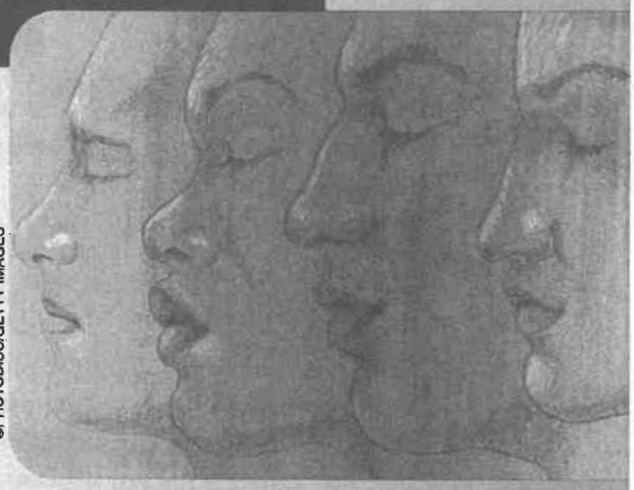
WORKSHOP 2

DECONSTRUCTING CULTURE



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Who you really are becomes clear only once you examine the various components that have shaped your unique cultural lens.

Profile of a Multicultural Individual

My mother was born into a cross-racial family; her mother was Irish, born in the deep South, and her father was the son of an African slave and a strict Christian Cherokee woman. Color, culture, and religion played significant roles in her upbringing, shaping many of her views on life. From her, I learned that skin color does not matter unless we make it so, that what makes a person good or bad is not based on what is on the outside, but rather what is on the inside, and that a passive approach to conflict is sometimes best.

Grandma was a fiery redhead with freckles that covered her skin. A strong southern woman, she left Virginia because her pastor refused to marry her and my grandfather. "They'll burn down my church if I marry you," the pastor said, and so she moved to New York City. From her, I learned that women could be strong, independent, and still be nurturing, that I should always speak my authentic voice and not rely on others to find my own truths, and that intelligence is not bound to any particular age, gender, or race.

Papi (the Latino reference for "father") was born and raised in Puerto Rico. His background constitutes a racial and ethnic blend of Spanish-European, Caribbean-African, and Taino Native American. When he moved to the United States, he experienced culture shock as a result of the racial division he encountered. Here, the outdated but predominant lingering shadow of the "one drop rule" means he is expected to categorize himself as Black or African-American. In response to this limited American perspective, he makes the effort to educate others on *Boricua* culture—the ethnic and racial harmony represented by Puerto Rican culture. From him, I learned that culture is not always visible, but nonetheless, more important than skin color, that being a woman meant that I had better learn to cook well and be a good host, and that having a sense of humor in life is helpful.

These individuals have had the most influence in my life. That my ancestors had been marrying across color and culture lines for over three generations meant that I spent most of my life crossing back and forth across cultural lines, speaking different languages and integrating different values, beliefs, and perspectives into the whole of my self-identity. Contrary to prevailing stereotypes of the multicultural individual, I believe this has been a valuable exercise.

Negative stereotypes of the "confused" biracial or multiracial individual are reflected in terms such as "tragic mulatto" or "mixed-up." It is my belief that these terms reflect, instead, the confusion most Americans feel about race and culture. Ironically, most Americans are blind to the influence of culture in their own lives, failing to understand how their culture truly differs from or compares to others. While this understanding is key to intercultural effectiveness, researchers confirm that this inability tends, unfortunately, to be a predominant American cultural trait.

GOALS:

Upon completion of this Workshop, the reader will:

- Identify his/her response to culture difference and define culture shock
- Identify the components (the three P's) of culture
- Begin to understand how cultures differ
- Deconstruct American culture and his/her own unique culture

RESPONDING TO CULTURE DIFFERENCE

What's your general response to culture difference? Do you tend to approach it with curiosity, avoid it at all costs, or respond as if it doesn't exist? At one time in our history, we believed that the solution to equality and intercultural harmony was color-blindness, or perhaps more broadly, blindness to any cultural difference. This philosophy still lingers so that from time to time, someone approaches me and proudly proclaims to be color-blind.

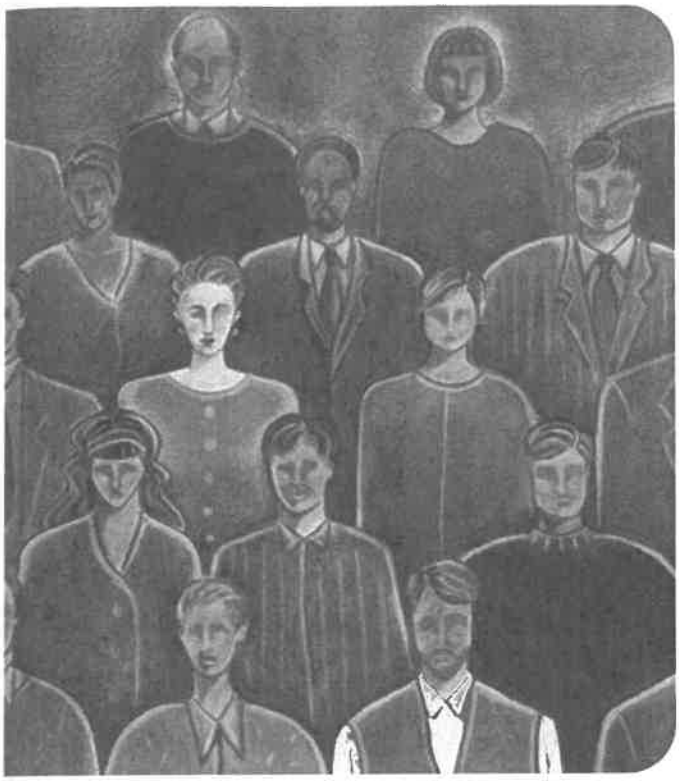
Being color-blind means you cannot see color. Blindness to difference means you cannot see that which is different. Hiding our heads in the sand and pretending that we do not see what is different means we err in making the assumption that we are the same—that those who are different think as we do, believe as we do, and share the same practices and social norms. The **ethnocentrism**—the tendency to evaluate other groups according to the values and standards of one's own cultural group, particularly with the conviction that one's own culture is superior to others—inherent in failing to acknowledge what is different does not help us to build the skills we need to effectively navigate cultural difference. Quite the contrary, it has the potential to result in greater conflict as it often renders the "other" invisible or invalid.

The benefits of seeing difference are clearly visible when we explore companies with multicultural marketing practices. These companies reap benefits such as increased revenues and better relationships with new customers, as they are able to effectively expand into new markets and deliver services and products tailored to meet the needs and interests of an increasingly diverse market. We must understand then that the goal is not to achieve color-blindness, but rather a curiosity about and appreciation for the mutual value that can result from acknowledging culture difference.

> "Greetings! I am pleased to see that we are different. May we together become greater than the sum of both of us."
>
> —Vulcan Greeting (*Star Trek*)

Culture shock—the disorientation and frustration we experience when we encounter different cultural rules and norms—is a typical reaction to culture difference. Because our own cultures are often invisible to us, taken for granted, emotionally charged and/or taught to represent moral high ground, we have a tendency to assume that something is wrong with others, not with us, and to define our own culture as "more natural," "more rational," or "more civilized." In doing so, we undervalue the other culture by defining it as "immoral," "irrational," or "uncivilized."

As this same orientation tends to be assumed by the other culture as well, the result often becomes a cross-cultural impasse, which further fuels the initial culture shock. Moving beyond this paralyzing response requires a willingness to acknowledge the legitimacy and relevance of other people's way of life within their cultural contexts.



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Culture shock is a natural response to culture difference.

Ironically, every time we encounter someone who differs from us in thought, manner, practice, or appearance, we have a perfect opportunity to learn something about ourselves, about how we uniquely view the world. If we first understand ourselves, we can then understand how we are truly alike or different from others.

SO, WHAT IS CULTURE ANYWAY?

Culture is a complex and multifaceted product of group life, a necessary means of creating structure and order, and is generally defined as "a learned system of meaning and behavior that is passed from one generation to the next[1]. Each group has its own particular cultural characteristics, so it is generally difficult for outsiders to understand or make sense of their cultural norms without first understanding the associated history and environmental context.

The National Foreign Language Standards define the **three P's of culture** as the philosophical perspectives, behavioral practices, and products—both intangible and tangible—of a society.[2]

- **Perspectives** include beliefs, thought processes, values, and **worldviews** (our mental models or ideas about the way the world works)—encompassing the "philosophies" of a culture.
- **Practices** include social norms, approaches to communication and conflict, orientation to hierarchy, power, class, status, and gender roles—constituting the "norms" of a culture.
- **Products** represent tangibles such as food, clothing, books, and tools, and intangibles such as songs, parables, dances, rituals, language, and laws—comprising the "artifacts" of a culture.

There are two important things to remember about culture. The first is that culture is ever changing. The three P's continuously interact with one another in complex ways. Since historical as well as current environmental realities play a significant role in shaping culture, each dimension tends to evolve over time. Collectively, a given culture's perspectives, practices, and products play a significant role in defining the unique expectations, assumptions, humor, and symbols of a culture. Therefore, it is common to observe great differences from one generation to the next. For example, do you remember the beehive, Afro, or mullet? How about the different comedies that made Americans laugh over the years, such as the *Three Stooges, Barney Miller,* the *Brady Bunch,* or the *Odd Couple*? It is very likely that a young person today would find the unique brand of fashion sense, humor, or ideals from bygone eras somewhat different from those enjoyed today.

The second thing to remember about culture is that a broad description of a group (e.g., all Americans) seldom serves

belong to various subgroups within the culture (e.g., African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, women, men, groups (e.g., Black: Caribbean, African, Latin, biracial or multiracial).

Proverbs and Culture

Proverbs—pithy statements of wisdom—serve as a window into a particular culture's worldview. As you read those listed below, consider the perspectives these proverbs might reflect. Can you identify any others you might have come across throughout your upbringing? If so, what might they reflect about your culture?

African Proverbs[3]

- All lizards lie on their bellies, but nobody knows which of them suffers a stomach ache. (Nigeria)
- Nobody refers to part of his body as a hump. (Refers to relatives, Nigeria)

American Proverbs

- Every man for himself.
- Good fences make good neighbors.

Arab Proverbs

- The son of a son is dear. The son of a daughter a stranger.
- A big-mouth person's words and point of view are worthless. (Iran)

Asian Proverbs

- The nail that sticks up will be hammered down. (Japan)
- He who asks is a fool for five minutes, but he who does not ask remains a fool forever. (China)

European Proverbs

- Time is money.
- One father is better at caring for ten children than ten children are for one father.

Native American Proverbs

- A people without history is like wind on the buffalo grass. (Sioux)
- We will be known forever by the tracks we leave. (Dakota)

DIFFERENT STROKES, DIFFERENT FOLKS

Working together, the three P's create cultures that differ from others in several key ways. Some of the more salient differences include the following: orientation to groups, orientation to time, orientation to power and authority, orientation to gender roles, and value systems. A brief description of each is provided in the following sections.[4]

Orientation to Groups

Individualists speak for themselves, value independence, and emphasize individual achievements. Their workplaces may utilize individual reward and recognition programs or issue salary increases based on individual performance. Their motto might be "You have to take care of number one."

Collectivists allow the group to speak for the individual, place great value on group membership, extend decision-making beyond the nuclear family to the extended family, and emphasize teamwork and harmony. These cultures tend to make a point of collectively and wholeheartedly participating in team-building activities. Their motto might be "There is no I in TEAM."

Orientation to Time

Clock-oriented cultures are likely to focus on the here and now, emphasize doing rather than being, and adhere to schedules, punctuality, and organization around clocks. Time is viewed in a linear fashion. Daily planners, Palm Pilots, and digital calendars are familiar and essential products within these cultures.

Event-oriented cultures, on the other hand, emphasize completion of an event over a strict adherence to schedules. They prefer to fully finish one task before beginning another, regardless of the amount of time it takes, and tend to think of time in a somewhat more abstract manner, viewing it as cyclical rather than linear. It may be customary, for example, to spend ample time welcoming a visitor before rushing to the business at hand. Imagine the clock-oriented individual's reaction when he arrives in an event-oriented culture with a tight itinerary to find that meetings seldom start "on time."

Orientation to Power and Authority

Egalitarian cultures work hard to ensure opportunities for upward mobility and a voice for all. Equal opportunity programs may be established so that women and other members of less dominant social groups do not face obstacles within the workplace. In this context, for example, directly challenging the CEO might demonstrate initiative and win you that promotion.

Hierarchical cultures are comfortable with status difference and may prefer formal use of titles and degrees. In some cultures, you may be born to a particular station in life and have little chance of upward mobility. Directly challenging the CEO in this context, for example, might not be such a good idea and only end up costing you your job.

Orientation to Gender Roles

Male-dominated cultures may prohibit access to education, ownership, and professions by women, enabling men to make key decisions for women. For example, in some cultures, a common practice is for the husband to decide what medical care and services his wife will receive.

Egalitarian cultures enable women to function as proactive members of society—ensuring rights to property ownership, political participation, higher education, and career advancement—independent of any male influence.

Values

Cultural values capture varying perspectives regarding the importance of relationships between human beings and nature. Examples include a prevailing belief that "materialism is bad" or that cultural products should be made from natural ingredients instead of synthetic ones.

Cultural values also capture varying perspectives regarding social interactions and practices. Examples include the belief that "showing your elders respect is important" or that social practices such as "Sweet 16," "La Quinceanera" (a Mexican celebration of a young girl's coming of age), or "Bar/Bat Mitzvah" celebrations mark an important transition to adulthood.

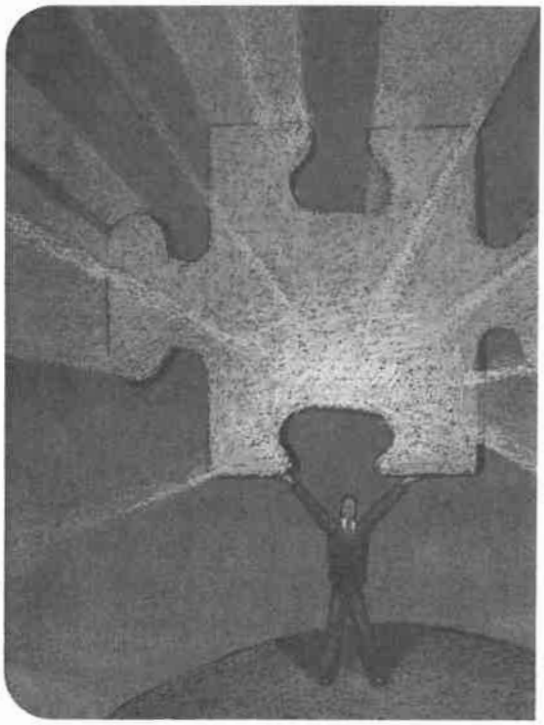
> "Each of us confronts a material, a social and a spiritual universe that must be structured so that we can negotiate our way through the maze of life."
>
> —K. Leung & M. H. Bond

Again, it is important to remember that not every individual within a given culture will reflect all of the characteristics associated with that group. Because cultures evolve, generational differences are commonly encountered. Individuals often belong to various cultural subgroups—defined by geographic region, education, or other dimensions—and their particular worldviews or behaviors may, at times, be indicative of these other cultural influences.

Cultural Assessment

Part A

Reflect on the ways in which cultures differ and write your thoughts regarding your own cultural orientation in the space provided below.



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What values, beliefs, and experiences shape and define your unique worldview?

Part B

What might the advantages and disadvantages of your particular orientation be in a diverse workplace? In other words, how might you help or hinder a diverse team?

My orientation to time	Advantages	Disadvantages
My orientation to gender roles	Advantages	Disadvantages
My orientation to groups	Advantages	Disadvantages
My orientation to power and authority	Advantages	Disadvantages
My cultural values	Advantages	Disadvantages

DECONSTRUCTING AMERICAN CULTURE

It is impossible for one individual to study the characteristics and nuances of every culture in existence today, but understanding how cultures differ on a fundamental level, such as that presented by the three P's framework, is a valuable first step toward understanding other cultures as well as your own. Americans, perhaps as a result of our unique history as a "melting pot" society, tend to be less aware of our own culture than others are of theirs. In fact, it is quite common to hear trainees of all backgrounds say, "I don't have a culture; I'm just American." Ask someone from another country to describe Americans, however, and you'll quickly learn that although American culture may be somewhat invisible to us, others do associate specific characteristics with our culture.

How Others View American Culture

Perspectives

- You appreciate capitalism and fiercely defend the idea of democracy.
- You are not very superstitious.
- You value and expect unique self-expression and independence.
- You focus primarily on the "here and now," which means that you're not overly concerned with the distant past or the very distant future.
- You expect that individuals in other countries will speak English.

Practices

- What to study in school or whom to marry is not an extended-family decision.
- If you're a woman, you feel free to make your own personal decisions.
- You cringe and apologize profusely if you are late to a major event, dinner, or business meeting.
- You ask "How are you?" as a way to simply say hello. You're really not expecting a drawn-out response.
- You think intellectual debate is a healthy activity in which adults should engage.

Products

- You expect to eat hot dogs at a baseball game.
- There's at least one McDonald's and one Burger King within driving distance, and probably a Taco Bell, a Wendy's, and a Boston Market as well.
- You probably know who won *American Idol* last year and the year before that.
- You wouldn't know how to prepare a live chicken if it flew into the pot.
- Your dream is to own a large home and an expensive car.

For how many of these cultural characteristics did you nod your head and think "Yes, that's me"? Again, remember that cultural subgroups (e.g., women, non-Whites) might align with some, but not all characteristics of a broader culture. Where your cultural lens (a perspective or expectation stemming from the context of one's culture) differs, it is helpful to think about which specific cultural groups or subgroups might have influenced you otherwise (e.g., race, religion, gender, class).

Online Research—American Cultural Characteristics

Conduct an online search on American culture to identify additional characteristics. Then choose an ethnic group from your ancestral background and conduct a similar search to explore how the two cultures compare and contrast. Note your findings in the space below.

American Culture Characteristics:

Ethnic Culture Characteristics:

Similarities

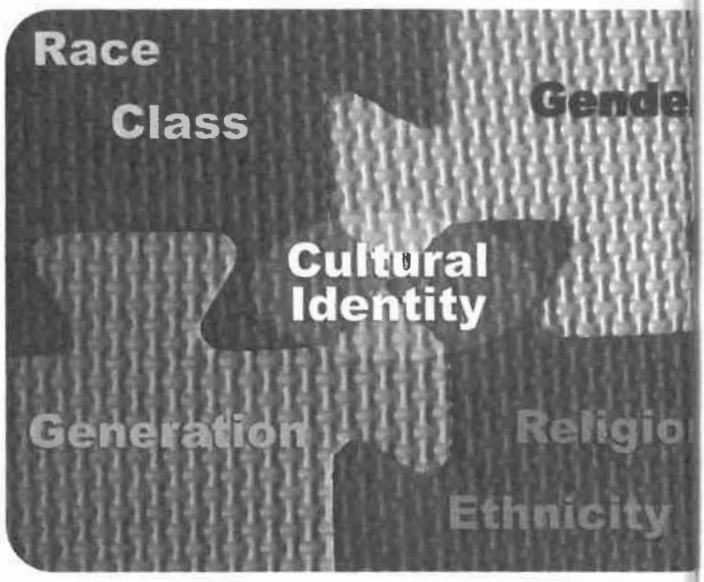
Differences

How do you handle the differences?

DECONSTRUCTING YOUR CULTURE

Effectively deconstructing your own culture—your worldviews, values, practices and social norms—requires taking a closer look at the various cultural dimensions that shape your unique experiences within the broader culture. Following is a brief look at some of the more salient aspects of culture: race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and generation.

Exploration of these cultural dimensions must begin with a clear understanding that the very definitions of terms such as *race, ethnicity, gender,* and *class* reflect ideas that are grounded in a particular social perspective, rather than in biological reality.



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Cultural identity is like a puzzle; one lone piece can never provide a complete or an accurate picture of who you are.

Race

Race can be defined as a human population distinguished as a more or less distinct group by variations in physical characteristics. However, scientists have recently discovered the following: Only 2 percent of our genes are ultimately responsible for the visible differences such as skin pigmentation or eyelid shape. Increasingly, scientists are coming to understand that the only meaningful racial category is that of human. Nonetheless, skin color carries with it significant historical, political, and social implications, and these are uniquely defined by each culture. How we are perceived and where we stand in relation to

others on the social hierarchy stems biologically from a mere 2 percent of the gene pool and therefore, social interpretations vary crossculturally. For example, a person who is considered Black in one society might be considered non-Black in another. Individuals of mixed heritage in Brazil may consider themselves White and very well experience culture shock when they find that in the United States, they are considered Black. Despite scientific and crosscultural ambiguities, race remains a highly significant **social construct**, a system of beliefs—positive or negative—created by society to categorize and classify individuals.

Understanding the unique cultural beliefs we have inherited about race, culture, and culture difference, and exploring what we've learned about social hierarchies (specifically, our place in relation to others) requires an examination of our history; the messages we received from family members, friends, and other influences about these issues; and our own life experiences as they pertain to skin color.

> "The first step in the process is to look at yourself. While no one is born a bigot, by the time we are adults most of us have developed some prejudices."
>
> —C. Stein-Larosa & E. Hofheimer Bettmann

A Note on White Privilege

While many American non-Whites are somewhat accustomed to thinking about what race means for them (it's hard not to, when society constantly reminds you that you are "other"), White Americans are less accustomed to such examination. Dr. Janet Helms, a researcher, professor, and author on the subject of White racial identity said, ". . . development of a positive, psychologically healthy White racial identity *requires* a decision to abandon racism. The first step toward abandonment of racism requires recognition of it".[5] Additionally, White racial identity development requires recognition of the general social privileges afforded Whites as a result of their position at the top of the social hierarchy.

A source of confusion for Whites on the issue of White privilege pertains to the undeniable reality that not all Whites have experienced easy lives, financial gains, or other tangible results generally assumed to be associated with "privilege." Kimberley Hohmann, author on race relations[6], offers the following examples to clarify the meaning of White privilege:

- Being able to turn on the television and see people of your race widely represented
- Never being asked to speak on behalf of your entire race
- Being able to buy "flesh" colored band-aids that closely match your skin color
- Being able to succeed without being called a credit to your race
- Being able to have a bad day without wondering what your race had to do with specific negative incidents

Although it is challenging, identifying and acknowledging the benefits associated with being White in America is a critical requirement for developing the ability to empathize, understand, and build effective crosscultural relationships.

How has race influenced your cultural lens?

Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably, although such use is incorrect. **Ethnicity** differs from race in that it represents social groups with a shared history, sense of identity, geography, and cultural roots, which may occur despite

racial difference. For example, Puerto Ricans, who on the whole represent a blend of White, Red, and Black races, refer to themselves collectively as *Boricuas*, thereby embracing the racial blend that is characteristic of so many from this Latin ethnic group.

As a result of widespread improper use of the terms *race* and *ethnicity*, many Americans mistakenly believe that unless they are people of color, the term *ethnicity* does not apply to them. All of us, however, have one or more ethnic backgrounds, and therefore, cultural influences.

The important thing to remember about ethnicity is that ethnic groups have a shared identity and that these groups alone decide who does and does not belong. For example, many individuals who may be somewhat removed from their Native American ancestors later seek to rejoin the relevant tribal nation. They are often surprised to discover that community involvement and ability to relate to that nation's unique cultural practices and perspectives is, by many Native American communities, considered more important than the particular percentage of Native blood the individual has. In this context, many Native American communities are trying to protect against further erosion of long-standing tribal customs and norms; they alone decide who is and who is not a member of their group.

Understanding the perspectives and practices you have inherited from your ethnic background(s) also requires an examination of your history and the messages you received from family members about what is valued and what constitutes tradition in your particular culture.

How has your ethnic background influenced your cultural lens?

Gender

Gender, the condition of psychologically identifying as male or female, may be genetically linked in most cases. Nonetheless, the expectations and social norms associated with each may differ significantly from one culture to the next. Gender differences are often observed, for example, in communication style and in the approach taken to building relationships.

Reflecting on the messages you received over the years about gender—your place in society and the role you inherited as a result—can provide valuable information about the cultural influences that have helped to shape your worldview. Similar to the concept of White privilege, American males must also be willing to recognize the power and status afforded them by society and recognize the effects that such power has on women.

How has gender influenced your cultural lens?

Religion

Religion plays a key role in shaping one's cultural lens, particularly in relation to the values adopted by a social group. Whether you currently practice a particular religion or not, understanding the religious influences in your family history can provide helpful information about the particular messages that may have been handed down and currently shape your worldview.

How has religion influenced your cultural lens?

Generation

In order to identify the influence of generation on our worldviews, we need only compare the ideals, social practices, etiquette rules, and cultural products with those of our grandparents, parents, and/or children. Watching movies or TV programs and reviewing commercials from an earlier period can also provide insight into generational cultural differences.

How has the generation in which you were born influenced your cultural lens?

Each of these cultural dimensions alone plays a powerful role in shaping your worldview. Combined, they provide a unique prescription for the cultural lens through which you alone view and interpret the world. Consider also that there are many other cultural dimensions that ultimately shape how you see, interpret, and interact with the world (e.g., class, education, profession). Once you have a greater understanding of your cultural lens and why you see things the way you do, you will then be better able to recognize the variety and complexity of influences that also serve to shape the perspectives of others.

Interactive Group Activity: Deconstructing Your Culture

Part A
For each cultural dimension described above (race, ethnicity, gender, religion, generation), reflect on your upbringing, life experiences, and your findings from Activity 2.2 to identify two or three key ways that each has shaped the three P's (perspectives, practices, and products) of your culture.

Part B
Working in groups, take turns sharing your findings with others. Listen for commonalities and differences and ask open-ended questions to clarify and/or solicit additional information.

Part A

	Perspectives	Practices	Products
Race			
Ethnicity			
Gender			
Religion			
Generation			

Part B

What were the similarities and differences?

What was your reaction to culture difference?

MOVING FORWARD

Deconstructing our cultural personalities is a challenging, but highly valuable exercise for both our personal and professional development. It is also one that requires ongoing self-awareness and an effort to consistently make visible that which is often invisible throughout our day-to-day interactions with others. Developing an awareness of our unique culture and its worldviews can help us to understand and influence how others perceive us and determine how effectively we interact with others.

Fortunately, every time we encounter difference, we also encounter an opportunity to learn something new about ourselves. If you travel to a foreign country and experience different customs, if you wonder why people from a particular country don't smile very much, or if someone reacts in an unexpected manner to something you say, remember to shift your focus from figuring out what is wrong with them and instead, know that your culture is showing.

Online Research—Using Keywords

Additional resources and information on culture can be accessed with the following online search terms: American culture, cross-culture communication, cultural diversity, ethnicity and culture, gender and culture, intercultural communication, proverbs, race and culture, and religion and culture.

Some specific resources for cross cultural studies include the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Cultural Dynamics, Cultural Studies, Culture & Psychology,* and *Journal of Business Communication*.

Points to Remember

- *Culture shock* is a term for the disorientation and frustration we experience when we encounter different cultural rules and norms.
- Culture is a learned system of meaning and behavior, passed from one generation to the next. Culture is defined by the three P's—perspectives, practices, and products. Culture is ever changing and can be specific to subgroups (racial, ethnic, generational, religious, gender) within a broader culture.
- Some of the more salient ways in which cultures differ include orientation to groups, orientation to time, orientation to power and authority, orientation to gender roles, and cultural values.
- There is an American culture, although it may be invisible to us as members, and it does differ, sometimes significantly, from that of other countries. Effectively deconstructing your own culture requires taking a closer look at the messages you have inherited and experiences you have had as a result of your race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and generation.