

*I was so surprised and confused
when, on leaving Whittier Hall,
the provost, in person, held the
door for me in order to let me
pass. I was so confused that I
could not find the words to
express my gratefulness, and I
almost fell on my knees as I
would certainly do back home.*

*A man who is by far my
superior is holding the door for
me, a mere student and a
nobody.*

*—A visitor from
Indonesia in
John Fieg & John Blair,
There Is A Difference*




Informant Activity



2.3—THIRTEEN CULTURAL CATEGORIES— AMERICAN AND HOST COUNTRY VIEWS COMPARED

This activity looks at 13 categories or aspects of culture and compare the typical American position on these matters with that of your host country. In each case, the American view has been summarized and illustrated for you as adapted from the work of several intercultural experts including Edward Stewart, Milton Bennett, Gary Althen * and several authors in the Interact series from Intercultural Press. It is your task to get together with an informant, either a host country national or someone else who knows the host culture well, and try to construct the host country position. You may, if you wish, do this activity with another trainee. After you have made notes on or constructed the host country position, try to get together with other trainees in your group and compare observations.

1. ATTITUDE TOWARDS AGE

-  Emphasize physical beauty and youth.
-  Fire older people to hire younger people for less money.
-  Judge a worker's worth based on production, not seniority.

American View—The American emphasis on concrete achievements and “doing” means that age is not highly valued, for the older you are the less you can accomplish. Age is also suspect because new is usually better in American culture, and the elderly are generally out of touch with what's new.

Host Country View:

*Based on concepts developed by Edward Stewart and Milton Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, ME, 1991; Gary Althen, *American Ways*, Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, ME, 1981.

2. CONCEPT OF FATE AND DESTINY

- ✎ You can be whatever you want to be.
- ✎ Where there's a will there's a way.
- ✎ The American dream is rags-to-riches.

American View—The concept of self-determination negates much of the influence of fate and destiny. Parents tell their children they can be whatever they want to be when they grow up. There are few givens in life, and people have little sense of external limits. Lack of success is their own fault.

Host Country View:

For me, there was only one place to go if I couldn't live in my own country: America. It is a country of immigrants. There is such tolerance for the foreign and unfamiliar. America continues to amaze me.

—*Milos Forman*

3. VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

- ✎ Courts consider a person innocent until he/she is proven guilty.
- ✎ People should be given the benefit of the doubt.
- ✎ If left alone, people will do the right thing.
- ✎ We need to discover how a vicious killer “went wrong.”

American View—People are considered basically and inherently good. If someone does an evil deed, we look for the explanation, for the reason why the person turned bad. People can and should be trusted; and we are fairly open to strangers, and willing to accept them.

Host Country View:

4. ATTITUDE TOWARDS CHANGE

- ☞ New is better.
- ☞ A better way can always be found; things can always be improved upon.
- ☞ Just because we've always done it that way doesn't make it right.

American View—Change is considered positive, probably because Americans believe in the march of progress and the pursuit of perfection. Improvements will always move us closer and closer to perfection. Traditions can be a guide, but they are not inherently superior.

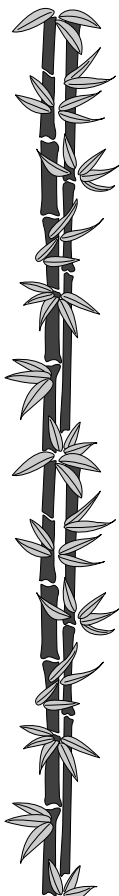
Host Country View:

5. ATTITUDE TOWARDS TAKING RISKS

- ☞ A low level of personal savings is typical.
- ☞ You can always start over.
- ☞ Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
- ☞ A high level of personal bankruptcies is common.

American View—There will always be enough opportunity to go around, so taking risks, involves no real danger. For the truly ambitious, failure is only temporary. Experimentation, trial and error are important ways to learn or to improve your product or service.

Host Country View:



6. CONCEPT OF SUFFERING AND MISFORTUNE

- ☞ People rush to cheer up a friend who's depressed.
- ☞ If you're unhappy, take a pill or see a psychiatrist.
- ☞ Be happy.

American View—Because we are ultimately in control of our lives and destiny, we have no excuse for unhappiness nor misfortune. If you are suffering or unhappy, then just do whatever it takes to be happy again. If you're depressed, it's because you have chosen to be.

Host Country View:

7. CONCEPT OF FACE

- ☞ It's important to tell it like it is, be straight with people.
- ☞ Confrontation is sometimes necessary to clear the air.
- ☞ Honesty is the best policy.

American View—In individualist cultures, no premium is put on saving face because people can take care of themselves. What other people think is not so crucial to survival or success. We can say what we think without worrying about hurting people's feelings, and we likewise appreciate directness.

Host Country View:

You have to be very subservient to people: "Ma'am, can I take your bag?" "Can I do this?" Being subservient to people made me very resentful.

—Supermarket box boy in Working by Studs Terkel

8. SOURCE OF SELF ESTEEM/SELF WORTH

- ☞ People judge you by how much money you make.
- ☞ First question at a party is, “What do you do?”
- ☞ Material possessions are a measure of success.

American View—In an individualist culture, you are what you’ve achieved; that is, you create your own worth rather than receiving it by virtue of birth, position, seniority, or longevity. Your self-esteem comes from what you have done to *earn* self-esteem.

Host Country View:

9. CONCEPT OF EQUALITY

- ☞ People try to treat everyone the same.
- ☞ While jogging, the President stops at McDonald’s for morning coffee.
- ☞ Putting on airs is frowned upon.

American View—In a strong reaction to the repressive class structure in Europe, Americans created a culture virtually built around egalitarianism: the notion that no one is superior to anyone else because of birth, power, fame, or wealth. We are not all the same, but we are all of equal value.

Host Country View:

10. ATTITUDE TOWARDS FORMALITY

- ☞ Telling someone to help themselves to what's in the refrigerator is common.
- ☞ Using first names with people you've just met is fine.
- ☞ Using titles like "Dr". for someone with a Ph.D. is presumptuous.

American View—Because of the strong egalitarian ethos, Americans tend to be casual and informal in social and professional interactions. Informality is also more necessary in a mobile society where people are always meeting new people. We don't stand on ceremony, nor use titles or rank in addressing each other.

Host Country View:

Bold Talent shook his head. How like children the Americans were, with their pranks and easy warmth. Men who offered their hands for strangers to shake, ladies who sat and chatted at dinner with gentlemen they had never seen before, children who threw snowballs at adults no matter what their station. He would miss them.

—Bette Bao Lord,
Spring Moon

11. DEGREE OF REALISM

- ☞ Things will get better.
- ☞ Bad things happen for a reason.
- ☞ It can't get any worse.
- ☞ Tag line of fairy tales: "They lived happily ever after."

American View—Largely because of the notion that the individual is in control, Americans are generally optimistic. We don't see things the way they are, but as better than they are, particularly if they're not so good. We feel it's important to be positive and that there is no reason not to be.

Host Country View:

—INSIGHT—

Behaviors reflect deeply seated values and world views.

12. ATTITUDE TOWARDS DOING

- ✪ Doing is preferred over talking.
- ✪ The absent-minded professor, the ivory tower reflect anti-intellectualism.
- ✪ Be practical.
- ✪ Arts are an adornment of life but not central to it.

American View—Individuals survive because they get things done, generally on their own. Words and talk are suspect and cheap; they don't put food on the table or a roof over your head. Pursuits not directly related to the creation of concrete results, e.g., academia, the arts, are less highly valued. What is practical and pragmatic is favored over what is beautiful and inspiring.

Host Country View:

13. VIEW OF THE NATURAL WORLD

- ✪ Building dams to control rivers.
- ✪ Seeding clouds to produce rain.
- ✪ Erecting earthquake-proof buildings.
- ✪ Spending billions annually on weather prediction.

American View—The natural world is a kind of mechanism or machine that can be studied and known and whose workings can be predicted, manipulated, and ultimately controlled. It is not to be feared.

Host Country View: