

## **Introduction:**

The ability to adapt in new or unfamiliar situations is a crucial life skill. However, in cross-cultural interactions, it can be difficult to decide when we should adapt to a different culture's expectations, or when it might be more appropriate to refrain from enacting unfamiliar customs and norms. Therefore, the goal of this activity is to guide participants through this decision-making process and allow them to understand and reflect on their ability to adapt.

## **Background and Information:**

This activity was created by Kris Acheson-Clair and Lindsey Macdonald, CILMAR, based on a chapter in Stella Ting-Toomey's *Communicating Across Cultures* (see citation below).

## **Objectives:**

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Analyze how effective, appropriate, and satisfactory adapting to other cultural expectations would be for them in a variety of situations.
2. Draw conclusions about the difficulties of negotiating adaptive behaviors across cultures.

## **Time:**

30 minutes.

## **Group Size:**

Small Group.

## **Materials:**

Participant Instructions (in [Downloads](#)).

## **Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:**

- Minimization
- Acceptance

## **AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:**

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication:

- To articulate a complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., demonstrates understanding of the degree to which people use physical contact while communicating in different cultures or use direct/indirect and explicit/implicit meanings).
- To skillfully negotiate a shared understanding based on these differences.

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks:

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

## **Activity Instructions:**

*Note:* This activity is based on Stella Ting-Toomey's (1999) model of Transcultural Communication Competence. Therefore, before leading this activity, facilitators should become familiar with the model (see citation below).

1. The facilitator should begin by explaining the premise of the activity: all participants should imagine that they are visiting somewhere with cultural norms that may be different from their own. They will then be presented with ten cultural behaviors or situations (handout on next page) that they may encounter. For each of these behaviors or situations, the participants must choose whether they would adapt or not adapt to the cultural expectations where they are visiting.
2. To make their decisions, participants should first ask themselves the following questions:
  - Do I have the skills and knowledge I would need to adapt, i.e., can I adapt **effectively**?
  - Do others want or expect me to adapt, i.e., is it **appropriate** to adapt in this situation?
  - Would adapting violate or conflict with my deep-seated morality or ethics, i.e., would adapting be **satisfactory**?
3. After participants have made their decisions, the facilitator should debrief with their own questions or the questions provided on the following page.
4. Alternate instructions: In lieu of a handout, these ten behaviors can be printed on cards and distributed so that each individual receives a card to respond to.

*Debriefing Questions:*

1. In what situations did you choose to adapt (or not) and what criteria did you use to make that decision?
2. Were there any situations where it was particularly easy or difficult to make a choice to adapt or not? If so, why?
3. Were there any instances where you felt the choice to adapt would be dependent on the specific scenario? If so, can you provide the group with an example (i.e., who was involved? where did this scenario take place? when did this scenario happen?, etc.)?
4. What did you learn about adapting to different cultures?

*For each situation, ask yourself:*

- Do I have the skills and knowledge I would need to adapt, i.e., can I adapt **effectively**?
- Do others want or expect me to adapt, i.e., is it **appropriate** to adapt in this situation?
- Would adapting violate or conflict with my deep-seated morality or ethics, i.e., would adapting be **satisfactory**?

## *Ten Behaviors or Situations:*

1. How you greet someone.
  - Examples: Kissing, hugging, shaking hands, bowing, etc.
2. How you dress.
  - Examples: Dressing more modestly or less modestly, dressing according to gender norms, wearing traditional garments, etc.
3. How you style your hair.
  - Examples: Pulling your hair back, wearing your hair down in its natural state, covering your hair, straightening, or curling your hair, etc.
4. Participating in a religious ceremony (for a religion you do not practice).
  - Examples: Praying, taking communion, going on a pilgrimage, meditating, etc.
5. How you interact with someone of a different gender identity.
  - Examples: Making/not making eye contact, taking on either a subservient or dominant role, using an intermediary or making sure you have a chaperone, etc.
6. How you interact with authority figures.
  - Examples: Challenging or not challenging an authority figure, calling them a formal title, or referring to them in more casual terms, etc.
7. The level of affection you show your friend or romantic partner in public.
  - Examples: Kissing or not kissing, holding hands, or not holding hands, etc.
8. Undergoing body modification.
  - Examples: Piercings, tattoos, cosmetic surgery, etc.
9. Accepting food or drink offered to you when it goes against your dietary restrictions or preferences.
  - Examples: Accepting meat when you're a vegetarian, accepting food or drink that is normally off limits due to religious beliefs (pork, shellfish, etc.), accepting alcohol when you normally refrain from drinking, etc.
10. How you interact with individuals in the service industry (restaurant servers, taxi drivers, etc.)
  - Tipping or not tipping, calling them by their name or the title of their position, snapping your fingers or yelling to get their attention, etc.