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# Encouraging Depth Rather than Surface Processing about Cultural Differences Through Critical Incidents and Role Plays

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# Encouraging Depth Rather than Surface Processing about Cultural Differences Through Critical Incidents and Role Plays

## Abstract

Intercultural interactions will increase in the future given international business ventures, immigration patterns, recognition of minority group rights in various countries, and other social changes. People can prepare themselves by participating in formal educational and training programs that deal with understanding cultural differences and with communication across cultural boundaries. One approach to education and training is to analyze critical incidents that depict people in intercultural encounters that involve a misunderstanding or a difficulty. In addition to identifying exact reasons for the difficulties, people can also learn about research-based concepts that assist in understanding many other intercultural interactions they are likely to have in the future. Participants in education and training programs can also prepare short skits that depict aspects of their own culture and how these can be explained to people from other countries. If participants can identify cultural influences on their own behavior, they will be more likely to search for culturally based reasons in their intercultural encounters. The realization that culture affects interpersonal interactions will make attributions based on "difficult personalities" or "purposeful prejudice" less common.

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## **Understanding Cultural Differences and the Future**

One certainty about the future is that people will need to know more about culture and cultural differences to be effective in their everyday lives. Reasons include increased migration across country borders, the impact of international business, greater recognition of cultural diversity within large and complex nations, and the increasing importance of international events on local communities (e.g., the events of September 11, 2001). This means that people will benefit from various formal attempts to increase their knowledge of culture and cultural differences. I have been involved in various such efforts, and I would like to share some of the methods used to communicate important information about culture and behavior. The two major types of efforts are college courses on topics such as cross-cultural psychology, intercultural communication, and international organizational behavior (texts include Adler, 2001; Brislin, 2000; Jandt, 1998); and cross-cultural training programs offered in various organizations whose employees deal with cultural diversity and the challenges of international assignments (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). In considering these methods, I would like readers to imagine that they have one or more of these tasks:

- a. they are students who are taking a course focusing on culture and cultural differences but have previously had few face-to face experiences with people from other countries;
- b. they are college teachers who have never themselves had a course concerned with culture, but are asked to teach such a course for the first time;
- c. they are employees in an organization that is contemplating international expansion and whose supervisors or managers ask people to accept a two-year job assignment in another country;
- d. they are specialists in the human resources division of a large organization and are asked, for the first time, to prepare a training program that will help employees be successful on their international assignments.

For convenience, I will refer to these people as "learners" since all face the challenging task of acquiring and communicating information about other cultures even though most may have had few interactions with people who are very different from themselves. There are other commonalities among these different learners.

### **The Starting Points: The Backgrounds of Many Learners**

All people have been socialized in culture, but people do not often think carefully about this fact. They have a rough idea about the "forest," that is, the fact that they are citizens of a country and hold certain values typical of people in that country. But people have rarely been encouraged to think carefully about the "trees," that is, the specific set of socialization experiences that lead to their becoming respected members of their culture. People may have had some intercultural interactions, e.g., Euro-Americans with African Americans, or either of these with Native Americans, but they rarely have been encouraged to think

deeply about these interactions. Students on college campuses, for example, can complete their college experience with few or no extensive interactions with people from another culture. A further unfortunate fact is that there is often a self-selected segregation where people from different cultural backgrounds spend their free time with each other and do not actively seek out relationships with people from other cultural backgrounds.

### **Some Approaches to Learning: Examining Features of Culture**

I have taught courses dealing with culture and cultural differences, and have offered short-term cross-cultural training programs in various organizations, for over thirty-five years. My basic goal is to encourage learners to think carefully, in an in-depth manner, about the influences of culture in their own lives and in the lives of other people. It is easy to be superficial in thinking about culture: the colorful kimonos worn by Japanese women, the interest in rap music among African Americans, and the tribal dances offered on a community's "culture sharing" day by Native Americans. It is much more difficult to think more deeply about cultural differences and about their effects on people's everyday behaviors. The various approaches I suggest here lead up to one of the major assignments that I suggest to serious learners. People are asked to develop a short demonstration or skit in which they have identified an aspect of their own culture that has an affect on their own behavior. I will summarize some of the learners' skits toward the end of this article. Prior to this, I will discuss various approaches to teaching that lead up to the learners' active analyses about the influences of their own culture.

Examining various definitions of culture, with examples. Culture is not easy to define, and there are various definitions among which learners can choose. I have developed a system of explaining culture based on twelve points (Brislin, 2000; space allows discussion of six, below), and one reason I developed it is that specific examples of each are possible. Ideally, learners can relate to these examples. When possible, I draw from experiences learners can relate to, and so this means that many of my examples will be based on my experiences in Hawaii (where I have lived for thirty years). I will also draw on a few examples I found useful for my work in short term training programs in various cities (e.g., Vancouver, British Columbia; Tokyo, Japan; Phoenix, Arizona; and Washington, D.C). One goal of tailoring specific examples for specific learners is the "aha!" reaction. Learners sometimes say, "Aha! I kind of knew that that behavior you described frequently occurs here, but now I see where it came from and how it relates to other behaviors."

Culture refers to learned behaviors that are shared among people who, most often, share the same language and live in the same place. These learned behaviors become part of culture given that they contributed to the solution of various everyday problems in the past and they sometimes make similar contributions today. People develop these culturally based behaviors, and so culture is the person-made part of the environment in which people live (Herskovits, 1948). This leads to some of the first specific examples I discuss with learners. Is Hawaii's climate part of its culture? The answer is "no," but there are person-made reactions to the climate that have become part of the culture. One cultural feature is informal dress standards, where light colored and loose clothing has

become the norm. Another is a slightly slower pace of life, as has been found in various cultures near the equator (Levine, 1997). An example I used in Washington, D.C., deals with its hot and humid summers. Prior to common use of air conditioning, people would use their porches during the summer months to take advantage of possible breezes. This led to the cultural behaviors of chats and pleasant conversations with neighbors and passers-by. Older individuals who remember these behaviors bemoan the decline in this type of socialization given that people now stay inside their air-conditioned homes. In Arizona, the very hot summers lead to various shared behaviors: being careful to drink water frequently during the day, cutting down on out-of doors physical activity during the middle of the day, and being aware of places to go swimming.

Culture is passed on from generation to generation, but rarely with explicit instruction, by parents, elders, teachers, mentors, and other respected elders. In response to the question, "What other respected elders are expected to pass on culture in your specific case?" learners have come up with good answers. These include religious leaders, kapunas (recognized and highly respected experts on aspects of Hawaiian culture), summer camp counselors, and athletic coaches. If certain shared behaviors have a cultural basis, we should be able to see aspects in the stories told by our parents and grandparents. For example, I tell a story about my father. He was the first to have a radio, in 1924, at his college given his ability to make his own from wire and tubes. I argue that this reflects the desired cultural behavior, "interest in current communication technology." I suggest that my father, today, would be one of those knowledgeable computer people that most of us go to when we face a difficulty or glitch that we can't handle.

If culture is learned and passed on generation to generation, this means that there will be childhood memories of experiences that led to the acquisition of culture-based behaviors. Indigenous Hawaiians remember experiences in family and community conflict resolution that emphasize full participation of all concerned and the agreement that everyone stop ill feelings at the end of the cooperative gathering of people involved. Hawaii had limited land where people have access to basic resources such as water and arable land. People cannot move away to avoid lingering conflicts with family members and neighbors. There must be respected conflict resolution procedures to which they can turn. Canadians remember experiences that lead to the conclusion, "There is this big, powerful, and sometimes overwhelming country to the South of us." They have experienced its invasiveness in the form of television shows, movies, manufactured goods, and even textbooks that they are required to read. Canadians realize that they will know much more about their neighbor to the South than citizens of the United States will know about them.

### *Introducing research based concepts*

With this introduction to what culture is and how it guides select behaviors, learners are now ready to tackle research based concepts that help summarize and explain many specific observations. I have found that people actually enjoy learning about individualism and collectivism if the concepts are explained clearly (Triandis, 1995; Hofstede, 2001;

Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Triandis & Suh, 2002). In individualistic cultures, the basic unit of society is the individual with her/his attitudes, values, skills, and goals. Beyond the nuclear family, there is not a group of people individuals regularly and seriously consult regarding their life goals. They don't necessarily, for instance, discuss career moves and mate choices with their uncles and aunts. In collectivist culture, the basic unit of society is a group such as a family or organization to which people are very loyal. People in collectivist culture are expected to develop cooperativeness, harmonious relations, and a sensitivity to group norms. There is a group of people beyond the nuclear family with whom any one person integrates his/her life goals. This can be the extended family, meaning that uncles, aunts, and cousins are very important figures in one's life. Or, it can be the organization where bosses and co-workers become important figures who are called upon for help with various life stresses, not just those that are work related.

Individualism and collectivism should not be introduced as "better or worse." They are major features of culture that can and should be understood, and most people will encounter the difference at some point in their lives. There is a pattern of "upsides" and "downsides" to these two aspects of culture. With individualism, people can pursue their ambitious goals and rise to high levels based on their various abilities. However, they do not have an automatic support group whose members will assist during various life crises. The attractions of individualism are clear. Some of my most successful colleagues have been Japanese and Korean women who would have been constrained by the normative expectations of collectivism had they remained in their countries of birth. With collectivism, people have an automatic support group but may face jealousy and rejection if they try to rise above others who are similar in age and education. Another aspect of collectivism, less discussed, is that cooperation and harmony may occur within any one collective but do not necessarily occur with members of another collective in the same country. Two family businesses in China may be marked by the benefits of collectivism within each company, but cooperative relations and joint ventures between the two companies can be non-existent.

Given this introduction, learners can often think of examples from their own lives. Who has the responsibility to set up people for a good set of job interviews (or jobs themselves) in various cultures? In individualistic cultures, it is the people themselves, while in collectivist cultures it is the uncles and cousins already discussed. This means that individualists often seek employment outside their families during their teenage years. Individualists remember jobs like baby sitting for neighbors, newspaper routes, lawn mowing, snow shoveling, and stints in fast food restaurants. My sixteen-year old son is seeking a summer restaurant job, and he is happy to be able to list his baby-sitting and his volunteer work as a basketball coach (for 7 and 8 year olds) on the "work experience" part of job applications. "These two items are better than four inches of blank space," he tells me.

Ideally, college classes and training programs will be blessed with diversity and will have collectivists in the class: people from Asia, Latinos, Native Americans, among others. They often do not remember work for money outside the family. If they have some time and energy for work, there is likely to be someone in the extended family able to take

advantage of these resources. Later, these family members can attest to "the ability to work hard" among their relatives. One of my students at Arizona State University was able to see some humor in the relationship between culture and job search. He was from Mexico and was attending college on an athletic scholarship. If graduation was scheduled for May 20, on May 1 he would meet friends on campus. Given the friends cultural background, two reasonable inquires are, "How are you?" and "How are the job interviews going?"

He commented to me, "I can handle the first question but am stuck for an answer to the second." His dilemma, which becomes clear to learners as I give this example, stems from the fact that extended family members have the responsibility for arranging a good set of job interviews. Collectivism involves benefits such as this, but there are also obligations. Once he is established in a career, my former student will be expected to look after and to given benefits to relatives, often favoring them over equally able and qualified people who are not family members.

A note on personal examples may be helpful. The willingness of professors and cross-cultural trainers to be self-revelatory and to tell personal stories is often well received. I have given examples from the experiences of my father, son, and former student. Personal stories to elucidate concepts are especially appreciated among learners from Pacific Island nations. One reason is that these cultures have long emphasized an oral tradition and the introduction of a written record is relatively recent. Lessons about life are captured in widely shared stories, and people tell about their recent experiences in story form with characters identified, a plot line established, an ending to the story and so forth.

### *Integrating individual differences*

Cultural dimensions such as individualism and collectivism, and others to be discussed later in this article, should not become the basis for new if slightly more sophisticated stereotypes. There are many variants of individualism and collectivism, and individual differences should be recognized (Triandis & Suh, 2002). In the case of individualism and collectivism, important research has been done on a parallel individual level personality constructs: independence and interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1998). Independent people view themselves as entities who are separate from others. Interdependent people view themselves in terms of their connections with others. Once these concepts are understood, learners are able to relate various combinations of the cultural level and individual level concepts. Are there independents in collectivist cultures? Yes, there are, and they may take on roles such as the entrepreneur rather than the loyal worker for a company who expects life-long employment. Even these independents behave according to the guidance offered by their culture. For example, the entrepreneurs will ask members of their collective to invest in their new business, and members of the collective will be expected to give the request very careful consideration.

*Are there interdependents in individualistic cultures?*

Yes, they take on roles that provide the "social glue" necessary for the smooth functioning of communities. They may be born into small communities in the Midwest or New England, and they may remain lifelong residents rather than move to big cities, a step that may have been taken by their more independent high school classmates. They will be volunteers in various community activities, pillars of their churches, and will have the widespread reputation of "good neighbors." But they also must deal with their membership in an individualist culture and engage in its guided activities such as personal negotiations for pay raises, selection of a mate for life, and readiness to give personal opinions when polling agencies call on the phone.

### **Using Critical Incidents**

One of the guidelines to understanding culture is that it becomes clear in "well-meaning clashes" (Brislin, 2000). People from different cultures come together and want to interact in a sensitive and effective manner. They may have the reputation of possessing considerable social skills in their own culture. Yet after an intercultural encounter, people feel that the interaction did not go smoothly. Given that I have indicated that people want to be sensitive and that they have good social skills, difficulties encountered during these interactions are very likely due to cultural differences.

The difficulties people face during intercultural interactions can be captured in critical incidents and then used as a highly effective communication tool. I have been involved in the development of several collections of critical incidents. One (Cushner & Brislin, 1996) deals with general issues faced by virtually all people who have extensive intercultural interactions, either overseas or among culturally diverse groups in their own country. Another (Wang, Brislin, Wang, Williams, & Chao, 2000) deals with interactions among North Americans and Chinese. In addition, I was asked in early 2001 to write a weekly newspaper column on understanding cultural differences for the Honolulu Star Bulletin. The column uses the critical incident approach (see <http://starbulletin.com/columnists/brislin.html>)

Critical incidents are short stories that describe individuals and give some background about them. There is a plot line developed, and there is an ending to the incident that involves a misunderstanding among people and/or the feeling that the intercultural interaction did not proceed as smoothly as people hoped. Learners are asked to identify reasons for the misunderstandings and to identify the cultural difference that may be involved.

Professors or trainers can start with a short presentation on some cultural differences and can then distribute a critical incident in which the cultural difference just introduced has an impact. In addition to identifying cultural differences, learners can also be asked, "Does this remind you of experiences in your own lives." This is an incident I developed which I have found stimulates good discussions



### **Critical incident # 1: So Many Adjustments, So Little Time**

Beth Foley worked in New York City for an international bank that had branch offices in many of the world's large cities. One day, her supervisor offered her a major position at the office in Seoul, Korea. Beth discussed the possible move with her husband. They also talked to their older two children, ages eleven and eight, who were reminded that they might have to spend more time looking after their two-year-old sister. Family members agreed that it would be a good career move for Beth and so she reported her positive decision to her supervisor. Beth's husband knew he would be a "trailing spouse." Given his expertise in computer technology, he hoped to land a job once the family arrived in Seoul.

After arriving in Seoul, Beth faced multiple demands on her time. She met and interacted with coworkers. She spoke with various Korean supervisors to whom she would report. With her husband, she sought housing, schools for the older two children, and day care for the youngest. After the excitement of the first few weeks, Beth became irritable and unenthusiastic about the position in Seoul. Coworkers noted that she was not very productive, and relations with her husband and children became strained at home.

Beth may be experiencing culture shock. Many people who live for extensive periods of time in another culture experience symptoms such as: an irritable mood, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, upset stomach, headaches, and decreased enthusiasm about life in general. One reason for culture shock is that the familiar methods of achieving everyday goals are suddenly taken away. For example, Beth has to meet and interact with colleagues and supervisors, but she has to do this in culturally appropriate ways in Korea. Familiar workplace behaviors learned in her own culture may no longer be suitable and in some cases may be totally inappropriate. For example, Beth would be familiar with speaking up in a direct, forthright, and candid manner at workplace meetings, given her experiences in the United States. In Korea, a gentler, indirect communication style is preferred since people want to "save face" and not be embarrassed in a public setting.

Another reason for culture shock is that so many adjustments have to be made in a very short period of time. The sense of "feeling overwhelmed" is common. In this example, Beth faces workplace challenges but also must find schools and daycare for the children, must figure out Seoul's transportation system, must support her husband in his job search, and so forth. Programs that prepare people for overseas assignments often cover culture shock reactions. Moving people away from the feelings that "I am the only one with these problems" can hasten their adjustment and job effectiveness.

In addition to coverage of issues central to courses such as cross-cultural psychology and intercultural communication (culture shock, family adjustment issues, direct and indirect communication), critical incidents also allow discussion of well-researched principles as they apply to intercultural interactions. People who observe Beth may want to make attributions about the causes of her behavior. These people would be making the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977) if they focus on aspects of Beth's personality such as "anxious" or "not open to change." They would be far more sophisticated in their thinking if they took into account the situational pressures facing Beth

(Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991), the multiple demands placed on her, and the limited amount of time she has to deal with the many adjustment issues she faces.

### **Critical incident #2: The Purposes of Apologies**

When possible, a good communication technique is to use examples from current events and shared knowledge of history that learners will know. With preexisting knowledge of the examples, professors can then add to the analysis through the introduction of research based concept. In February, 2001, there was a collision between a United States Navy Submarine (the USS Greeneville) and a Japanese fishing boat (the Ehime Maru) in the Pacific Ocean, near Hawaii. This tragedy received extensive media coverage throughout North American and Asia. Cultural differences in ways apologies are extended was the topic of this critical incident that I wrote for teaching purposes.

Harumi Tanaka, from Osaka, Japan, had accepted an assignment in Boston. His task was to explore the possibility of developing joint ventures with American firms. He had been invited by one company to spend a month and had been assigned an office and a research assistant. He agreed on a Monday to present a business plan the following Friday. On Tuesday, the computers in the company crashed and the research assistant called in sick with a severe case of the flu. Still, Harumi pushed forward and presented his plan on Friday. He began his presentation, "I'm sorry that I am not well prepared. This meeting may not be a good use of your time." He then went into a clear, interesting presentation. After the meeting, one of the American executives said, "I don't know why you had to apologize. Everyone knows about the computer crash and your assistant's illness." Harumi responded that he thought that the apology would be a good introduction to his presentation.

The misunderstanding in this incident occurred because apologies are interpreted differently in the United States compared to Japan. In the USA, apologies are associated with weakness and with the admission of guilt. In this case, people at the meeting might interpret Harumi's apology as an admission of responsibility for a poor presentation. In Japan, apologies are less associated with weakness or with the admission of guilt. Apologies show concern for the difficulties and emotional distress people are experiencing. However, Japanese people making apologies are not necessarily claiming that they are responsible for the difficulties or distress.

Japanese like hearing apologetic language. It shows modesty and demonstrates that people are not putting themselves above others. A Japanese colleague told me, "We enjoy hearing the language of apologies, much like we enjoy hearing the breeze as it moves through palm trees." Before my first lecture tour in Japan, a wise colleague advised me to use phrases such as "I hope there is something in this lecture that is worthwhile. Many of you in the audience could make a better presentation." A comparable type of language Americans like to hear deals with compliments. Examples are, "That suggestion you made in the meeting was excellent," or "I appreciate your hard work on the recently completed project."

Differing views about apologies is one reason for bitterness among the families of sailors who died in the collision between the Ehime Maru and the USS Greenville. The Japanese family members wanted to hear timely apologies that would have indicated the deep regret, concern, and empathy of Americans involved in the collision. American Naval officials delayed their apologies because (before examination of the cultural differences) they felt they would be admitting their guilt and would be exposing themselves to career ending judicial proceedings and to lawsuits.

After introducing this incident, other concepts professors can introduce include the functional approach to the study of behavior, as reflected in the differing functions that apologies serve. Another topic, that I have found must be covered several times to make sure it is communicated well, is the conceptual equivalence of behaviors in different cultures. People in different cultures often have the same goal (e.g., survival, education of children, pairing of males and females for procreation), but there are different behaviors that are employed to achieve the goals. Behaviors are said to be conceptually equivalent if they serve goal attainment in similar types of social situations. In this critical incident, the shared goal in Japan and the United States is the maintenance of positive interpersonal relations. There are conceptually equivalent behaviors used to achieve this goal: apologies in Japan, and compliments in the United States.

### **Learner Prepared Short Skits: My Culture and My Behavior**

After examinations and discussions of critical incidents, learners often express a willingness to engage in even more active and participatory approaches to communications about cultural differences. For example, learners can be asked to prepare short skits that include an aspect of their culture and its guidance for their specific behaviors. People find the assignment challenging and most are happy that they were encouraged to do it. Well into a college course or training program, learners still agree that it is easier to identify aspects of other cultures and culture-guided behaviors in other cultures. They often have to think long and hard about aspects of their own cultures that have had an impact on them. To use current terms in cognitive social psychology (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1999), they have to engage in deep thought rather than in surface processing of information.

Here are some lessons from my experiences with this assignment. While the most motivated and interested learners will carry out interviews, will search libraries, and will use web-based search engines in the quest for something more original, many will stay with "tried and true" examples. For example, learners will often take a critical incident from one of the published collections (Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Wang et al, 2000; many examples in Francesco & Gold, 1998 can be developed) and will turn them into the short skit or role-play called for in the assignment. As long as they can identify the aspect of their own culture and aspects of behavior guided by culture, they fulfill the assignment successfully. I give them the strong suggestion that they limit their skits to one minute so that they don't wear out their welcome with amateur theatrics.

Here are summaries of six skits that learners have prepared, together with the identification of cultural differences in their own lives.

### **Off with the shoes**

A student from Hawaii is attending college at the University of Wisconsin. In November, she is invited to a Saturday evening party at a classmate's house. Upon arrival, she starts taking off her shoes but can't seem to find the place where everyone has put their shoes prior to entering the house.

One of the most widely shared norms in Hawaii is that people take their shoes off prior to entering a house or apartment. There are a number of reasons that this norm developed, and they allow discussion of how norms travel (dispersion) as well as their functions. Many early settlers in Hawaii were Japanese who were contracted to work in the sugar cane and pineapple fields. They brought the norm of "shoes off" with them, and visitors to Japan will encounter this norm. A functional reason deals with Hawaii's thick clay soil. This soil contains a brown/red coloring that is extremely difficult to remove once it is ground into a rug. This problem is preventable if people don't bring soil into a house from the bottom of their shoes. The "shoes off" norm is so strong in Hawaii that violators are likely to be reminded of its existence in a firm manner. People from Hawaii agree that they would behave according to this norm until they find that it is not applicable in some places.

### **Lines under one's yearbook picture**

In September, some American high school seniors discuss plans for the upcoming year. Several agree that they should join a few more high school clubs so that they will have more activities listed under their names in their senior-year high school yearbooks. This skit requires the culture-specific knowledge that American high school yearbooks very often give special attention to graduating seniors. Part of this attention is that the students' activities are listed under their pictures, and many students find it desirable to have many lines that summarize their activities. Three column inches of material to summarize activities can lead to more social status than two column inches. Some will join clubs solely to make sure they have an adequate number of such lines. Joining multiple clubs also serves the cultural value of individualism. People can show that they are unique individuals with a well-rounded collection of skills if they are members of such diverse groups as the track team, mathematics club, junior achievers, and student newspaper.

### **Who is the most polite?**

This skit was developed by Dr. Ann Marie Yamada. There is an employee in an American business, Mary, who does not have control over muscles above her waist and moves about offices in a electric wheelchair. After a staff meeting one day, the exit from the room is blocked by chairs and wastepaper baskets. Three coworkers are sitting near Mary. One makes eye contact with Mary, they exchange smiles, and this person leaves the room. A second person simply stands up and leaves without saying "goodbye" to anyone. A third

person stands up and moves the wastepaper baskets and chairs out of Mary's path, and comments on the lack of social skills among some people. Which coworker is the most polite according to Mary's norms?

The answer is that the first person is the most polite. This person made eye contact, did not receive any request that help could be offered, and then proceeded to leave the room. Mary is behaving according to the norm, shared among many handicapped Americans, that help should not automatically be offered. Rather, if help is needed, Mary will ask or signal its acceptability. The automatic offer of help reinforces feelings of dependency among the handicapped, and (at least in individualistic cultures), this is not welcome. Given this norm, the third coworker is the least polite since she automatically assumes that Mary needs help.

### **Special attention**

A male student from Japan who is studying at an American university attends a reception sponsored by the International Programs Office. An American female volunteer in the International Programs Office, Jan, greets him at the door in an enthusiastic manner, asks him if he knows some other people in attendance, and brings him to a table where there are cookies, cakes, and punch. The Japanese student stays near Jan most of the evening and does not mix with other attendees. Jan had hoped to talk with lots of people and becomes uncomfortable with the constant attention shown by the Japanese student.

At receptions in the United States such as this one, the goal is to meet many people and so the norm is to "circulate" and to "mix." This is not the norm in Japan and in many other Asian countries. At gatherings in many Asian countries, people stay with the same individuals for the entire evening and people don't circulate, a practice they consider superficial. The Asian norm leads to good-natured advice. "When you arrive at a party, be sure to start talking with some interesting people because you will be with them the rest of the time."

Another cultural difference deals with the content of social skills. The woman in this skit is behaving properly according to the norms of her culture. She welcomes the visitor, communicates enthusiasm in her voice, offers to introduce the visitor to others, and so forth. Behaviors such as these are interpreted as "special attention" in many cultures. The Japanese visitor may interpret Jan's enthusiasm as directed at him alone and may engage in behaviors such as writing love notes. These will be disturbing to Jan, who may confide in her friends, "I was trying to welcome the person and to be friendly, the way my mother taught me to be." This cultural difference stems from the distinction between universalism and particularism (Osland & Bird, 2000). With universalistic norms, people are expected to treat all individuals in as similar a manner as possible. As a professor, I should not have favorite students, for example, who have access to higher grades. Jan has been socialized to display similar social skills when she meets people for the first time. With particularistic norms, people behave quite differently based on the type of relationship they have. An enthusiastic greeting is reserved for people with whom one has or wants to establish a special relationship. My cordial welcome to an international student who visits my office

shortly after his arrival in the United States has been interpreted as a sign that he will be one of my favorite students.

### **Self-presentation during the job interview**

A graduating senior from Hawaii is being interviewed for an entry-level position in an accounting firm. The interviewer comments on the number of times the applicant has been on the dean's list, and she replied that she tried to work hard in school. The interviewer asks about out-of-class activities. Even though she had been the president of two clubs, she simply said that she tried to become well rounded. The interviewer asks about future career ambitions, and she replies that she wants to start out being a good accountant. The interviewer ends the meetings with a rather unenthusiastic comment that he will be in touch if the applicant makes the short list.

People in Hawaii often do not have either the opportunity or the encouragement to develop a dynamic style of presenting themselves and their qualifications for different jobs. They often find themselves passed over in favor of "mainland Americans" who do not have more qualifications but who do present themselves in an exciting, interesting manner. There are several reasons for the difference. One is that there is a norm in Hawaii that a person should not call attention to his or her own accomplishments - if such attention is to be given, then others should extol the virtues of the person. There is the widespread feeling in Hawaii that people who call too much attention to themselves may be stepping on others to get ahead. Going back to the point made earlier about childhood experiences, children or adolescents will likely remember being ridiculed if they commented too loudly or often about their accomplishments. Being ridiculed means that they "made A." This term is known to every person socialized in Hawaii. "Making A" means that people made an ass out of themselves in a public forum. To avoid "making A," people don't engage in public behaviors that might lead to embarrassment. Consequently, they don't have the opportunity to practice positive, self-confident, self-presentation behaviors. I often find myself encouraging students to apply for internships during their junior and senior years just to have the opportunity to participate in an activity that is very similar to a job interview. I also recommend that they attend "job search strategies" workshops that are offered on campus.

### **Out of the house**

In the earlier discussion of individualism and collectivism, the concept that Americans often work outside the home was introduced. Other "movements from the home" have been the subject of learners' skits.

One learner plays a twelve-year old sixth grader who receives a phone call inviting him to a birthday party. The call is from a classmate who is neither a close friend nor a person currently being avoided. The twelve-year old does not particularly want to go to the party and begins a list of lame excuses why his attendance is impossible. His mother overhears the conversation and asks him to put down the phone for a moment. She then says, "Go to the party! You've got to learn to get out of house, meet people, put them at

their ease, and have a good time even if you don't know the party goes very well." The mother is making attempts to prepare her son for success and happiness in an individualistic society. She may not be able to use the technical terms, but she knows that people who can meet others in a socially skilled manner, who can find topics of mutual interest to talk about, and who can enjoy themselves at various types of social gatherings will reap various benefits. The mother knows that her son must learn to present himself to the world outside the home. There is no other person who is responsible for this extremely important life task.

### **Some Final Thoughts**

People can learn to think about their own cultures and to identify aspects of their cultures that have provided guidance for selected behaviors. With this important set of self-insights, they can look upon the behavior of other people in other cultures in a more sophisticated manner. They will be able to engage in thinking such as, "People's cultural background gives them guidance for behaviors in various social settings. When I meet people from other cultures, we interact in one of these settings. I should keep in mind situational norms as well as people's traits. In the intercultural interaction, the other person chose a behavior guided by his or her cultural background. I, having the guidance of another culture where I was socialized, should not make conclusions based solely on my initial observations. Instead, I should think more carefully about the cultural guidance this other person brings to intercultural interactions. There are some concepts that can help me to do this, such as individualism and collectivism, universalism and particularism, and various reasons for self-presentational styles.

While admittedly challenging, I believe this type of thinking can be developed and will contribute to societies whose members are more accepting and appreciative of cultural diversity.

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### Questions for Discussion

1. Throughout this chapter, cultural differences and possible reasons for the cultural differences were discussed. Keeping mind that there is more to learn and remember with this combination, would you prefer to learn only about the differences, or would you prefer to learn about the differences-underlying reasons combination?
2. Think of an puzzling or difficult encounter with a person from another cultural background that you have had in the past. Are there any concepts presented in this chapter that help you better understand this interaction. If not from another culture, the person could be from another part of your country, or could be different in terms of gender or age. Can this encounter become the basis of skit you might prepare, as discussed in this chapter?
3. It is often easier to see cultural influences on behavior in someone else's culture. Do you now have any insights into an aspect of your own culture that has an influence on your behavior?
4. Surface and depth processing refer to different amounts of effort we put into thinking about various events in our lives. Can you think of another example (e.g., in your relations with other people, with products that you buy, with training and education programs in which you participate) where it is useful to know the distinction between surface and depth processing?
5. A person from another country comes to you and tells you, "I will be in your country for two years on a work assignment in a large organization that manufactures consumer products. What advice do you have for me to help me make my stay successful?" What would you say to this person?

### Related Websites

- I have used critical incidents to help understand cultural differences as the basis of a weekly newspaper column I have been writing for the Honolulu Star Bulletin. This newspaper puts the most recent column at this web site (<http://starbulletin.com/columnists/brislin.html>). Previous columns can be found by using this web site (<http://starbulletin.com/columnists/brislin.html>) and then using these search terms "culture clash brislin".
- For applications of cultural understanding to human relations in the workplace, the Society for Human Resource Management has a web site (<http://www.shrm.org>). You can use a search term such as "cultural diversity".
- If you use the search engine [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) you will obtain large amounts of information if use cross cultural training or intercultural communication as search

terms. One of my colleagues, Nestor Trillo, prepared a web site on communicating across cultures, and this can be found at <http://www2.soc.hawaii.edu/css/dept/com/resources/intercultural/Thesis.html> or by entering "intercultural nestor trillo" as part of a search on a search engine, such as [www.google.com](http://www.google.com).

- To see the range of books available on communicating effectively with people from different countries, you can go to the web site for Intercultural Press ([www.interculturalpress.com](http://www.interculturalpress.com)).