

## **OTHER ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING ABOUT CULTURE AND HOW CULTURE SHAPES HOW WE EXPERIENCE REALITY.**

**Developed by Carol C. Mukhopadhyay  
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For relevant conceptual background material, and for links with Teaching about Race, see chapters 5 and 6, by Mukhopadhyay in ***How Real is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, And Biology***. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. C. Mukhopadhyay, R. Henze, and Y. T. Moses, 2014. Altamira Press  
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### **Overview:**

These short activities further illustrate the subtle power of culture on individual experience. Overall, the objective is for students to understand and be able to provide concrete examples of how culture shapes how we experience “reality”—what we see, hear, perceive, the labels we use, and our emotional responses. These can each be applied to understanding how we experience race in the United States.

### **Activity 1: Title and Brief Description: The Impact of Culture on our Perception of the World. Map Exercise**

Culture influences how we perceive the physical world, as illustrated in this map exercise. We can’t see—or draw—everything. So we notice selectively. How we think about (and represent) the world in a map reflects one’s cultural, microcultural and personal perspective. We tend to draw what is salient to us.

This exercise also can be used to discuss the Eurocentric focus of our culture (and educational system) and long-standing ethnocentric attitudes (and ignorance) about Africa and Asia. This activity can be linked to other material on racial attitudes, racial policies, and racism in the United States.

Objectives: Students should be able to:

1. Explain the notion that culture (along with our personal experience) affects our perception of the physical universe, using the drawing of a map as an example.
2. Be able to draw several maps that reflect perceptions of the world from the view of different cultures or micro-cultures.
3. Be able to give some reasons why different cultural or microcultural groups might produce different maps.

4. Be able to recognize areas of bias that exist in the maps used in many U.S. schools.

Appropriate For: all grade and age levels

Time Requirements: At least 15 minutes—can go longer depending on class responses and the amount of variability (ethnicity, nationality) in class.

Materials: Students need paper and pencils. It would also be useful to have at least two world maps, one showing “standard” projection with North and South America in the center; the other a “polar” projection. These can be visual representations of maps, such as from a computer projection. One could also use maps from different historical periods. These are often available on-line. Or one could use world maps published in different countries (e.g. Israel, Syria, India, Pakistan, China, Germany, U.S., Iraq, France). After using this lesson with several classes, representative student sample maps can be saved and used with subsequent classes.

Procedure:

1. Ask students to draw a map of the world. Assure them it is not a test of their map-drawing ability. But suggest they do the best job possible. Ask them to label different areas on their map. Give them 5-10 minutes for the drawing.
2. Upon completion of the map, have them reflect on the maps they produced, thinking about each of the following:
  - a. The relative placement of each continent on the paper (i.e. which was central, which peripheral).
  - b. The relative size of continents and which are labeled.
  - c. Which continents have the most and least detail (e.g. include names of countries) and what this might reflect. Compare especially the United States and Europe with other parts of the world.
  - d. Whether Africa’s land connection to the Arabian Peninsula is included or whether Africa is seen as separate isolated continent.
3. Compare their maps to a published map of the world or a globe. How do the differences between their maps and the “official” maps reflect cultural bias? Does it also reflect the significance of different regions in students’ own lives? Does it reflect their own ethnic or national backgrounds? Places they have visited?

Make the point that all cultures tend to focus on their own culture or region and often see themselves as the “center” of the world. However, this is even more the

case with powerful, dominant, world cultures. These cultures also tend to make the maps and control vast areas of the world, forcing small, less powerful cultures to see the world from their perspective.

In the United States, northwestern European (Anglo) culture has been the most dominant culture and historically has viewed itself as superior to other cultures. Other cultural regions, especially non-western cultures, have been largely ignored in public life and in the school curriculum. This is true for virtually all non-European cultures. But it is perhaps most striking in the case of African nations and cultures, even though those with African ancestry (African Americans) have been in the U.S. since the 1600s. This will be likely apparent in the maps students draw, which will tend to be European-centric with little detail about the African continent. Moreover, even though Egypt spans both Africa and the Arabian peninsula, Egypt (and Egyptian civilization) has traditionally been taught in a way that it is not “associated” with Africa. This is also probably reflected in students’ maps.

Re-emphasize the point that different cultures have different perspectives on the world and on events in the world.

4. Have students examine their own maps to see if they reflect their own family backgrounds or experiences (ethnic, racial, nationality, family ties, etc.)
5. If possible, introduce maps from other countries or historical periods and discuss how those maps reflect particular perspectives on the world derived from the experience and values of the mapmaker.
6. Try imagining what the maps might look like if this exercise was done in a similar classroom of students in such places as: India, Nigeria, Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan, Israel, Syria, South Africa, Mexico, Chile, Alaska, the Philippines, Japan. What would be East and West from this perspective?
7. Examine the maps available in your school, textbooks, or classrooms. What perspective is presented here? What might be the impact of exposure to only this perspective? How might this affect one’s attitudes about other countries? What would be the value of introducing maps with other perspectives? How might this ultimately help students as future adults to understand world affairs?

Assessment Activities:

- Students will construct a hypothetical map of the world as seen from the perspective of someone from a different ethnic group in the United States (e.g. African-American, Filipino-American, Irish-American, Mexican-American, Indo-American, Jamaican-American, Italian-American, Native American, etc.).

- Students can extend the map-drawing activity to physical realities other than the globe (e.g. their school campus) to illustrate how our microcultural backgrounds and what is personally “salient” affect how we perceive our environment.
- This exercise can also be used to stimulate discussion of social groupings on campus. Students might be asked, for example, to draw a map of the school cafeteria or school playground at lunch time. *[part 4]*

**Activity 2: Brief Activities on our Perception of Sound**

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- Play a tape of a non-English speaker or use a non-English speaker in your class or in the school to see if students can improve their ability to hear new sound distinctions which are not relevant in English.

e.g. Use a tape of a Spanish speaker and listen for differences in pronunciation of such consonants as “d”, “t”. etc.

e.g. Listen to a tape IN ENGLISH of a non-native English speaker (e.g. an adult, a school child). Try to figure out where “the accent” comes from.

- Experiment: Draw a line and have students place these sounds along the line in relationship to how similar they are.

	Objective Differences	p(ae)t	Pat	Phat	Fat
Bengali			Pat	Phat	Fat
English			Pat	Phat	Fat

Native English speakers will tend to hear Pat and Phat as very similar, reflecting the irrelevance of aspiration in English. In contrast, Fat, will appear to be quite different. To Bengalis, who recognize aspiration, Pat and Phat will be distinct. However, because they do not differentiate aspirated p’s from f’s, Phat and Fat will seem quite similar. In fact, the objective difference between the pairs of sounds is the same. This experiment could be done at the beginning and the end of this discussion.

**Activities 3-5: How Culture Shapes our Emotional Reactions.**

There are many experimental activities that can be used to illustrate the affective dimensions of culture. They range from short, simple activities to more elaborate and time-consuming projects. In addition to the brief activities listed below, a more elaborate lesson plan is available for the simulation game, BAFA BAFA (Mukhopadhyay 1985) along with a videotaped demonstration. A shorter simulation, Helotia, also deals with culture contact situations. [Mukhopadhyay 1985].

The following simple activities take little time, preparation or materials.

**Objectives:** Students should be able to describe the type of emotions one may experience when confronted with a new culture or microculture.

**Activity 3: The Emotional Reality of Cultural Rules on Appropriate Spacing.**  
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This activity can be done in class in approximately five minutes. It simply involves having students engage in a short conversation (preferably standing) with a neighbor. After students have done this and, unconsciously, assumed the culturally appropriate distance for such a conversation, stop the activity and have them move a few inches closer and then continue the conversation. Notice the ways in which they try to re-establish the “comfortable” culturally appropriate spacing. Have students then discuss their reactions. Relate their discomfort to the fact that cultures differ (within limits) in what they consider appropriate spacing. Ask how they might react to a student or a student’s parent who assumed a culturally inappropriate distance in a casual conversation. How might “too close” proximity be interpreted? How might they react to a parent who came “too close”? To a parent or student whose own culture had more distant spacing rules?

You can also have students stand at a distance farther than what would normally feel comfortable. This exercise works particularly well in multicultural and multi-gender settings since what is “comfortable” will vary by ethnicity and gender.

**Activity 4: The Emotional Reality of Cultural Rules on Touching.**

Once again, this activity can be done in a few minutes. Have students select a conversational partner (preferably of the same sex) and begin talking. Stop the activity and ask students to hold hands with, or touch on the arm, shoulder, back, etc., their conversational partner, maintaining the contact with their partner. Once again, discuss their emotional reactions, noting the cultural variability in touching rules and, in particular, the unusually strict U.S. prohibitions on touching between males. Again, ask how they might react to a more “touchy” student. Ask also how a student from a “less touchy” culture might respond to their own “normal” degree of touchiness.

You can extend this to male-female touching rules, and discuss differences among various ethnic groups, religions, cultures. Ask how these cultural differences might create misunderstanding, tension and even conflict among various groups of students on a school campus.

**Activity 5: Reaction to Scenarios.**  
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**Brief Description:** These use a verbal picture or, if available, a photograph of some culturally inappropriate behavior as a stimulus for student reactions (usually strongly negative). Through discussion, participants realize that while their emotional reactions are valid, there is no logical or rational basis—except for cultural conditioning—to account for their responses. The point is not to get them to alter their cultural beliefs—but just to realize how deeply committed on an emotional basis they are to their own cultural ways—and that emotional commitment doesn't necessarily mean these ways are morally right, correct, natural, or universal.

- a. Imagine sitting down to a dinner of fried rat tails (you can substitute any suitable alternative such as caterpillars, snakes, etc. particularly if it is an item you have actually consumed). You may want to note that rats (or caterpillars) are an excellent source of protein, are associated with dirt only in cities that are dirty, and make as much ecological sense to consume as do cows or pigs.
- b. Imagine sitting down with a friend at breakfast to a plate of fried eggs, sunny side up. After eating part of the egg, she picks up the dish and licks the egg off the plate. What would be your response?
- c. Picture yourself on an international goodwill trip. It is time to greet the Ambassador from country X. In this culture the appropriate greeting behavior is for you to kiss each other on the lips. How would you react?
- d. Imagine traveling in a South Asian country. It is time to eat a delicious shrimp and coconut curry. The curry is liquid and is placed on some rice. After washing your hands (a must!), you are expected to begin eating the curry and rice with your hand (your right hand only). How would you feel?

Note: You can point out that it is more hygienic to eat this way, having washed your hand, then to eat french fries, sandwiches, chips, and other foods without washing your hands, as is common in the U.S. Also, silverware collects dust—yet we use it without washing it.

**Activity Idea 6: Discussion Points for the concept of Culture as a Symbolic System.**  
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- Discuss some of the symbols in school culture? Do any students or student groups (informal or formal) at your school utilize symbols? What are they and what meanings do they convey? Do the teachers or administrators utilize symbols? Are there racial or ethnic-based social groups at your school that utilize symbols of group identity?
- E.G. Discuss how clothing can be “symbolic”. What are the meanings associated with the clothing you wear? With the clothing other students wear? With the clothing of non-students, like your teacher, the principal, etc.

- E.g. Discuss other symbolic forms used by social groups, such as greeting behaviors. Are there any greetings that symbolize ethno-racial identity? Are there gendered greeting behaviors?
- E.g. Discuss what symbols students use to express or signal their gender identity. Are there racial/ethnic, regional, or generational differences in how gender identity is expressed? How does sexual preference get expressed?

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