

Cultural Norms

Concepts of physical space

Different cultures have different norms about the accepted distances between people.

In the UK

Intimate space	18 ins
Personal space	18ins – 4 ft
Social space	4 ft - 9 ft
Public space	over 9 ft

Space can also be used to express dominance. People with high social status are often given a bigger personal space.

There are also variations related to sex. An experiment in the US showed that women stand closer together when talking one another than men do. When stress was introduced, the person feeling stressed tried to create a bigger distance and also reduced eye contact. The physical environment can also influence what is possible, regardless of what is preferred. (For example, on a crowded London tube, where space is invaded, eye contact or smiling is minimised as a compensation.)

Individuals within the same culture will also have different views about what is acceptable.

Body language

Many aspects of body language are culturally specific. For example, in Western Societies making eye contact is seen as being respectful and a way showing that you are listening. In other societies, including parts of Africa and the Caribbean and many parts of Asia, making eye contact is only done between equals. It is common to lower your eyes when being spoken to by someone who is considered to be more powerful than you. It is a mark of respect. Many women will therefore lower their eyes before men; children and young people will lower their eyes before adults; and adults will lower their eyes before their elders.

Smiling is another area ripe for misinterpretation. In Britain we see a smiling face as a relatively neutral face. We often greet strangers with a smile to accompany our “hello.” In Russia, and other parts of the world, a smile is an expression reserved for amusement /amusing situations. It is not considered polite to smile at strangers – it could be interpreted as laughing at them.

Physical contact between the sexes

Different cultures have different norms about the amount of physical contact that is acceptable between people of the opposite sex in public places, including in the workplace. In some parts of the world religion has a strong influence on culture. For example, the requirement in Islam to treat women with dignity is interpreted differently in different countries. Some interpretations of Islam require men to protect women and this can include protecting women from the gaze of men or from physical contact apart from with husbands or sons. Feminist Islamic scholars argue for a different interpretation of Islam and would argue that the religion itself teaches equality. It is the patriarchal nature of society that leads to an oppressive interpretation of the requirements of the religion. In this respect, they have much in common with Christian, Jewish and Hindu feminists.

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The importance of greetings

There are so many ways to greet people, ranging from bowing to kissing three times on alternate cheeks. Different cultures also place different emphasis on the ritual of greetings. In Scotland, if we are being introduced to a new person we *might* shake hands, we *might* say “Hi”, we *might*, at a push, even kiss them. The context and the individual’s preference will have an impact. In other societies there may be more importance attached to greetings and the rituals may be more fixed.

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The extent to which there is an expectation that people will adapt to new environments
The saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans,” may be a dated expression and rarely heard these days but as a value it can still be seen to underpin many conversations about living in a multicultural society or working in an multi-cultural institution. Some international students will want to experience the richness of all that life in Glasgow has to offer. Others will pick and chose aspects that do not challenge their own sense of what is acceptable and not acceptable behaviour. Others might try to stick to the group they know and who are from their home country.

Individuals from the same cultural groups will have different views about what it means to adapt to life in Glasgow and staff too will have different views about the level of adaptation that is beneficial for students.

However there may be some of our norms that are part of the formal way that the University functions. For example, there may be some parts of the world where a meeting that is due to start at 10.00 a.m. is understood by everyone to start at 10.15. In other parts of the world it is understood that a 10.00 a.m. meeting means that everyone in the room by 9.50, so that the greetings and preliminaries are done and everyone is seated and ready to start by 10.00. It may help to make the expectations about time keeping explicit to all students.

Communication styles: direct and indirect

The English language is seen by many speakers of other languages as being “flowery”. The British character is seen by many other national groups as being extremely indirect. There are situations where we may think that we are being polite and /or subtle but the receiver of the message is wondering if we are ever going to get to the point and if we are, what is it?

We are not at an extreme. There are cultures where the norm is to be far more direct in communication and to say, assertively and clearly, exactly what is on your mind. This is not seen as being insensitive or rude but as being honest. There are other cultures where the norm is the exact opposite and the polite way of relating, particularly to someone who is perceived to be of higher status, is say what you think they want you to say. This is not seen as being duplicitous but as being respectful.

Individuals within the same culture will obviously vary and some may even have been on assertiveness courses to help them to think through some of these issues.

Gift giving and receiving

There are huge variations in customs and habits about the giving and receiving of gifts. Common sense has to prevail in the University. Brining a plant or a box of chocolates as a

thank you at the end of a course is different from bringing you a Rolex or a diamond bracelet at the beginning! Gifts should be declared. There are some useful websites that you can consult about the finer points of giving and receiving gifts in different cultures. (See below.)

Dress

Students from all over the world, including home students, will bring a rich variety of dress codes to the University. For some students modesty will be more important than for others – and the very concept of what is “modest” will also vary. Traditionally, modesty is important in Muslim dress and this is interpreted differently in different communities. Many Muslim women cover their head in public as do many Hindus and Sikhs. Some devout Christian and some Jewish women also keep their hair covered.

Where there are issues, as in the last scenario, about ensuring the identity of students, it shouldn't be too difficult to find a way of ensuring a private space to establish the identity of the student and to make sure that it is a female who checks the identity.

Culture and change

Culture is not static. Both internal and external pressures mean that it constantly develops and changes. Scottish culture now, is very different to the way it was forty years ago. However, in some parts of the world, the concept of what it means to be Scottish is locked in time as the immigrant community tries to hang on to some aspects of the culture that was left behind. (For example, more bagpipes are made and played in Canada than in Scotland.)

Stereotypes of cultures also shift over time – but they are still stereotypes. It is important in relation to all of the above not to fall into the trap of assuming that all behaviour is culturally determined – especially if we are working from stereotypes.

Sources of information

www.kwintessential.co.uk has a guide to country etiquette and country profiles for over 50 countries

The BBC Country Profiles has detailed information about most countries in the world. (Google BBC Country Profiles)

The CIA (the US' Central Intelligence Agency) also has a world factbook. www.cia.gov