

**Using Family Culture to Illustrate
the Basics of Intercultural Interaction:
An exercise to teach the problems and
potential of cross-cultural interaction**

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Human Services Today

Fall 2004

<http://hst.coehs.uwosh.edu>

Abstract

It is often difficult to teach intercultural concepts to students who have, or who think they have, few experiences to draw on. When Jane Elliott attempted to teach her White Iowa students about racial discrimination she chose an attribute they already possessed, eye color. This small element that is a part of every human became the basis of a powerful lesson in discrimination. Many of our students at a small Midwestern liberal arts college have had little direct experience with what they consider "other" cultures. Because of their lack of experience, they often find it difficult to appreciate the importance of culture in their own lives and the lives of others. The exercise presented here uses a concept all students are to some degree familiar with, the family, to illustrate the problems and potential of intercultural interactions. This exercise has a number of possible applications and has been well received by participants in a variety of contexts.

The importance of having students learn about other cultures is unquestioned in modern education. As Milton Bennett (1998) noted, while the question of how people can understand each other was traditionally the province of the diplomat, expatriate, or foreign traveler, today's global village has made this concern part of everyday life.

Educators have not neglected this area. Several good ideas have been presented on how to teach about culture (e.g., Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, and Terrell, 2002; Gloria, Rieckmann, and Rush, 2000). One potential problem is that the perception of students,

particularly those from fairly homogeneous areas, is that they have had little contact and therefore know little about “other cultures.” This may lead to discomfort with presentations and discussions of intercultural norms and differences.

The central tenet of this article is that students who perceive that they have no experience with intercultural interaction and therefore know little about culture are wrong. Instead, they know a great deal about the influence of culture and about intercultural interactions because they engage in them every day. Because students do not realize they are acting outside of their original culture, they do not define their interactions as intercultural and dismiss what they have learned from them. Highlighting their original culture can help students respect their own skills and can provide an easily understood model of broader intercultural interaction.

The basic culture that all students have originally learned is the culture of their own family. The concept of “family as culture” has informed a number of areas of research and theory. It serves as a foundation of family systems theory (e.g., Bowen, 1966), a theory proven useful in a variety of therapeutic settings. These therapeutic settings range from the understanding of school problems (Barbarin, 1992) to couples therapy (Papero, 1995). The concept of “family culture” has also been used by Halevy (1998) to help students understand the cultural aspects of counseling and therapy.

The intent of this paper is to look at the central tenet of family systems theory, that family is our first culture, and to develop a classroom exercise to use that concept to further understanding of intercultural interaction. The exercise provides a rough measure of certain aspects of the student’s family culture. It allows the participants to contrast their own family cultures and help them predict and understand the differences in family

culture. The goal is to help students see that differences in family culture create difficulties in communication and understanding, just as differences and difficulties create misunderstandings in broader cultures. Other secondary exercises are also suggested.

The Family Culture exercise

The exercise begins with a description of the concept of family culture and then draws upon early interfamily experience, such as one's first sleepover at a friend's house, to illustrate how norms can differ from family to family. When it is clear students understand the concept of family culture, the Quick Family Culture Scale (QFCS) is administered.

Quick Family Culture Scale

Circle the alternative that best describes the norms of your family as you were growing up:

1. How often did you eat your evening meals together as a family?

Always Most of the time Occasionally Never

2. How often did the members of your family hug to display affection?

Very often Rather Frequently On special occasions Never

3. How often did the members of your family express verbal affection for each other?

Very often Rather Frequently On special occasions Never

4. What were the rules for expressing disagreement in your family?

Blunt honesty Direct, but courteous Indirect Not encouraged

5. What were the rules for expressing anger in your family?

Yelling okay Showing anger okay Talking OK No anger shown

6. Was your family "competitive" with each other, in terms of playing games, or using humor at the expense of others?

Always Very often Seldom Never

7. How important were sports in your family?

Extremely Moderately A little Not at all

8. The traditional sex roles in our society often involve men working at a career and women taking care of children and the house. With that understanding, how traditional would you describe the sex roles of your family?

Very Mostly Non-traditional, i.e. equal Counter-traditional

9. What was the attitude of your parents toward your education?

Extremely supportive Moderately supportive A little supportive
Uninvolved

The QFCS avoids questions that could be especially embarrassing or value-laden. Some degree of discomfort is inevitable and consistent with the experience of intercultural interaction, but the participants should not feel reluctant to participate. After the scale is completed on paper, participants are asked to stand. According to their responses on the first question they are separated into areas of the room. Students who circled "Always" are asked to stand in one corner. Those with "Most of the time" stand far enough away for group boundaries to be visible. The process continues for the other responses, and results in a clear picture of the variability within the group.

Participants are then encouraged to notice how many people are from family cultures similar to theirs, and how many family cultures are quite different. We also address the possibility that one's family culture may be fairly distinctive. An example given is that in our experience comparatively few people grew up in families who never

ate their evening meal together. The next step is to ask a question that provides an opportunity to explore how differences in culture can affect communication and perception. An example is "How might a person from Family A (always ate together) and someone from Family D (never ate together) have a misunderstanding based on their family cultures?" After some thought and prodding, one typical response is that the Family D representative may not be accustomed to talking at mealtimes. They may therefore be less concerned about the norms of eating, and may find Family A people overly talkative. Family A types may find Family D types very quiet, and in extreme cases, unmannerly and rude.

This sets the stage for the more serious parts of the scale. The presenter reads the second scale, tells students what parts of the room correspond to which response, and waits until everyone rearranges. There is typically much chattering, and much comparing as people find their groups. The question is then asked again "How might people at one extreme of the scale misunderstand each other, based on their family culture?" Participants generally have little trouble coming up with plausible misunderstandings, and sometimes offer personal experiences related to the item in question.

It is important to note the use of the QFCS and the idea of "family as first culture" does not require the assumption that participants behave in ways that are perfect mirrors of their family culture. In fact, the first time they interacted with someone outside their own family they began to accrue the benefits of intercultural interaction, and began to modify the effects of their first culture. Growing up in their particular family however, their primary experience has been with people of that family culture who did indeed act in accordance to the rules of that family culture. Behavior encountered from people

outside the family that violates the standards of one's family culture may therefore still be seen as wrong or maladaptive, in the same way that behavior violating the norms of one's broader culture can be judged negatively.

Points to be made from the Family Culture exercise

There are two major points demonstrated by this exercise. First, the exercise demonstrates that cultures differ in their norms concerning central aspects of life. Pursuing this point, it is relatively easy for learners to see that the dimensions of the QFCS have no “correct” answers. This does not mean, however, that all cultures are perceived as equal; participants often feel their family culture had the “right” (or sometimes the “wrong”) norm. Helping participants see that on many dimensions cultural norms are matters of fact, not matters of value, can be a valuable lesson in the avoidance of ethnocentrism.

Second, the exercise is a clear demonstration of the potential for problems in intercultural interaction. As one moves through the items of the QFCS, participants have little trouble imagining the misunderstandings that may occur between people from different family cultures. The idea that people from cultures with different norms may misunderstand and misinterpret each other is one of the fundamentals of intercultural communication. Likewise, the move from family culture to broader culture is fairly linear.

The exercise also allows for at least two other, more subtle, but potentially valuable, points to be made. First, the exercise demonstrates that considerable diversity exists where many do not expect it. People who are not from recognizably different ethnic groups may differ a great deal in terms of their family cultures. A typical

gathering of look-alike college students contains a rich diversity of backgrounds. This helps create an appreciation for the hidden diversity present in any group of learners, and can be used to show the dangers of simplistic descriptions of groups.

Second, the exercise can also be used to make a powerful argument for the value of intercultural experiences. It is often revealing to ask students to imagine their own experiences as being still limited to the culture of their own family. Students typically respond that they have learned a great deal from individuals outside their family and can often point to other family cultures that have affected their perspectives on life. It is a short step then to suggest that being exposed to only one broader culture would have similar limitations. The final step is to show that intercultural interaction on a broader scale is similarly essential to intellectual and social development.

Two variations

This exercise has been presented in a variety of settings, from the classroom to large conferences. Using the exercise in these settings has opened new avenues beyond those described above. Below are two examples found to be useful extensions of the exercise. In each case, the Family Culture exercise described above was conducted as a starting point.

1. With groups from ostensibly different backgrounds, the exercise can be used first to demonstrate commonalities and then to identify possible areas of misunderstanding.

The exercise was recently used at a joint conference involving students from two colleges, one predominantly White and one Historically Black. A scaled down version of the QFCS was used to introduce the idea of family culture and how differences in family culture could lead to cross-cultural

misunderstanding. Added to the scaled down version were items developed especially for this setting. The additional questions were added with the suspicion they might yield important differences between Euro-American (EA) and African-American (AA) culture.

During the QFCS procedure we were struck, as were the participants, at how difficult it was to create items that clearly differentiated the Euro American and African American groups. Despite the fact that an effort was made to highlight differences between the two groups, there was, in general, far more variability within the Euro American and African American groups than there were differences between them.

A few questions identified potentially important differences between the two groups of students. One example is that African American students expressed somewhat deeper religious beliefs than their Euro American counterparts. Showing the greatest difference, however, was a question concerning the degree to which one considered one's race to be part of one's identity. On this question the groups were sharply divided. African American students felt their race was a large part of their personal identity, whereas Euro American students did not. As a follow up to the question on race, students were verbally asked how they may misunderstand, or be misunderstood, by those who do not see race as an important aspect of their personal identity. One of the Euro-American students said, "Get over it!" The reply of African-American students was "How can you be so oblivious to racial issues?" This conversation mirrors

one we have heard consistently over the six years of participating in this conference.

2. To provide students about to attend study-abroad programs with some understanding of the importance of cultural differences and some types of differences to expect.

With the help of contacts in Belgium, a short questionnaire was developed to identify areas where American and Belgian cultures differ. Measuring over 100 university students in each country, Americans were significantly more likely to agree with the following statements:

It is necessary for personal cleanliness to shower at least once a day.

It is very important for parents to frequently say “I love you” to their children.

My religious faith is an important part of my everyday life.

Belgians were significantly more likely to agree with the following statements:

I would vote for a political candidate who was unfaithful to their spouse if they were otherwise the best qualified for the position.

One of the primary functions of government is to provide healthcare for its people.

The Belgian-American form of the QFCS represents an approach to the understanding of intercultural differences more relevant to a student’s understanding than random anecdotal information. The more prepared a student is before leaving home, the better one may adjust to a study abroad program. It is worth noting that the American and Belgian data, while showing significant differences on these items, also represented considerable within-group variability. The point, therefore, may also be made that it is difficult to characterize either culture in ways that apply to all of the individuals within that culture.

Evaluations of the Family Culture exercise

The QFCS has been used in several classes. It has been used at the European-American/African-American conference described above. It has presented at a workshop to intercultural educators. The most recent class exercise involved a Junior Honors class entitled “The impact of culture on everyday life”. The 14 members of the class rated the exercise a 4.55 (SD= .65) on a scale of 1(not useful) to 5 (very useful), and 4.3 (SD=.78) on a scale of 1 (do not use again) to 5 (definitely use again). Professional educators gave the exercise an overall 4.3 (SD=.51) on a scale from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent). Finally, the ratings from the Euro-American/African-American conference were, though on a different scale, comparable to the classroom ratings. Individually the QFCS has been used and found by the authors to be especially valuable as an icebreaker at multicultural conferences and in classes concerning culture.

Summary

The Quick Family Culture Scale exercise is an enjoyable and easily adapted exercise which intends to provide students with an accessible way to understand the basics of intercultural communication. The two extensions we note above provide useful directions for expansion of the basic concepts.

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