

# COMPARISON OF CULTURES

## Time Oriented

(Closure Culture—U.S. Culture)

- Time is a resource, used to accomplish goals.
- It is important to have control of time.
- The focus is on quantity of time.



**Potential Culture Clash**—New Neighbor volunteer Sheila has a very tight schedule. She is trying to squeeze in a meeting with her refugee partner, Azra, between work and getting to her daughter's softball game. She has exactly two hours available. Sheila is therefore very frustrated when she arrives at Azra's apartment and Azra is not home. After waiting 20 minutes and worrying about everything else she needs to do that evening, Sheila is ready to leave. Just then, Azra walks up. Azra had been visiting with her neighbor. She was expecting Sheila that evening, but she wasn't worried about the exact hour. She knew it was some time after dinner. Unlike Sheila, Azra has no fixed agenda for their visit. She is simply expecting a relaxed, unhurried conversation.

## Event Oriented

(Non-Closure Culture—Culture of Many Refugees)

- Time is used to establish a warm, harmonious atmosphere.
- It is important to have close human interaction.
- The focus is on quality of time.



## Competition

(Closure Culture—U.S. Culture)

- Focus is on accomplishing goals.
- Relationships are something that can help accomplish goals.
- Success is an objective standard that people strive to achieve.



**Potential Culture Clash**—New Neighbor volunteer Robert is very excited about the opportunity to meet with his refugee partner, Hassan. Hassan knows very little English, and Robert feels he can really be of help to Hassan if he can teach him to speak better English. At the end of their first three months together, however, Hassan's English skills are still at the same basic level. Robert wonders whether he should continue in the New Neighbor Program. He does not feel his time with Hassan was very productive or successful because he did not accomplish his goal of helping Hassan learn English. Hassan, however, is very pleased with the time he and Robert had together. Hassan thinks Robert is a very nice man and is glad he and Robert could spend time together. Hassan is looking forward to continuing to meet with Robert.

## Cooperation

(Non-Closure Culture—Culture of Many Refugees)

- Focus is on relationships and interactions with others.
- Relationships are an end in themselves.
- Success is a subjective standard and is therefore not as important.



## Comparison of U.S. and Other Cultures

The most important skill in managing cross-cultural relationships is learning to recognize what your own cultural values are and how they are different from other cultural values. Until we are confronted with cultural differences, we are often not even consciously aware of our own culture. One of the greatest challenges, and joys, of spending time with your refugee partner is the opportunity to step outside your culture and see things from a new perspective.

The chart on the next page examines differences between closure cultures, such as that of the U.S., and non-closure cultures as well as potential misunderstandings that can occur because of those differences. Keep in mind several important things as you review the chart:



The chart on the next page describes two end-points on a continuum. The values or behaviors of actual people may be at any point along this continuum.\*



The chart describes the general cultural values of a group of people. Specific individuals living in that group may or may not accept these general cultural values. For example, minority communities in the United States often have their own cultural characteristics.



Cultural values can change. Because culture is something that is learned—not something we are born with—we can learn to do things in new ways. In fact, one of the benefits of relating to people of other cultures is that we are exposed to new ways of thinking and behaving. Instead of reacting automatically from the cultural perspective we were raised with, we can choose how to react.

*"The atmosphere at a sorority party looks very intimate, but if the same people met on the street, they might just ignore one another. Americans look warm, but when a relationship starts to become personal, they try to avoid it."*

Visitor from Indonesia\*

### Closure Culture (U.S. Culture)

As the name implies, a "closure" culture is a culture in which people are most comfortable when things are finished or settled. People in a closure culture are quick to draw conclusions about people, issues, or ideas. They do not like ambiguity. The most important value in a closure culture is "goals"—setting goals, tasks or objectives and working to achieve them.

### Non-closure Culture (Culture of Many Refugees)

A "non-closure" culture is a culture in which people are very comfortable when things are open-ended. People in a non-closure culture do not draw quick conclusions. They have a high tolerance for ambiguity. The most important value in a non-closure culture is "relationships"—establishing deep, warm, and harmonious relationships with others.

\* *ibid.*