



Friendship Force International Thoughts on Cultural Awareness

Humans have different values and perceptions of the world because of culture. To assume that there is one proper way to behave toward all human beings is both naïve and unworkable.

Humans are captives of their culture. Each of us operates within confines of training, socialization, and tradition. We are like icebergs when it comes to our cultural bindings. The bulk of the iceberg is that part of perspective which is ordinarily unexamined and unquestioned. The extent to which we are able to call on this perspective is part of our ability to understand and accept human differences.

Awareness of our own perspective involves stepping over the consciousness threshold to examine the behaviors and assumptions ordinarily set in motion when we are confronted with human differences. Hence, cultural awareness is as much about “us” and “me” as it is about “them.”

There are some common ways humans express cultural and ethnic differences... stereotyping, ethnocentrism, prejudice, and discrimination.

There's a great diversity within cultural groups. This means that we cannot simply develop a code book for any culture's behavior, and apply it to all members of the group. No code book for behavior can or should be developed. Limiting our education about cultural groups to how “they” do things – as opposed to how “we” do things – denies individual and subgroup identity within the larger cultural group. Moreover, we tend to substitute one set of stereotypes for another.

Cultural awareness is the development of sensitivity to cultural differences.

Stereotypes affect what we think and believe about others as well as how we behave towards them. These images allow us to treat people differently than we would if our thinking were less rigid, more tentative. Stereotypes often serve as substitutes for thinking. We often tend to use them to avoid any contact with people we perceive as being fundamentally different.

There's a critical difference between CATEGORIZING and STEREOTYPING.

Because of the amount of information we have to assimilate, categorizing is necessary. It is a way to reduce and simplify an otherwise impossibly complex world. Stereotypes are beliefs about people in categories that lessen the chances for interaction – and diminish the potential for recognizing and accepting differences.

From “Teaching About Cultural Awareness”
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