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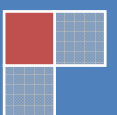
Self Study: Cultural Awareness and Religion

Sample



In association with
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Sample

Self Study: Cultural Awareness and Religion

What is Cultural Awareness?

Our understanding of other people and our approach to human relationships are coloured by our own cultural background, often to a much greater extent than we realise. Our values, attitudes, beliefs and even our body language are in part formed by the cultural environment in which we have grown up and live. We can easily misinterpret the behaviour of other people by evaluating it within our own cultural terms of reference. The term 'cultural awareness' refers to the way in which we can develop an appreciation of these cultural effects on our own and other people's behaviour and sometimes make adjustments to our own behaviour in order to minimise misunderstandings. It does not require an in-depth knowledge of world religions or cultures. Instead it requires an open mind and a willingness to interpret behaviour that may be out of our own cultural norm as acceptable or understandable.

To illustrate the need for cultural awareness, consider the following examples:

- A teacher who reprimands a pupil is subconsciously irritated by his refusal to look her in the face while she speaks. She reads his lack of eye contact as insolence or a guilty conscience. However, in the boy's Caribbean culture looking away from an authority figure is a sign of respect and deference. The teacher becomes increasingly annoyed by this perceived insolence. The pupil is confused and upset by the teacher's growing antagonism towards him.
- The team leader of a successful sales team regularly takes his team to the pub after their monthly sales meeting, where they swap company news and get to know each other more informally. A newly recruited Muslim team member does not wish to enter a pub environment and makes excuses not to come each month. She misses out on the opportunity to build contacts with her team mates and to get to know them personally. She becomes regarded as anti-social by her team mates who feel she is avoiding them.

In both of these examples a lack of cultural awareness can potentially cause negative consequences for the individuals involved. A limited level of cultural awareness on the part of the teacher and team leader could prevent the situations becoming aggravated by small changes in their behaviour. The teacher could accept the boy's lack of eye contact as the respectful gesture it is intended to be or explain calmly to the pupil that she would like him to make eye contact while she speaks. The team leader may discuss the meetings with the Muslim team member and suggest an alternative venue for their team get-together.

Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act encompasses cultural awareness and religion. It is designed to strengthen the legislation that is already in place by:

- **making the workplace more diverse**

The Equality Act helps us tackle the employment gap for people from minority ethnic communities by allowing employers to choose to take positive action to appoint a person from an under-represented or disadvantaged group in order to make their workforce better reflect the community they serve. This is a voluntary measure and will only be allowed if two candidates under consideration are as qualified as each other in terms of competence, aptitude, experience and overall performance during any interview or assessment.

- **creating a power to ban caste discrimination**

The Act creates a power for the government to ban discrimination and harassment because of caste, if the available evidence (including research commissioned by the Government Equalities Office (GEO) shows this is appropriate.

- **increasing the diversity of Parliament**

Our democratic institutions should reflect the people they serve, so the Act allows political parties to do more to increase the diversity of their candidates, for example by reserving a specific number of places on every shortlist for minority ethnic candidates.

- **putting a new duty on public bodies**

The Equality Act puts a duty on public bodies to consider the needs of people with different religious and philosophical beliefs when designing and delivering services. This could include considering the need to offer halal and kosher meals as part of a meals on wheels service.

- **protecting people from discrimination**

The Act carries forward existing laws protecting everyone from discrimination because of religion or philosophical belief, or lack of religion or belief. These protections are not just for minority groups – they extend to Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and members of other religions, as well as humanists and atheists.

Customs and manners

It is impossible to be aware of the cultural rules of every tradition but it can be helpful, when dealing with somebody of a different culture from your own, to bear in mind that any perceived insults or irritations may just be the unintentional result of different cultural rules or expectations.

The following are examples of customs or 'manners' that may differ between cultures:

- **Eye contact**

Within UK culture we tend to expect to make eye contact during conversation. In some cultures, such as in certain Caribbean countries, it is not polite to make direct eye contact particularly with someone of superior status to you. Around the world direct eye contact may be interpreted as honesty, aggression or sexual flirtation.

- **Kissing**

In some cultures kissing on the cheeks is the standard greeting both between women and men and when a man greets another man. In other cultures, kissing is considered unacceptable between unrelated members of the opposite sex. Public displays of affection such as kissing or cuddling are deeply offensive in certain cultures, for example in Thailand, even between married couples.

- **Conversation**

The way we talk to other people is governed by cultural rules that we are usually not aware of. These rules differ widely from culture to culture and can be the cause of misunderstanding and discomfort in cross-cultural conversations.

In Finland it is bad manners to interrupt someone, but long silences between speakers are acceptable and are not felt to be the uncomfortable pauses that British speakers might be conscious of. In other places it is quite normal for two speakers both to talk at once.

In Japan and some other oriental cultures it is rude either to disagree with, or to question, a person in a more senior position, so trainees may not question a trainer even if they have not understood what they have been told. The word 'no' is often avoided altogether.

Acceptable topics of conversation can differ too and subjects of conversation that are taboo in some cultures are quite acceptable in others. For example, in parts of Africa asking a pregnant woman when her baby is due would be thought far too personal and in some Arabic cultures it would not be acceptable to ask a man about his wife or daughters.

- **Language**

In English, emphasis and intonation can be used to express a question, disbelief, anger or many other feelings. For example, you may say the same sentence, 'He didn't press the red button' and by varying your emphasis or intonation the sentence can be given a wide variety of meanings. Other languages often use different conventions to express these meanings such as repetition, volume or by speeding up or slowing down. Speakers of these languages may not understand the meaning implied by an English speaker.

- **Emotions**

In some Mediterranean countries, raising the voice and large hand gestures show strength of feeling or emphasis but don't necessarily signify the anger or aggression that they might in the UK. In many oriental cultures such as in Vietnam, emotion is less openly expressed and the use of a raised voice or hand gestures may be seen as an undignified loss of control. The meaning of facial expressions can vary. In some cultures a smile can mask anger or grief.

- **Physical contact and personal space**

The amount of 'personal space' left between speakers of different cultures varies, potentially causing a level of subconscious discomfort in cross-cultural exchanges. For example, while the speaker from a closer contact culture steps into the space between speakers to bridge an uncomfortable distance, a British speaker may back away as they feel their personal space is encroached upon.

Britain is seen as a relatively 'low-contact' culture and British friends tend to make less physical contact than in many other cultures. Hand holding between men, for example in the Middle East, is more acceptable and holds no sexual connotations. The social rules about what is acceptable physical contact between men and women also differ, and putting an arm round an upset colleague's shoulder may be inappropriate in some Islamic countries.

- **Gestures**

Across the world there is an enormous range of non-verbal gestures with a great variety of meanings and it is impossible to be aware of all of these. It is important for everyone to be aware that a gesture, which in their own culture may have one meaning, could be misinterpreted by others. A simple example is winking, which could be meant as a friendly gesture but understood as a sexual innuendo. Blowing the nose or pointing is highly offensive in several places.

- **Punctuality**

Expectations surrounding punctuality can vary widely between different cultures. In Northern European cultures, an agreed time for a meeting is expected to be adhered to. In other places, for example in El Salvador, time is used as a flexible guideline and lateness is not considered bad manners.

- **Queuing**

Many cultures do not share the British custom of queuing. In shops, ticket queues or at bus stops for example it is often the case that people wait their turn but not necessarily in an orderly line.

- **Table manners**

There is an enormous variety around the world in the customs relating to eating, and when sharing a meal with members of another culture it may be advisable to find out in advance what behaviour is expected. Manners which in Britain are considered important, such as not eating with your mouth open, may have no importance in some other cultures whereas other rules are very significant, such as the Islamic practice of using the right hand only for eating because the left hand is unclean. In many cultures a tradition of hospitality means that guests are offered refreshment which it is not polite to refuse.

- **Posture**

The expression of aggression, withdrawal or neutrality through body posture varies from culture to culture.

- **Politeness**

The standard expression for greetings, expressions of gratitude or deference vary widely from place to place. Politeness is often shown through body language, intonation or the use of particular grammatical forms. As these signals of politeness vary from one culture to another they may not be understood or be omitted in cross-cultural communication, causing unintended offence.

Terms to use when talking about ethnic origin

The accepted terms used to refer to people's ethnic origins or cultures can change over time and there is a wide range of opinions on what are acceptable or unacceptable terms. If there is a genuine need to discuss a person's ethnic origin, in order not to cause offence it can often be wisest to ask them directly about the terminology they prefer. The following are general guidelines.

Asian

The term '*Asian*' is often used to refer to people from India, Pakistan or Bangladesh, although in its literal sense it refers to anyone from the continent of Asia. Alternatively, it can be appropriate to refer to a person's national origin such as '*Indian*' or '*Pakistani*' providing their exact country of origin is known. Increasingly people are referring to themselves by their religion instead of ethnic origin, for example, '*I'm a British Hindu.*'

Black

The term '*black*' is now generally accepted to refer to people of African or African-Caribbean origin and it is also becoming increasingly common to use the term '*Black British*'. The terms '*African*' and '*African-Caribbean*' are considered appropriate terms to refer to someone's ethnic origin but the term '*West Indian*' is generally falling from acceptable use because of its historical connotations. '*Coloured*' is not an acceptable term.

British

This refers to citizenship. The majority of people living in Britain have British citizenship regardless of their ethnicity or country of origin.

Dual heritage / Mixed race

The term '*half caste*' is unacceptable and can be found offensive. The term '*mixed race*' is commonly used and is generally accepted but an increasing number of people prefer the alternatives '*dual heritage*' or '*dual parentage*', so avoiding any negative connotations.

English

'*English*' is both the name of the language spoken in Britain and the term used to refer to people who come from England. It should not be used as a general term when meaning '*British*' as this disregards the Welsh, Scottish and Irish.

Ethnic minority

This term is generally accepted. The term '*minority ethnic community*' is also used to recognise the fact that everyone has an ethnicity whether a minority or majority one.

Names

Be aware, particularly when designing forms, that there is a wide range of different systems of naming, most of which are not equivalent to the British system of a first name and surname. Do not use the term '*Christian name*' as this excludes other religions. The terms '*first name*' or '*given name*' followed by '*family name*' are more explicit.

It is important to understand that some cultures use a family name first, followed by a given name. Some cultures use a personal name only, while others use a personal, family and religious name. Many cultures do not follow the custom of the woman taking her husband's name in marriage or for their children. To avoid confusion it is advisable to ask every individual by what name they would like to be known personally.

Practical considerations for employers

It is important to remember that levels of practice and orthodoxy will vary considerably in many religions. Staff practising the same religion may belong to different communities with specific customs and practices. Staff may also be atheists, humanists or hold other beliefs. Their belief systems are as important to them as those who hold religious beliefs and should be respected accordingly.

Religious festivals and holy days

Managers should consider requests for flexible work schedules and make reasonable adjustments to working arrangements to allow staff to participate in religious festivals and observe holy days. Adjustments could include approving annual leave, time off in lieu, unpaid leave, and/or flexible working arrangements.

Holy days during the working week

Managers could be flexible with start and finishing times which would, for instance, assist devout Jews who may wish to leave work early on Fridays for Sabbath (as travelling by car or public transport, cooking, phoning or writing are forbidden after sunset). They could offer extended lunch breaks on Fridays for Muslims with the opportunity to make up the time during the course of the week, which would enable Muslim staff to attend the collective ritual noon Friday prayers.

Devout Christians should not be asked to work on Sundays when avoidable. When an employee is fasting, requests for a reduced lunch break could be considered.

Compassionate leave

Managers should consider requests relating to births, coming of age, marriage and death. Religious obligations can vary according to religion, culture and position in the family.

Requests for a prayer room

Legally, employers are not required to provide a prayer room/quiet room. Refusing a request where such a place is available and would not have an adverse impact may mean that an employer is acting in a way that is discriminatory.

Interviews

There should not be any questions about religious belief and/or if these will cause conflict with working practices or schedules.

Dress

Managers should make every effort to accommodate the wearing of religious dress safely.

Specific dietary requirements

Where a religion or belief has specific dietary requirements, managers should make specific arrangements to accommodate them, for instance the storage or cooking of food separately from other foods if staff bring food into the workplace.

Work functions and social events

Managers should bear in mind any potential conflicts between a member of staff's religion and their ability to take part in such events.

Names

Ask for the individual's first name or family name rather than Christian name.

A brief guide to the main religions in the UK

Every religion encompasses a wide range of different beliefs and customs and it is therefore impossible to make generalisations about the beliefs or practices of any one person on the basis of their religion.

JUDAISM

Beliefs

Jews believe in one everlasting God. They believe that God has revealed his will in the Torah (*the first five books of the Old Testament*) and the Talmud (*holy writings on Jewish life*). Unlike Christians they do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but that there will be a future Messiah. There are several different Jewish groups in Britain. Orthodox Jews generally interpret the Torah most strictly. Other Jewish groups such as Reform, Conservative and Liberal Jews interpret elements of the Torah in the light of modern life.

Customs and Practices

Many Jewish people adopt some of the customs and dress of the country where they live. Some orthodox Jews keep their heads covered at all times, men with a kippah, women with a wig or hat and orthodox women do not usually wear sleeveless clothes or trousers. Dietary rules are complex. Certain foods such as pork are forbidden, as is the cooking and eating of dairy and meat products together. The extent to which these dietary laws are followed varies from individual to individual. The Jewish holy day is the Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday and this is seen as a day of rest to be spent with the family. Jewish people who observe these rules strictly will not work during this time, including operating machinery or driving. Orthodox Jewish women who observe the rules strictly do not touch adult men and therefore may be uncomfortable if expected to shake hands or make other physical contact.

ISLAM

Beliefs

Muslims believe that there is one God, Allah, and that the Prophet Mohammed is his messenger. Mohammed was the last and most perfect of the prophets, who also include Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. To show lack of respect to the prophets, Mohammed or God is deeply insulting to Muslims. The holy book, the Qu'ran, is the word of God spoken to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel and it provides a guide to every aspect of how to live life. There are several different sects of Islam, the main two being Sunni and Shi'ite.

Muslims believe that they have five basic duties, the five pillars of Islam. These are the declaration of faith '*There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet*', giving a percentage of their income to charity, pilgrimage to Mecca, prayer five times a day and fasting from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan.

Customs and Practices

Muslims pray five times a day. They can do this anywhere, although it may be appropriate to consider setting a small room aside for prayer at certain times in the day if a Muslim worker wishes to pray. Friday midday prayers should be in a mosque where possible. Muslims usually follow the dietary laws set by the Qu'ran, which forbid the eating of pork and consumption of alcohol and other intoxicating drugs. Muslims are required to be modest in dress and this can be interpreted in a range of ways. Many Muslims wear western dress or the dress of the country where they live. Devout Muslim women often cover their heads with a headscarf. Depending on their cultural background and their interpretation of Islamic rules some Muslim women are uncomfortable about being alone in male company or touching unrelated men, for example when shaking hands.

The timing of Muslim festivals is based on sighting of the moon and so a Muslim employee may not be able to give an exact time for the start of any leave they wish to take to celebrate a festival.

SIKHISM

Beliefs

Sikhism originated in the Punjab area of India and Sikhs are followers of the teachings of the Gurus. The most important Gurus are the first Guru, Guru Nanak, the last human Guru, Guru Gobind Singh and the holy writings of the Sikhs which are seen as another Guru in themselves, the Guru Granth Sahib. The Gurus teach that there is one omnipotent God and that all humans are equal. Sikhs believe in living by honest work, giving to charity and in service to God and to others.

Customs and Practices

Sikhs who are full members of their faith wear five items, known as the five Ks, as symbols of their faith. These are:

- Kesh – uncut hair
The Gurus teach that, as God's gift, hair should be allowed to grow naturally. Not trimming the hair is a symbol of living a simple, spiritual life. Sikh men often wear a turban over their hair and this has become an important symbol of their faith. Most Sikh men wear a beard.
- Kangha – a wooden comb to keep the hair tidy
The Kangha is a symbol of cleanliness, another requirement of the Sikh faith.
- Kirpan – a small sword or knife
This represents the Sikh duty to fight against evil.
- Kachera – shorts
Originally a practical part of the military uniform, now these are a symbol of sexual restraint.
- Kara – a steel bracelet
This is both a physical reminder of the Guru and a symbol of the eternity of God.

Sikhs are often vegetarian and do not eat beef or halal meat. Sikh men and women are taught to dress modestly.

HINDUISM

Beliefs

Hindus believe in one Supreme Spirit or God, but this God has many different aspects in the form of deities which are worshipped separately. The deities include Shiva, the God of Destruction, Vishnu the sustainer, Lakshmi the Goddess of prosperity and purity and Ganesh the elephant-headed God of knowledge. In Hindu homes there is often a shrine to one of the deities where prayers and offerings are made.

Hindu beliefs vary from individual to individual but central beliefs of the faith are that it is wrong to hurt any living thing and that there is a cycle of death and rebirth. Our deeds in one life influence the form of our future lives. The concept of caste, where each family belongs to an unchangeable level of society is also part of the Hindu culture, although caste rules are becoming more relaxed nowadays, especially in Britain.

Customs and Practices

Hindus are often vegetarian and do not eat beef. For some Hindus the use of alcohol and tobacco is not acceptable. Some Hindu women may prefer not to be alone with unrelated males. The traditional Hindu greeting is the 'namaste' gesture, where hands are put together with a nod of the head, rather than a handshake.

CHRISTIANITY

Beliefs

Christians believe in one omnipotent God, who also takes the form of Jesus his son on Earth and the Holy Spirit. Jesus was crucified and so redeemed mankind from his sin, before rising from the dead. The Christian holy book, the Bible, consists of the Old and New Testaments which provide a guide to life. A central tenet of Christian teaching is the concept of loving others as yourself.

Customs and Practices

Christianity is the world's largest religion and the dominant religion in the UK. Within Christianity there is a wide range of different branches, traditions and practices. In the 2001 census 72% of British citizens identified themselves as Christian, although there are wide variations in the extent to which people observe Christian traditions such as Sunday church going, bible reading and prayer. The majority of Christians do not observe any set dietary rules or dress code.

BUDDHISM

Beliefs

Buddhists do not believe in any omnipotent God or other deities. Instead they follow the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, meaning enlightened one, who lived 2,500 years ago in India. He taught that suffering is part of life and that to end suffering we need to end our greed and selfishness. This can be done by living a life of right thought, action and meditation. The aim of a Buddhist is to reach Nirvana, the perfect state of enlightenment and bliss, when all desire and selfishness have been banished.

Customs and Practices

Buddhists believe that no living thing should be intentionally killed and so are vegetarian. Buddhist homes may often have a statue of Buddha where offerings are made and meditation takes place.

Cultural Diversity in England & Wales

Table to show the proportion of the population of England and Wales belonging to different ethnic groups

Ethnic group	Thousands	Percent
Indian	1,503	1.8%
Pakistani	747	1.3%
Bangladeshi	283	0.5%
Black Caribbean	566	1.0%
Black African	485	0.8%
Chinese	247	0.4%
Mixed	677	1.2%
Other ethnic minorities	576	0.9%
White	54,154	92.1%
Ethnic minority*	4,635	7.9%
All population	58,789	100%

* Ethnic minority = all non-white groups

Source: 2001 Census

On 11 October 2009 a census rehearsal took place in Lancaster, the London Borough of Newham, and Ynys Môn – the Isle of Anglesey in North Wales. The rehearsal was in preparation for the full 2011 census.

The proposed census form contained a number of additional categories of ethnic groups such as "Gypsy/Irish Traveller and Arab. Sample 2009 Census rehearsal questionnaires can be downloaded for viewing from the Office for National Statistics website at www.statistics.gov.uk.

Table to show the proportion of the population of England and Wales belonging to different religions

Religion	Thousands	Percent
Christian	42,079	71.6
Muslim	1,591	2.7
Hindu	559	1.0
Sikh	336	0.6
Jewish	267	0.5
Buddhist	152	0.3
Other religion	179	0.3
No religion	9,104	15.5
Religion not stated	4,289	7.3
Total	58,789	100

Source: 2001 Census