

The Self as a Cultural Self

Ann Schauber. Excerpt from Working with Differences in Communities. Chapter 2.

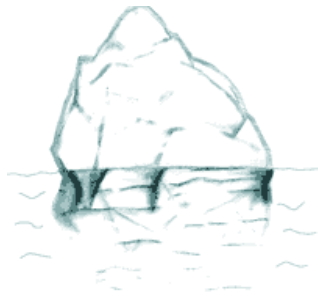
Every one of us is a cultural person. Just as a frame around a painting focuses attention and brings out the features of the painting, a frame around the self can focus attention and bring out the features of an individual. This frame around the self is our culture.

Our cultural frame includes language, art and artifacts, traditions, and social customs. It also goes much deeper. Culture includes norms, beliefs, values, and universal human needs.

Culture is like water to the fish, essential yet not often noticed until the fish is taken out of the water. Culture gives context and continuity to our movements and, like water, buoyancy to our world.

Our culture is...

- Learned
- Shared
- Internalized
- Handed down to the next generation
- ...often without conscious awareness that we are doing so



The image of an iceberg is one way to begin to understand culture. Our culture is like an iceberg. Part of our culture is visible above the water: our language, art and artifacts, food, and customs.

But there is much more below the water's surface! In fact, the visible part of our culture is only the tip of the iceberg. Underneath, we find the meanings of our symbols, our norms, beliefs, and values. Way down deep, we find our universal human needs (page 21). It is this larger part of our culture, which often lies outside of conscious awareness, that influences our understanding of "what is."

Because these hidden parts of ourselves often differ from culture to culture, we find ourselves colliding with the "unknown" and not understanding the cultural patterns of other, something like what happened to the Titanic!

The "underwater" part of culture often is just outside of our conscious awareness. We see, feel, and act based on our norms, beliefs, and values, but we rarely are aware of doing so. It is like breathing. We do not reflect on each breath. We just breathe, taking it for granted.

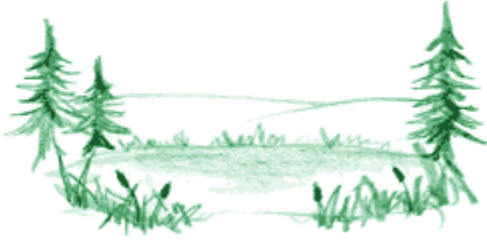
Because so much of our cultural self is above the surface, it is easy to assume that's all there is. Becoming conscious of all that lies below the surface can be daunting.

The key to developing an inquiring mind set is to seek to become aware of the part of our culture that is below the surface. Once we are aware of how we have internalized the patterns of our cultural upbringing and experiences, we are better able to understand how we make meaning and take action in our world. This understanding of our cultural self is an ongoing discovery. To uncover who we are culturally takes time, experiences with those who are different, and self-reflection.



Remember, an essential principle in working successfully with difference is: the only person I can change is myself.

We begin by becoming aware of the norms we live by, our beliefs, and our values. We listen to ourselves to become aware of our perceptions, attitudes, and assumptions. Only then can we begin to understand how others might be different and how we can interact successfully with those differences.



- What are some of the “underwater” aspects of culture?
- Norms are the unwritten rules we live by.
- Beliefs are what we see as truth.
- Values are what we hold to be worthwhile and most important.
- Perceptions are what we believe we see.
- Attitudes are what we feel about what we see.
- Assumptions are what we believe about what we see.

As a cultural self, each of us has a set of norms, beliefs, and values. We learn them from our cultural groups. How we perceive the actions and appearances of others, the attitudes we form, and the assumptions we make are all based on these internalized parts of our culture.

We all belong to many cultural groups. How much we identify with a cultural group varies with our life experiences.

What are these cultural groups that shape our view of the world? Many of us think of cultural groups within the context of ethnicity or national origin. Very few of us think of other aspects of culture. An inquiring mind set incorporates many cultural dimensions into the definition of diversity.

In *Workforce America! Managing Employee Diversity as a Vital Resource*, authors Loden and Rosener outline 14 dimensions of diversity. I call these dimensions cultural groups because within each of these categories we have experiences that affect the way we communicate with others.

These cultural groups are:

Age

In what decade were you born? How old do you feel?

Nationality

In what nation were you born? Raised? Emigrated from?

Race

How do you identify yourself racially?

Ethnicity

What is your ethnic back-ground? How strong are your ties to your ethnicity(ies)?

Gender

Which gender(s) do you identify with (male/female/both)?

Sexual

To which sex(es) are you physically attracted? How do orientation you identify yourself (homo-sexual, heterosexual, bisexual, transgendered)?

Physical/mental abilities

Do you see yourself now or in the past as being physically/mentally able or with physical/mental limitations?

Income

How would you define your socioeconomic status now? When you were growing up?

Education

What is your level of formal/informal education?

Family

What is your marital and parental situation? Children? Siblings? Significant others or partners?

Work experience

What has your work or profession been during most of experience your career?

Religion

What, if any, would you describe as your religion?

Geographic location

Where do you live? Where have you lived?

Military

What, if any, is the extent of your military experience?

Can you think of other cultural groups?

As you consider where you fit within each of these groups, you will begin to bring your cultural self into awareness. One approach is to reflect on the following questions for each of the cultural group dimensions.



- How would I describe myself within this cultural group?
- How strongly do I identify with each cultural group?
- Which of my norms, beliefs, and values come from each cultural group?
- What perceptions, attitudes, and assumptions might I hold about those who are different from myself within each cultural group?

People in a cultural group share common assumptions about right and wrong that shape the way they see, feel, and act. Not belonging to a particular cultural group, for example, not having military experience, also shapes our view of how we should behave in the world.

Consider the cultural dimension of work experience. Norms created by the dominant culture say that the professional staff works until the job is done; the secretarial staff works from 8 to 5. Think of the tension that occurs when a member of the professional staff shows up at 10 a.m. The secretary had to get two kids ready for school, pack lunches, and make it to work by 8 a.m. What happens when a professional needs a package mailed on Tuesday, but the secretary runs out of time and mails the package on Wednesday?

Diversity is about all of the ways we are culturally different. It includes each of the cultural dimensions listed here as well as others, not just race and ethnicity.

As you think about your own culture, notice that sometimes it is difficult to identify the norms, beliefs, and values that connect you to each cultural group. Remember the image of the iceberg. You are digging into the deeper part of yourself, the part that probably is not in your conscious awareness.

To become conscious of this deeper cultural self is an ongoing process. As you journey through each day, try paying attention to the norms, beliefs, and values that guide your thoughts, feelings, and actions at any given moment. Try to name the norm, belief, or value. This is an important part of the process of becoming aware of your own culture.