

Everybody's Ethnic

Everybody's Ethnic
Your Invisible Culture



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Legal Niceties

The Video

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Summary

Culture is like eye color. Your eye color is obvious to anyone who sees you. But you cannot see the color of your own eyes without some kind of reflection. Everybody's Ethnic helps viewers hold a mirror to their own culture.

Travel by video to Mexico for a Day of the Dead celebration, witness a funeral in Bali, explore food in Hong Kong, and see street life in New Delhi to learn about our own "invisible" culture.

We believe many of our cultural beliefs are simply the most "natural" or "best" way to behave. We believe everybody should behave that way; therein lies the roots of prejudice.

Explore daily behaviors shaped by culture:

- Do friends shake hands or hold hands?
- What do you reveal and what do you hide by the clothes you wear.
- Sitting on a chair -- a natural act or a behavior taught by ones culture?
- Would you dance differently if you were born into a different culture?
- How do you separate the edible from the disgusting?
- Is it acceptable to wash your car in public? What about washing your laundry in public?
- Do all cultures use beaches to sun and swim? The answer is a surprising, no.
- Do you run from a snake or play with it?
- Is art something everyone does or a special talent given only to gifted individuals?
- Eating in public and bathing in private. Could the two be reversed?
- Is a smile really a universal message?

Discussion Questions

1. The video begins by suggesting that a culture is like a path formed over time by frequent use. In what ways is this comparison true?

The video speaks of culture as “a path of beliefs and behaviors shaped by generations of use.” Most people chose a path simply because it seems natural, because that’s the route everyone else chooses. A culture is similar in that most people do not make a conscious decision to choose a particular culture. Their actions are often taken because they seem to be the “natural way to do things.”

To extend our metaphor of the path ask what kind of person might reject the common path and forge a new path, a “road less traveled”?

2. The video next compares culture to eye color. How is a culture like eye color?

The video observes, “A culture is a bit like eye color. We all have colored eyes, but none of us can see our own eye color. We rely on photographs, reflections or feedback from others. Eye color is obvious to outsiders but invisible to our own eyes.”

The key here is to understand that one’s own culture is typically “invisible” to its members. A real understanding of your own culture comes only through contact with other cultures—by literature, travel, or personal contact. This realization is one reason many colleges strive for a diverse student body. Understanding your own culture is part of self-understanding.

3. The video states: “Albert Einstein was once asked how it felt to be a genius. He replied, “What does a fish know of the water in which it swims every day?” What does this have to do with understanding a culture?

In the words of the video narration, “Every human has a culture. But, like water to a fish, like color to eyeballs, culture is invisible to those who “swim” in it, yet obvious to outsiders. In a sense, we all swim in invisible water. Americans, for example, rarely see themselves as members of a culture. When asked to describe an American, they explain, “Oh, they’re all different.” They don’t see that this belief itself is part of the culture. They believe only foreigners are ‘ethnic.’ They see other cultures as bound by strange traditions and customs, yet do not see their own behavior as shaped by culture.”

A key understanding to take from this video is to realize we are all very much shaped and influenced by the culture in which we are raised.

4. How is a culture learned?

“Learning” your culture is called enculturation and takes place through parents, families, schooling and simply living in the culture. Parents never sit down and say, “Today I’m going to teach cultural values.” But they do by every word, every meal, every game, every waking moment.”

We learn a culture in much the same way we learn a language. Schooling plays a key role both in learning language and culture, but is not essential to either.

Celebrations and holidays also play an important role as do peers, mass media, national celebrations and rituals.

5. The chart on the following pages notes some behaviors and beliefs that vary among cultures. Some, but not all, are noted in the video. The chart does not attempt to match a specific behavior to a specific culture since that is beyond the objectives of this video. Examine the chart (it may be reproduced for classroom use) and explore how misunderstandings about each behavior or belief could lead to confusion or conflict.
6. How does the Mexican “Days of the Dead” and the funeral festival in Bali teach about death in those cultures? How do our ceremonies dealing with death differ?
7. Stories and entertainment also transmit cultural values. In traditional cultures these stories were oral and passed down through generations as legends, myths, and folk tales. Modern cultures use television, movies, and mass advertising to teach cultural values. Examine tonight’s offerings on television in terms of cultural teaching. Descriptions of the shows from a publication such as *TV Guide* will work here. What do the shows teach about what it means to be a part of the culture?
8. New technology changes a culture. The change from hunting and gathering to agriculture greatly changed cultures. Imagine living in a time when this change was taking place. How would the change from hunting and gathering to growing crops and raising animals change behavior? Are there new technologies today producing similar sweeping changes?

The video points to travel and mass communication as “culture changers.” From the video: “Television, mass media, the Internet, and satellite communication mean that cultures can develop without respect to national boundaries. Radio signals cannot be stopped at the border, a satellite relay or e-mail requires no passport. Once, culture and nationality were nearly identical. Today, new types of cultures are possible—cultures without geographic boundaries.”

9. What are the three obstacles to inter-cultural understanding described in the video?

The video suggests: “1. To assume “we’re all alike.” The thought that everyone is the same, deep down, is comforting, but leads to an inability to see differences. 2. To believe in stereotypes. A stereotype is a judgment about an individual based on culture. For example, all Americans are friendly, or all are rude. The belief fails to recognize that not every person in

a culture holds all its beliefs. A stereotype also fails to recognize describing a culture is not the same as describing an individual member of that culture. 3. To evaluate and hold one's own culture as superior. Cultures are not like sports with winners and losers. Pride in one's own culture is understandable, but demeaning the values of other cultures is the stuff of racism and conflict."

10. What does the video mean when it says that "People define nations or cultures. The lines you see on a map that define national boundaries exist only in agreements between peoples."

The phrase means that societies (people) mark (or construct) national boundaries. Lines separating one country from another are not visible from an airplane. The boundaries of nations are determined by governments based on treaties often signed after a war. The boundaries are changeable and exist only as long as other nations agree to recognize them.

11. Explain the following statement: "Two hundred years ago there were no Hispanics, Orientals, Indians or Native Americans, or Africans."

Certainly people lived in Asia, America, and Africa two hundred years ago, but they did not identify themselves with these terms. The word "Hispanic" is a 20th Century invention. Indians (or Native Americans) identified themselves as members of a tribe, considerably different from members of other tribes. People in Africa and Asia likewise identified themselves by local groupings and not by the name of a continent. These terms are "constructs" of other cultures rather than names chosen by people to identify themselves.

12. The video talks about countries that drive on the right side of the road versus those that drive on the left. What does the side of the road you drive on have to do with understanding other cultures?

The video uses a simple behavior (traffic flow) to illustrate the idea of judging others in terms of one's own values. If you view your culture as the standard of the entire world's wisdom, people with different cultures and values must be inferior. This attitude is "ethnocentrism" — placing your own culture at the center of the universe. If you drive on the right side of the road, those who drive on the left are not merely different, they're backward. Right is superior, left is primitive.

An example of this is seen in judgments about a native speaker of Cantonese who speaks English as a second language. In Cantonese, pitch changes are important within a word but not to modulate a sentence. So a Cantonese speaker of English might not drop his or her pitch at the end of a sentence. Additionally, Cantonese sounds staccato and a bit loud to American ears. English speakers hearing this speech might conclude the Chinese person is brusque or rude. If a native English speaker used such a flat, staccato tone it would be rude. But when the Cantonese speaker talks that way he or she is using the English language with Cantonese inflections. The judgment that such a person is rude illustrates an ethnocentric perception.

What one thinks of another country's driving habits is usually harmless, but when the behaviors are more critical — ideas of how to live and die — the disagreement can lead to racism, war, or even genocide.

13. Why do people in many nations view American culture with suspicion or even fear?

In countries worldwide, adults see their children dancing to American rock music, wearing jeans and t-shirts, eating fast food and soft drinks. They see a corresponding decline in respect for national dance and rituals, native costumes, and local foods. They see these symbols of American culture as a threat.

14. Discuss the following paragraph from the book, *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States* by Gary Althen:

“Americans do not usually see themselves...as representatives of their country. They see themselves as individuals who are different from all other individuals, whether Americans or foreigners. Americans may say they have no culture, since they often conceive of culture as an overlay of arbitrary customs to be found only in other countries. Individual Americans may think they chose their own values, rather than having had their values and the assumptions on which they are based imposed on them by the society in which they were born. If you ask them to tell you something about ‘American culture,’ they may be unable to answer and may even deny there IS an American culture.”

15. You are riding as a passenger in a car driven by one of your closest friends. He hits a pedestrian. There are no witnesses to the accident and the pedestrian is bruised but not seriously injured. The speed limit on that street is 20 miles per hour but you saw the speedometer and know your friend was driving at 35 mph. Several days later a lawyer representing your friend tells you that he will go free if you will testify under oath that he was driving only 20 mph. Would you be willing to do that?

This question is adapted from Riding the Waves of Culture by Fons Trompenaars. When asked, most Americans (96%) said they would not lie under oath to protect their friend. When this same question was posed to people in Venezuela, only 34% said they would not testify. How would you explain the difference? There are many possible explanations for the huge difference in the results of this question. One of the reasons is culture. Asking this same question in different cultures world wide would produce equally widespread results.

Americans (among other cultures) tend to be “universalists.” They believe in universal rules of right and wrong. Fairness means treating everyone alike and applying these universal rules without exception for friends and family members. Circumstances are important, but “the law’s the law.”

Venezuelans (among other cultures) are more situational in their approach. They believe that what is right in one situation might not be correct in another. Family and friends are treated as well as possible, even if that means treating others “less fairly.” They consider the idea of treating “everyone the same” as unfair and prefer treating each person as unique. Personal feelings are relied upon rather than put aside.

Everybody's Ethnic Quiz

1. What does the color of your eyes have to do with culture?
2. In which country are beaches for socializing or religious ceremonies more than for swimming or sunning?
3. The video shows a country in which a “day of the dead” celebration features parades, candy skulls, and fireworks. In which country does this take place?
4. If you translate the names various tribes and/or ethnic groups use to describe themselves you find they often mean the same thing. What is this common translation?
5. What does “ethnocentric” mean?
6. For many Westerners results are most important. The video describes one culture in which the way things are done (the process) is just as important as the results. Which culture is this?
7. Name one way mass media such as radio, television, and the Internet influences cultures worldwide.
8. Which best describes how much of the world uses knives, forks and spoons for meals:
 - (A) Almost every civilized nation
 - (B) Those countries that understand germs cause disease
 - (C) Many cultures but probably less than half the world's population

Everybody's Ethnic Quiz – Answer Key

1. Culture, like eye color, is obvious to anyone except the person with the eyes. You can know your own eye color only by feedback from outside sources.
2. India, Mexico
3. The people or “humans.”
4. To be ethnocentric means to judge other cultures only by comparison with one's own.
5. Japan
6. Mass media separates cultures from nations. A “culture” can develop without regard to national boundaries.
7. Mass media separates cultures from nations. A “culture” can be independent of national boundaries.
8. C: Probably less than half the world's population.

Behavior	Your Culture	Other Cultures
Carrying heavy loads	Use arms or hands	Balance on head or shoulders.
Holding hands	For couples in an intimate relationship. Rare for same sex friends	Rare for couples but common for same sex friends.
Clothing	Casual, OK to reveal skin. Clothing to express being different.	More restricted. Clothing to express group membership.
Sitting	Using a chair is the norm.	Sitting cross-legged on a mat or floor is the norm.
Dance	"Do your own thing" rules but learned patterns are often repeated.	Dance is a form of story telling. Movements are more choreographed.
Breakfast	Certain foods (cereal, eggs, citrus) are breakfast" foods.	No distinction as to when foods are eaten.
On the beach	Swimsuits and sunbathing.	Beachwear ranges from casual nudity to fully-clothed.
Eating	Using spoons, forks, and knives	Using chopsticks or hands. Only the right hand is acceptable.

Behavior	Your Culture	Other Cultures
Status	Status is judged by achievement and earning power. Status can change quickly.	Status comes from family background, origin, or as a birth right. Status can be unchangeable.
Art	An “artist” has rare talent. Great art is expensive and often found in museums.	Art is a form of expression for everyone.
Streets	Streets are for traffic. The “streets” are dangerous.	Streets are the “living room” of society. Street life IS social life.
Pets	Dogs and cats are on leashes or kept indoors or fenced in yards.	Dogs and cats are a part of street life and often found in stores and restaurants.
Thinking	Thoughts and actions are seen as separate and distinct.	Action and thoughts are inseparable. One result: “wrong thoughts” can be a criminal offense.
Smile	A smile shows happiness or amusement	A smile shows happiness, confusion or embarrassment.
Truth	“Tell it like it is.” Be blunt.	Truth is secondary to social harmony. “Blunt honesty” is rude.

Behavior	Your Culture	Other Cultures
Showing agreement	Saying yes means “let’s do that.” It shows acceptance and understanding.	Saying yes is a polite way to show you are listening. It does not show agreement.
Showing agreement	Saying, “Probably, I think so,” or “That’s a good possibility” is a tentative “yes.”	A qualified agreement is a polite way of saying “no.”
Public Affection	Holding hands, locking arms, hugging, and kissing is acceptable for couples	Physical contact in public is very rare.
Eye contact	Maintaining eye contact is part of good communication.	Best to look away and make only passing eye contact, especially with one’s superiors.
Left handedness	No special attention paid to which hand a person uses.	Certain actions (e.g., eating) are taboo for the “dirty” left hand.
Time	Being “on time” is considered polite. People believe “time is money.”	Time is fluid and governed by social interaction not by the clock.
Age	The elderly are treated with respect but “retirement” is seen as a reward.	Elderly seen as a store of wisdom for important decisions.

Resources

American Beliefs: What Keeps a Big Country and a Diverse People United

by John Harmon McElroy (Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 1999).

McElroy identifies and explains the essential ideas of American culture that promote the unity of a diverse nation—because they have been shared and acted upon by generations of Americans.

Among the beliefs he identifies: everyone must work, improvement is possible, freedom of movement is needed for success, each person is responsible for personal well-being, achievement determines social rank, and a majority decides.

American Ways: A Guide For Foreigners in the United States

by Gary Althen (Intercultural Press, P.O. Box 700, Yarmouth, Maine 04096).

This book is very readable and valuable because it is written to explain American culture to non-Americans. Althen's point is that "It is usually helpful, when trying to understand others, to understand how they see themselves." As Althen observes, "Foreign visitors often find that Americans in general condescend to them, treating them a bit...like children...Foreign visitors are well advised to remember that it is not malice or intentional ignorance that leads so many Americans to treat them like inferior beings. The Americans are, once again, acting the way they have been taught to act. They have been taught that they are superior, and they have learned the lesson."

www.ethnicgrocer.com

Explore foods and eating habits of China, Greece, India, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Turkey, Viet Nam and more on this very user friendly website. Offers insights in eating customs, recipes, and allows browsers to buy hard-to-find ethnic foods. Food for the mind and the body here.

Survival Kit for Multicultural Living

by Ellen Summerfield (Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, Maine, 1997).

In very readable "newspaper style" prose, Summerfield explores the major issues confronting multicultural America. She deals with the "melting pot versus salad bowl" analogies, explores how to move beyond stereotypes, and explores the concept of political correctness.

The most valuable part of the book suggests ways students (or teachers) can thrive in a multi-cultural society. Here three "Multicultural Dilemmas: Mini Case Studies" provides enough for at least an entire class on the practical problems of living with differences. Her listing of resources is extensive.

Respecting Our Differences: A Guide to Getting Along in a Changing World

by Lynn Duvall (Free Spirit Publishing, 400 First Ave N, Suite 616, Minneapolis, MN 55401. 1994).

Duvall writes with a teen audience in mind in this book that could well be used as a text for a course in multi-cultural living. The book would be controversial as a text but is a fine teacher resource supplying many ideas for discussion. Duvall deals with stereotypes, language, race, scapegoats, hate groups, and unlearning prejudices. Very practical teacher resource.