard

\* \* \*

We will come back to these questions later in the book, but for now it will serve as a starting point to know yourself better and to begin to determine the influence of culture on your beliefs and behavior.

It is easy to believe that one's own culture is the best—because it works so well for you it seems impossible to think that it would not be best for everyone. The truth is that all cultures are equal in their ability to work for the people *of that culture*. Problems arise, however, when people from different cultures enter into relationships with each other and the beliefs long taken for granted are no longer shared.

Recently I taught at a conference titled *When the World Lives Together*. As part of our discussion I asked the class to identify what questions made them feel uncomfortable. I explained that in some cultures it was not uncommon, nor considered impolite, to ask someone how much they paid for an item.

Immediately one woman blurted out, “My mother taught me it was always rude to ask such a question.” And her mother was right, for her culture. But the reality and challenge of a multicultural world are that we do not all have the same mothers.

Typically when faced with another culture, people will respond in one of the six ways described below. We must examine how we respond and discover how God would have us respond in our unique situations. It is also interesting to see if you respond one way to one culture and another way to a different culture.

## **Xenophobia**

This refers to the fear of another culture. Such fear could be rooted in a number of causes, and may eventually evidence itself in racism, hate groups and crimes.

Roger lived in a small coastal town where the predominant occupations were related to the fishing industry. One day some newcomers arrived. They began purchasing boats and fishing in the same waters that Roger and his friends were fishing in. The competition became fierce because the market for fish was not enough to

adequately support both groups of fishermen.

Because the newcomers were Vietnamese, the hostility became focused on their ethnicity and culture. Any misfortune that occurred in the town was blamed on the Vietnamese. Their traditions, values and ways of life were ridiculed. They were harassed when they shopped in the town. Violence even broke out on the docks. Both cultures began to fear each other and their fear was manifested as hate.

### **Ethnocentrism**

This is the belief that one's own culture, race or ethnicity is the best. This is not the same as self-esteem or feeling good about who you are, but rather a belief in one's superiority to others. Ethnocentrism may display itself in patronizing or stereotyping other cultures and in seeing others as "tokens." As tokens, people are invited to be a part of the dominant culture, but not in a meaningful way. The most damaging reflection of ethnocentrism is bigotry and intolerance toward those who are different.

We have many examples of this attitude in Scripture, but let's look at Acts 10 for an example. In this passage Peter sees a vision of unclean foods and is told he should "kill and eat." This happens three times. While Peter is thinking about what this means, three men come to the house looking for him and asking if he would come with them to visit Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile. This helped Peter understand the meaning of the vision and he knew that God would have him go with the men.

Why was this vision necessary? Didn't Peter want to share the good news with everyone? Actually, no. His Jewish culture gave him a limited perspective of cultures other than his own. God knew that it would take a dramatic event in Peter's life in order for him to see beyond his ethnocentrism.

We are not so different from Peter. Like him, we many times believe that our culture is better than any other culture or race. It is good for us to be reminded of verses 34-35 of this passage: "I truly

understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (NRSV).

A church decided that they should elect a council member to represent the growing number of Hispanics joining the church. As the discussions on the topic grew, it became clear that the motivation was not to have genuine inclusion and representation but to give the illusion that there was representation. The Anglo church members wanted a token Hispanic to sit on the board. They particularly wanted someone who showed deference and loyalty to the church leadership, someone who would not expect changes. They felt justified in this position because they believed their church was great the way it was. Therefore to make any changes for Hispanic members would be weakening a strong church program. Proof of this belief was the fact that the Hispanic members had joined the church the way it was. The leaders felt justified in their approach. There was no animosity at all toward Hispanics or Hispanic culture, only the firm belief that the Anglo leadership knew what was best.

### **Forced Assimilation**

Forced assimilation is a step away from ethnocentrism but still closely related to it, because at its root is the belief that one’s culture is the best, therefore everyone should be “like me.” However, with this position the person welcomes the other culture as long as the others will assimilate. In other words, “They can be on my team if they play just like I do.”

At times this approach can seem quite friendly and may be motivated by a desire to be helpful. Many of the early advocates of integration held strongly to this belief, sincerely believing that it was best for all people and the country. “English only” laws reflect this same perspective.

Again if we look to Scripture, we see the same attitude expressed in the Judaizers—who were willing to accept Gentile converts as long as they would become Jews (see Acts 15). How often do we ex-



press that same mentality on issues without really being aware of what we are doing?

Martha volunteered at her church as a teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL). She enjoyed her relationships with her students and took a great deal of personal interest in them and their families. She involved the internationals in shopping trips, museum visits and church functions. She was always thinking of ways to include her students in her daily life. Her goal was to have them, at their own initiative, join in the functions she found so rewarding and fulfilling. She did not dislike their cultures but rather ignored them altogether. She did not patronize or believe she was better than her new friends, but believed it was in their best interests to abandon their cultures as quickly as possible and become "like an American." Everyone at the church admired her commitment and sacrifice for her new friends. In fact, she was often praised and cited as an example of what the church would like to see from all the volunteers.

Martha was doing many things well in her relationships with her international friends; however, her friendships centered on the Americanization of her students. Rather than building relationships based on mutual learning and shared experiences, Martha was expending her energy on teaching her friends her own culture, values and language. She was confident that she was doing what was best for her friends by helping them to become "American" as fast as possible. *After all, she thought, they are living in the United States now.* She truly wanted them to fit into the community.

Martha was not wrong in being a cultural guide for these newcomers, exposing them to the lifestyles and values of their new environment. Because Martha was proud of her culture and wanted her friends to adapt quickly, she did not call attention to any negative aspects of U.S. culture. Even though she truly cared for her friends, it was a care based to some degree upon her ability to help them become more like her. Martha believed that she was helping her friends in exactly the way they wished. Martha confused the in-

ternational students' desire for a relationship with their desire to change their culture. By making such strong efforts to change her friends, there was a subtle message of "Your culture is not okay."

To put this in another perspective, let's assume that Martha is Anglo and that she is working with an African American woman on a team at work. How would her subtle messages of needing to be more like the dominant culture be perceived? In Martha's mind she is trying to be helpful, maybe even a mentor. But how would the other woman feel? What would she understand the message to be?

### **Segregation**

Segregationists believe that different races and culture groups should remain separate from each other. This was a popular view prior to the civil rights movement when the premise of "separate but equal" was revealed to be separate but not equal. Currently some ethnic and racial leaders, such as Louis Farrakhan, are reviving this belief. They believe that only leaders of one's particular culture can give appropriate guidance to a group and therefore must be allowed to do so in separate venues. Evidence of this is the increased demand for "African American only" schools.<sup>5</sup>

### **Acceptance**

Others are willing to show acceptance of other cultures. They are willing to coexist, accommodate and build relationships with those of other cultures. There is a recognition that all cultures are equal and should be respected. This is a worthy goal. Many diversity training programs in the business world advocate acceptance and tolerance within their multicultural teams. Acceptance is good but God calls us to do more.

### **Celebration**

Celebration is characterized by valuing other cultures because God created us as cultural beings and values diversity in all of creation. This attitude appreciates mutuality in relationships and the desire

for multicultural experiences and relationships. Celebration extends beyond accepting and tolerating to embracing and valuing.

A local church began to recognize that its area was changing demographically, and it wanted to respond to the challenge of being a church that would truly be inclusive of the entire community. As new families came into the church great effort was made at matching their talents and gifts with places of service. In so doing the church found leaders from several cultures. Now the task became incorporating different styles of worship, each with meaningful function and tradition, in order to reflect honest, indigenous worship and to celebrate the glory of God's redemption for all humankind. The church members faced many struggles as they intentionally kept focused on becoming the church that God wanted them to be in their community. Their strength came from their dependence on God and their recognition that no one culture has the corner on truth. Together they could be stronger than any one of them would be alone.

### **Culture and the Church**

As you read these definitions did you see yourself? Are you responding to persons of other cultures as you want to be? As you study the New Testament, what response do you see from Jesus? How do you think he would want you to respond?

The U.S. Christian community has not taken the lead to endorse the acceptance and celebration of other cultures. Churches, rather than being outspoken on issues of racial justice and equality, have typically been silent or even worse, supportive of segregation. This has not improved as immigrants to the United States have become more noticeable. Why would this be so, when Christians have led the way in humanitarian efforts around the world? Have we been blinded by our culture to the challenge set before us as followers of Christ and celebrators of his creation?

When our way of life or our standard of living feels threatened, in general, Christians respond like the rest of their society. Our desire

to protect those priorities supersedes the knowledge that we have of Christ's teaching related to how we should value and treat our neighbors. In fact we are so much a part of our U.S. cultural values that we seldom see the contradictions between the standards we profess and the values we protect.

In the days following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, a church that was sharing its building with a Middle Eastern congregation decided to remove the sign that indicated that the Middle Eastern church met on their property. The Anglo church's perspective was that having this visible sign on their property might make them targets for graffiti, vandalism or even a more serious hate crime. They reacted to the unfolding news of terrorists attacking the United States as the general public did. Their fear of being retaliated against for allowing this church to meet in their building led them to make a decision based out of their culture rather than their faith. The strong cultural values of materialism (wanting to protect their physical property and their financial well-being), individualism (responsible to take care of one's own first) and even privacy (it is no one's business who we have meeting here) motivated their decision.

It was only after seeing their action through the perspective of the Middle Eastern congregation that some realized which values they had given priority. For the Middle Eastern church, the Anglo church's decision was one of denying them as their brothers and sisters in Christ. Both churches believed they were one body in Christ, yet removing the sign in a time of crisis reflected the Anglo church's decision to go with their culture rather than their theology.

The Middle Eastern congregation, which faces the potential for retaliation and harm each day it publicly proclaims Jesus as Lord and Savior, was surprised that their sisters and brothers in Christ would so quickly hide their relationship. Both congregations learned a valuable lesson on the blind spots culture can create and how we need others' eyes to point these out as we journey together in Christ.

For example, when African Americans moved into predomi-

nantly Anglo neighborhoods, most churches resisted along with the rest of the Anglo community. Their justification was the same as that of the non-Christians, and even worse, they tried to use the Bible to support their fear of living in close proximity to a culture different from their own. Even today it is often observed that the most segregated hour of the week is 11 a.m. on Sunday.

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**Knowing how you would like to respond to other cultures will help guide you as you learn how to engage a multicultural world.**

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## Connecting

1. Go back and look at the inventory you took. How would you see Jesus responding to each question? On what are you basing your answers?

2. Our cultural values can be seen in our idioms or common expressions. Write down five idioms from your culture and what value each teaches.

For example:

☐ "He pulled himself up by his own bootstraps," shows a value of independence and self-reliance.

☐ "It takes two to tango," shows a value of taking responsibility.

You may also want to ask others of your culture to give you five idioms and determine the value taught in each. (This is also a good conversational tool in a crosscultural conversation.)

3. Many cultures have similar values and words of wisdom. See if you can match these U.S. idioms to their Chinese counterparts.

- |                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Biting off more than you can chew. | A. To blow on the hair and search for tiny sores. |
| 2. The truth will win out.            | B. The horse that leads the herd astray.          |
| 3. A drop in the bucket               | C. If one plants melons, one gets melons.         |
| 4. Picky, picky, picky.               | D. Like ants on the top of a hot cooking pot.     |
| 5. As you sow, so shall you reap.     | E. Riding a tiger and finding it hard to get off. |

6. The bad apple that spoils the barrel.

F. One hair from nine oxen.

7. On pins and needles.

G. Paper cannot wrap up fire.

4. Think about your everyday world. What culture groups do you have contact with and how would you categorize your response to them? Review the six responses listed (pp. 37-42). Do you respond differently to different cultures? Why? What response would God have you to make?

5. Think about the influences on who you are. In figure 2.3, fill in each box for yourself to form your visual autobiography.

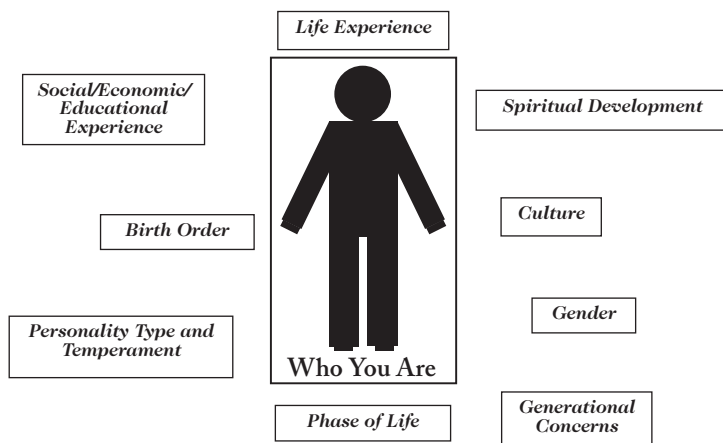


Figure 2.3. Visual autobiography

6. As you think about the box in figure 2.3 that is labeled culture, list the influences on your culture. This includes historical information about your country of origin or the persons in your family who have influenced your values and likewise the cultural influences on them. (For example, my mother grew up in the northeastern United States, and many of her values are consistent with the culture of that region. Although I grew up in the South, my mother's values are part of my unique cultural heritage.)

7. Respond to the following statements by determining whether they are universal truths (true for everyone regardless of culture) or whether they are molded by culture.

**Table 2.1. Universal truths or culturally determined truths**

Statement	Universal Truth	Culturally Conditioned
1. People should always strive to arrive at the appointed time.		
2. It is best to tell a person if they have offended you.		
3. Women should not wear makeup.		
4. It is rude to accept an offer if only asked once.		
5. It is better to be rich than to be poor.		
6. One should choose one's own spouse.		
7. Polite men will allow women to walk through doorways first.		
8. Being a good citizen means agreeing with your country's leaders.		
9. Individuals have the right to make decisions about their future, regardless of what their family wants.		
10. Good children will agree with their parents.		

8. Discuss your responses with people of different generations and different cultures. Write down your reactions to your discussion.

Answers to question three:

- |      |      |      |      |
|------|------|------|------|
| 1. E | 3. F | 5. C | 7. D |
| 2. G | 4. A | 6. B |      |

Answers to question seven:

All of these are culturally based.