
CULTURAL CUSTOMS IN THE WEST BANK

Working Draft
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"Breaking the rules", in this case social rules or cultural customs, receives various consequences (you can think of examples from our culture). Try this: sit right next to a new North American person in the group who you don't know very well. Watch what they do next. That person will do something like: move away, fidget, give you a funny look, asks for an explanation of your behavior, question your behavior or demands that you move. If they get physical and push you away, you know that the US rule of not violating the personal space of an acquaintance is one rule about which they have strong feelings. How can I predict what responses you'll get? Because the purpose of such rules is to make social life predictable. Social rules can also embody important cultural values. When they do, we are more likely to defend them strongly.

The behavior of breaking the rules may be seen as a minor social impoliteness, as committed by someone who doesn't know better, or isn't very socially skilful. Or the person may be seen as crazy or rude. More serious rule violations will be seen as offensive and met with angry verbal or physical attack. The strength of the response depends on how serious the particular rule is held to be in the culture, (the stronger the feeling about the value, the stronger the response). Other factors that may mean the response varies depend on the attitudes of individual perceiving the rule violation, the relationship between rule breaker and observer, the genders of the persons involved, how much intercultural experience the observer has, and many other factors. I say all of this to that Mohammed may response one way, while Ahmed or Basma respond another.

However, it is predictable that every level of rule violation elicits some level of a response.

HOW CAN I KNOW A RULE IS A RULE, SINCE THERE ISN'T A RULEBOOK?

How did you learn what was polite as a child? Initially, by receiving others' responses. For example young children are corrected; later, adults explain what is polite to you. In adulthood, you're just expected to know them, and you get the wide range of responses to breaking rules that I've just mentioned, above.

So how can I learn the rules of another culture?

- 1) You can actively observe and imitate the behavior of others.
- 2) Asking others, "is this polite?", is a good habit. People often appreciate your consideration for asking. Ask good friends to explain the rules to you. Ask someone you know and trust well to point out when you are doing something that might bother or offend others, so that you can learn appropriate behavior. (In fieldwork, three informants is a commonly accepted rule of thumb, as when you ask, each cultural informant will tell you their individual opinion, and you're trying to understand the cultural [group] pattern).

BUT I HATE RULES!

Me, too. But notice these important functions of rules: they make it easier to get along with others AND they show respect for others. The rules aren't the point, but rather these functions are: smoothing our relationships and respecting each other.

You don't have to behave appropriately all the time. You don't follow the rules do so in your home culture either. But if you know the rules, you can know when you break them, what to expect.

If you still want to "do it my way," please do consider what are the consequences for the Team. A pattern of consistent insensitivity to cultural rules or customs may endanger the Teams' work, particularly if Team members behavior is not seen as improving over time.

In general, performing the politeness rules of local culture will be appreciated and will serve as a lubricant for better relationships.

Violating the most serious cultural rules, [e.g., worst scenario, if two unmarried Team members were caught in the sex act by an extremist religious fanatic], it could be deadly in its consequences.

A FEW CULTURAL RULES

I'll describe a few rules for you, below, but unlike the rules for most games we play, and unlike laws (social rules that have been written down), social rules are especially fluid, enacted by individuals, and subject to change. Remember that you'll see variation on them. That makes them confusing. That doesn't mean that you can therefore pretend they don't exist--they do, not in physical reality, but in social reality.

ONE key theme: One person's behavior reflects on the whole group. This culture is more collectivistic in orientation, as opposed to individualistic. It is the family's responsibility to make sure all of its members behave well, so when anyone does not, it reflects badly on the honor of that family. In the Team's case, the Team should think of itself as a family, and guard its reputation carefully.

IMPORTANCE OF HOSPITALITY: The ritual of offering another a drink (of water, tea, juice, etc.) when they first arrive is important. This symbolizes the offer of friendship towards to other. Always take a drink offered to you, especially if you don't know the person well. It is rude to refuse it. If you don't want it, drink only a sip or two. (After you know someone well, you may tell them not to bring you anything to drink when you first arrive, if you don't want anything. This will usually be understood, if the relationship is on firm ground.)

Paying taxis. In the serveece, pass your fare forward when others do. This is usually in the early part of the taxi ride, but after the driver is out of the congested traffic and on the road. If you don't have exact change, don't worry. The correct change will always be returned to you, eventually. This is a matter of honor. If he forgets, other passengers will remind him since this transaction is very public. If the driver doesn't have exact change, he may wait until others' pay their fare and he has the correct change. If he still doesn't have exact change, he will stop somewhere before the end of the trip and get change. Also merchants in various shops will always give you correct change.

Special taxis: If you hire a special taxi, you may negotiate in advance, or you may just give him a fair amount at the end of the trip, if you know the usual fare for the distance. If the driver objects to what you give him, consider his argument. If his argument isn't valid, don't pay more. Say why briefly and politely and walk away. If he is asking for one or two shekels more, consider giving it to him, as special fares don't have a set rate. You should definitely pay a little more (one or two shekels more) if any of the following apply: (1) traffic was unusually heavy; (2) he waited at your destination and then drove a return trip, tip extra beyond the two-way fare; (3) he returned at a designated time later to pick you up; (4) the group was extra large; (5) any unusual or extra service provided, e.g., help with luggage, etc.

Bargaining: It is usual to bargain over items like clothing, shoes, household goods, and so on. Food prices are usually fixed. You should go to make a purchase of an item for which bargaining is the norm with an idea of what is a fair price. The price the merchant first quotes you will be high. Next, you name a price lower that you hope to pay. The merchant will usually make an argument that your offer is unreasonable (ignore this, however convincing, if you have a good idea of a normal price). The merchant will make another offer, somewhat less that the first price. You can then offer the price you really want to pay for the item. (Don't bid higher than the price you really want to pay). He will probably agree at this round. If he doesn't walk away. Often the merchant will follow you outside and give you the item at your price. One ground rule: it's rude to change your mind after the bargaining has begun, so usually you shouldn't ask a price unless you are really interested in an item. Also its a good idea to not let on how much you want an item; don't say how beautiful it is, etc., you're only driving the price up for yourself. In fact, you can point out any flaw in the merchandise as an argument for a lower price, or act like it's not quite the color you like, etc. Think of this as a game, and role play a neutral or even mildly critical customer. If a friend is with you, it also can work well to play "good cop, bad cop," with the one of you doing the bargaining saying how great the item is, while the friend keeps insisting it's too expensive, not worth the price, etc. Be subtle with this--don't insult the merchandise.

Your feet: Never sit with the bottom of your feet facing someone. It' not considered polite. If you look at the bottom of your shoe one day after you've been out walking awhile, you'll understand why.

Shoes: It used to be that everyone removed his or her shoes at the door, before entering someone's house. It seems to be rarely practice today. However, if you see family members walking barefoot in their house, follow suit. (The good news is, if you love to take your shoes off indoors, no one will think you are uncouth.)

Eating food: It is usual to eat with the hands. As much as possible, eat food only with your right hand, especially when all are eating from a common plate; the left hand is considered ritually unclean. (Again, this habit is not held to universally or rigidly). You can observe the family you are eating with and follow their example. You can usually tear bread with both hands.

GENDER ROLES & RULES: Here's a tough set to live, but EXTREMELY important!

Male-female contact: One woman and one man should not stay in the same room together for an extended period of time, or their reputations may be damaged. If there are at least three persons in the room, then it is not as much of a problem; however, it looks bad, and is somewhat damaging to a female's reputation if she is the only one sitting with several men. If she makes a habit of this, it seals her reputation in people's minds as a loose woman.

Friendships: Men have friendships only with men. Women have friendships only with women. Men and women don't have friendships in this culture. The Arabic word for male friend means boyfriend, and the Arabic word for female friend means girlfriend, and both carry sexual connotations. If you want to describe the close relationships that male and female team members have, say "he is like my bother (or son, or nephew; sister, daughter, niece) to me." Which term will work best depends on the age difference between the two persons.

No PDA: Male and female members of the team should avoid all public displays of affection. If two men or two women hug in public, it is no problem. If two persons of the opposite sex do, it's scandalous behavior. Avoid even simple pats on the shoulder across genders (the exception persons married to each other).

Shaking hands: Some very religious people do not shake hands with persons of the opposite gender. Do not take offense at this. They feel they are obeying religious proscriptions. This is especially true if a man has made ablutions [ritual washing] just before prayer time; he won't touch any female at this time. Handshakes are often exchanged in warm greeting, so it isn't wrong to offer your hand. Just don't take offense if your offer of a handshake isn't returned. For men, it is probably better not to initiate a handshake with a woman, but by all means, shake her hand if she proffers it.

Speaking volume: While everyone speaks loudly when excited, North Americans have the reputation around the globe for being boisterous, even too loud, and this is not always regarded positively. Generally, North Americans speak more loudly than do Palestinians. This is especially true for women. Women tend to speak more softly overall, and not laugh loudly in mixed company. Also, it is considered flirtatious for women to smile wide enough at someone that you show your teeth.

Kissing: Two male friends (or two female friends) will kiss both cheeks, and even sometimes on the mouth, if they haven't seen each other in a long time, or feel especially close to each other. No public kissing the other gender (see PDA, above).

The women's apartment, "the harem": No male should enter the female's apartment. The assumption is that only bad things can happen in this situation. This can damage the reputation of the Team considerably. In a place where Islamic fundamentalism is strong and growing, it can be dangerous not to take the local customs regarding more separation of the genders seriously. The word "harem" just means the women's quarters--forget all those exotic Hollywood notions about exotic sexual practices in the harem--they've strictly Western fantasies. The word "harem" comes from the same Arabic root as "haraam," which means something forbidden by religion. See the connection? The "harem" is "haraam" to men (and hence this is a really serious rule to break).

Walking together: It would be scandalous for two unmarried, unrelated young people of the opposite sex to walk together in the street, let alone travel together (even engaged). Therefore, whenever possible, walk in same gender pairs. It is somewhat less scandalous for an older woman to walk with a younger man, as the age difference makes them more like auntie and nephew.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: ETHICS AND RULE CHOICES

In all these customs, it doesn't matter what you personally think of them. Most of these customs are not moral issues, so wherever possible you're conforming to the local customs. The advantage of doing so is that it will smooth the Teams efforts at building bridges. Clearly situations will arise where it is difficult to discern whether one of one's dearly held moral values is being violated, or just one's comfort zone. Therefore, please limit the areas of judgement to only the most important ones, like those on which the Teams purposes rest.

Remember: you aren't there to judge the local customs, and it is at least ethnocentric to do so. The Team's purpose is one of nonviolence--if you witness violence of any kind it makes sense to intervene. Cultural customs do not support violence in relationships with others. (And if culture did, e.g., couldn't an argument be made that violence is an American tradition?-- wouldn't that be a weak defense?)

David Kale, a scholar of intercultural communication, argues that there are two values that international, universal values:

1. "to protect the worth and dignity of the human spirit" (Kale, 1991, p. 423).
2. a world at peace.

From these values, he generates these principles for behavior in intercultural settings:

1. "Address people of other cultures with the same RESPECT that they would like to receive themselves.
2. "Try to describe the world as they perceive it as ACCURATELY as possible.
3. "ENCOURAGE people of other cultures TO EXPRESS themselves in their unique natures.
4. "Strive for IDENTIFICATION with people of other cultures." [p. 423, my emphasis added, to identify

the values named in these statements].

These values and principles seem so apply so well to the Team's regular style of work. I encourage you all to keep working in the same Spirit, adjusting for local customs where you can. Finally, intercultural communication always involves this fundamental dilemma between one's own values and conforming those values of the other culture. This textbook in intercultural communication says it better than I can, so I'll quote it: "WHEN IN ROME. . . .

"A fundamental issue confronting those who are in the midst of another culture is a decision about how much they should change their behaviors to fit the beliefs, values, and norms of those with whom they interact. Is it the responsibility of visitors, newcomers, or sojourners to adjust their behaviors to the cultural framework of the host culture, or should members of the host culture adjust their communication and make allowances for the newcomers and strangers?

"The old adage 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do,' which clearly places the responsibility for change on the newcomer, offers a great deal of wisdom. Behaviors that conform to cultural expectations show respect for the other culture and its ways. Conformity with common cultural practices also allows the newcomer to interact with and to meet people from the host culture on some kind of genuine basis. Respecting differences in verbal and nonverbal codes means that the ethical intercultural communicator takes responsibility for learning as much about these codes as is possible and reasonable. Naturally, what is possible and reasonable will vary, depending on a range of circumstances (p. 346).

"Sometimes it is difficult for people to change their behaviors to match cultural patterns that contradict their own beliefs and values. For example, many European American women, whose actions are based on the values of freedom and equality, may find it difficult to respond positively to the Saudi Arabian cultural practices that require women to wear veils in public and to use male drivers or chaperons. The ethical dilemma that intercultural communicators face is the decision about how far to go in adapting their behaviors to another culture. Should people engage in behaviors that they regard as personally wrong or difficult? At what point do people lose their own sense of self, their cultural identities, and their moral integrity? One of the challenges and delights of intercultural communication is in discovering the boundaries and touchstones of one's own moral perspective while simultaneously learning to display respect for other ways of dealing with human problems" (Lustig and Koester 1996, 345-6).

Works Cited

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Lustig, Myron W. & Koester, Jolene. (1996). *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures*. (2nd Ed.). New York: HarperCollins College Publishers.