Accommodate cultural differences in the workplace

What is culture? 2
   What is Australian culture? 3

Stereotypes 4

Communicating across cultures 6

Working with people from culturally diverse backgrounds 8
   Organisations and cultural diversity 9

Summary 10

Check your progress 10
What is culture?

We hear the word **culture** used a lot but what does culture actually mean? Culture has various meanings but it is taken here to include the social understandings, knowledge, values, beliefs and customs in a given society.

A culture refers to a large group of people, although within that group there can be **sub-cultures** — smaller groups with their own identities within the major culture. For example, these groups could be surfers, bike riders, teenagers, lawyers or Canadians.

You may only think of culture as meaning ‘race’, referring to the country where someone lives or where they were born. But when a large group has similar expectations about **values and behaviours** then they can be said to share a culture. We are all members of many different cultural groups.

Some examples of what defines some different cultures are:

- the age of the people within a group (old or young)
- whether the people live in the city or country
- whether the people in the group have a particular physical similarity or disability
- whether the people work in the same place. This is sharing workplace culture.

**Reflect**

The best place to start thinking about culture is to think about your own life and circumstances. Ask yourself the following questions about culture and your own life:

1. When people look at me, what cultural group do they think I belong to?
2. Why do people make this assumption?
3. What cultural group(s) do I actually feel aligned with?
4. What influences from ‘my’ culture are most important to me?
5. In what way has ‘my’ culture shaped who I am today?
What is Australian culture?

Australian culture is probably more easily described when seen from the point of view of another culture. Observations of other cultures, including Aboriginal culture, suggest that non-Aboriginal Australian culture is individualistic and not family-focused, and that there is a preoccupation with accumulating material wealth. Common phrases about Australia, used by Australians, for example, ‘she’ll be right’ and ‘fair go’ seem to indicate a concern for fairness and equality and a relaxed attitude to life. Australian cultural icons are ANZACS, surf lifesavers and sports people. Mateship and loyalty are seen as intrinsic Australian values.

Australia is a multicultural society/country, which means there are many different cultures represented in the one country, each with the right to live in the way they feel is right, as long as it fits in with the laws of the country. Although Australia is considered to be a multicultural society, the dominant influence on Australian society remains white Anglo Saxon/Anglo-Celtic culture. Aboriginal culture, in particular, has not been reflected or represented in our major institutions.

Living in a multicultural society seems like a straightforward thing to do but, in practice, it raises many issues for our society and for our relationships with diverse groups of people, including our relationships in workplaces.
Stereotypes

Stereotyping is a process where we classify someone according to certain characteristics. We often see in them what we want to see rather than what is really there.

When we think about the cultural stereotypes or labels that are commonly attached to people from Australia, Italy, China, the Middle East and the USA we might come up with the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>casual, sporty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>hard working, diligent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>loud, aggressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>passionate, explosive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: A stereotypical Aussie male
Some of these characteristics might describe some people from these cultures but they are still generalisations. It is important not to generalise about people from different cultures because everyone is an individual. Generalising and categorising people in this way does not take into account these individual differences. Perceptions about people from different cultures are often based on media stereotypes and tourist images and, at worst, they can be considered as examples of racism.

Reflect

Ask yourself these two questions:

1. What stereotypes exist about the people in my culture?
2. How do these stereotypes make me feel?
Communicating across cultures

Different cultures communicate in particular ways. These differences are obvious in how they greet others, how they take turns when speaking, how they address each other, what is said and how they express their feelings and react to the feelings of others.

To work effectively and to take into consideration the culture of colleagues and clients, we need to be aware of:

*Non-verbal communication and culture*—Gestures, movements, tone of voice, eye contact and facial expressions vary in meaning across cultures. In India, for example, shaking the head from side to side is an indication of agreement rather than disagreement which is how we understand it in Australia.

*Personal space*—Distancing oneself or getting closer to clients may be misinterpreted as coldness or inappropriately intimate or pushy. The gender of the client and worker is also an important factor in how personal space is utilised.

*Eye contact*—There are many cultural variations of what eye contact means. In some cultures such as Mexican, Japanese, Korean and many indigenous Australian cultures, avoidance of eye contact means respect. This is sometimes misinterpreted as not listening or being rude.

Figure 2: Sensitive communication means being aware of all these things
Use of silence—Different cultures use silences differently. Arabic people often regard silence as a time to collect private thoughts; Russians, Spanish and French might regard silence as indicating a common agreement or shared view; while in Asian cultures silence is often used as a sign of respect.

Cultural variation in interpretation of social issues—For example, people might have a different interpretation of issues such as what constitutes a marriage or a marriage separation. In some cultures a woman may regard herself as not being separated from her husband, even though the husband has left, simply because they are still legally married.

Cultural responses to emotions—Different cultures have different rules about how to respond to emotions. Touching the hand of someone crying might be acceptable in our culture but in others, offering tissues or a glass of water could be adequate.

This, of course, is not a conclusive list of all the issues we need to be aware of but they are some points to consider.

Figure 3: Different cultures have different rules for responding to emotions

Reflect

Look at the illustration at the beginning of this topic. Imagine that these two people are sitting in a dentist’s waiting room. What advice would you give the young man about his behaviour?
Over 20% of the Australian population were born overseas. It is important to remember that in 1788, 100% of the people who lived in Australia were indigenous people. Indigenous people now make up around 1.8% of the population. It is easy to see from these statistics that a very large proportion of Australians come from a migrant heritage.

A multicultural society is one that not only recognises but actively encourages people from a variety of backgrounds to retain their language and culture. Since the 1970s government policies in Australia have reflected multiculturalism with the setting up of ethnic councils and services like the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS TV and radio). This was a complete reversal of previous government policies that favoured assimilation and integration. The earlier policies of assimilation were based on the idea that people coming to Australia and indigenous Australians should conform totally to the dominant beliefs and customs, while integration was thought of as a melting pot idea where different characteristics of each culture mixed together over generations to form a unified group.

However, culture is not just related to immigration. It is about the knowledge, values and beliefs of a society.

When working with people from a similar background, there is a shared language, similar gestures, and a shared understanding of the dominant cultural values. People are more likely to be familiar with culturally appropriate boundaries such as knowing when to shake hands or touch or not touch.

Different cultures have evolved differently, based on different political, social and religious histories, adaptation to different climatic and environmental conditions and types of food available, as well as availability of resources for economic development. Different cultures also have different ways that people relate to each other, ways of expressing feelings, using gestures, and protocols for communication, for example people from Mediterranean cultures kiss once on each cheek when they meet but Asian culture are more inclined to nod or bow.

Working with people from different cultural backgrounds can mean that you need to be aware of possible cultural differences, and respond in a culturally appropriate manner whenever possible. If you are not sure of the meaning of certain actions or gestures you might need to clarify with your colleague or supervisor.
Organisations and cultural diversity

The Australian and State governments all have policies about promoting cultural diversity. The Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW promotes multiculturalism, ethnic affairs, cultural diversity, community unity and harmony through many different programs. Many organisations also effectively accommodate cultural differences in the workplace by:

- providing training on cross-cultural issues
- promoting skills in cultural awareness and language
- producing organisational policies and other documents about cultural diversity
- having programs and projects that show respect for people of different cultures
- having a register of people who speak languages other than English
- using flexible arrangements to allow employees to observe religious and cultural holidays

Reflect

Think about how cultural diversity is promoted in an organisation you belong to, eg a TAFE college, community group or workplace. Do you think this could be improved? What suggestions would you make if you could?
Summary

It is important for us to be aware of our own attitudes and beliefs about cultural diversity. Stereotyping cultural groups is unfair as it denies individual differences and can act against developing positive relationships with others. People from diverse cultures communicate in different ways and we need to be aware of these differences in our workplaces. Australian workplaces are encouraged to accommodate cultural differences by developing programs and work practices that view diversity in a positive light. In a multicultural country where workplaces are made up of people from diverse cultures we can try to educate ourselves about cultural diversity by becoming aware of cultural norms, taboos and customs of the people that we come into contact with through our work. We should also be familiar with any workplace policies and documents related to cultural diversity.

Check your progress

Now you should try and do the Practice activities in this topic. If you’ve already tried them, have another go and see if you can improve your responses.

When you feel ready, try the ‘Check your understanding’ activity in the Preview section of this topic. This will help you decide if you’re ready for assessment.