

Building Blocks of Culture

This section of the workbook introduces you to four fundamental dimensions or building blocks of culture which correspond to four broad categories of the human experience. The values and beliefs associated with these four dimensions are the source of and explanation for a wide variety of behavior. To understand these four concepts, then, and in particular the different ways they manifest themselves in different cultures, is to take a giant step along the road to cultural awareness and sensitivity.

These four building blocks are

- Concept of self—individualist and collectivist
- Personal versus societal responsibility—universalist and particularist
- Concept of time—monochronic and polychronic
- Locus of control—internal and external

Because these topics are so fundamental to an understanding of cultural differences, underscoring and influencing a wide variety of human activity, they will be examined in some detail in this chapter, each building block being the subject of five separate exercises:

1. a brief introductory exercise
2. a defining exercise
3. a self-scoring exercise
4. an application exercise
5. a cultural comparison exercise

When you have finished with each building block, you will have a deeper appreciation of the scope of these dimensions of the human experience, of the different forms they take in different cultures, and of what you can do when confronted with them.

Chapter 2

Truth is not that which can be demonstrated by the aid of logic. If orange trees are hardy and rich in fruit in this bit of soil and not in that, then this bit of soil is what is truth for orange trees. If a particular religion or culture or scale of values, if one form of activity rather than another, brings self-fulfillment to a man, releases the prince asleep within him...then that scale of values, that culture, that form of activity constitute his truth. Logic you say? Let logic wangle its own explanation of life.

—Antoine de
Saint-Exupéry
Wind, Sand and Stars



Exercise 2.1

Dialogues

What strikes me the most upon the whole is the total difference of manners between them and us, from the greatest object to the least. There is not the smallest similitude in the twenty-four hours.

—Horace Walpole
Letters

Each of the next three chapters in this book will begin with what is called a diagnostic exercise, a kind of pretest which will expose you to the major concepts of the chapter and measure your knowledge of those concepts before you actually begin studying them. Then, when you have finished the chapter, you can take the test again and, so the thinking goes, do much better on it, thereby demonstrating how much you have learned.

In each case, the diagnostic exercise will be called *dialogues*.¹ For the purposes of this workbook, a “dialogue” is defined as “a short conversation between speakers from two different cultures which illustrates a particular cultural difference.” Your task is to read each dialogue and try to identify what that difference is. Be advised that a dialogue is deliberately written in such a way that the cultural difference will not be obvious—just as it is not obvious to speakers in similar real-life conversations. If you can’t see it, don’t worry; the information in the rest of the chapter will help you get to the bottom of the dialogues.

You may feel, incidentally, that the speakers in these dialogues need not come from different cultures in order to have these conversations, that the misunderstanding or confusion could easily occur between two speakers from the same culture. That is entirely possible, of course; the point here is not that a cultural difference is the *only* explanation for these kinds of misunderstandings, but that when the two parties involved come from different cultures, it is always a possible explanation.

After you have tried to figure out the dialogues, you should go ahead and complete the other exercises in this chapter. Later,

¹ The dialogue concept, the notion of burying a cultural difference inside an innocuous conversational exchange, was first developed by Alfred Kraemer, to whom the present writer is greatly indebted.

when you finish the chapter, you will be asked to return to these dialogues and analyze them again in light of what you will then know about the building blocks of culture. With any luck, the cultural difference buried in each dialogue will suddenly jump out at you.

You will, incidentally, find the “answers” to these dialogues—an explanation of what was happening in each one—at the end of this chapter in the section called “Dialogues Revisited” (pages 83-85). While you might be tempted to read these answers now, before working the intervening exercises, you are strongly encouraged to hold off. If you curb your curiosity now and then reread the dialogues as recommended, you will have the distinct pleasure of figuring them out on your own!

1. Near the Family

- SHARON: So, Fatima, you’ll be graduating in May. Congratulations.
- FATIMA: Thank you.
- SHARON: Do you have a job lined up?
- FATIMA: Yes. I’ll be working for the Central Bank.
- SHARON: Good for you. Have you found a place to live yet?
- FATIMA: Actually, the bank’s very near my parents’ place.
- SHARON: That’s nice. So you’ll be living quite near them.

2. Vacancy

- HORST: Have you finished writing that job advertisement yet?
- LUIGI: Not quite.
- HORST: Don’t take too long. Filling that vacancy is a priority.
- LUIGI: I agree. Actually, I think I know of a possible candidate.
- HORST: You do? Who?
- LUIGI: She’s my youngest niece, Marta. A nice girl.
- HORST: Great! Tell her to apply.

3. Helping Miss Thomas

ROBERTO: Miss Thomas! How nice to see you.
 MISS THOMAS: How are you, Roberto?
 ROBERTO: Fine, fine. Thank you. What can I get for you?
 MISS THOMAS: Well, to start with I'd like half a dozen eggs.
 ROBERTO: Yes.
 MISS THOMAS: And then I'd like some butter.
 ROBERTO: Yes. Ah, Octavio! Good to see you. How are you?
 OCTAVIO: Fine, thanks. And you?
 ROBERTO: Fine. How can I help you?
 OCTAVIO: I need some bananas.
 ROBERTO: Of course. Rosita! How are you? I haven't seen you in a long time. How is that little boy of yours?
 ROSITA: He's very well.
 ROBERTO: What can I do for you?
 MISS THOMAS: Roberto! I thought you were helping me.
 ROBERTO: But I am helping you, Miss Thomas.

4. Out of Order

MIRANDA: Excuse me, but the elevator is out of order.
 LARISA: Really? Whom should we talk to?
 MIRANDA: Talk to?
 LARISA: To report it.
 MIRANDA: I have no idea.
 LARISA: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you lived here too.
 MIRANDA: But I do.

Dividing the Spoils

This exercise is a brief introduction to the first of the four building blocks, the concept of the self. The two poles of this dimension, individualism and collectivism, will be defined in the exercise immediately following this one.

For six weeks, you and the three other people in your division have been working on an important special project. Now the work is done and the four of you have been awarded a cash prize of \$20,000. How should this money be distributed? In answering this question, you may find the following information useful:

1. Person A did 25 percent of the work.
2. Person B did 40 percent of the work.
3. Person C did 25 percent of the work.
4. Person D did 10 percent of the work.

Write in the amount of the cash prize you think each member of the team should get:

Person A: \$ _____

Person B: \$ _____

Person C: \$ _____

Person D: \$ _____

Now read the discussion on the following page to see how respondents from individualist and collectivist cultures typically differ in their answers to this question.

The Japanese regard individuality as evidence of immaturity, and autonomy as the freedom to comply with one's obligations and duties.

—W. M. Fox

*"Japanese Management:
Tradition under Strain"
Business Horizons*

Discussion

Typical answer from members of individualist cultures:

Person A: \$5,000 (or 25%)

Person B: \$8,000 (40%)

Person C: \$5,000 (25%)

Person D: \$2,000 (10%)

Typical answer from members of collectivist cultures:

Person A: \$5,000

Person B: \$5,000

Person C: \$5,000

Person D: \$5,000

People from more collectivist cultures believe that their own security and well-being ultimately depend on the well-being and survival of their group. A group is only as strong as its weakest members, of course, so dividing the spoils evenly—increasing the well-being of everyone in the group equally—offers the greatest protection for all members.

People from more individualist cultures believe rewards should be directly commensurate with one's level of effort.

Individualist-Collectivist

People in different cultures have different notions of personal identity, spanning a wide range of alternatives, from *collectivism* at one extreme to *individualism* at the other.¹ The two poles of this building block are defined below:

Individualist: The smallest unit of survival is the individual. People identify primarily with self, and the needs of the individual are satisfied before those of the group. Looking after and taking care of oneself, being self-sufficient, guarantees the well-being of the group. Independence and self-reliance are stressed and greatly valued, and personal freedom is highly desired. In general, there is more psychological and emotional distance from others. One may choose to join groups, but group membership is not essential to one's identity, survival, or success.

*Collectivist*²: The primary group, usually the immediate family, is the smallest unit of survival. One's identity is in large part a function of one's membership and role in a group (e.g., the family, the work team). The survival and success of the group ensures the well-being of the individual, so that by considering

I had noticed in several prior conversations with Bolivar his difficulty distinguishing between his own likes and dislikes on the one hand and what he saw as best for the community as a whole on the other. It came through in his way of using "we" over "I" much of the time.

—Mike Tidwell
Amazon Stranger

¹ The exercises in this building block derive in part from the excellent work of Harry Triandis and Geert Hofstede on the individualism/collectivism dichotomy. See Hofstede entry in Recommended Reading.

² *Collectivism* and *collectivist* are highly charged words in many countries, with strong political overtones. These words are used here in their strict ethnological sense, as opposites of *individualism* and *individualist*, and should not be construed as referring to any political ideology. Alternatives might have been found, but the individualist-collectivist formulation is so widely used in the intercultural field that it would have been a disservice to readers to have invented an artificial substitute.

the needs and feelings of others, one protects oneself. Harmony and the interdependence of group members are stressed and valued. There is relatively little psychological or emotional distance between group members, though there is more distance between group and nongroup members (ingroups and outgroups).

No culture, of course, will be exclusively individualist or collectivist—all cultures will have elements of both poles—but cultures do tend to be *more* one than the other. Because of personal differences (see exercise 1.3), individuals in a given culture could of course be anywhere along the continuum—though they are more likely to be on the same side as their culture—and may very well be at one spot in one set of circumstances and somewhere else in another. Personal differences notwithstanding, it is important to understand these two poles and the numerous cultural behaviors they account for.

The exercise which follows asks you to take the definitions of *individualism* and *collectivism* presented above and apply them to specific examples of behavior. Below you will find a list of twelve items, each of which is more representative of one pole of this dimension than the other. Read each item and put an *I* next to those behaviors more consistent with individualism and a *C* next to those more consistent with collectivism.

- ___ 1. Companies give employee-of-the-year awards.
- ___ 2. Harmony and saving face are highly valued.
- ___ 3. Friendships tend to be somewhat opportunistic; people have many friends.
- ___ 4. Promotion is based on output, measurable results.
- ___ 5. There is less of a need for signed contracts in business.
- ___ 6. Friendships are for life; people have one or two close friends.
- ___ 7. It's okay to stand out.
- ___ 8. A mother asks her four-year-old what he or she wants to wear today.

- ___ 9. Self-help books are popular.
- ___ 10. Consensus decision making is the norm.
- ___ 11. The language has one word for "mother's brother,"
another for "father's brother."
- ___ 12. Arranged marriages are common.

Suggested Answers

- I 1. Singling out people for individual recognition is, of course, individualistic.
- C 2. This is the glue that binds collectivists together.
- I 3. In collectivist cultures friendships are automatic, as a result of ingroup membership.
- I 4. Individualists tend to define themselves more in terms of what they accomplish than by their personal qualities.
- C 5. People do business with members of their group or with people known to members of their group—in other words, with people they know they can trust.
- C 6. The bonds of collectivists are strong and enduring.
- I 7. Collectivists are generally more comfortable with group rather than personal recognition.
- I 8. Fostering self-reliance and independence is individualistic.
- I 9. This is self-reliance again.
- C 10. Trying to get all members to agree and thereby preserving harmony is classic collectivist behavior.
- C 11. In close-knit primary groups, people tend to play distinct roles, and names are needed to distinguish the players from each other.
- C 12. The primary group, the family, must play a major role when new members, such as a proposed spouse, join the group.

Choices

This exercise introduces additional aspects of the individualist/collectivist building block and reviews some of those from exercise 2.3. It also asks you to think about your own self-concept in this context. Below you will find ten sets of paired statements, *a* and *b*. Read each pair and circle the number of the one which best describes the way you feel or the action you would take vis-à-vis that item. Please choose one even if you think that both alternatives are true or possible. For many of the examples, you might also be tempted to say, "It depends on the situation," which indeed it does. But choose anyway, without thinking too much!

- ___ 1a. Managers should be hired from within the organization, based mainly on their seniority.
- ___ 1b. Managers should be hired on the basis of their skills and previous experience in similar jobs.
- ___ 2a. It takes a long time to make a new friend.
- ___ 2b. Friends can be made relatively quickly.
- ___ 3a. If I took a job with a new company, I would expect my old employer to wish me well.
- ___ 3b. If I took a job with a new company, I would be afraid that my present employer might lose face.
- ___ 4a. I expect people to judge me by my achievements.
- ___ 4b. I expect people to judge me by the groups I belong to.
- ___ 5a. Before making a decision, it is best to make sure everyone agrees with it.

When someone says privacy, I think of loneliness.

—Ethiopian student in
John Fieg and John Blair
There Is a Difference

- ___ 5b. Before making a decision, you should get at least half of the people to agree with it.
- ___ 6a. I am embarrassed by individual recognition.
- ___ 6b. If I do a good job, I feel I have earned individual recognition.
- ___ 7a. Making sure people don't lose face is more important than always being completely honest.
- ___ 7b. Being honest with people is always best in the end.
- ___ 8a. If my brother did wrong, I would admit it to other people.
- ___ 8b. If my brother did wrong, I would defend him to other people.
- ___ 9a. Confrontation is sometimes necessary to clear the air.
- ___ 9b. Confrontation almost always causes more problems than it solves.
- ___ 10a. In the end, you can always rely on other people.
- ___ 10b. In the end, you can only rely on yourself.

Now that you have circled your choices, read all the items again and decide which are more consistent with individualism (put an *I* in the blank) and which with collectivism (put a *C*). Then check your answers. How many of your circled choices turned out to be individualist and how many collectivist?

This exercise isn't scientific, of course, and doesn't "prove" anything about you. For one thing, all the items, as noted earlier, are taken out of context; you might very well select one alternative in one set of circumstances and the other in another set. Moreover, the choices you made for any given item may have more to do with some other aspect of your personality than your individualist or collectivist tendencies. Even so, you have no doubt been given some food for thought and also been exposed to additional contexts in which this important concept operates and additional circumstances under which it might influence people's behavior.

Suggested Answers

Remember that an item marked *I* or *C* means only that the particular behavior tends to be *more* characteristic of an Individualist or a Collectivist but is by no means exclusive to members of that category.

- 1a. *C*
- 1b. *I*
- 2a. *C*
- 2b. *I*
- 3a. *I*
- 3b. *C*
- 4a. *I*
- 4b. *C*
- 5a. *C*
- 5b. *I*
- 6a. *C*
- 6b. *I*
- 7a. *C*
- 7b. *I*
- 8a. *I*
- 8b. *C*
- 9a. *I*
- 9b. *C*
- 10a. *C*
- 10b. *I*

Exercise 2.5

What Would You Do?

[W]hen a psychiatric clinic was first set up in a rural district of Nigeria..., the family invariably accompanied the sufferer and insisted on being present at the patient's interview with the psychiatrist. The idea that the patient might exist as an individual apart from the family...did not occur to Nigerians who were still living a traditional village life.

—Anthony Storr

Solitude: A Return to the Self

Now that you have spent a good bit of time in the company of the individualist/collectivist dichotomy, the moment has come to begin applying what you have learned. In this exercise, you will be presented with two situations where differences involving this aspect of culture have caused an incident. These may be situations you have been in or can imagine being in. In any case, a successful resolution of each incident requires putting into practice what you know about this concept of self. Read each incident and jot down in the space below it what you would do or say if you were faced with the situation.

1. Teamwork

You come from a culture where people prefer to work in teams and where the success of the team guarantees the well-being of the individual members. You believe that a group of people is more likely to meet with success if they work as a team than if they work independently. But in the culture where you now live and work, most of your colleagues prefer to work on their own, to succeed or fail based on their own individual actions, and they expect you to depend on yourself as well. While they help each other as necessary, it is not considered professional to need too much help.

In dealing with them, you have tried to work collaboratively, offering assistance wherever you saw it was needed—assistance that was often very much appreciated—and expecting assistance in return. You have noticed, however, that whenever you have asked for help, your colleagues have been somewhat surprised and reluctant. One day you confronted one of your colleagues on this issue. You pointed out that you helped her a few days ago when she was behind on a project, but this week when you asked for her help, she said she was too busy. You asked her

why she thought it was okay to take help but not to give it in return. She looked surprised and said, "But I never asked for your help. I thought you were just being kind. I certainly don't expect that kind of help." What should you do in this situation?

2. Telling It Like It Is

You are working in a culture where people tend to be more collectivist, especially in the sense that group harmony and saving face are highly valued. You, on the other hand, feel that while harmony and saving face are good things in general, they can sometimes be more trouble than they're worth. You've noticed, for example, that people tend to tell you what they think you want to hear rather than the truth, especially if the truth isn't particularly pleasant. This bothers you because you take people at their word; you assume they mean what they say, or they wouldn't say it. You're not sure anymore if you can trust what people are telling you, if you can act on what they say.

At the same time, you're beginning to sense that you may be rubbing some people the wrong way by "telling it like it is." Today, any doubts you had about this were removed when your manager called you into his office. He said several colleagues had complained that you weren't "very careful" in how you spoke, that you said things "more strongly" than was necessary, and that you didn't take people's feelings into account. What would you do if you were in this situation?

Discussion

Each of these incidents raises the same basic issue: What does a person on one side of the individualist/collectivist divide do when working in a culture that is on the other side? What adjustments in his or her behavior and attitudes might be expected and appreciated by members of the other culture? People in these situations do not *have* to make these adjustments, of course, but they should at least understand the consequences of not doing so.

1. Teamwork

This incident explores the question of what a person who is more of a collectivist must do to work effectively in a culture that is more individualistic. To begin with, you should not be offended by the woman who readily accepted your help but was surprised to be asked to reciprocate. From her point of view, when you offered to help her, it was sheer generosity on your part and not because you felt any particular obligation; she probably even wondered how it was you had so much free time that you were able to offer help. And she certainly did not feel, when she accepted your help, that she was thereby incurring any kind of obligation to help you in similar circumstances. She is, therefore, genuinely surprised when you seem upset because she didn't help you when you asked.

As a collectivist, you will have to learn to work more on your own in an individualist environment, which may mean, by the way, that you won't have much time to help others with their work. You may find this difficult and against your instincts, but you must keep in mind that your superiors and colleagues are going to expect you to get all your work done, and it will not matter to them that the reason you're behind is that you've been helping other people. As for those other people, you must realize that they may very well accept your help if you offer it, but they certainly do not expect it, nor do they feel that this means they have to help you in return. They will assume, rather, that you are very kind and seem to have a lot of spare time!

Finally, this does not mean that people in individualist cultures never work in teams or help each other out, but it does mean that they may do this less often than you are used to.

2. Telling It Like It Is

This incident highlights the trouble an individualist can get into in a more collectivist society, where people are careful what they say to one another in order to preserve harmony and face. As an individualist in such a setting, you have two tasks: (1) to learn how to read between the lines in what people say and (2) to learn how to phrase what you say more indirectly (so that others will get the message by reading between the lines).

You are used to taking people at their word, which means you assume people say what they mean. But in cultures where people don't, you will have to get into the habit of thinking what *else* people's words could mean in addition to the literal meaning. You will also need to pay more attention to the nonverbal cues accompanying people's words (which are, incidentally, culture-specific), for these often convey more of the message than the spoken word. Finally, you will need to pay more attention to what people do not say, for this can also be a large part of the message.

As for your own speech, as your manager has just told you, you will have to get into the habit of being more indirect, saying less and implying more, saying half of what you mean, perhaps, rather than the whole of it. You may also want to use third parties to deliver messages, what you would probably call "going behind someone's back," and they might call "using a go-between," for this allows people to save face more easily. And you can always try to express more of your message through nonverbal channels and through the things you elect not to say.