



BACKPACK

CULTURAL DIVERSITY TRAINING



MODULE 1-SECTION 1

Fundamentals of
Intercultural Competency

BEFORE WE BEGIN

This module will cover the fundamentals of Intercultural Competency. In this section, we will dive into the definitions of culture and diversity, and how we may sometimes unconsciously generalize and stereotype various groups of individuals.

This section will highlight the different tiers and aspects of culture and our unconscious biases.

The goal for this section is to start thinking about the fundamentals of culture and begin to recognize how our learned experiences affect the ways we view other cultures.

This section will provide you with a strong foundation for the rest of the training.



WHAT IS CULTURAL DIVERSITY TRAINING?

Cultural diversity training provides you with the tools to identify and respect diversity, withhold judgement, and create common ground with others.

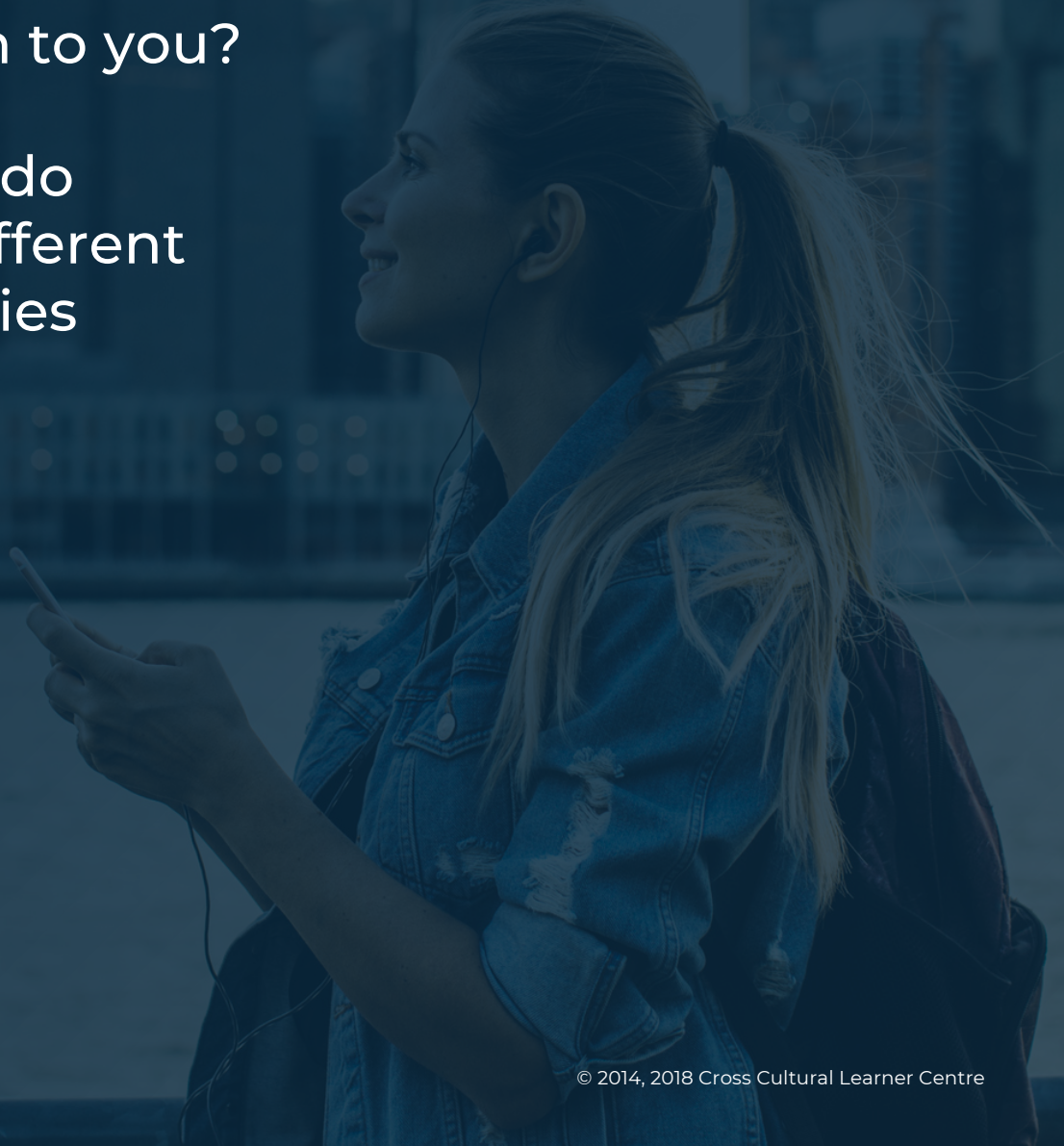
Participants are asked to critically examine their own culture in order to develop an understanding of the complexity of the social-cultural integration process.

This module addresses individuals' attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours for the purpose of developing intercultural competency.

SELF-REFLECTION

What does culture mean to you?

What beliefs and values do you have that may be different than those of the countries you will be visiting?



DEFINING CULTURE

Culture is a set of learned practices, beliefs, patterns and ideas that are transmitted from generation to generation

Culture is a “noun” and thus is often viewed as something we have, rather than something we learn. We also talk about people losing culture, as in the case of immigrants (who move to new places), or people learning a culture after spending time in another place.

Yet culture is something we learn continuously throughout our lives, as well as something we contribute to change, transform and adapt to new contexts.

DEFINING CULTURE

When thinking of culture as a learned process of behavior and thought, there is an emphasis on the interpersonal or relational aspect of how one relates to others (Mahler 2013).

Clifford Geertz, a renowned anthropologist, believed that humans look to create meaning from experiences or phenomenon to help them impose order onto the world that often feels chaotic.

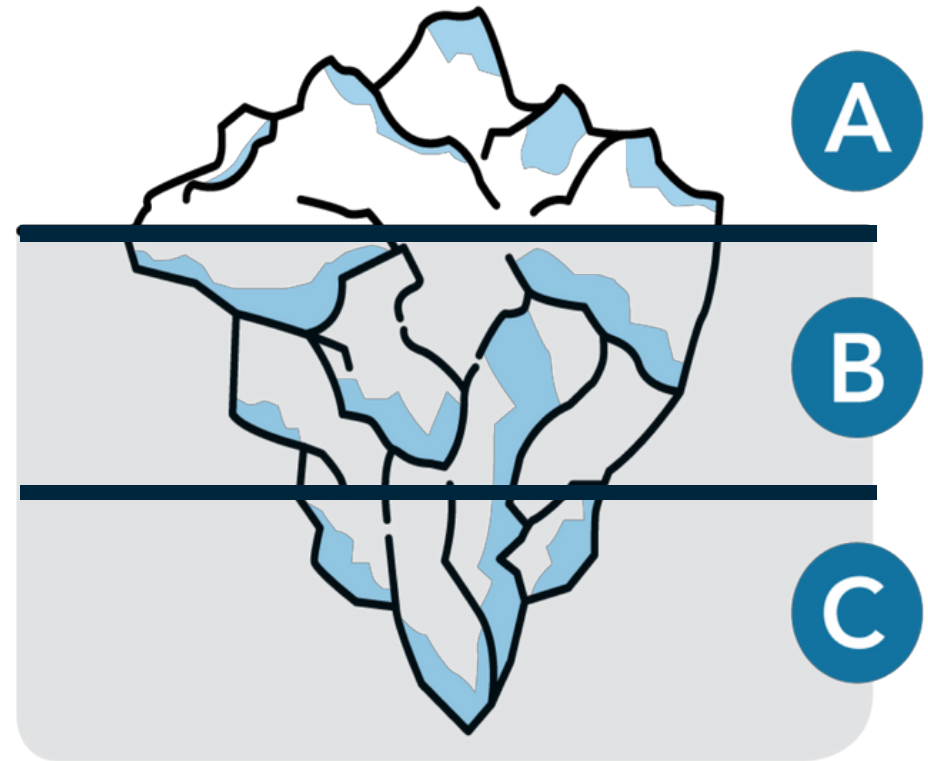
“When people share meanings of an experience, they often share the same culture” (Geertz 1973).

This ability to create and impose order on our social worlds shows how we interact with our environments (Mahler 2013).

CULTURE AS AN ICEBERG

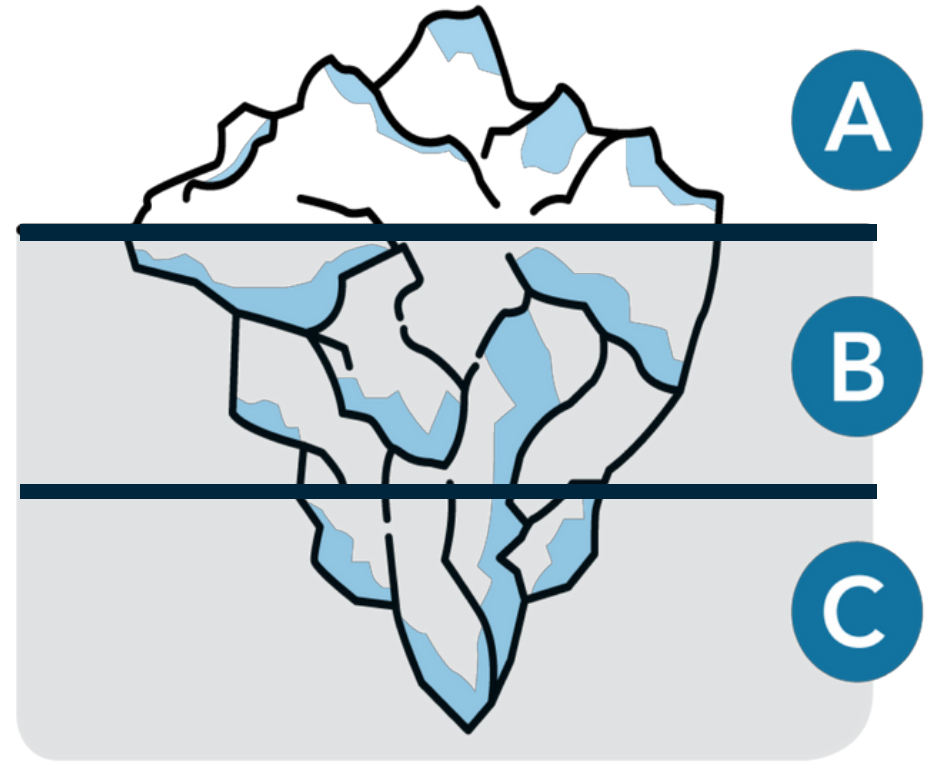
Nine-tenths of our culture resides outside of our consciousness. Generally, the more unconscious the aspects of culture, the more intense the emotional attachment to those aspects.

The iceberg metaphor helps us to see that culture has diverse aspects and levels



CULTURE AS AN ICEBERG

- A) Explicit or readily visible aspects of culture: These are above the waterline on the iceberg. Examples include aspects of our cultures such as clothing, food, dance, art, and music.
- B) Learned aspects of culture are found below the waterline of the iceberg. Examples include: politics, health, medicine, community, language, and family. These are also aspects that are easy to explain to someone who does not share our cultural background
- C) Aspects of culture that would be very difficult to learn or even be consciously aware of, and are consequently really difficult to explain without a supportive common cultural background are at the lowest level of the iceberg. Examples include: values, beliefs, assumptions, history, traditions, communication, conflict resolution, and rites of passage.



GENERALIZATIONS

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, generalization is the action or process of forming or expressing a general concept or proposition on the basis of inference from particular instances.

In neuroscience, generalization is defined as the process through which we apply learned experiences to present situations, if the conditions in the present situations are regarded as similar to the past ones (cf. Gluck et al. 2011).

The common trait to all these definitions is the idea that we generalize in order to transfer previous experiential knowledge across multiple situations.

GENERALIZATIONS

When we move from one socio-cultural environment to another, we can no longer take for granted that our knowledge, beliefs, and social practices are transferable or immediately applicable.

For instance, even if we know how to be polite in our home country and culture, we do not know if the same norms and etiquettes will be correctly interpreted and recognized by the people in a new societal context.

We know that, in many countries, a smile could be a good way to start an interaction.

But what about physical contact?

Should we shake hands or avoid any contact altogether?

And how can we determine the best forms of interaction, situation by situation, when we interact with so many diverse people on a daily basis?

GENERALIZATIONS → STEREOTYPING

An important aspect to consider is that when we generalize we basically assert something to be true either of all members of a certain class, or as a part of that class.

We ultimately build mental models of the world around us, generalizing attributes to individuals based on membership to a particular group, defined on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, abilities, and/or age, regardless of the variation within the group (cf. Aronson et al. 2001).

Examples of this process are the unfounded negative assumptions against specific minority populations, and against entire groups of people such as immigrants.

This process leads to stereotyping, and is reinforced when supported by people who are close to us, like family and good friends. This allows stereotypes to become a convenient, often exclusive filter for interpreting the surrounding world.

GENERALIZATIONS & US

So, even if generalizations and biases are the usual way in which human beings build their mental models of the world, and these processes are rooted in the ways through which we come to know and understand the world, this does not mean that we cannot challenge them!

By investigating and critically analyzing our routines and interpretational methods for viewing and understanding the world around us, we can begin to challenge, break down, and ultimately correct our habits of understanding, generalizing, and stereotyping.

UNCONSCIOUS BIASES

Unconscious biases are the consequences of our generalizations.

They are shortcuts we unconsciously and repeatedly use in our daily life to make sense of the surrounding world and to positively or negatively judge the information and situations we deal with. Consequently, we make our decisions based on these unconscious biases.

UNCONSCIOUS BIASES

Generally speaking, research tells us that we prefer being with people who are like us. This can lead to integration issues when visiting a new country habituated by individuals who are culturally different than us.

In order to try and mitigate the feelings of being isolated in a new culture, is to become culturally aware and open to new relationships with those who are different from us by being consciously aware of unconscious biases we may have.

In order to observe and understand our attitudes, we should not ask ourselves which are the “real” reasons why we make some decisions instead of others. More useful questions would be “How was this situation produced?” or “Which paths did I take, and decisions did I make that resulted in me having a coffee with one person instead of another?”

THE TAKE AWAY

We all carry unconscious biases as a result of our individual values and beliefs. They are simply the brain's way of coping with and categorizing all the information we receive every day.

Our tendency to discriminate against groups or types of people may not be intentional, but the consequences of this tendency are real and can negatively affect people around us.

Taking part in academic opportunities abroad is a core way in which we immerse ourselves in new cultures. The more we expose ourselves to alternative and challenging ideas, images and words, the more we can deconstruct and understand our biases and stereotypes, and the less discriminatory we will be.

Indeed, by recognizing our own views and attempting to understand where they stem from and how they influence our interactions with others, we can control our stereotyping and work to eliminate it.

