

Lecture 3: Guidelines to characteristics of other cultures

When one asks “How can I learn about culture X?”, all too often we are discouraged to learn that there is no comprehensive book (or list) available on culture X. The lack of reading matter on various cultures is, in some ways, a blessing, since knowledge of other cultures is better acquired by experience than by study. Thus, ones in foreign mission should plan to experience cultures different from their own, particularly the cultures represented in their mission or posts. To be valid, these experiences should incorporate a few basic principles and discovery techniques. By discovering the characteristics of other cultures, it should be noted that cultures vary internally and are changeable. There are usually many cultural differences within a single race or nationality. The following principles may be useful to keep in mind:

- Firsthand experience is necessary to understand many subtleties of any culture.
- Feelings of apprehension, loneliness or lack of confidence are common when visiting and experiencing another culture.
- Differences between cultures are often experienced as threatening.
- What is logical and important in a particular culture may seem irrational and unimportant to an outsider.
- In describing another culture, people tend to stress the differences and overlook the similarities.
- Stereotyping due to generalizing may be inevitable among those who lack frequent contact with another culture.
- Personal observations of others about another culture should be regarded with skepticism.
- Many cultures often exist within a single race, language group, religion or nationality, differentiated by age, gender, socioeconomic status, education and exposure to other cultures.
- All cultures have internal variations.
- Cultural awareness varies among individuals.
 - One’s own sense of cultural identity often is not evident until one encounters another culture.
- Cultures are continually evolving.
- Understanding another culture is a continuous process.
- One should understand the language of a culture to best understand that culture.

An understanding of these principles would certainly support to become a more insightful observer of other cultures.