

# CULTURE AS PROCESS

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Described below are six important concepts about the "deep structure of culture." Awareness of them helps us understand culture as a process.

1. **Culture is a set of rules for behavior.** You cannot "see" culture because you cannot see the rules; you can only see the products of culture, in the sense that you can see the behaviors the rules produce. Yet, cultural rules do not *cause* behavior, they *influence* people to behave similarly, in ways which help them to understand each other.

It is by understanding your cultural influences that you know how to greet a person younger than you, older than you, a friend, a stranger. Cultural rules help you to know *how* to hold a baby. Cultural rules shape food preferences, and celebrations --determine whether you celebrate the sun or the moon; whether you wear a dress or pants, or nothing at all. These rules give meaning to all the events and experiences of life. The essence of culture is not these behaviors themselves, but the rules that produce the behaviors.

2. **Culture is characteristic of groups.** The rules of a culture are shared by the group, not invented by the individual; the rules of the *group* which are passed on from one generation to the next form the core of the culture. It is a mistake to confuse individual differences with group cultural differences. Every person develops a unique personality as a result of their personal history, and at the same time develops within a cultural context with some behavioral characteristics which are shared with other members of the group.
3. **Culture is learned.** No one is born acculturated; rather, we are born with a biological capability to learn. *What* each person learns depends upon the cultural rules of the people who raise them. Some rules are taught with words "hold your fork in your right hand and your knife in your left." Other rules are demonstrated by actions---when to smile, how close to stand when talking to someone.

Because culture is learned, it is a mistake to assume a person's culture by the way s/he looks. Someone can be *racially* black and *culturally* Irish. A person can also become bi-cultural or tri-cultural by learning the rules of cultures other than his or her own primary group.

4. **Individual members of a culture are embedded to different degrees within their culture.** Because culture is learned, it can be *well* learned by

some people in the group and *less well* learned by others. As children are acculturated they usually learn the core rules of their culture, yet they may not always learn every cultural rule equally well. Some families are more tradition oriented, others less. Further, even when families and individuals learn the cultural rules, they may not always behave according to what they have learned---some people are conformists, others are non-conformist.

As a consequence of both phenomena, we say that the behavior of members of a culture will vary depending upon how deeply *embedded* his or her experiences are within the core of a culture. As we work with individual families, thinking about behavioral variations in this way helps us understand why for instance, all Japanese people don't always "act Japanese."

5. **Cultures borrow and share rules.** Every cultural group has its own set of core behavioral roles and is therefore unique: yet some of the rules of Culture A may be the same as the rules of Culture B. This happens because cultural rules evolve and change over time, and sometimes when two groups have extensive contact with one another, they influence each other in some areas. Thus two groups of people may speak the same language, yet have different rules about roles for women. Understanding this helps us avoid becoming confused when a person from another culture is so much like you in some ways, yet so different in others.
  
6. **Members of a cultural group may be proficient at cultural behavior but unable to describe the rules.** Acculturation is a natural process, and as we become acculturated we are not conscious that our ideas and behavior are being shaped by a unique set of rules. Just as a 4-year-old who is proficient with language couldn't if asked, diagram a sentence or explain the rules of grammar, so also do people become thoroughly proficient with cultural behavior without consciously knowing that they are behaving according to the rules. Understanding acculturation in this way explains why you can't walk up to a person and ask them to teach you their culture. Nor could you probably explain your own.

Phillips, Carol Brunson, Culture As Process, In *A Guide to Culturally Sensitive Care*, 1995, California Department of Education.

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