

## Edmonton 2008 Cultural Profiles

### Cultural Orientations and putting the cultural profiles in context

Cultural differences can be explained by understanding the concept of cultural orientations. The concept of cultural orientation offers a framework for describing and explaining cultural differences developed by a social psychologist, Geert Hofstede who studied various cultures around the world. In his studies, he had observed patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving of people across different cultures.

**A cultural orientation** is an inclination to think, feel or act in a way that is culturally determined. It defines the basis of differences among cultures such self-identity, interpersonal relationships, communication, resolving conflict. **Cultural orientations are not black-and-white.** No one totally belongs to only one cultural orientation but could lie somewhere on a continuum bounded by the extreme on both ends. The three most important cultural orientations relevant to working with immigrant seniors based on to Hofstede's work are: individualism-collectivism, power distance and time orientation (Hofstede, 2005).

### Individualism-Collectivism (I, We, They)

People around the world live in societies where the individual or the group's interests are dominant. This dimension refers to how people define themselves and their relationship with others. These societies could either be individualist or collectivist societies. In individualist societies, the *pivotal unit is the individual*. Life decisions such as career choices and marriage are normally made by individuals themselves. *Individual identity* takes precedence over group rights and needs. Personal freedom is valued as observed in home and workplace environments. *Communication tends to be direct, explicit and personal*. People from *individualist cultures* appreciate clear, direct and explicit communication that could be easily understood. Their thinking process reflects a linear cause and effect patterns. They also express personal accountability.

In *Collectivist societies*, the self is relationship based and intricately connected to the other members of the group. It could be said that the self is defined in relation to others and that the public presentation of self is shaped by established patterns and sets of prescribed mutual objectives. *The pivotal unit is the group*. Group decisions are most valued. Individuals consult others before making decisions and gives priority to groups over individual needs. Collective values prevailed. The "we" is emphasized over the "I". Values cherished are harmony, personal dignity or "face", filial piety and respect for elders. *Space and privacy are less important than relationships*. Shared space is preferred in both personal and business environments. Whether in the home or office, there is space large enough to accommodate people who would spend a great deal of time socializing. *Communication is intuitive, complex and impressionistic*. Indirect and ambiguous. "reading

between the lines”. Communication should nurture relationship, maintain harmony and prevent loss of face. Thinking patterns reflect a circuitous logic using stories or metaphorical statements to express their ideas.

In many other cultures interdependence is highly desired and appreciated. The adult children are expected to involve parents and grandparents in life’s major decisions even if they are not residing in the same dwelling. For example if a young couple is having marital problems, it won’t always be up to the young couple to decide whether to separate or work things out. The couples’ parents and/or extended family members like grandparents, uncles and aunts would expect to be involved in the decision making process.

### **Power Distance (“More equal than others”)**

Power Distance is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. (Hofstede, 2005) It is also the “communication distance” between the most powerful and the least powerful members of society; focuses on the relationships between people of different statuses. Societies are described as low power distance culture or high power distance cultures.

*In low power distance or egalitarian cultures*, individuals viewed as equals. There is an emphasis on legitimate power assigned through a democratic process. Superiors and subordinates are interdependent. Obedience of children to parents not as important and elderly people not feared. Communication flows up as well as down. People from individualist cultures may not necessarily accept orders at face value; people may want to know why they should follow them

*In high power distance or hierarchical cultures*, individuals viewed as unequal. There is an emphasis on coercive/referent power. Subordinates are dependent on superiors. Obedience to parents is valued highly. Old people are respected and feared. Communication tends to be restricted and emanates from the top of the hierarchy. In these cultures, aging is accepted with grace and dignity as a process set by nature. Qualities of a person are valued over the youthful looks of an aging individual. One doesn’t have control on nature and cannot change and alter the course of nature. People gladly welcome the grandparenthood and enjoy the respect given to them by the grandchildren and others. As being an experienced and a wise individual they assume the role of great advisor and a valuable teacher

### **Time Orientation (“yesterday, now or later?”)**

Time Orientation refers to how certain cultures view and values time and influences the performance of tasks. It can be *monochromic time patterns* which mean that time is linear and a commodity that must be saved, spent or squandered. It can *polychromic time patterns* which means time is circular and relaxed and reflect a view of time flowing around us.

### *Monochromic time patterns (Linear and future oriented)*

In North American culture time is future oriented and anticipated. Goals are set and time is tightly scheduled, people are running from one engagement to other. Time is a limited resource; you often hear people say “time is money”. “I don’t have time to waste”, as if people are talking about a commodity. Time orientation is lineal, divided into precise units assigned to perform different tasks. In case you have not finished the task at hand within the slotted time period, you would have to leave this task unfinished as you are scheduled to start another task (meeting) and etc. Whereas, in many culture people are really laid back, just being is preferred. There is no hurriedness or rush to get somewhere to do things not needed or find things to do.

### *Polychromic time patterns (Time is circular and past-oriented)*

In many cultures time is circular and past oriented. You will find people always making reference to an incident, an event or an occasion from the past to make sense of what they are doing now and where they are going, that makes time orientation circular. For example, in Aboriginal culture every important activity is done in circle and always the information is passed from one generation to the next generation and context is built on how it was done by their ancestors. In many cultures “time is for being and living”, you live as it is and don’t rush.

Time is not only circular but also undifferentiated and a limitless resource. In some African communities there is very little orientation to “hurriedness” or “being on time”. If they are busy doing one thing and they are supposed to attend to something else later on, most likely they will finish what they were doing and then go to next activity or engagement. For example, if a woman is visiting a sick friend who could use some help with house chores and this visiting woman has a doctor’s appointment later in the day, it is very likely that she would do what needs to be done at her friend’s house at risk of being late for, or miss her doctor’s appointment. Whereas, in many cultures people are really laid back, just being there is preferred.

### **High and Low Context**

Edward Hall, an anthropologist and a cross-cultural researcher, studied communication patterns across the world and conceptualized a set of behaviour known as low and high context communication process. The general terms "high context" and "low context" (popularized by Edward Hall) relates to the framework, background, and surrounding circumstances in which communication or an event takes place.

### *High Context Communication*

In cultures that practice *High Context Communication*, people are less verbally explicit, less written formal information and more internalized understandings of what is communicated. Communication are embedded in long term relationships and there is strong boundaries as to who is accepted as belonging versus who is considered an

"outsider". The knowledge generated in the communication process is situational, relational. Decisions and activities focus around personal face to-face relationships, often around a central person who has authority; subordinates tasks to relationships.

#### *Low Context Communication*

In cultures that practice *Low Context Communication*, the communication process tends to be rule oriented. More knowledge is codified, public, external and accessible. There is sequencing and separation of time, space, activities and relationships. There is more interpersonal connections of shorter duration. Knowledge is more often transferable; Decisions and activities focus around what needs to be done, division of responsibilities.

#### **Ageing**

As people grow old there are different expectations. In North America youthfulness and vigour are desired and appreciated. There is very profound marketing by the cosmetic industry to promote products that are specially made for middle-aged women to attain that youthful look. There are many other methods besides make-up, plastic surgery and dermatologist procedures, which are intended to get that youthful look back.

Whereas, in many other cultures aging is accepted with grace and dignity as a process set by nature. The qualities of a person are valued over the youthful looks of an aging individual. One doesn't have control on nature and cannot change and alter the course of nature. People gladly welcome the grandparenthood and enjoy the respect given to them by the grandchildren and others as being an experienced and a wise senior.

#### **The Teacher's Role**

In North American culture students have lots of freedom of expression in a classroom. Learning is participatory and the teacher involves students in two-way discussion. A student could question the teacher and challenge his/her abilities. Parents are expected to be involved in their children's education. They may volunteer in classrooms, serve on parent councils, or they may demand a parent/teacher meeting as well as complain to higher authorities if need be.

In other cultures there is a great power distance. Teachers enjoy a high level of respect and students are expected to listen to the teacher. They cannot question a teacher. The teacher's job is to teach and the student's job is to learn without questioning his/her ability. Parents (and grandparents) have different view of schools and teachers. Parents are not as involved in their children's day-to-day tutoring and education. It is considered the school's responsibility that the learning of their children is up to standard. If the child is having difficulty in keeping up with the curriculum they would hire a tutor to teach the child after school. They also believe that schools and teachers are instrumental in building children's character in becoming upright citizens. There is a great emphasis on behaviour

at school such as following strict rules in the classroom, during lunchtime and in the playground.

When parents are asked to volunteer at school or go for parent/teacher meetings, they may not see themselves in this role. They become really intimidated and suspect that their children or themselves must have done something wrong. Sometimes the children don't feel comfortable in having their parents involved in school activities due to cultural and language barriers.

In many instances, parents will look up to the teachers to set a career direction for their children with the assumption that the "teacher knows best" about their child.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural worldviews are complex and require detailed attention especially when dealing with seniors' services. The profiles presented in this resource manual highlight this complexity. The profiles are drawn from immigrant communities in Edmonton, Canada. There are however similarities between different communities which share the same religion.

### **REFERENCES**

Bennett, B. J. (1988). *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication: Selected readings*, Yarmouth, Intercultural Press.

Wikipedia, worldviews, Retrieved on 14 December 2008, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/world\\_view](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/world_view)