**What is Culture?**

Welcome!

Welcome to the second module of AFS-USA’s Host Family Orientation online course.

In this module we introduce you to the topic of Cultural Learning, as well as ways for you to connect with your hosted exchange student as they experience a new culture in your home.

**Learning Objectives**

Upon Completing this module, you will be able to:

- Define the concept of culture and identify ways in which cultures may differ
- Describe the difference between cultural generalizations and stereotypes
- List some of the factors that influence our perceptions of culture
- Access resources to assist with the facilitation of cultural learning between you and your exchange students
Defining Culture

Culture is...

- Constantly, but slowly, changing
- Shared by all or almost all members of a group
- Passed on from generation to generation
- Behaviors and structures of perception
- Rules often followed unconsciously

Cultural Groups

You may belong to several overlapping groups.

Each exists with its own rules (or “norms”) that define what it means to be a part of it, as well as what it means to be outside of it.
The Iceberg

Culture is like an iceberg. Some parts of culture are “above the surface” just as a small part of the iceberg is visible.

However, many parts of culture are “below the surface” just as the majority of the iceberg is hidden underwater.
Learning From Cultural Differences

Moments of discomfort between you and your hosted AFS participant most likely result from cultural differences experienced when your cultures clash “below the surface.” These subtle differences may be values, beliefs or customs that you’ve never had cause to consider before.

Your AFS participant will no doubt experience many moments like this as he or she adjusts to a new culture.

Being aware of these “below the surface” cultural differences is the first step toward learning from cultural differences.

Experiencing Cultural Differences

Experiencing cultural differences may cause misunderstandings, but they can also bring about positive results. We learn from each other because of our differences.

Colliding with another culture’s way of being is just what we need to learn, adapt, and grow. So don’t worry about the confusion or embarrassment that might result.

With any growth we may experience uncomfortable feelings - that’s why they are called “growing pains!”
Cultural Generalizations vs. Stereotypes

Introduction

While your hosted participant is the newcomer in your culture, as a host family member you too will have the opportunity to gain a new perspective on both your hosted participant’s and American culture.

This process of mutual enrichment and learning is what thousands of participants, host families, and natural families will tell you is at the heart of the hosting experience.

Cultural Generalizations

Cultural generalizations describe tendencies among people from the same culture. They are not universally true, but represent characteristics that tend to be true of people within a culture.

Because generalizations describe tendencies, there will always be individuals from the culture who do not fit the description, but cultural generalization are useful for understanding both the visible and hidden aspects of a culture.

Cultural generalizations allow for individual difference and help build cultural awareness.
Tendencies

For example, people raised in the culture of the United States tend to be more individualistic, meaning they highly value freedom and self-determination.

In contrast, people raised in the culture of Japan tend to be more collectivist, meaning they highly value following group norms and maintaining harmony between people.
The Cultural Continuum

Just as you find differences between cultures, differences within a culture group also happen along a cultural continuum.

Opposites exist at the same time and within the same culture even if they are contradictory. Where there is overlap, there is common ground.

Cultural Stereotypes

Cultural generalizations must not be confused with cultural stereotypes, which are fixed ideas or exaggerated beliefs about every individual in the culture group. As most stereotypes tend to be negative, they lead us away from an open-minded approach towards other cultures.

It is especially easy to rely on stereotypes and snap judgments when things are not going well instead of taking a step back and really trying to figure out what is going on below the surface and understand the reasons behind the difference we are experiencing or observing.

Whether stereotypes are positive or negative, it is important to guard against the natural human tendency to label whole groups and not consider the individual within the context of his or her culture.
Culture & Perception

Culture Influences Perception

Many actions and words have multiple meanings. In order to sort out what a person really means, we need to gain some perspective on what he or she might be thinking.

- Boaz Keysar, Professor of Psychology, University of Chicago

Perceiving Difference

During your hosting experience you will encounter many instances of difference between your own perception and that of your host student.

Acknowledging these differences through open and honest dialog can be one of the best paths towards true cultural learning. Admitting that we each see things differently helps us each move towards greater understanding of how the other person experiences the world around them.

Different Interpretations

A person with a direct communication style values honesty and getting straight to the point, and is likely to perceive someone with an indirect communication style as dishonest, evasive or wishy-washy.

On the other hand, a person with an indirect communication style values saving face and getting the message across in more subtle ways and would likely view a direct communication style as abrupt, inconsiderate or rude.

In this case each person has good intentions when setting out to communicate with the other, but because of their different values, misunderstanding will likely occur. That is why it is important to raise awareness of both your own
and your participant’s culture so that you will have the information you need to bridge the cultural differences.

**Supporting Cultural Learning**

**Communication Styles**

Exchange students from Asia, Africa and Arab countries tend to communicate in a less direct manner than people generally do in the U.S. Students from Northern and Western European countries, and in particular Germany, tend to communicate in a more direct manner.

What might direct and indirect communicators think of each other?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indirect (thinks direct communicators are...)</th>
<th>Direct (thinks indirect communicators are...)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Insensitive</td>
<td>Evasive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Dishonest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Without tact or manners</td>
<td>Unwilling to take a stand</td>
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<td>Insulting and harsh</td>
<td>Without strong opinions</td>
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<td>Increasing tension by being too direct</td>
<td>Increasing tension by being too indirect</td>
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**Bridging Cultural Differences**

Bridging cultural differences starts with understanding each other as individuals who are coming from specific cultural contexts as well as individuals who have distinct personalities.

There will be many times throughout the year when you and your student will find yourselves bridging differences.
Through our many decades of sponsoring exchanges, we have found that it is helpful for the student and host family members to be proactive in understanding each other.

AFS Host Family Questionnaire

We recommend that you complete the Participant and Host Family Questionnaire in the Host Family Handbook early in your time together.

Though it will take some time and you may have some language difficulties to overcome, the time spent will be worth it as you will increase your understanding of each other immediately and avoid some of the conflicts that stem from misunderstandings.

We also recommend that you once again review this questionnaire 4-6 weeks after the arrival of your participant in order to solidify his or her understanding on the responses you previously discussed.

Culture Grams

CultureGrams is a country-specific online resource for increasing your understanding of specific cultures.

For host siblings, be sure to check out the "Kids Edition."

Username: AFSUSA
Password: cgrams

**Please be sure to log out when you are finished by closing the window, as we have a license which permits a limited number of users online at one time."
In-Person Orientation

This online Host Family Orientation does not replace the local, in-person orientations. All Volunteer Teams are still required to offer an in-person host family orientation prior to the arrival of participants. You will be asked to share some of your learning from this module during the in-person Host Family Orientations that take place in your area.

Summary

You have now completed the second of three of AFS-USA’s Host Family Orientation online modules. You should now be able to:

- Define the concept of culture and identify how cultures may differ
- Describe the difference between cultural generalizations and stereotypes in cultural learning
- List some of the factors that influence our perceptions of culture
- Access resources to assist with the facilitation of cultural learning between you and your exchange students