

Practitioner Toolkit

Thoughts on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

| toolkit@nesa.com.au | nesa.com.au

#weR4jobs *weR4everyone*

Practitioner Toolkit

NESA's Dr Colin Harrison is both an Australian and a French citizen, and spent 20 years living and working in the field of language and communication in France...

Communicating across cultures: clients from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds

Different cultures have different habits, values, traditions and expectations, right? So when dealing with someone from a different culture, it's important to understand that culture so that you can interact with them appropriately....



Stop right there!

This is a really common – often unexplored – ‘kicking-off’ point for anyone who has to interact with CALD clients. But starting from that apparently harmless conclusion can quickly lead us into poor communicative habits which can end up segregating, isolating and disenfranchising those we are trying to communicate with. In this short paper I would like to shine a spotlight on the problems with this common conception of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural difference’, and finally to offer a much simpler, more general and more effective way to approach CALD clients, and in fact to approach *any* clients.

Who is this paper for?

This paper has been written for employment consultants who work with CALD clients, without presuming any privileged cultural knowledge on their part. That is, it's about communicating with people from cultures you may know little or nothing about.

CALD vs Indigenous clients

In the employment services world, CALD and Indigenous clients are usually considered separately. In the context of the current discussion there is no reason for such a separation: the advice here pertains just as much to Indigenous clients as it does to people from any other cultural background.

In fact, the advice here pertains to any situation in which there is some degree of ‘cultural difference’ between you and your client, and as we'll see below, I'm actually going to suggest that this is ‘always’. The advice here is therefore in fact general, and can be applied to any communicative situation.

The way we normally think about ‘culture’ is the problem...

Let me ask you a question: do you consider yourself to be “Australian”? What about your colleague in the next room, is she “Australian”? Let's imagine you've said “yes” to both of these questions. Now, do you and your colleague have the *same values, beliefs, likes and dislikes*? Are you the *same religion*, do you vote for the *same political party*, follow the *same sports clubs*, like the *same music*? Do you have the same views on *euthanasia, global warming, same sex marriage*? Almost certainly not, right?



Practitioner Toolkit

If you were to sit down with your colleague and compare everything you thought, believed and took as ‘normal’, you would find a lot of differences (you might even end up in an argument...). You might both belong to the same ‘culture’, and speak the same language, but really, how many generalisations about ‘Australian culture’ would be accurate to both of you? (or indeed, either of you?)

Cultural generalisations: “Cambodians do X.” “French people don’t like Y...”

These are the kinds of comment that are likely to appear in a ‘guide’ on Cambodian or French culture. *(Why am I focussing on these particular ‘cultures’? No reason! This section could have zeroed in on any cultural group or nationality.)*

To see why comments of this kind are a problem, let’s consider two hypothetical clients: Mr. Ong and Miss Muoy.

Mr Ong is 55. He came to Australia from Cambodia in 1980 at the age of 18, just after the fall of the Pol Pot regime. His parents were both French teachers in Phnom Penh, and he saw them both killed by Khmer Rouge soldiers. He was lucky to survive and to escape with his uncle. Mr Ong has worked hard since arriving in Australia. His schooling in Cambodia was very inconsistent because of the war, nevertheless he managed to get a technical qualification here and had stable employment in a power station. Unfortunately he was made redundant two years ago and has had trouble finding work since. He is married to a Cambodian woman and has two teenage children. His circle of friends are mainly Cambodian. He speaks Khmer at home and has a heavy accent in English.

Ms Muoy is 26. She was born in Cambodia. Her father is Cambodian and her mother is American. She spent a portion of her childhood in the US. At the age of 15 she moved with her family to Korea, where she lived until the age of 24. She has the equivalent of a BA from a Korean University. She came to Australia two years ago. Despite her tertiary qualifications and being fluent in English, Korean, and Khmer she has had trouble finding work and has recently registered for unemployment benefits.

These two clients both identify as ‘Cambodian’, but generalisations about ‘Cambodian culture’ are unlikely to be very useful for either of them. Their life experiences are completely different: Mr Ong fled his country in anguish and turmoil with little but the clothes he was wearing; Ms Muoy was born when the Pol Pot regime was already history, into a relatively wealthy family, and had a stable and happy childhood. The influences on their beliefs and behaviours have been worlds apart. For anyone to assume that Mr Ong and Ms Muoy are going to behave or react the same way *simply because they both identify as Cambodian* is highly questionable.

So, what is a ‘culture’?

We tend to use this word quite a lot, but it’s really a much slipperier notion that most people think. Is there really a usefully identifiable thing called ‘French culture’ (for instance)? Someone from the east of France (Alsace) might have more in common with a German than they do with a Parisian. A Ch’ti from the far north of France might have trouble even *speaking* with someone from Marseilles, even though technically they both speak ‘French’¹. Bretons (from Brittany in the north east) and

¹ There is a great French comedy called “Welcome to the Sticks” (Bienvenu chez les Ch’tis) from 2008 which explores precisely this cultural crossover within ‘French culture’.



Practitioner Toolkit

Basques (from the south east) traditionally spoke languages that were nothing like French... So, *who are we actually referring to* when we say 'French culture'? And of course modern France, like most modern nations, has a multi-cultural population meaning that there are French people whose ancestors are African, Asian, from other parts of Europe... Do all these people magically become exactly the same as soon as they identify themselves as 'French'? Of course not. So what would 'French (German, Italian, Australian, Thai...) culture' even actually mean?

'Culture' is just one possible way of grouping...

'Culture' is most commonly used with a similar meaning to 'nationality' (although they are importantly different). But we can also speak of 'business culture' for example, meaning the particular set of values and expectations that exist within a specific company. 'Culture' is really just a term for a grouping of people, united by some kind of perceived (or imagined) similarity – in terms of *national cultures*, normally along actually quite vague linguistic, political or geographical lines – and it's only one of many, many ways of categorising people.

Mr Ong is a 55 year old man. He possibly has more in common with Mr Phillips, another one of your clients, who is also a *55 year old man made redundant from the power industry*. Mr Phillips was actually born in England, although he now considers himself Australian, but he and Mr Ong might be more 'related' by age and situation than either of them are to any large-scale 'cultural' groups.

Ms Muoy might identify more closely with your Korean client Ms Kim (more closely than she ever would with Mr Ong) because they are the same age, same gender and share a language (Korean), and a lot of *pop culture* references (hey, there's that word 'culture' again!)

Stereotyping

We regularly group people by *language, culture, generation, gender, religion, politics, sporting teams, likes, physical characteristics, disabilities, medical conditions...* Is this list starting to make you feel a little uncomfortable? It may well be. Grouping people in this way is a necessary first step to being able to *discriminate against* them by assigning characteristics unfairly to the whole group: 'stereotyping'.

But isn't *assigning characteristics to someone based on a category* exactly what we are doing if we try to anticipate somebody's beliefs and behaviour based on some learnt idea we may have of their 'culture'? Yes it is! *Discrimination* is negative: intended to harm or limit freedoms. *Trying to be culturally sensitive* is positively motivated, but if it is done using stereotypes, it is still operating in the same space of *assuming* characteristics based on categories.

(And while we're on the topic of stereotypes, they're not even a useful guide to anticipating characteristics in an individual, despite what most people think. See the boxed segment "The problem with stereotypes" if you really want me to do your head in!)

So, is there some way we can remain sensitive to CALD clients (or in fact *any* clients) without having to categorise people at all? Yes there is. We'll get to that below.

Of course, I'm not suggesting that 'cultural understanding' is *completely irrelevant*. Certain older cultural groups do have many identifiable traits and shared beliefs that someone studying their language with a mind to interacting intimately with them would be well-advised to understand, particularly if it was their intention to go and live within this culture.

Practitioner Toolkit

If you happen to know something about the cultural values of a client, and you can demonstrate sensitivity to that, that's a great way to open the door to 'in-group identification'.

In-group identification

In-group identification – where we feel we have 'something in common' with another person – is a powerful aid to rapport building. But in-group identification is by no means limited to 'culture'. A female client may be more at ease with a female consultant; an older client might appreciate a consultant closer to their own age; Indigenous clients might be more at ease with Indigenous consultants; if you establish early on that you and your client support the same football team, like the same music, love the same movie, *anything* that groups you together, these are all 'in-group identifiers' that will help you to build a rapport with that person.

In-group identification is about finding common ground, whereas cultural stereotyping tends to be about identifying difference, and as the example of Mr Ong and Ms Muoy above has hopefully demonstrated, cultural stereotypes will never give you privileged insight into *individuals*...

And that's the bottom line.

While you are trying to understand your client through the lens of any kind of stereotype, *you are not paying attention to them as an individual*. Your clients are not stereotypes, they are people!

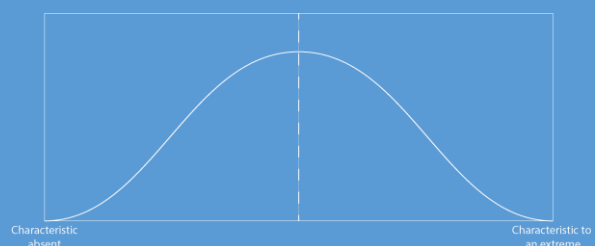
Your client is a person

Rapport-building is about finding common ground. When you have somebody in front of you who is from a different cultural background, or who speaks a different language natively, there may be things about their behaviour that you do not understand or are not able to correctly interpret.

But there are also a great many things that are the same or similar across *all human cultures*, and many of these are things that you can use to respond to the person in front of you rather

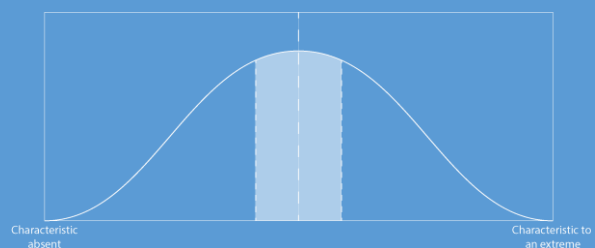
The problem with stereotypes...

Typically, when we imagine cultural characteristics, we are talking about 'most common' tendencies across a group. Imagine we were to survey a whole culture, taking into account a particular characteristic. A 'normal' distribution might be the classic *bell curve*:



(*actually, it doesn't matter what shape the distribution comes out*)

Question: if we have an individual from this culture in front of us, how likely are they to be 'typical' with regard to this characteristic? In other words, how likely are they to lie let's say within a 30 percentile point band centred on the *highest* point of our bell curve, i.e. somewhere in the shaded segment of the diagram:



Well, if we have defined our 'typical' band as 15% on either side of the average (= most typical) case, then that means there is only a 30% chance of any individual actually being within it, or in other words a 70% chance (2½ times more likely) that they are not. The more closely we define 'typical' (i.e. the narrower our band), the worse this likelihood gets.

That doesn't seem right does it? Surely the 'typical' characteristics are found in the *greatest number* of people? Well, actually not quite: the 'typical' characteristics are those that have the largest number of people in the sample associated with them, but paradoxically, that does *not* mean that a randomly chosen person is more likely than not to exhibit a 'typical' characteristic.



than focussing on (probably inaccurate) stereotypes.

Facial expressions

One hundred years of cross-cultural studies have repeatedly shown that there is a very strong correlation across all people for facial expressions indicating happiness (laughter), anger, fear, surprise, confusion and even less basic emotions, like disgust, and contempt.

You can tell a lot about how the person in front of you is feeling and reacting from looking at their face, and your instincts for what their face is telling you will be good enough in most contexts, no matter what their cultural heritage is.

Clearly this does not mean that *all* facial expressions are the same across the whole world! There certainly are culture-specific facial expressions, but the *most basic* human emotions tend to show up in usefully recognisable ways. Nobody, no matter where they come from, will spontaneously smile when they are uncertain, nor cry when they are amused.

Body language: separating the truth from the nonsense...

There has been a lot written in popular literature about 'body language' and unfortunately a great deal of it is very exaggerated or, let's be frank, just plain nonsense. Associating highly specific emotional and intellectual decisions and motivations to very specific body positions or movements is just not possible (but unfortunately, it does sell books).

- You may have heard that people look up and to the left if accessing memories (i.e. telling the truth), while they look up and to the right if accessing imagination (i.e. lying). This is simply not true at all. All you can tell about people from these kind of eye movements is that they are thinking harder than usual ('increased cognitive load'), but it is just not possible to work out how *truthful* they are being.
- There is a common misconception that people who avoid eye contact are liars or untrustworthy, but in fact in many cultures direct eye contact is considered aggressive and disrespectful, and worse, now that this 'factoid' is known, it has been shown that deliberate liars often exhibit *greater* eye-contact because they *know* that this is meant to be perceived as 'more trustworthy'.
- It is said that people's blink rate increases if they are lying, but in fact our blink rate can increase for all kinds of reasons (stress, fatigue, high air movement, rapid changes in light levels...)

Although many such small gestures can vary a lot across cultures (and indeed between individuals in 'the same' culture), *subconscious responses to emotion* do not. The very basic facial expressions mentioned in the previous section are actually part of these non-conscious responses.

For example,

- all of us experience the 'fight or flight' response to threat or anxiety, and it does the same things to us: increased heartbeat, trembling extremities, dry mouth, racing mind
- everybody's pupils dilate when we see something we like, and hence we all tend to respond more positively to people with dilated pupils than to people whose pupils are small

Some other broad generalisations also work quite well:



Practitioner Toolkit

- relaxed and confident people don't tend to protect the front of their body, while nervous, threatened or uncertain people do (for example by folding arms, holding things in front of them, turning away or hunching forwards).
- Attentive and interested people mostly keep their face (although not necessarily their eyes) pointed towards the person they are interested in, while disinterested bored or agitated people tend not to.

Great! How do I learn about these signs and signals?

You are already an expert!

You don't *need* to read a book to understand body language! Indeed, reading many of the books out there will only muddy the waters and make things less clear, or else give you broken tools that really won't help you at all.

We respond to many body and facial signals instinctively, and our 'gut feelings' are often more accurate than we realise. They are certainly *accurate enough* to trust as a starting point.

Wait, did you just say "a starting point"?

Yes! Because, just as treating the person in front of you as a *stereotype* is not being a good communicator, neither is *making silent assumptions* based on your (instinctive) observation of their behaviour...

In your professional capacity, you need to establish rapport with your client, part of which is *communicating* with them clearly. Making silent assumptions – or worse, *acting on them* – is not communicating, it is just another kind of stereotyping. I have just encouraged you to trust your instincts regarding body language and facial expressions, but you will not always be right. Rather than reacting to something you *assume* to be the case, a much better communicative strategy is to *make it overt*: talk about it openly. Ask!

The bottom line

We are all CALD! Our life experiences, beliefs, desires and expectations are all different. Every time you communicate with another person you are engaging in *cross-cultural communication* to some degree. And the only solutions to that "problem" (if it even *is* a problem... I don't really think it is!) are: **pay attention** to the person in front of you; genuinely **listen** to what they tell you and to **be sensitive** to their apparent state of mind; **check your understandings** to make sure that you are getting what it is they are trying to tell you and **don't assume** anything about them that you cannot determine by direct observation or by asking.

There will be many other resources in the Communication section that will guide you on the best questions to ask, and things to avoid.