

Communications and Customs in the United States

Presented to Rice University Graduate Students

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Today's Discussion

- Culture – basic definitions
- Are generalizations helpful?
- Context and communication styles
- Learning about cultures
- Rice University's culture

Culture – Basic Definition

- There are hundreds of definitions of culture.
- Culture is a system of symbols, beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations, and norms for behavior shared by a group of people.

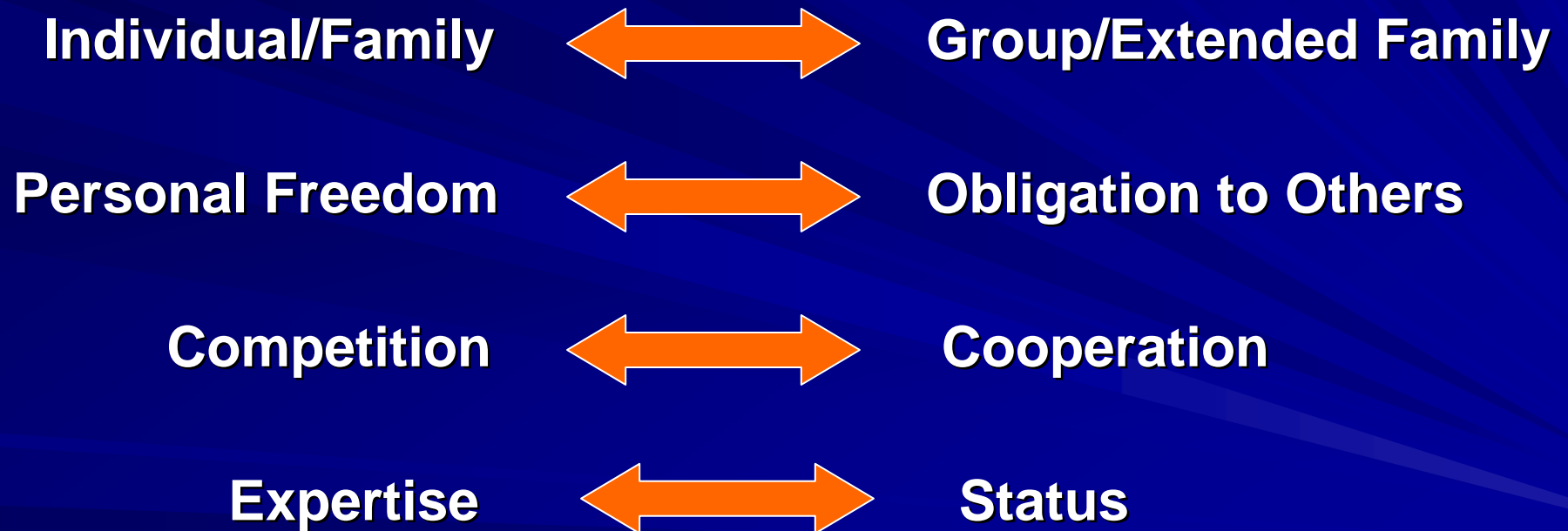


Are Generalizations Helpful?

- In studying cultures, we may make some generalizations about cultural priorities
- BUT, in any culture, **individuals** have their own priorities that may be different!
- You can always find some person or some situation that contradicts the generalization you made, so be careful!
- However, generalizations may give us a place to start in learning about a new culture

General Beliefs and Attitudes

*In different cultures, **priorities** may vary:*



Context and Communication Styles

■ Context

– Is that which goes on in and all around you . . . what you know internally and how you understand situations and events

■ High-context cultures rely more on shared understanding, expectations, and relationships than on words for meaning in communications

■ Low-context cultures depend more on explicit and direct verbal messages to convey meaning

Context and Communication Styles (cont'd)

- Example: you visit a home for the first time and the family is about to have lunch. The mother kindly asks you to stay and have lunch. Do you stay?
- Communication Styles
 - Direct vs. Indirect

Direct vs. Indirect Communications

Direct

I don't agree



Indirect

May I make a small suggestion? (or)
What do you think?

This won't be easy!



We will try our best

We have some concerns
about your proposal



We understand
your proposal

I'm not sure that's a
good idea



Your idea might
work

How Can We Learn About Other Cultures?

- Consider surface **behaviors** that reflect the core values:
 - Social customs
 - Orientation towards time
 - Gestures and slang expressions
- Be open-minded, adaptable, and empathetic

U.S. Social Customs (vary regionally!)

- Hello!... and other greetings
- Titles and forms of address
 - When should you add a title in addressing a person?
- Eye contact
- Silence

U.S. Social Customs (vary regionally!)

- Personal space and situations
 - In conversation, on a bus, in an elevator, in small meeting rooms
- Gift giving
- Table manners

Orientation Towards Time

- U.S. time zones, date conventions, working hours
- “Time is money”
- Appointments / meetings
- What does it mean to be *late*?
 - For work or business
 - For a social occasion

Gestures and Common Expressions

- Common Gestures
- Expressions:
 - Money
 - Food
 - Technology
 - Interacting with others
- What have you heard?



Rice University Culture

- Phrases you may hear in the classroom
 - Cold call, out-of-the-box, take-away, ball-in-your court, hit the books, cram, grain of salt
- Honor the Honor Code – cite all sources carefully in assignments and teamwork
- Where to sit in the classroom to get involved

Rice University Culture

- Get involved!
 - Class participation is important
 - How to be recognized in class
 - It's OK to disagree (agreeably!)
 - It is important to ask questions
 - Join student clubs
- Share your culture with others

A few last thoughts . . .

- When in doubt, be sure to ask questions!
- Remember that there is probably no one answer that is correct in every situation
- Try to stay open-minded, be empathetic, and be adaptable to different ways of doing things
- The OISS and all your professors are here if you need us!

Additional Resources

- ***NTC's Dictionary of Everyday American English Expressions*, by Spears, Birner, and Kleinedler**
- ***NTC's American Idioms Dictionary*, by Spears**
- ***Letitia Baldrige's Complete Guide to Executive Manners*, by Letitia Baldrige**
- ***Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*, by Linda Beamer and Iris Varner**
- ***Gestures, The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*, by Roger Axtell**
- ***Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands – How to do Business in Sixty Countries*, by Terri Morrison, Wayne Conaway, and George Borden**
- ***Figuring Foreigners Out*, by Craig Storti**

A background image of numerous colorful prayer flags hanging vertically. The flags are in various colors including red, yellow, green, blue, white, and purple, and are arranged in a dense, overlapping manner. A light blue rectangular box is superimposed over the center of the image, containing the text.

Have fun and good luck at Rice!