

What is Culture?

Defining “Culture”

Culture has three dimensions. It refers to the way in which a group of people think and conceive of themselves, God, creation, and other human beings. It indicates the way in which a group of people behave and can determine rules or codes of conduct. It also possesses a material dimension which expresses a people’s ideas or beliefs by outward signs. Culture shapes individuals within a given community by personal formation of the intellectual, affective, ethical and practical dimensions of the human person. “Culture is a set of values by which people judge, accept and live what is considered important within the community” (Mod 2).

The term “culture” also carries with it three meanings. The classical meaning of the word culture denotes the highest artistic and intellectual achievements of a society. For example, some would say that the works of Goethe and Beethoven represent the height of German culture. The modern meaning of the word “culture” refers to a set of customs, beliefs and practices that characterize a specific community or society. For example, the introduction of Advent wreaths and Christmas trees into the celebration of Christmas is regarded to be the product of German culture. It is this understanding of the word “culture” that largely shapes our study of multi-cultural ministry. Lastly, “culture” can be used in a postmodern sense, in that it is something determined by individuals who, in their view, lack a traditionally defined set of values and customs. For example, many second and third generation immigrants find it difficult to define their own self-identity in the postmodern culture of America today.

What is Intercultural Competence?

“Intercultural competence is the capacity to communicate, relate and work across cultural boundaries” (Mod 2). It is a set of cognitive (knowledge), affective (emotion), and behavioral (action) skills for communicating in various cultural contexts. Studies have shown that cultures can be mapped according to five (5) basic parameters. These parameters are not exhaustive, and no culture fits perfectly into any one group, but students of intercultural communication have found them helpful for identifying patterns of cultural behavior.

For Further Reflections visit: <https://www.usccb.org/committees/canonical-affairs-church-governance/intercultural-competencies-module-2>

Parameter 1

Collectivism vs. Individualism charts how people conceive of themselves in relation to the group to which they belong. In a collectivist culture, the good of the group takes precedent over that of the individual. The individual is defined in terms of membership to the group, and major decisions for every member tend to be made by certain representatives of the group. An individualist culture prizes the good of the individual over that of the group. The group’s identity is formed by the free coalition of each individual member, and one is responsible for one’s own decisions and welfare.

Parameter 2

Hierarchy vs. Equality examines how power is distributed among individuals. In a hierarchy, power is distributed unevenly and authority – i.e., where one falls in within the hierarchical structure – is often inherited. Communication is facilitated through mediators and, as a result, this model is known as a “high context culture.” In a structure of equality, power is diffuse, and authority is based on merit. Communication is more direct and, because of this, this model is known as a “low context culture.”

Parameter 3

Low Tolerance of Ambiguity vs. High Tolerance of Ambiguity charts the importance of rules and the amount of ambiguity which is permitted to exist in a given culture. In a low tolerance culture, rules for behavior are explicit and every event needs an explanation or interpretation. For example, if a tragedy should befall a certain family it might be attributed to some family member’s violation of a given ethical norm. In a high tolerance culture, on the other hand, there are fewer explicit rules, and events need not be interpreted a single way, or at all.

Parameter 4

Masculine vs. Feminine Understanding of Gender Roles looks at how clear and distinct gender roles are in a given culture. Within masculine cultures, gender roles are clearly defined. Men alone act in the public sphere and, in the domestic sphere, they are seen as financial providers. Within feminine cultures, gender roles are not clearly defined. Both men and women operate in the public sphere and, in the domestic sphere, they share responsibilities.

Parameter 5

Lived-Experience vs. Abstract Time Orientation addresses the meaning and value attached to time in a particular culture. In the lived-experience model, value is attached to the past and present. Time is considered secondary to the needs of the community, to maintaining good relationships within the community, and to fostering traditions and customs. In the abstract approach to time, value is attached to the present and future, and time itself is of great value. Social commitments, the cultivation of human interaction, and the maintaining of human relationships come secondary to other duties and tasks that need to be accomplished. “Abstract ideas and long-term goals are valued, and their achievement is calculated and calibrated into units of time” (Mod 2).

Clarifying Terms

Ethnic Group – groups that share a common heritage and reflect identification with some collective or reference group, often in a common homeland. (Identification with an ethnic group is reflected in a sense of peoplehood, or the feeling that a person’s own destiny is somehow linked with others who share this same ethnic background.)

Ethnic Identity – a sense of belonging and identification with one’s ancestral ethnic group.

Intercultural Communication – the study of theories and practices related to face-to-face interaction between people whose cultures are significantly different from one another.

Intercultural Competence – a set of cognitive (mindset), affective (heartset), and behavioral (skillset) skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in various cultural contexts.

Prevailing Culture – the culture of the social or political group that holds the most power and influence in a society; sometimes called the dominant culture.

Works Cited

Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church. “Intercultural Competencies Module 2.” USCCB, 2012. Web. (Mod 2)