

## **Elements of Surface and Deep Culture**

The following examples are meant to demonstrate cultural diversity and should NOT be considered true for all members of a cultural group.

### **Surface Culture:**

<b>Foods</b>	includes foods and eating patterns/habits
<b>Holidays</b>	patriotic, religious observations, personal rites and celebrations
<b>Arts</b>	visual and performing arts, music and drama
<b>Folklore</b>	myths, fables, legends, fairy tales, folk songs, proverbs, riddles, jokes, limericks, verses, rhymes, and games
<b>History</b>	historical and humanitarian contributions, social and political movements
<b>Personalities</b>	historical, contemporary, and local figures

### **Deep Culture:**

- Ceremony** (What a person is to say and do on particular occasions)
- Some cultures teach children to shake hands with adults as an appropriate greeting. However, within many Asian cultures, body contact is not practiced. Greetings are expressed by bowing the head slightly.
  - Eye contact between the teacher and the student is expected in most schools. However, in many cultures it is considered disrespectful to look the teacher in the eye, because the adult is a figure of authority.
  - When a teacher congratulates a Vietnamese student for doing something very well, the person may say that he or she is not really good at all. This is not false modesty, but only an example of the Confucian concept of reacting with modesty to praise, which has been practiced for more than two millennia.
- Courtship and Marriage** (attitudes toward dating, marriage and raising a family)
- Today, most persons have a choice in choosing their mates; however, within some Arab and East Indian cultures, marriages are still arranged through mutual consent of both families.
  - Among some Asian cultures, wives assume a subordinate role to their husbands in all areas after marriage. They have no legal or marital rights and must obey their husbands. In the event of the husband's death, this obedience must transfer to the eldest son.

- Community property laws, where women are entitled to half of men's wealth after marriage, come from Spanish law. Not all 50 states have community property laws. The majority of the states with such laws are found in the Southwest because of the Spanish influence in this area.
- The upper and middle classes in Haiti follow the Western pattern of formal marriage. The vast majority of less affluent Haitians follow the marital pattern of "placage," a form of common-law marriage. This is a union which may last for life.

**Aesthetics** (the beautiful things of culture: literature, music, dance, art, architecture, and how they are enjoyed)

- What is considered beautiful in one culture may be considered unattractive in another. Some cultures will not use complementary colors on the color wheel together, e.g., red and green, while other cultures consider this juxtaposition as beauty.
- Some cultures emphasize the subdued and the miniature while others prefer things that are large. For example, the value placed on "miniature" objects within Asian cultures is represented by the centuries-old practice of bonsai, the cultivation of dwarfed plants.
- Some Native American tribes have seven words for the color "blue." Who would argue that the "blue of the sky" is the same as the "blue of the ocean"?
- Some cultures value items that are made by hand more than items which are made by machine. This explains why a handmade gift item, regardless of how primitive it may seem to one, is received with extreme admiration in some cultures.
- The adage "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" remains true today. All people learn to appreciate the things they see through their own cultural eyes.

**Ethics** (how a person learns and practices honesty, fair play, principles, moral thought, etc.)

- How cultures practice honesty, fair play and moral principles may differ. What some classroom teachers consider "cheating" may be viewed as "helping one another" from another cultural point of view.
- The concepts of good and evil for the Vietnamese are part of the "mainstream of life." Living consists of successfully existing or surviving, as best as one can. Authority is recognized more readily when it has a human face. The law is understood better when it is represented by a person. Allegiance, political or otherwise, is usually to a human being rather than to an abstract principle or idea.
- In the Lao culture, to be "adult" is to be totally independent, self-sufficient and self-reliant.

**Family ties** (how a person feels towards his or her family, friends, classmates, roommates, and others)

- Bonding is different among different cultures. In some cultures, for example Hawaiian and Mexican migrant, older children, regardless of gender, are typically expected to care for younger children.
- Some cultures practice multiple generation housing patterns. Three, four, or five generations may live as one family unit.
- Extended family relationships exist in many cultures. First and second generation relatives may be considered as important as siblings.

- The family nucleus is the center of Haitian life, this includes all relatives. The family deals with all aspects of a person's life, and everything is considered within their domain. Handling crises, counseling, healthcare, marriage, travel, and educational decision-making are all included. Religion is primarily family-oriented in that all interaction and worship patterns are conducted as family, not individual, endeavors.

**Health and Medicine** (how a person reacts to sickness, death, soundness of mind and body, medicine, etc.)

- Natural medicines are used by many cultures. Teas made from roots, bark and leaves of a plant are used today as they have been for centuries. Scientists are continually discovering the chemical bases for the effectiveness of these natural medicines.
- Folk medicine is practiced by some cultures. *Curanderismo*, the practice of using folk healers, continues among some Hispanics. *Curanderas* or *curanderos* practice the gift of healing through natural remedies, superstition and religion.
- Coining (Cao gio) is a common practice in Asian countries. A coin dipped in mentholated oil is vigorously rubbed across the skin in a prescribed manner, causing a mild dermabrasion. This practice is believed to release the excess force "wind" from the body to restore balance. You may access the following web site for a picture of coining.  
[www.ethnomed.org/ethnomed/clin\\_topics/dermatology/pigment36.html](http://www.ethnomed.org/ethnomed/clin_topics/dermatology/pigment36.html)
- Cupping (Giac) - A series of small, heated glasses are placed on the skin, forming a suction that leaves a red circular mark, drawing out the bad force.
- Pinching (Bat gio) - Similar to coining and cupping, the dermabrasion formed by pinching the skin allows the force to leave the body. (It should be noted that many of these practices are performed on young children, even infants, and the temporary dermabrasions they produce should not be confused with abuse or injury.)

**Folk myths** (attitudes toward heroes, traditional stories, legendary characters, superstitions, etc.)

- Every culture has folk myth practices. For example, among some Hispanic groups, hiccups may be cured by making a small ball of red thread, moistening it with saliva and placing it on the forehead of the child. In contemporary U.S. culture, many groups believe a sudden fright will cure hiccups. Some Asian cultures cure colds by rubbing the skin with a coin until bruises appear.
- Every culture has its distinctive omens. In some U.S. groups, the dropping of an eating utensil foretells the arrival of someone who is hungry, or walking under a ladder signifies bad luck. The owl is considered a bad omen among some Hispanics, Asians and Middle Easterners and may represent bad luck, evil, or stupidity. In many Vietnamese homes, the first visitor to one's home on New Year's Day is an omen of how the coming year will be filled with happiness if the visitor is a prosperous one. If the person is gruff or drunk, the year will bring misfortune.
- Regional differences exist across cultures. Many homes in the South serve black-eyed peas on New Year's Day to bring good luck during the coming year,

although these may be considered livestock feed and “not fit for human consumption” by people residing in the Midwest.

**Gestures and Kinesics** (form of nonverbal communication or reinforced speech, such as the use of the eyes, the hands, and the body)

- Body language in one culture may mean something completely different in another. Directions in the U.S. generally are indicated by pointing with the index finger. In other cultures, this same gesture may have crude or unacceptable connotations.
- The hand signal indicating “come here” used by Americans, wiggling the index finger toward the body, may be an insulting gesture to some Asians since it is used only with dogs or cats.
- Americans indicate that something is “perfect” by touching the index finger and thumb. In Vietnam, this gesture means “worthless.”

**Grooming and Presence** (the cultural differences in personal behavior and appearances, such as laughter, smile, voice quality, gait, poise, hair style, cosmetics, dress, etc.)

- The manner in which one dresses is culturally determined and may also be affected by socioeconomic factors. Some immigrants to the United States use their traditional dress at times and American clothes at others. Often the use of traditional dress is due to the costliness of replacing one’s native wardrobe with American clothes.
- Cultural presence is also evident in the way people appear, their gait, their stance, and their posture. For example, a woman who walks rapidly may be considered extremely “unladylike” in some cultures, whereas TV commercials in the United States imply this is a sign of valued vibrancy.
- Adornment of the ears is considered a mark of beauty in some cultures. Some groups pierce the ears of females during infancy. Other groups may pierce their nostrils for adornment purposes.

**Ownership** (attitudes toward ownership of property, individual rights, loyalties, beliefs, etc.)

- All cultures teach a sense of ownership, but to varying degrees. Among Native Americans, land was not to be owned or abused. It was only to be used to provide for one’s immediate need.
- Some cultural groups would find it rude to accept an offer immediately. They believe offers must be politely refused several times before accepting.

**Precedence** (what are accepted manners toward older persons, peers and younger persons)

- Within some Hispanic families, siblings have specific roles. The oldest boy, *el hijo mayor*, is accorded certain responsibilities. He becomes an authority figure for his mother and siblings.
- Many languages have specific language forms for addressing older people that serve to denote respect.
- Among many cultures, age is respected. Hispanics use the titles *don* and *dona* with the given name to show respect. Asians also revere the elderly and equate age with wisdom.
- Among Native American families, grandparents assume the role of teachers. To have contact with one’s grandparents during childhood is considered fortunate. Cultural (and linguistic) influences that break that bond are detrimental.

- A Vietnamese person greets the head of the family or an older person first, then the younger family members.
- In Haitian society, elderly persons are highly respected. They are revered within the family as persons of authority and great wisdom. Middle-aged people do not tell parents to mind their own business. The elderly are expected to monitor family life. They mitigate the discipline of the mother and the father.

**Rewards and Privileges** (attitudes toward motivation, merit, achievement, service, social position, etc.)

- Attitudes towards rewards and privileges are part of one's culture and are learned through social interaction with the environment in which one lives. Prevailing attitudes toward different ethnic groups and socioeconomic status may impose limitations on or create temporary detours in the development of a person's self worth.

**Rights and Duties** (attitudes toward personal obligations, voting, taxes, military service, legal rights, personal demand, etc.)

- Noble actions in these areas exist across cultures, and in most instances they occur without fanfare and go unnoticed. One unpublicized fact is that a higher percentage of Hispanics have received commendations for bravery in defending the United States since World War II than any other ethnic group.
- Children in some Asian cultures, such as Vietnamese, are taught to work independently. Self-sufficiency is considered to be a virtue. In other cultures, such as some Hispanic cultures and many Native American cultures, children are taught to help their peers and work cooperatively. They often work better in groups or teams.

**Religion** (attitudes toward the divine and the supernatural and how they affect a person's thoughts and actions)

- Every cultural group has beliefs concerning the divine and the supernatural. Large cultural groups tend to be diversified in their religious practices. For example, not all Cubans are Roman Catholic; many practice Protestant and evangelical religions.
- Small groups, such as the Kickapoo Indians, may practice a religion known only to members of the tribe.
- Some Vietnamese follow *Tam Giao*, the Three Teachings, which combine the humanistic philosophies of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Taoism seeks to define the role of human beings in relation to the universe. Confucianism suggests an ethical code of conduct in relation to society. Buddhism suggests an avenue to sagehood. Vietnamese may hold more than one religious belief unlike the Roman Catholics. A Vietnamese Catholic may also worship his or her ancestor (i.e. in a crisis, a Vietnamese Catholic may pray to both God and his ancestors.)

**Sex Roles** (how a person views, understands, and relates to members of the opposite sex and what deviations are allowed and expected)

- Within most cultural groups women have one role, while men have another. The Navajo culture is matriarchal. Women make the decisions concerning the family and control the money, yet males always walk a few paces ahead of them.

- Within traditional homes in many cultures, men provide and women serve. In today's non-traditional homes, where both husband and wife provide, conflict often occurs when the man expects the woman to continue the serving role and the provider role simultaneously.
- In Haitian society, the man is considered the primary income provider for the family. Daily decision-making, rules, and governing are considered his domain. Social, political, and economic life center on the man. Daily enculturation of children is the woman's domain. Men are called to solve only unusual problems. The father is primarily a distant authority figure, rather than a prominent figure in the education or daily life of the children.

**Space and Proxemics** (attitudes toward self and land; the accepted distances between individuals within a culture)

- The amount of space between individuals is called proxemics. Within the Anglo-American culture, communication occurs when individuals are within 18 to 48 inches of each other. Among Mediterranean cultures, the appropriate communicative distance between individuals may be as close as 12 inches. In other cultures, physical contact such as standing so close that arms touch may be necessary to signal attentiveness. What is considered acceptable proxemics by one culture is interpreted as invasion of personal space by another. As classroom teachers, we often say more through proxemics than we do verbally. When a teacher draws away from a child who stands too close, she may be giving a non-verbal message of rejection.

**Subsistence** (attitudes about providing for oneself, the young, and the old, and who protects whom)

- Generally speaking, North Americans are youth oriented. Emphasis is placed on looking, dressing and acting young. In other parts of the world, age is venerated. Age is associated with maturity, experience, and wisdom and this is recognized and accepted by the young.
- Every culture has rules that determine who takes care of the young, who takes care of the elderly, and who respects whom.
- In Vietnamese households, on the first day of Tet (lunar New Year), the whole household gathers to pay respect to the eldest person in the house by wishing him or her a prosperous New Year.

**Taboos** (attitudes and beliefs about doing things against culturally accepted patterns)

- Every culture has a list of "no-nos." For example, what many consider socially acceptable, such as dancing with a partner, is forbidden behavior in many religious groups and some Native American cultures.
- Undressing or bathing with a group, as is expected in physical education classes, is considered taboo among many cultural and sub-cultural groups.
- Placing a hand on a person's head may seem harmless in many cultures; however, in some Asian countries, such as Laos, it is an insult because it is believed that the king of souls resides in a person's head, thus the head is considered a sacred area and should not be touched.
- Body contact in public also is taboo in many cultures, and boys and girls do not hold hands or kiss in public. In some cultures a woman may not touch a man in any way (such as a tap on the arm) during conversation.

- Vietnamese children may refrain from asking questions of their American teachers even when they do not understand a point, because they believe they might convey to the teacher that she has not explained well or do not want to confront the teacher with any unpleasant fact.

**Time Concept** (attitudes toward being early, on time, or late)

- Time concepts are distinguished by the language of a culture. In English the clock “runs.” In Spanish the clock “walks” (*el reloj anda*). In Vietnamese time also “walks.” Where time “walks,” a person may arrive an hour early for a function and not become upset because of the wait. Likewise, the same person may be an hour late for a function and not feel obligated to apologize, as life is less hurried.
- The concept of time among Native Americans is also distinctive. Solar and lunar positions dictate when certain things will occur. Tribe members may wait patiently for days in order for a particular ceremony to take place. “Indian signs” have been used by American farmers for centuries. Potatoes are planted in the dark of the moon when the astrological signs are below the waist line. However, corn is planted in the full of the moon when the signs are in the head.

**Values** (attitudes toward freedom, education, cleanliness, cruelty, crime, etc.)

- Attitudes toward honor and dishonor are evident in all cultures. Vietnamese have a high regard for morality and adhere to the five Confucian virtues of humanity, righteousness, prosperity, wisdom and faithfulness as guides for their daily conduct. Within many Asian cultures, the best way for a child to honor his or her parents is to succeed academically.
- *Tan hieu hoc*, literally translated as “love for learning” frequently is mentioned as a cultural characteristic of the Vietnamese people. This does not mean that scholars devote their entire lives to the pursuit of knowledge and investigation of various phenomena. What the Vietnamese call “love of learning” is actually a traditional, deep and almost subconscious respect for the learned and the learning. This attitude is best exemplified by the documented story of the illiterate old farm woman who took a sheet of rice paper from her grandson and reverently burned it, because it had calligraphic writing on it, rather than let the little boy desecrate it by making it into a kite for his own entertainment.

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