

## Exercise 2.6

### An Accident

*Abstract consequences, like right and wrong or truth and untruth, depend on the circumstances. Behavior that is acceptable in one situation may be unacceptable in another. Both legally and morally individuals and governments have no compunction about changing the rules at any time...*

—David Rearwin  
*The Asia Business Book*

This exercise is a brief introduction to the second of the four building blocks, personal versus societal responsibility. The two poles of this dimension, universalism and particularism, will be defined in the exercise immediately following this one.

You are riding in a car driven by a close friend when he hits a pedestrian. There are no other witnesses and the pedestrian is bruised but not badly hurt. The speed limit in this part of town is 20 miles an hour, but you noticed that your friend was driving 35. His lawyer tells you that if you will testify under oath that your friend was driving 20, he will suffer no serious consequences. (Adapted from Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture*.)

Before reading further, circle yes or no in answer to this question: Would you testify that your friend was driving 20 miles an hour?

	Yes	No
Percentage of Americans who said they would not:		96%
Percentage of Venezuelans who said they would not:		34%

What do you think accounts for the great difference between Venezuelan and American percentages? Now read the discussion on the following page for an explanation.

## Discussion

There could be many explanations for the large difference here, but one of them almost certainly is the difference between being a universalist (as many Americans are) and a particularist (as many Venezuelans are). Universalists tend to feel that right is right, regardless of circumstances, while particularists tend to feel that circumstances (the person in trouble here is a friend) must be taken into account. This section of the workbook will explore these differences in greater detail.

## Exercise 2.7

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### Universalist-Particularist

*Back in Iran, a friend is a friend. You are brothers and you stick together no matter what.*

—Iranian student in  
John Fieg and John Blair  
*There Is a Difference*

People in all cultures struggle with how to balance personal responsibilities to family, close friends, and colleagues (your ingroup), on the one hand, and responsibilities to society in general (composed of outgroups) on the other. In cases where these responsibilities conflict, people of different cultures often find themselves on opposing sides of this dichotomy.<sup>1</sup> The two poles, *universalism* and *particularism*, are defined below:

*Universalism:* There are certain absolutes that apply across the board, regardless of circumstances or the particular situation. What is right is always right. Wherever possible, you should try to apply the same rules to everyone in like situations. To be fair is to treat everyone alike and not make exceptions for family, friends, or members of your ingroup. In general, ingroup/outgroup distinctions are minimized. Where possible, you should lay your personal feelings aside and look at situations objectively. While life isn't necessarily fair, you can make it more fair by treating everyone the same.

*Particularism:* How you behave in a given situation depends on the circumstances. What is right in one situation may not be right in another. You treat family, friends, and your ingroups the best you can, and you let the rest of the world take care of itself. (*Their* ingroups will protect them.) One's ingroups and outgroups are clearly distinguished. There will always be exceptions made for certain people. To be fair is to

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<sup>1</sup> The exercises in this building block owe a great deal to the excellent work of Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner on universalism and particularism. See Recommended Reading.

treat everyone as unique. In any case, no one expects life to be fair. Personal feelings should not be laid aside but rather relied upon.

No culture, of course, will be exclusively universalist or particularist—all cultures will have elements of both—but cultures do tend to be *more* one than the other. Due to 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 differences they account for.

The exercise which follows asks you to take the definitions of *universalism* and *particularism* 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 one and put a *U* next to those behaviors more consistent with universalism and a *P* next to those more consistent with particularism.

- \_\_\_ 1. A deal is a deal, whatever happens.
- \_\_\_ 2. You don't compromise on principles.
- \_\_\_ 3. Friends expect preferential treatment; friends protect friends.
- \_\_\_ 4. Consistency is desirable and possible.
- \_\_\_ 5. Justice is blind.
- \_\_\_ 6. Situational ethics prevail.
- \_\_\_ 7. Reason and logic prevail over feelings.
- \_\_\_ 8. Exceptions to the rule should be minimized.
- \_\_\_ 9. Principles are bent once in a while.
- \_\_\_ 10. Life is neat (as opposed to messy).
- \_\_\_ 11. There is a tendency to hire friends and associates.
- \_\_\_ 12. A deal is a deal, until circumstances change.

### Suggested Answers

- U** 1. Not taking circumstances into account is more universalist.
- U** 2. Principles that apply across the board are more universalist.
- P** 3. Ingroup members looking after each other is more particularist.
- U** 4. Consistency is a core belief of universalism.
- U** 5. This is universalist in the sense that the law should be the same for everyone.
- P** 6. Taking circumstances into account is a hallmark of particularism.
- U** 7. Reason is more consistent with objectivity, hence, universalism. Feelings are more consistent with subjectivity, hence particularism.
- U** 8. Exceptions are by definition particularist.
- P** 9. Principles are bent because you have to make exceptions.
- U** 10. The universalist idea of being able to apply rules and principles across the board suggests that life is neater than it really is.
- P** 11. Particularists favor their ingroup members.
- P** 12. Circumstances count for much more in the particularist worldview.

## Choices

This exercise introduces additional aspects of the universalist/particularist building block and reviews some of those presented in exercise 2.7. It also asks you to think about your own preferences in this regard. Below you will find nine 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. In hiring someone, I want to know about his or her technical skills and educational/professional background.
- \_\_\_ 1b. In hiring, I want to know who the person's family and friends are, who will vouch for this person.
- \_\_\_ 2a. In society, we should help those who are the neediest.
- \_\_\_ 2b. In society, we should help the neediest of those who depend on us.
- \_\_\_ 3a. I would be very hurt if my neighbor, a policeman, gave me a ticket for speeding.
- \_\_\_ 3b. I would not expect my neighbor, the policeman, to jeopardize his job and not give me a speeding ticket.
- \_\_\_ 4a. The courts should mediate conflicts.
- \_\_\_ 4b. People should solve their own conflicts; it's embarrassing if people have to go to court.

*Written contracts, keiyaka, are not as common in Japan as they are in the West, and even those contracts in Japan that are concluded in writing are not expected to be any more binding because of it.... To the Japanese a relationship is what holds agreements together.*

—William Bohnaker  
*The Hollow Doll*

- \_\_\_\_\_ 5a. In general, people can be trusted.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5b. My closest associates can be trusted absolutely; everyone else is automatically suspect.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6a. Performance reviews should not take personal feelings into account.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6b. Performance reviews inevitably take personal feelings into account.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7a. You often have to make exceptions for people because of circumstances.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7b. Exceptions should be very rare; otherwise, you open the floodgates.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8a. Contracts aren't necessary between friends.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8b. Contracts guarantee that friends stay friends.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9a. What is ethical in a given situation depends on whom you are dealing with.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9b. Ethics are ethics no matter whom you are dealing with.

Now that you have circled your choices, read all the items again and decide which are more consistent with universalism (put a *U* in the blank) and which with particularism (put a *P*). Then check your answers. How many of your circled choices turned out to be universalist and how many particularist?

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 universalist or particularist 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 *U* or *P* means only that the particular behavior tends to be *more* characteristic of a Universalist or a Particularist but is by no means exclusive to members of that category.

1a. ***U***

1b. ***P***

2a. ***U***

2b. ***P***

3a. ***P***

3b. ***U***

4a. ***U***

4b. ***P***

5a. ***U***

5b. ***P***

6a. ***U***

6b. ***P***

7a. ***P***

7b. ***U***

8a. ***P***

8b. ***U***

9a. ***P***

9b. ***U***



## Exercise 2.9

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### What Would You Do?

*Resting and gossiping under a tree, the medical aides would sometimes refuse treatment, saying the clinic was “closed for cleaning.” It was a lie; no cleaning ever went on in that miserable mud-brick clinic. But having been appointed by relatives, the aides knew no work was required of them to keep their jobs.*

—Peace Corps Volunteer  
Senegal

Now that you have spent some time in the company of the universalist/particularist dichotomy, the moment has come to begin applying what you have learned. In this exercise, you will be presented with two situations where differences concerning 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. Read each incident and jot down in the space below it what you would do or say if you were faced with this situation.

#### 1. Between Friends

You are from a particularist culture, but you have emigrated recently to another country (a more universalist culture), where your good friend Mrs. Thompson lives and where you have been offered a job in the company where her husband works. You started work a few months ago, and everything went well until recently when you started having trouble with the day-care arrangements for your daughter. Because of this problem, you have been arriving an hour or more late to work at least twice a week. Yesterday Mr. Thompson, who manages the division you work in, complained to you about your tardiness and explained that you could not continue to come in late or you would get a reprimand in your personnel file.

You asked Mr. Thompson to do what he could to help you, but he explained that this is the standard policy and that to treat you differently would not be fair to the other employees. You are very hurt to be treated just like every other employee. After all, you are not just any employee; you are the friend of Mrs. Thompson and her husband. Friends make exceptions for

friends, and other people understand this. You would certainly help them out if they were in trouble. What should you do now?

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## 2. Qualifications

You come from a universalist culture, but you live and work in a particularist one. You have been asked to fill a vacancy in the division you manage, and you have been reviewing the qualifications of various candidates. You intend to select Mr. Chu, a man who has worked his way up through the organization. He scores the highest on all the criteria against which the candidates are being measured, namely, education, work experience, technical skills, and knowledge of the job and the organization.

You are surprised and disappointed to learn that your boss, who has final approval, wants to hire the nephew of a certain well-connected family who may be in a position to steer a large government contract to your company. You believe this is very unfair to Mr. Chu and that it is not good in the long run for the company to hire someone who does not have the skills to do the job. What do you do?

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## Discussion

Each of these incidents raises the same basic issue: What does a person on one side of the universalist/particularist 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. Between Friends

You may be hurt by Mr. Thompson's actions, but he actually believes he is behaving properly here and that you are the one who is being insensitive. In his universalist culture, friends would not ask for special favors, especially not in a work-related situation, where people who are friends outside of work are supposed to leave their personal feelings at the door. By asking for an exception, you are putting Mr. Thompson in a very difficult position, which is why he feels you're being insensitive.

As a particularist, you will have to think less in terms of ingroup/outgroup than you are used to and also to realize that universalists who try to treat everyone the same are only doing what they think is right—and are not slighting you. Remember that universalists who happen to be in your ingroup won't expect or even appreciate being given special treatment by you, and they certainly won't feel any obligation to give you special treatment. Remember also that acting like a universalist doesn't mean you have to treat everyone as if they were in your ingroup, as if they were special; it means treating people as if they were all in some kind of in-between group, neither in (deserving special attention) nor out (deserving none).

### 2. Qualifications

For universalists such as you to be effective in more particularist cultures, you must understand the importance of ingroups, that it is through ingroups and connections that things get done, and that people like Mr. Chu will of course understand and fully expect this. Indeed, Mr. Chu would probably be ap-

palled to learn that you selected him for the job and thereby jeopardized an important contract that will keep everyone busy for several months. He certainly doesn't want to be responsible for that, nor should you want to be.

You have to remember that what you think of as fair, treating everyone the same, as if there were not ingroups and outgroups, will generally not be appreciated by particularists and will not win you any friends, including those you think you are defending against favoritism. They have long since accepted the reality of favoritism and play by those rules themselves.

You would be well advised to start distinguishing between people on the basis of whether they're in your ingroup or an outgroup, though this will not come naturally to you. You must remember that the people around you are doing this and that those who consider themselves members of your ingroup may very well feel free to make special claims on you (even as they extend special treatment to you). Remember, too, that people who consider themselves in the outgroup will neither extend you any particular courtesies nor expect or appreciate even-handed treatment from you. It will just confuse them.

## Review Exercise

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### Building Blocks 1 and 2

*I feel my neighbors are rude, coming and asking for things from my garden. They believe I'm selfish, keeping my first harvest to myself.*

—Peace Corps Volunteer  
South Pacific

In this exercise, you will be comparing your culture and any other cultures you are interested in or need to know about—hereafter called “target cultures”—vis-à-vis the first two building blocks of culture: the concept of the self (individualist and collectivist) and personal versus societal responsibility (universalist and particularist). Once you see your culture’s view of these important dimensions and the views of your target cultures, you will have identified major cultural differences that are a likely source of and explanation for common misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

The mechanism you will use to make these comparisons is the continua which appear on pages 50-51. You will see three different continua, one for the individualist/collectivist dimension and two for the universalist/particularist dimension (one called Personal versus Societal Responsibility and one called Subjective and Objective), with the poles or extremes of each topic described at either end. For each continuum, read the two descriptions and put a vertical line somewhere along the continuum—depending on which explanation you think more accurately describes the view of people from your culture in general on this issue. Not everyone will take the same view, of course, but try nevertheless to make a generalization about the perspective of a “typical” person from your culture on this topic.

For example, on the continuum marked Concept of Self, if you think the description under Individualist (left side) more accurately describes your culture’s view or position on this matter, you will put your mark nearer to the left. For purposes of marking, think of each continuum as being divided into five segments, starting at the left:

extreme left	Put your mark here if the text at the left describes your culture very accurately.
halfway to the middle	Put your mark here if the text at the left is more or less accurate about your culture.
in the middle	Put your mark here if your culture is a true combination of the text at the right and left.
halfway from the middle	Put your mark here if the text on the right is more or less accurate about your culture.
extreme right	Put your mark here if the text at the right describes your culture very accurately.

After you have marked all three continua, you can then use the chart to compare your own culture with your target culture (or cultures) and identify important differences. You can do this in one of two ways:

1. You can give the chart to someone from the target culture and ask that person to complete it the same way you did, following the instructions given above.
2. You can consult the master list on page 52. This list locates a number of cultures or cultural groupings on the chart.

What do these marks mean? While these are all generalizations and not necessarily predictive of what individuals in any given culture might think, each mark represents how the people in that culture in general feel about that item on the continuum.

More precisely, the marks indicate

- what the people in that culture think of as natural, normal, right, and good;
- how these people assume everyone feels about these issues; and
- which perspective these people use to interpret and judge the behavior of others (including you).

Where there is a wide gap between your mark and that of someone from the target culture, you can assume that you and that person may not see eye to eye on this matter. He or she may think your behavior or attitude is strange or surprising, and you

## Review

may think the same about that person. And each of you is more likely to misinterpret or misunderstand the actions of the other in certain situations.

This doesn't mean that the two of you will never understand each other or be able to live or work together successfully, but it does mean that you may have very little intuitive understanding of each other with regard to this particular item. In other words, each of you will have to make some effort and exercise patience in trying to understand the other.

Finally, remember that context determines everything in human interaction. Nothing happens "in general"; things only happen in context, in specific circumstances. And depending on those circumstances, the individualist/collectivist or universalist/particularist tendencies of a person may or may not play a role, or at least not a deciding role, in any particular interaction. But they are always there as a potential, waiting for an opportunity to show themselves.

### Concept of Self



#### Individualist

The self is the smallest unit of survival; looking out for one's self protects others; personal fulfillment is the greatest good; independence and self-reliance are highly valued; children are taught to stand on their own two feet; workers don't mind individual recognition; one's identity is personal and individual, not a function of one's membership or role in a group.

#### Collectivist

The primary group, usually the family, is the smallest unit of survival; looking out for others protects one's self; group harmony is the greatest good; children are taught to depend on others, who in turn can always depend on them; employees don't like to stand out, they prefer group/team recognition; identity is a function of one's membership/role in a primary group.

## Personal versus Societal Responsibility



### Universalist

What's right is always right; there are absolutes which apply across the board; the law is the law no matter who one is, there should be no exceptions; consistency is important; "fair" means treating everyone the same and one should try to make life fair.

### Particularist

There are no absolutes; what's right depends on the circumstances; there must always be exceptions (for ingroup members); consistency is not possible (life isn't that neat); "fair" means treating everyone uniquely and no one expects life to be fair.

## Subjective and Objective



### Logic of the Head

Favoritism is frowned upon; people should not let personal feelings intrude into or affect workplace/professional decisions; friends don't expect friends to cover for them; people succeed because of what they do, not whom they know; to be objective is a positive thing, something to strive for.

### Logic of the Heart

Favoritism is the norm; since the system isn't fair, people have to look out for their ingroup; whom you know, connections, are more important than performance; friends expect—and provide—preferential treatment; one can't and shouldn't leave personal feelings out of professional dealings.

## Position of Selected Cultures

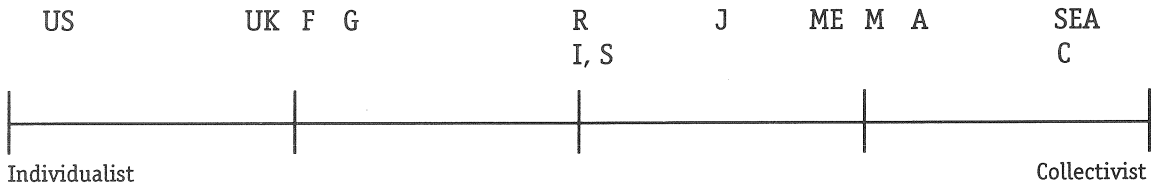
A number of cultures or cultural groupings have been selected for inclusion on this chart. The positions given here reflect either where nationals of these countries/regions have consistently placed themselves on this chart in numerous workshops and training seminars given by the author or where the author has placed these cultures after consulting various surveys and studies in the literature of the intercultural field. Remember



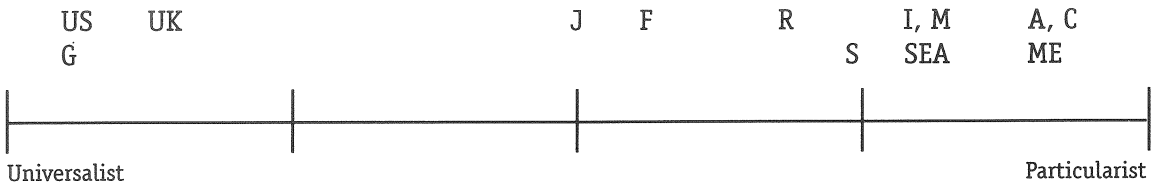
**Review**

that these placements are approximations and that they indicate the position of a culture as a whole on these matters, not of individuals. Even then, it's possible the reader may not agree with where his or her culture has been placed or even where other cultures have been placed. The best way to use these continuum charts is not to take our word for any of this, but to hand them to a person from another culture and let that individual speak for his or her own society. If any of your target cultures do not appear on this chart, you may be able to infer their position by noting the placement of a similar culture.

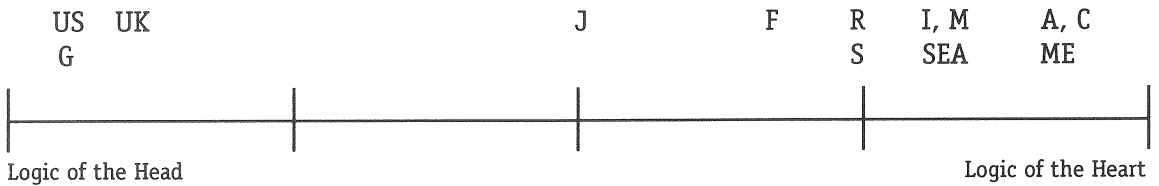
**Concept of Self**



**Personal versus Societal Responsibility**



**Subjective and Objective**



A—Africa C—China F—France G—Germany I—India J—Japan  
 M—Mexico ME—Middle East R—Russia S—Spain  
 SEA—Southeast Asia UK—United Kingdom US—United States