

What Makes Cultures So Unique?

Differences Are the Spice of Life!

Have you ever given serious thought to what creates cultural differences? We all know, of course, that these differences *exist*, but what is really involved in making each culture so unique? This is one of the first questions we ask attendees in our cross-cultural classes at Circles Of Excellence. It provokes thought in everyone—and quite the myriad of different responses!

Some people assume we are just born different. Others cite our country, region, and language as forces that create these differences. Then there are those who feel that tradition, beliefs, religion, and family are what make us so distinct from one another. Of course, every one of these answers is absolutely correct; there is no wrong answer.

When we consider the different elements that affect cultural distinctions, we realize that it all starts from our moment of birth. Before we can even see, we hear language all around us—and for the most part, the main language we hear will become our mother tongue language. That language's sounds, expression, and melody will have a profound effect on how we develop and communicate.

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As we grow up according to our country's, region's, and even neighborhood's rules and traditions, we develop cultural beliefs and values that will remain with us throughout the rest of our lives. How and where we live creates immediate perceptions about who we are and how we are likely to behave. We're all familiar with the labeling and branding that are implicit in a statement such as, "Oh, you're from *that* neighborhood [or *that* part of town]." It doesn't matter if it's the best or the worst neighborhood or part of town; you've been identified by where you live. Almost everyone who lives in Dallas knows that if you are from Highland Park, you are from one of the oldest, wealthiest neighborhoods, with one of the best *public* school systems in the city. On the other hand, almost everyone is aware of what "being from the wrong side of the tracks" can connote. Of course, our families, friends, teachers, experiences, and religious beliefs reinforce this kind of labeling and branding—and affect our beliefs and values as well. These things ultimately become part of every person's foundation, no matter what culture we claim.

Our gender, race, and ethnic background clearly have a strong impact on our development. How the genders interact and how people from different races or ethnic backgrounds relate to one another play important roles in what we believe is appropriate—or not. Our friends, colleagues, education, and work/life experiences can reinforce these beliefs—and in some cases, dramatically change them.

And let's not forget the impact that different regions or countries to which we travel can have on our approach and outlook. These further define both how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. We change dramatically when we travel to places with different cultures and languages from our own. As we absorb these differences and learn to understand or speak another culture's language, it becomes part of who we are. We begin to develop what is referred to as cultural overlay, a blending of our own culture with another. The more we experience other cultures—and especially speak that culture's language—the more cultural overlay and blending we have. For example, as I discussed in the book's Introduction, I was raised by a predominantly Swedish family in the United States and lived in Europe for several years early in my career. I'm now married to a Frenchman and live in the United States. As a result, I've often been asked if I feel more European or American. My answer is that I feel Euro-American, a *blend* of both. I still prefer the long European lunches and the social camaraderie that accompanies them; however, I also like the United States' direct and focused business style.

In addition, the major events that happen in our lives can certainly change our cultural perceptions. Our world, beliefs, values, and how we view life have been forever changed by wars, slavery, the holocaust, tsunamis, earthquakes, famines, and terrorist attacks. And likewise, politics—specifically, different countries' current political regimes and leaders—have a tremendous impact on how we view the nations of our world. When we teach in different countries, natives of those countries have strong feelings about our current president, as well as the United States' recent policies and actions. Indeed, some countries have boycotted the United States for some of our political actions, while others have praised us.

Although we've come a long way—as both a nation and a world—from where we once were, judgment and discrimination still manage to weave their way through the innermost layers of global perception and cultural differences. I often remind myself that if I had been born in a different culture and walked in another's shoes—and had the same experiences as the person in those shoes had—I would likely be quite similar to that person in cultural perspective.

International adoption is a perfect example of this. When a young child of a particular race and ethnic heritage is adopted into a different culture, that child will likely develop the new culture's ethnic preferences, regardless of its native race and heritage. And the younger the child is when adopted, the more likely it is that this will be the case. The older the child is when adopted, the more likely there will be greater native culture retention along with the cultural overlay.

As we begin to truly understand what creates cultural differences, we realize that it's fair to say that “different is normal.” Clearly, there is no right or wrong culture; these kinds of distinctions belong to the actions of people within every culture. Even within individual countries, there can be vast cultural distinctions, accents, and languages in different regions. There is no doubt an array of cultural variations within the United States. I have heard many times that the Southern states are “slower and more social” in their business style—a tendency that can be quite annoying to the northeastern states. On the other hand, I've heard that the fast pace of the business style in the northeast can be perceived as “too direct and rude” in the Southern states. And everyone seems to agree that the west coast, especially California, is a “culture unto itself”!

With all our naturally created cultural nuances, distinctions, and unique ways of life, it may come as a surprise that *we do have a culture*

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in common. This is the human culture, where we share bodies, minds, and hearts in common. This is a culture where we are all created as equals. It's a culture where we live, work, and play on our planet in common . . . Earth. The human culture is where we find our *common bond* and where we are able to connect with one another in mind and spirit. It encompasses each and every one of us, and it can be tapped into at any time and from any place. It is our heritage and the door to understanding both our differences and similarities. It is the *bridge* that we can use to cross from one culture to another.