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COMMUNICATING AND ADAPTING ACROSS CULTURES

Living and Working in the Global Village

Riall W. Nolan

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*Living and Working
in the Global Village*

RIALL W. NOLAN



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—Introduction—

Every day, thousands of people leave the familiar behind, heading into new environments: college in France, the Peace Corps in Malaysia, a transfer to the Tokyo office. These are *cultural transitions*—movement from a place where the rules are known and where things feel right and comfortable, to one where nothing seems to make much sense at first.

Does this prospect seem a little intimidating? If so, you're not alone. We're a mobile society, and getting more so all the time. Many of us will make not just one, but several of these transitions during our life. Whereas only a few generations ago it was not unusual to stay in the town where you were born all your life, today more and more of us are likely to make a major cultural transition at some point, and live among people fundamentally different from ourselves.

If you were moving from Los Angeles to Boston, you probably wouldn't give the question of managing this transition much thought. In fact, it probably wouldn't occur to you at all. And yet, you'd understand and expect that there would be adjustments to be made, a certain period of getting used to the new place, the people, and the way they do things.

Consider, then, how much more important this transition is when you move to a foreign country, and work there. Imagine how you'd feel if none of the familiar support systems—banking, the telephone system, language, stores—were the same. Suppose you had to figure them out, one step at a time, without a handy reference guide. And imagine that, at the end of the process, when you've finally mastered most of it, your life *doesn't* return to what it was before. You're not a visitor in the new culture now—you're a *resident*. Understanding how to do this effectively—how to manage difference—will not only

make your life easier, but will add considerably to your professional skills. That's what this book is about—understanding and managing the process of adapting, in your work and your personal life, to a different cultural environment.

Almost everyone can learn to manage difference and make such transitions successfully, but not everyone does. Many people are unhappy and uncomfortable in the new situation, never really settling in. For others, the time it takes to come to terms with the unfamiliar exacts a heavy price. And for a few, there is failure. In fact, research indicates that an amazingly high percentage of overseas assignments don't work out. The reason, in most cases, is simple: a failure to learn, and consequently, a failure to adjust.

How can you prepare to manage difference? Since there are many thousands of different cultures in the world, you can't possibly hope to learn as much as you need to know about each one. Instead, *learning how to learn* about cultural difference is the key to success. Developing the ability to see the world through someone else's eyes will enable you to respond to virtually any cross-cultural situation.

In this book, we focus on the two most important elements of this: *communication* and *adaptation*. The chapters which follow will:

- Describe what culture is and why it is so important;
- Outline the process of cross-cultural adjustment, together with some effective tools and strategies;
- Describe the essentials of communicating across cultures, looking at both language and nonverbal communication; and
- Provide you with a comprehensive plan for making a transition, including advice on preparing, coping strategies, recognizing the signs and symptoms of culture shock, and becoming a truly cross-cultural individual.

Learning how to manage difference and adapt cross-culturally will pay off in a great many ways. You'll not only gain insight into another way of life, but you'll become more relaxed and comfortable personally, and more effective and successful in your work. You'll have acquired a set of skills that will enable you to adapt more easily to any new cultural environment. Along the way, you'll also gain valuable insights into yourself and your own culture.

Learning to manage difference will make you a better qualified professional, equipped with a cross-cultural mindset which will enable you to understand and manage difference anywhere in the world.

This book shows you how.

CHAPTER 1

The Cultural Basis of Difference

A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Today, nowhere on earth is truly remote. Affordable air travel, the Internet and television have connected us with the world beyond the shoreline, a world which appears to be more Americanized with every day.

But despite surface appearances, real differences remain, some of them more important than ever. "Globalization," as we're finding out, does not at all imply homogenization; quite the reverse. It means that we now have to deal with difference directly, instead of at a distance. The philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way:

The same strength which has extended our power beyond a continent has also . . . brought us into a vast web of history in which other wills, running in oblique or contrasting directions to our own, inevitably hinder or contradict what we most fervently desire. We cannot simply have our way, not even when we believe our way to have the "happiness of mankind" as its promise.¹

In short, we no longer have a choice about engaging with the world. In the years to come, the majority of Americans—whatever their skill or profession—will either (a) work for an international concern, (b) buy from one, (c) sell to one, or (d) compete with one.

Whether we see ourselves as competitors or collaborators in this new global environment, we are generally ill equipped for the demands it will make on us. As more and more of us are finding out, it is one thing to recognize difference on the television screen, but quite another to confront it on a daily basis. "Never before," says Ahmad Sadri, "have so

many lived so closely to so many of whom they have so little knowledge." ² Pico Iyer observed:

Insofar as we aspire to be our brother's keepers, we have to acknowledge that we have five—soon eight—billion brothers, and that they are in Borneo and Bolivia and Benin. Insofar as we try to love our neighbors as ourselves, we have to admit that our neighbors are people with whom we share no common language, or past, or value. And the smaller the distance between people, Freud reminded us, the greater, often, the dispute. ³

As the rest of the world comes knocking on our doorstep, more Americans than ever before are headed overseas to visit, study, or work. But even direct contact with different cultures will not, by itself, bring about greater understanding. As one management consultant remarked:

In the headlong rush to turn the world into one big free-spending, "multi-culti" global market, companies are dispatching workers to all parts of the planet with little or no thought about how these displaced souls will cope in new social and work environments. Or what damage they might do to their employer's reputation before they eventually figure out how to behave like Romans—or Koreans or Tuvans or Texans. ⁴

Skill in technology, finance, and management will still be important, but how people of different backgrounds learn to work effectively together—to manage difference productively—is undoubtedly the prime challenge of the coming century. Cross-cultural competence—the ability to learn within this multifaceted context, and to translate learning into effective decisions—will become the key to global success, for both individuals and organizations. Peter Drucker reminds us that: "the essence of management is not techniques and procedures. The essence of management is to make knowledge productive. Management, in other words, is a social function." ⁵

The ability to function in another culture doesn't just require knowledge, but the development of a *cross-cultural mindset*. A cross-cultural mindset helps you look behind facts and figures to uncover meanings and patterns, learn in unfamiliar surroundings, and gain entrance into the cultural worlds of others. As Barnlund puts it: "To grasp the way in which other cultures perceive the world, and the assumptions and values that are the foundation of these perceptions, is to gain access to the experience of other human beings." ⁶

Without this ability, we can live for years in another culture as outsiders, always subject to someone else's understandings and interpretations. Learning to uncover culture on one's own, and to use what we learn, is like learning to read, instead of being read to.

There are basically two types of knowledge that professionals need to have to operate in the new global environment:

- One is *content* knowledge—the specific details of processes, operations, and formulae. This kind of knowledge gives someone the tools to get a job done.
- The other is *context* knowledge—an understanding of the environment that surrounds the activity to be carried out.

Reduced to its essentials, context is culture. Understanding context enables someone to know why this process or that operation is the appropriate one for this particular situation. As someone once pointed out, people who possess content knowledge will always be able to find work, and people who possess context knowledge will be the ones giving them their jobs.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Each of us has a particular worldview—a unique way of seeing the world. Nothing illustrates this better than the old anecdote about the painter, the engineer, and the mystery writer who walk past a downtown construction site. The painter stops and admires the textures and colors of the worksite, how the light filters through the dust. The engineer notices the details of the scaffolding, the placement of the foundation piers, the thickness of the girders. The mystery writer is silent for a moment. Then he says, “Great place to hide a body.”

Simply put, culture is a group worldview, the way of organizing the world which a particular society has created over time. This framework or web of meaning allows the members of that society to make sense of themselves, their world, and their experiences in that world. Culture has three main components:

- The *knowledge* we hold;
- The things we *make*; and
- The things we *do*.

Cultural knowledge, although hidden inside people’s heads, is the most important of these components. Cultural knowledge consists of the rules, categories, assumptions, definitions, and judgments that people use to classify and interpret the world around them. Although these are essentially arbitrary, they are shared among people, and form the basis for their life together. To the members of that society, these cultural rules don’t seem arbitrary at all, but logical, normal, right, and proper.

Culture manifests itself everywhere. *Social structures* reflect our culture, for example; whether we have kings and queens, or presidents

and prime ministers. Within our social structures, furthermore, culture assigns roles to the various players—expectations about how individuals will behave, what they will stand for, and even how they will dress. A king in one society may wear a military uniform; in another, ermine robes and a crown. In a third, he may be dressed in an ordinary business suit, or perhaps a leopard skin. He may carry a scepter, a sword, a briefcase, or a spear.

The knowledge component of culture is basically a pattern of *values, beliefs and expectations* which underlie and shape the behavior of groups and individuals. Each cultural system is different in this respect, with a logic and a consistency of its own. People in any given culture derive a large part of their personality and sense of group identity from these patterns, which have developed over a long period of time.

And this cultural pattern is learned, not innate. At birth, we are not Mexican, or Egyptian, or Japanese. We learn to become these things, to perceive, value, and behave in certain ways, and not in others. We develop a particular cultural style, an inability, in Georges Braque's phrase, to do otherwise.⁷

The cultural style that we absorb is a therefore kind of framework within which we develop a highly personal style. Although we remain individuals, we operate within a context which also marks us as Japanese, Mexican, or Egyptian.

As Japanese, Mexicans, or Egyptians, culture equips us with not only a special way of looking at life and the world, but with a problem-solving mechanism for finding our way through that world. It does so by providing us with categories for organizing our perception, and with a set of values for arranging these categories into basic groups: good and bad, better and worse, true and false, ugly and beautiful, and so on. Through the lens of our culture, we selectively *perceive*; we *organize* what we select; and we make *judgments* about these things.

You can easily see how useful culture is. The patterns developed within a social group over generations of interaction enable its members to generate meaning and structure very quickly from the plethora of daily events and occurrences. Culture helps us achieve a level of security and predictability, to create and maintain order in large segments of our lives, thus freeing us to be more creative in other areas.

But culture can also be limiting. Since we can't just ingest the enormous quantity of data which comes our way each second, we divide the world up into categories. We then use these categories to sort new data, whether or not that really makes sense in the local context. "When a pickpocket looks at a king," the saying goes, "all he sees are his pockets."

Although people everywhere must contend with many of the same issues in life—for instance, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—they may define these things quite differently. So it comes as no

surprise that they also pursue these goals quite differently. When two individuals from two different cultural systems come together, there is likely to be some initial confusion about what's going on.

For most people, culture is largely ingrained, unconscious, and axiomatic. Far from being aware of their own cultural assumptions, people tend to take them for granted. Because these cultural frames of reference are usually implicit and largely unconscious, we are, in a sense, the prisoners of our respective cultures. As one writer pointed out:

It is not we who decide what to become aware of, what information will reach consciousness. As a result, our lives are not ours in any meaningful sense: most of what we experience will have been programmed for us. We learn what is supposed to be worth seeing, what is not; what to remember and what to forget; what to feel when we see a bat, a flag, or a person who worships God by different rites; we learn what is supposed to be worth living and dying for.⁸

A foreign culture is therefore very much like a secret code. Until you are able to unlock the code, little of what you see or experience will make much sense. Peter Conrad described it this way:

Society has always seemed to me an idea dreamed up by conspirators. The tribe adheres thanks to shared understandings, which never need to be voiced; it celebrates its uniqueness by the exchange of private jokes, by perfecting a dialect of signals. I used to be amazed, before I could understand the language, by the sight of a whole world which conversed in Portuguese. Everything was unintelligible: I couldn't even read the gestures, and because of their vehemence—having come from the land of laconicism, where only madmen or migrants talked with their hands—I used to assume that people were quarreling when they were only being exuberant.⁹

The implications of culture are enormous for the globalization process now underway. We are different—really different—and we will probably stay that way for quite some time. The differences are arbitrary, but not at all trivial. Nor are they things that people can shrug off, or easily change. So before we talk about how we can begin to learn about new and unfamiliar cultures, let's look at some of the ways that different cultures can vary.

DIMENSIONS OF CULTURAL VARIABILITY

Cultural differences appear in many ways and in many forms along a set of key dimensions.

- **Perceptions:** People from different cultures do not necessarily see the same things, even when everyone is looking in the same direction.

- **Interpretations:** People do not select, interpret, or remember what they see in the same way, even when they see the same thing.
- **Facts:** Because people from different cultures have different definitions of the situation, they use different pieces of information in their thinking.
- **Goals:** People from different cultures may have quite different purposes or destinations in mind.
- **Methods:** Even when destinations are the same, people may have different ways of getting there.
- **Values:** People from different cultures apply very different standards in their evaluations of individuals, situations, behaviors and outcomes.

Broad Patterns of Cultural Difference

What are some of the different ways that cultures are different? One common approach, derived from anthropology, looks at culture in relation to some of life’s universals. Table 1.1 sets out six of these, and suggests how cultures might vary accordingly.

Table 1.1
A Model of Basic Cultural Orientations

Basic Cultural Dimensions	A Range of Cultural Variations		
	←		→
The Nature of Human Beings	Essentially evil	A mixture of good and evil	Essentially good
Humanity’s Relationship to the World	Man is subservient to nature	Man is in harmony with nature	Man dominates nature
Relationships to Other People	Dominating	Group-oriented	Individualistic
Humanity’s Primary Mode of Activity	Being: stress on identity	Growing: stress on self-development	Doing: stress on action
Orientation to Space	Private	Mixed public and private	Open and public
Orientation to Time	Past-oriented	Present-oriented	Future-oriented

Adapted from: Kohls 1979: 23, 76; Adler 1986: 12; Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961.

We can use Table 1.1 as a framework to look at the differences and similarities between specific cultures. Table 1.2 outlines the broad contrasts between Japanese and American culture with respect to the same six dimensions.

Another approach to cultural difference looks at variations in workplace values. Geert Hofstede¹⁰ focused on four dimensions of cultural difference seen to affect behavior in the workplace:

Table 1.2**U.S. and Japanese Cultural Contrasts**

U.S. Dominant Orientation	Cultural Dimension	Japanese Dominant Orientation
Humans are a mixture of good and evil, which are often at war with each other within an individual. Ideally, people should be rational. Antisocial behavior indicates a weakness or failure of will and should be punished.	The Nature of Human Beings	Humans are driven by emotion and not necessarily by logic. Human nature is not assumed to be evil. Antisocial behavior is caused more by ignorance than ill will.
The world of human beings and the world of nature are separate and in some ways antagonistic. Humanity is supreme in the world, and should dominate nature.	Humanity's Relation to the World	The physical and human environments are intertwined and not opposed. Harmony is sought.
People are individualistic and independent, and encouraged to be so. Competition is good; it is expected that there will be losers as well as winners.	Relationships to Other People	Collaterality in human relationships is sought. Uncertainty and embarrassment are to be avoided, and efforts are directed toward this goal.
Emphasis is placed on action and accomplishment, coupled with change and improvement.	Humanity's Primary Mode of Activity	Activity is focused on harmony in relationships and human interdependency. Activity is group-based.
A mixture of public and private. In many situations, the public arena is more formal than the private one.	Orientation to Space	A mixture of public and private. In some situations, the public arena is less formal, and the private more restricted.
Time is monochronic—people do one thing at a time. People tend to be present- and future-oriented, with little emphasis placed on past tradition.	Orientation to Time	Respect for the past and for tradition, coupled with a future orientation. Time is polychronic, and emphasis is more on completing transactions than simply being on time.
Truth is considered absolute. Reality is concrete, empirical, and "out there."	The Nature of Truth and Reality	Truth and reality are determined by situations and contexts, not necessarily considered as absolutes. The insiders in a group determine what is true and real.

Adapted from: Reeves-Ellington 1993: 203–15.

- **Individualism/Collectivism:** the degree to which people define themselves as individuals, or as members of tightly bounded groups.
- **Power Distance:** the extent to which people accept an unequal distribution of power within an organization.
- **Uncertainty Avoidance:** the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations and avoid these.
- **Masculinity/Femininity:** the extent to which the culture's values emphasize assertiveness and materialism (masculine) rather than relationships, concern for people, and quality of life (feminine).

Hofstede found that there were statistically significant differences across the forty countries in his sample, falling into broad cultural groupings. He concluded that national cultural patterns explained more about workplace behavior than did other variables such as age, sex, occupation, or rank within the organization.

Core Cultural Values

For someone going overseas, the most useful approach to difference is probably *core cultural values*. Although each society has many sets of values that help to make up its particular culture, some values stand out, because they seem somehow fundamental to that culture's worldview, and because they seem to organize, determine, or at least underlie, much observed behavior.

Every culture has a set of core values:

- Organizing cultural values in Thailand include *krengjai*, "consideration for the feelings of others," and *jai yen* (literally, "cool heart"), the avoidance of conflict.
- In Philippine society, *hiya* (shame) and *amor-propio* (self-respect) are very important.
- In Malay society, *budi*, representing idealized behavior, helps organize social interaction. *Budi* has two forms: *adab*, at the individual level, enjoins people to be courteous and respectful toward others; *rukun*, at the group level, obliges the individual to seek harmony in the family, community, and wider society.
- Among the Fulani of West Africa, the concept of *pulaade*, "the Fulani way," is a complex of values including intelligence, beauty, wealth, and independence, which conditions the Fulani response to economic and environmental opportunities.¹¹

These core values have implications for many aspects of behavior. Fantini observes:

In most Polynesian settings, it is not customary for individuals to set themselves above other group members in status or in public achievement unless the group

itself first allots that status. Regardless of one's achievements earned in the wider world, the act of setting oneself above others, without some group-initiated and prior consent, infringes a complex cultural value that is only partially captured in Western values of egalitarianism, modesty, community, and humility. This most basic Polynesian value is manifested in many norms of language use: a reluctance to reveal achievement in case it is interpreted as conceit, an absence of boasting, an expressed deference to the group as the true source of one's success. For many Maori New Zealanders, to infringe this value by using inappropriate language would be to bring shame on themselves.¹²

Americans, too, have core cultural values. On the whole, Americans tend to be direct and open, to value truth, progress, hard work, and equality, and to believe in the individual's right to freedom, privacy, and self-expression. Although these may not be shared by everyone living in the United States, they are core values in two important senses: they are held by a large number of people in our country; and they are often seen—even by people who do not necessarily hold them—as normative values having some historical significance.

Understanding what our own core values are can also make us more aware of values that are in contrast to them. Table 1.3 sets out some commonly held American core values or assumptions, together with a hypothetical contrasting value.

As numerous studies show, the core values of one's culture matter a great deal. Different cultures have different methods of child-rearing, for example, and different patterns of family dynamics. Researchers suspect that cultural differences may help explain very different patterns of emotional illness, phobias, and obsessions. Agoraphobia and anorexia, for example, are much more common in the West (and among Westernized individuals) than elsewhere.¹³

The Economist, noting that flying accidents were higher in Latin America and Asia than in Europe or North America, observed that these two regions ranked high on the Hofstede power-distance index. "Translated to the flight deck," the article concluded, "that means that an Asian or Latin American co-pilot is wonderfully obedient but less likely than his American or European counterpart to tell his boss that he is about to fly into a mountain—until it is too late. It is a high price to pay for deference."¹⁴

Children in some Asian cultures, according to researchers, develop less of an *individual* self and more of a *family* self than do Americans. This makes those individuals more sensitive and responsive to their surroundings. Americans, on the other hand, are puzzled by people for whom the self is not just the individual. The notion that the self is not really a person but the nexus of a web of relationships—family, friends, peers—all of which entail obligations, is hard for Americans to accept.

Asians' willingness to shift and adapt to the relationships they're involved in strikes many Westerners as inconsistent and hypocritical.

Table 1.3
Contrasting Core Values

American Assumption or Value	Contrasting Assumption or Value
People are individuals.	People are integrally connected with other people (e.g., families).
Personal growth and change are valuable and desirable.	Following time-tested traditions is desirable.
Individuals have control over their own life circumstances.	One's life circumstances are determined externally.
Personal problems can be solved through analysis and action. Others, including professionals, can help you with problems.	Problems are fated to occur and fate may or may not alleviate them. One's problems are beyond the control of other human beings.
People can be genuinely interested in the welfare of strangers.	Only one's close friends and relatives can be trusted.
An open discussion of one's problems can be beneficial.	It can be dangerous to reveal oneself to others.
People—both men and women—are more or less equal.	There is a hierarchical ranking of people in society. Males are superior.
Self-help and initiative determine who you are and how you live.	Inheritance or birthright are important for who you are and what your circumstances are.
Competition is healthy and productive.	Cooperation is the most important thing.
Actions are oriented toward the future, with a view to change and improvement.	There is a past or present orientation with emphasis on stability.
Emphasis in relationships is on directness, openness, and honesty.	Emphasis is on indirectness, ritual, "face," and smooth surface relationships.
Materialism and acquisitiveness are emphasized.	Spiritualism and detachment are emphasized.

Adapted from: U.S. Department of Agriculture 1989: 94; Stewart 1972; Kohls 1984.

Robert Kohls¹⁵ points out that many American core values are viewed negatively by many other people in the world. For example, the American tendency to informality and equality is seen by some people as depersonalization—everyone is kept at the same distance. Margaret Mead also described the conflict of core values across cultures:

Americans . . . find it very confusing to shift from high to low status as the situation demands and . . . respond by a continuous endeavor to stabilize relationships. Their uneasiness often leads to an assertive attempt either to establish a

superficially egalitarian ethos—as in the ritual use of first names for everyone, which is most disorienting to persons of many other cultures—or else to an attempt to establish hierarchies which are rigidly resistant to other considerations such as lineage and education.¹⁶

Across some cultures, the differences can be both deceptive and extreme. In Japan, overt expressions of gratitude most often occur, according to Barnlund, between people who do not know each other very well. Close friends, to the Japanese way of thinking, have no need to express gratitude. In this way, formal expressions of gratitude actually indicate distance, not closeness. Barnlund comments:

The distance that divides these two cultures [Japanese and American] is so enormous along the same interpersonal dimensions that it is difficult to avoid concluding that they are nearly exact opposites. The qualities that one society nurtures—reserve, formality, and silence in one case, and self assertion, informality, and talkativeness in the other—are the same qualities the other society discourages.¹⁷

Learning How to Learn

And so we come to the central question: How can we cope with the enormous diversity—and complexity—of cultural difference, and still do our jobs successfully? Clearly, it would be an impossible task to learn the details of each of the world's thousands of distinct cultures—or of even a few of these.

Learning *how* to learn is the key. Rather than memorizing the details of culture, acquiring skill at entering new cultural contexts and determining what is appropriate within them gives us an ability to manage difference that we can use anywhere, over and over again, as we move through our changing world.

In the next chapter we'll begin our discussion of managing difference by looking at what happens when we encounter a new culture, and outlining some techniques and strategies for overcoming the initial shock of contact.

NOTES

1. Quoted by Robert D. Kaplan, "Was Democracy Just a Moment?," *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 1997): 60.

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12. Alvino E. Fantini, "Introduction: Language, Culture and World View," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 19, 2: 143-53.
13. Reported in the *New York Times*, March 7, 1989: C1, C6.
14. In *The Economist*, June 4, 1994: 87.
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16. Margaret Mead, "The Factor of Culture," in Mottram Tore (ed.), *The Selection of Personnel for International Services* (Geneva: Federation For Mental Health, 1963): 7-8.
17. Barnlund 1975: 75.

CHAPTER

2

Encountering Difference

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Cultural differences would be unimportant if we never came into contact with one another. But we do. And when we do, we often encounter problems. Many of the problems stem from the very nature of culture itself. Although culture is very useful to human beings in many different ways, it's also a problem in some respects.

For one thing, cultures aren't very flexible. Although cultures do change slowly over time, at any one time, a particular culture will tolerate a rather narrow set of behaviors. Other behaviors are labeled as wrong or foreign. This is *ethnocentrism*—the view that your ways are superior, and that all other ways should be judged in terms of yours.

For another, culture imposes blinders. Since people learn about their culture's way of constructing the world when they are very young, that cultural imprint is, for all intents and purposes, part of an individual's personality. Just as culture creates a "we" identity for people, it also creates a "they" category for all others. *Stereotypes* are summary generalizations about other, culturally different groups. Although stereotypes reduce the threat of the unknown somewhat by enhancing predictability, they also tend to be abstract and one-dimensional, obscuring important information in new situations.

Finally, culture can give us the mistaken impression that we really know what's going on around us. Because our culture is so much a part of who we are, we tend to develop an attitude of *naïve realism*, the belief that the way we see the world is the way the world really is.

None of this helps us very much in our first encounter with a different culture. We are drawn, almost instinctively, to interpret what's