



INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS OFFICE

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

FALL 2022

NAVIGATING MIT SERIES: UNDERSTANDING U.S. CULTURE

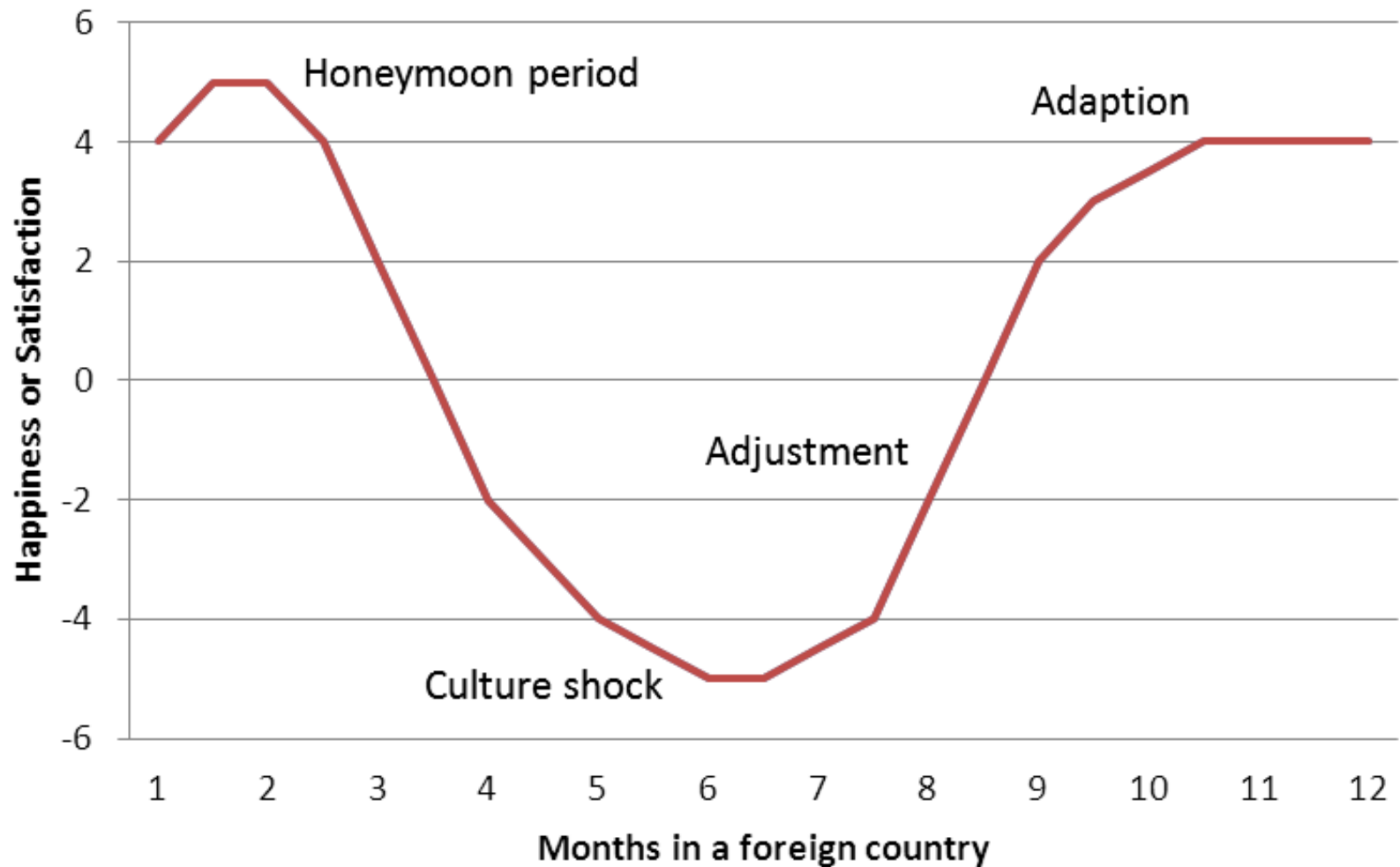
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2024

DANA RIECHMAN, ISO

What do you prefer?



Culture Shock Curve



Cultural Adjustment

- “Honeymoon Period”
 - **Culture Shock:** homesickness, frustration, loneliness, withdrawal, depression. This is a normal reaction and should eventually pass in a few days or weeks, sometimes months.
 - Recovery/Adjustment
 - Adaption
- *Be mindful that your peers, spouse or partner and/or children may be in a different stage in the adjustment phase than you.

Tips for Surviving the Adjustment Process

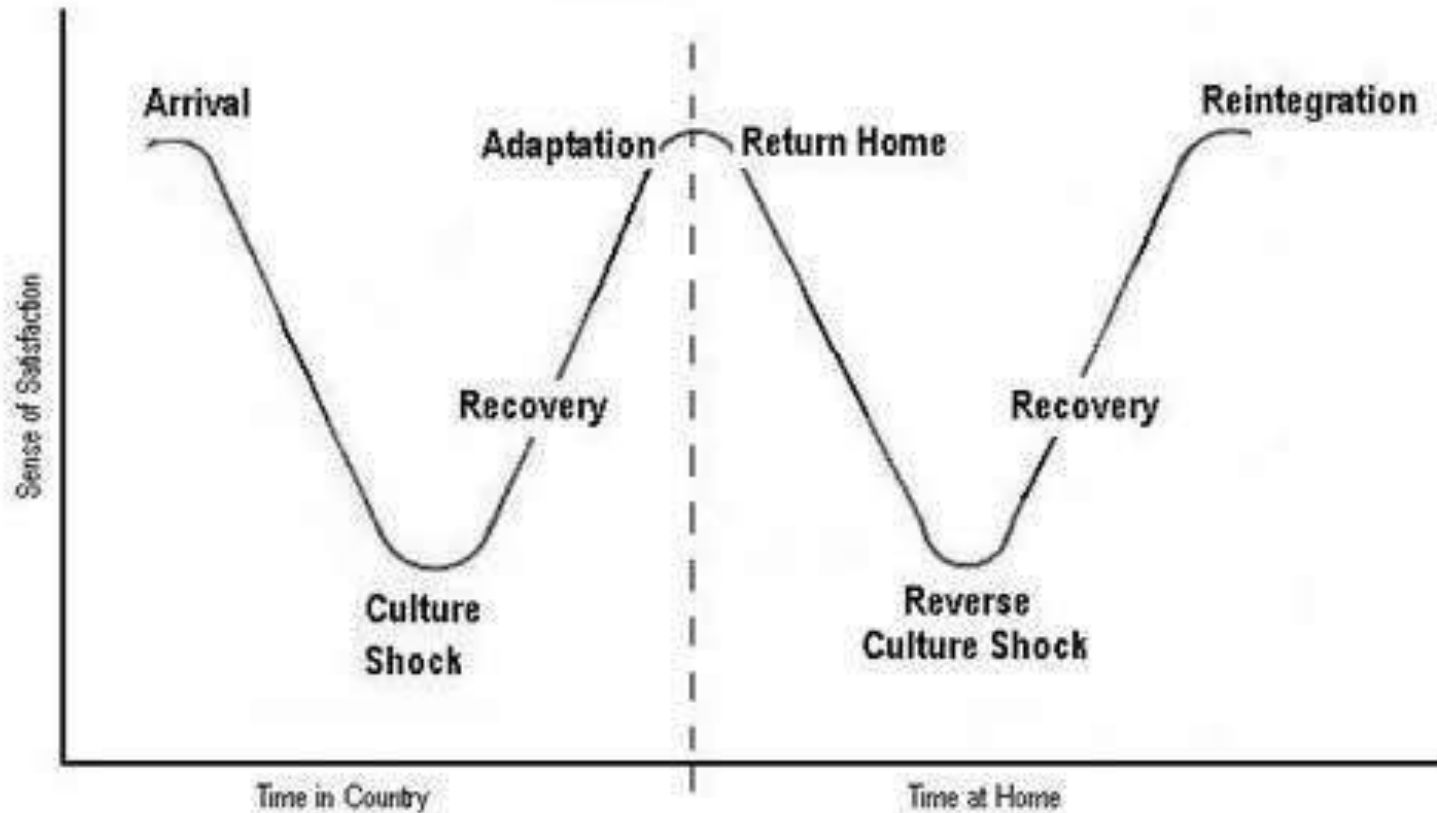
- Get Connected...It's important to avoid isolation and have SOCIAL SUPPORT. Connect with people from your home country and in the local community.
- Be open to new experiences and try to understand this new culture.
- Speak English as much as possible. Don't be afraid to make mistakes – your English doesn't have to be perfect! Watch TV shows/movies with subtitles; read books from library
- Suspend judgement on things that are new --- they may be different than you are used to, but they are not necessarily “good” or “bad”



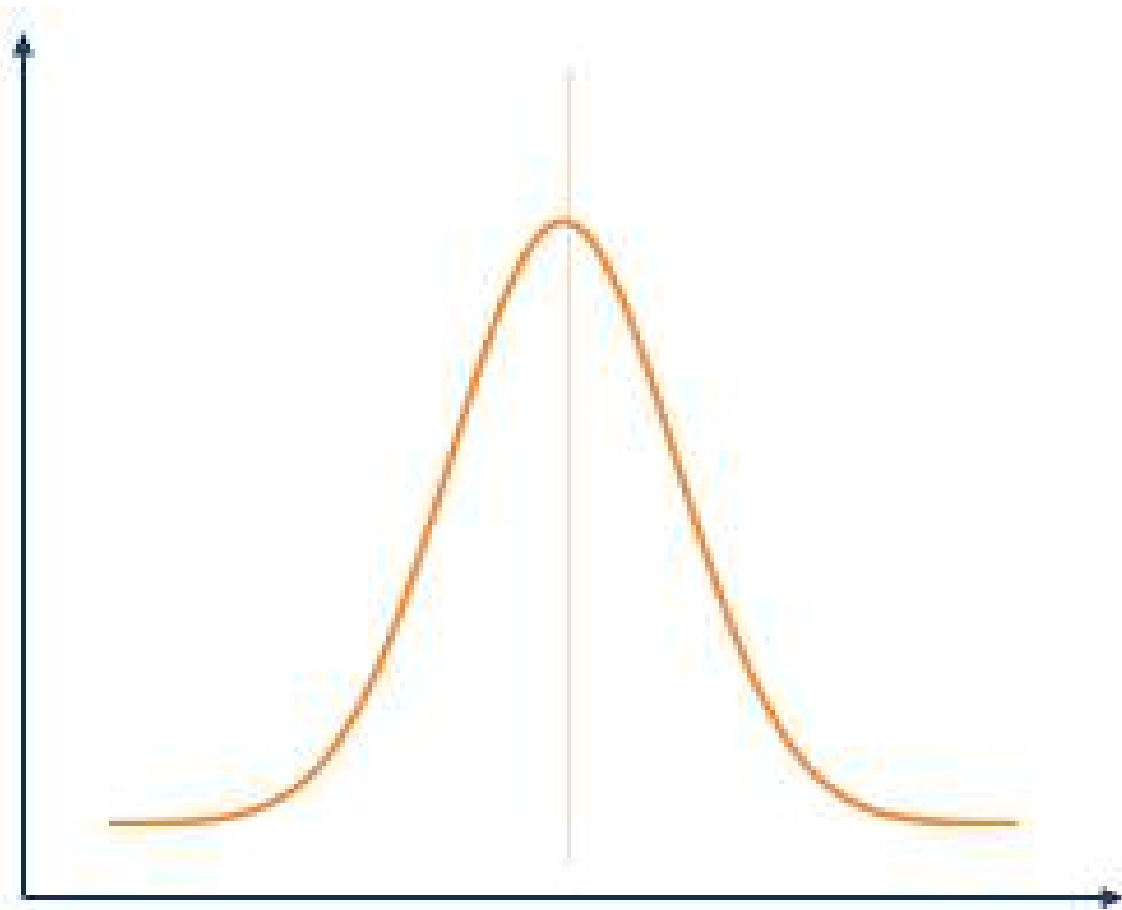
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Reverse Culture Shock



Bell curve - generalizations



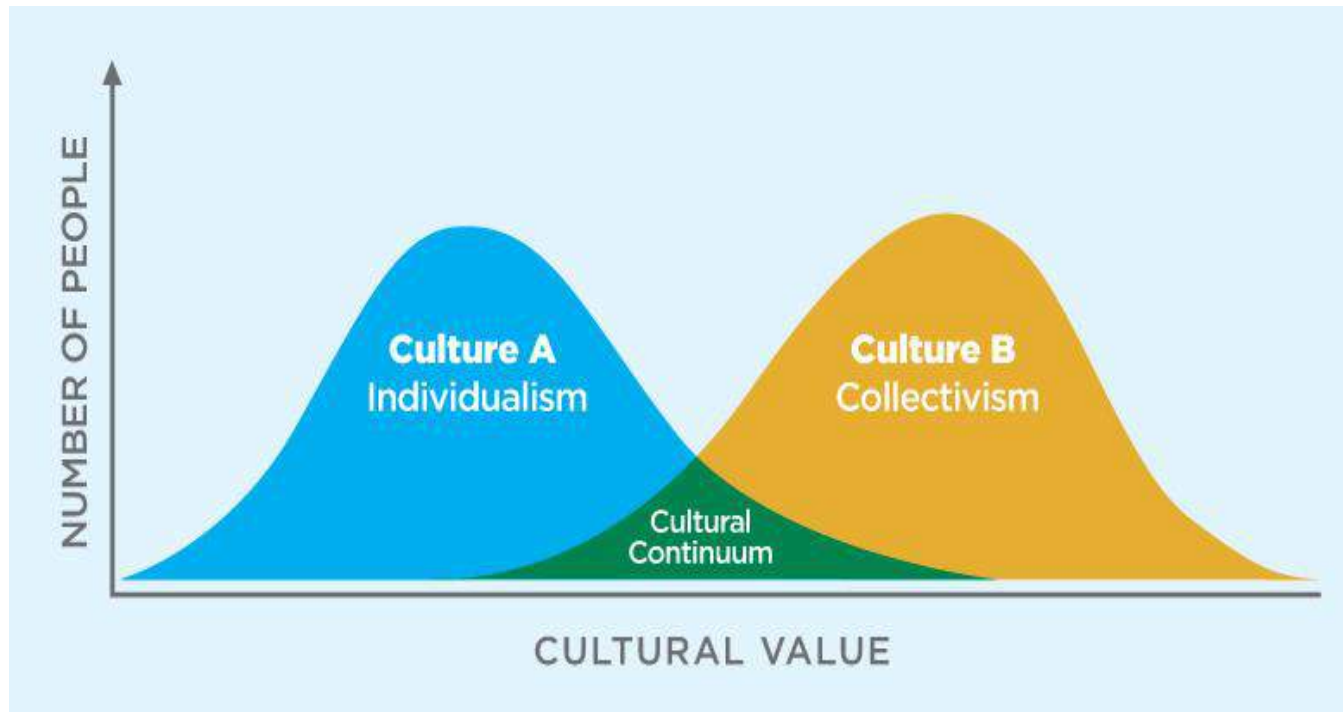
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Cultural Continuum



*From Intercultural Link Newsletter Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2009

http://www.connectinglivessharingcultures.com/alerting/IC_Link_Newsletter_v.1

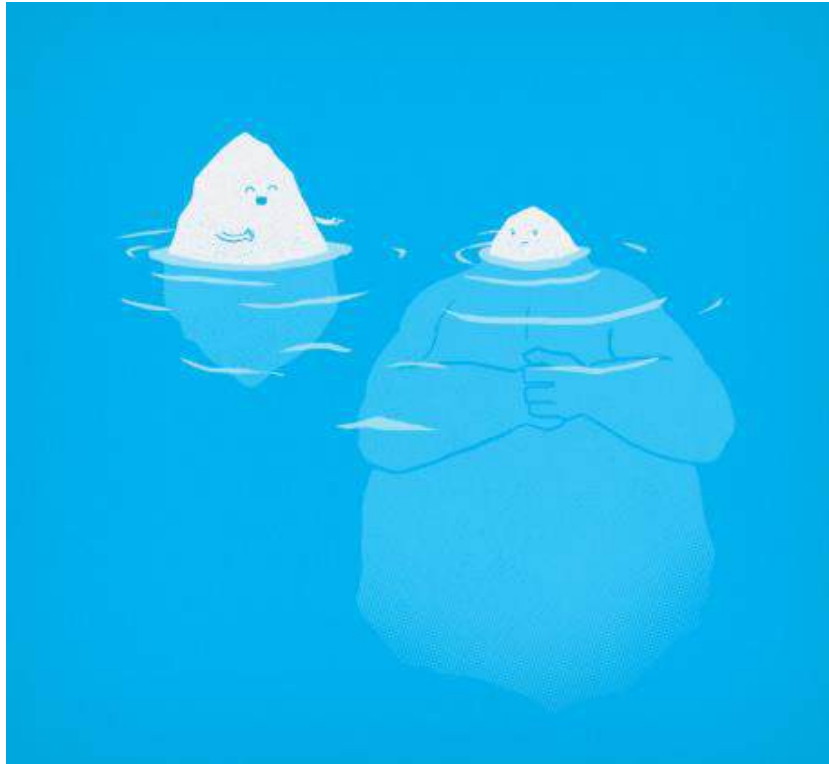
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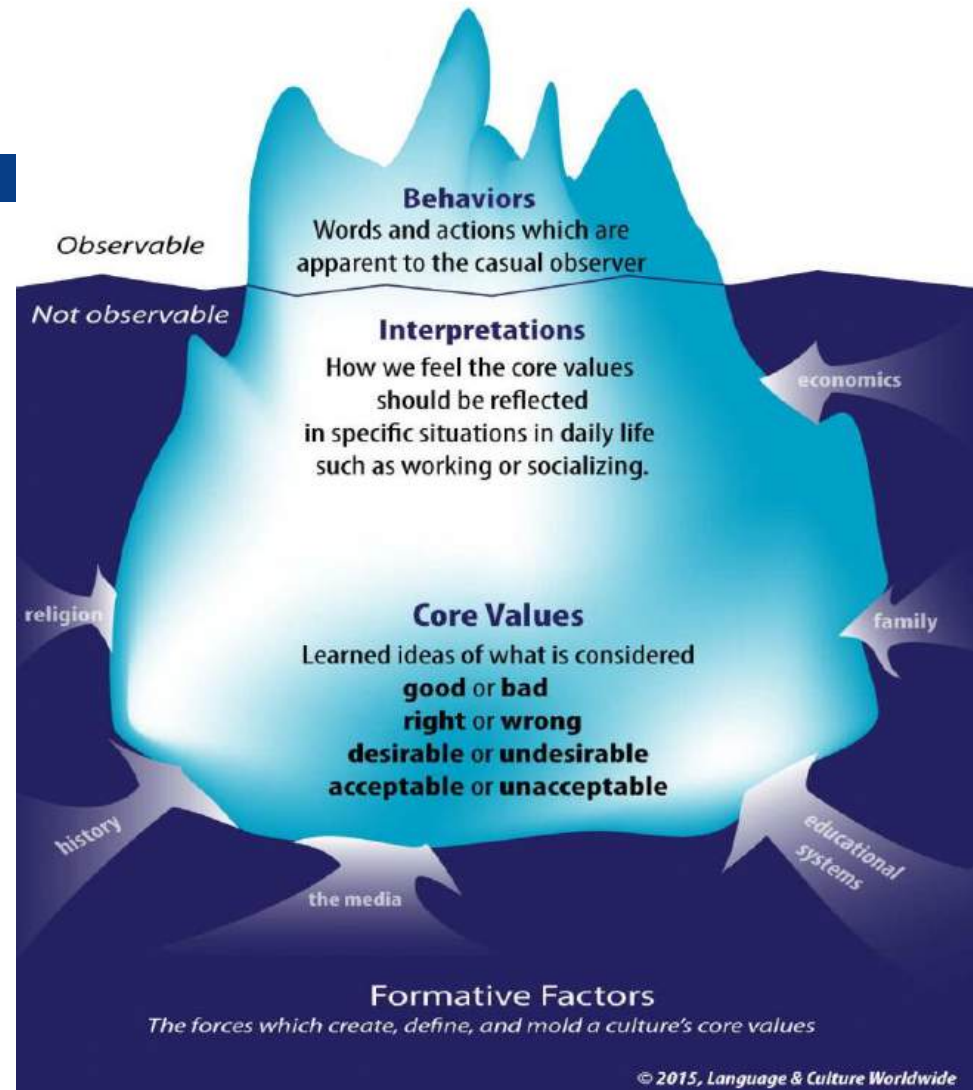
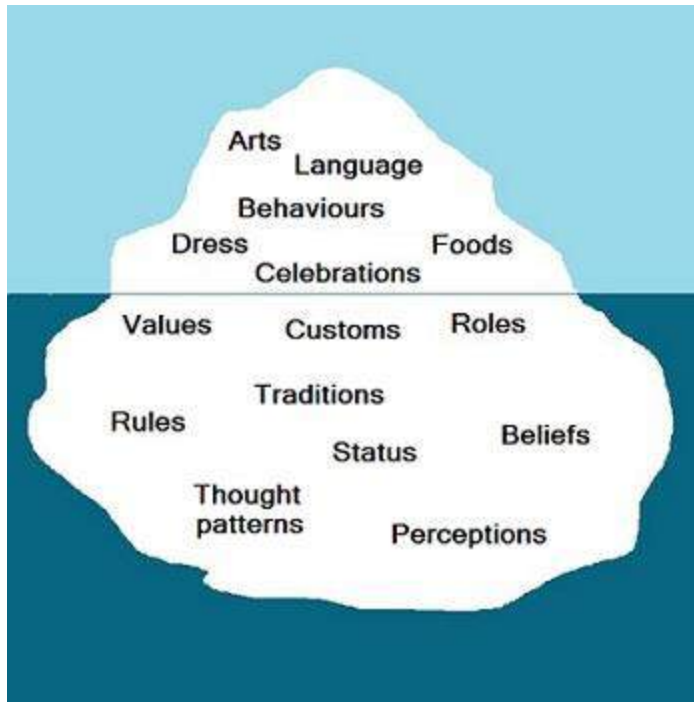
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Cultural iceberg



Edward T. Hall

Cultural iceberg



Discuss with a group or partner

With a partner:

What are some observations you've made about U.S. culture?

What has surprised you or confused you most about U.S. culture?



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U.S. Culture

Surface culture

- Food
- Casual and informal (form of speaking and dress)
- Certain holidays are very important
- Direct communication (say what you mean)

U.S. Culture

Deeply-rooted culture

Values

- Direct communication (= value time & efficiency)
- Individualism
- Independence and freedom
- Equality/egalitarianism (informality)
- Self-reliance (“pull yourself up by your own bootstraps”...or improve one's position by one's own efforts)



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Caveat: Not all Americans are the same

- Geographic and regional differences (North vs. South; East Coast vs. West Coast vs. the Midwest)
- Dominant vs. marginalized cultures and different ethnicities; “diverse”
- “U.S. culture” stems from “white,” male, Protestant Christian ideals
- History of this nation: Indigenous people were already here; Africans were forced here in the slave trade
- Question: How inclusive has U.S. society been in the past and currently? Nevertheless, these are still some shared ideals people strive for in this country

Americanisms

Greeting: Hi, how are you?

Meaning: Hello!

Statement after a sneeze: Bless you!

Response: Thank you

(Also: Gesundheit = health, but this is not very common)

RSVP = répondez s'il vous plait (French origin)

Meaning: Please respond



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Etiquette - Speech

- Interruptions are accepted
- Small talk expected with strangers and acquaintances
 - Common topics are weather and the Red Sox/sports; TV/movies/music; what did you do last weekend?
 - Most frequently asked question: “What do you do?”
 - Taboo topics are age, salary, relationship status, and sexual orientation; politics & religion too unless trust established. Ask questions if you’re not sure!

Etiquette - Time

The U.S. is a clock-time oriented culture instead of relationship-orientated culture.

Punctuality important for meetings and special events (weddings!)

- If you are a few minutes late to a meeting, apologize. If you know you will be more than 10 minutes late, you should call or email to explain.
- If you are invited to an American's home for dinner, you should arrive 10 to 15 minutes after the expected time. Do not arrive early, as your hosts may not yet be ready for you.
 - ▣ NOTE: You do not have to take shoes off in many Americans' homes, however, do not assume; always ask!

Showing respect; personal space

- Strong handshake – firm but not tight
- Stand a little less than arm's length away
- Maintain eye contact
 - In U.S. culture, no eye contact could be interpreted as shyness or that you have something to hide
 - If you're not comfortable with direct eye contact, you can alternate between looking at person's forehead and eyes

Intercultural communication styles

- direct vs indirect – No means no; in some cultures, yes or maybe could mean no
- informal vs formal (calling your boss by their first name)
- silence – Americans need to “fill the void” vs. use silence for reflection
- low vs. high context – in U.S. expectations are clear and not context-specific (low context)

GlobeSmart, Aperian Global

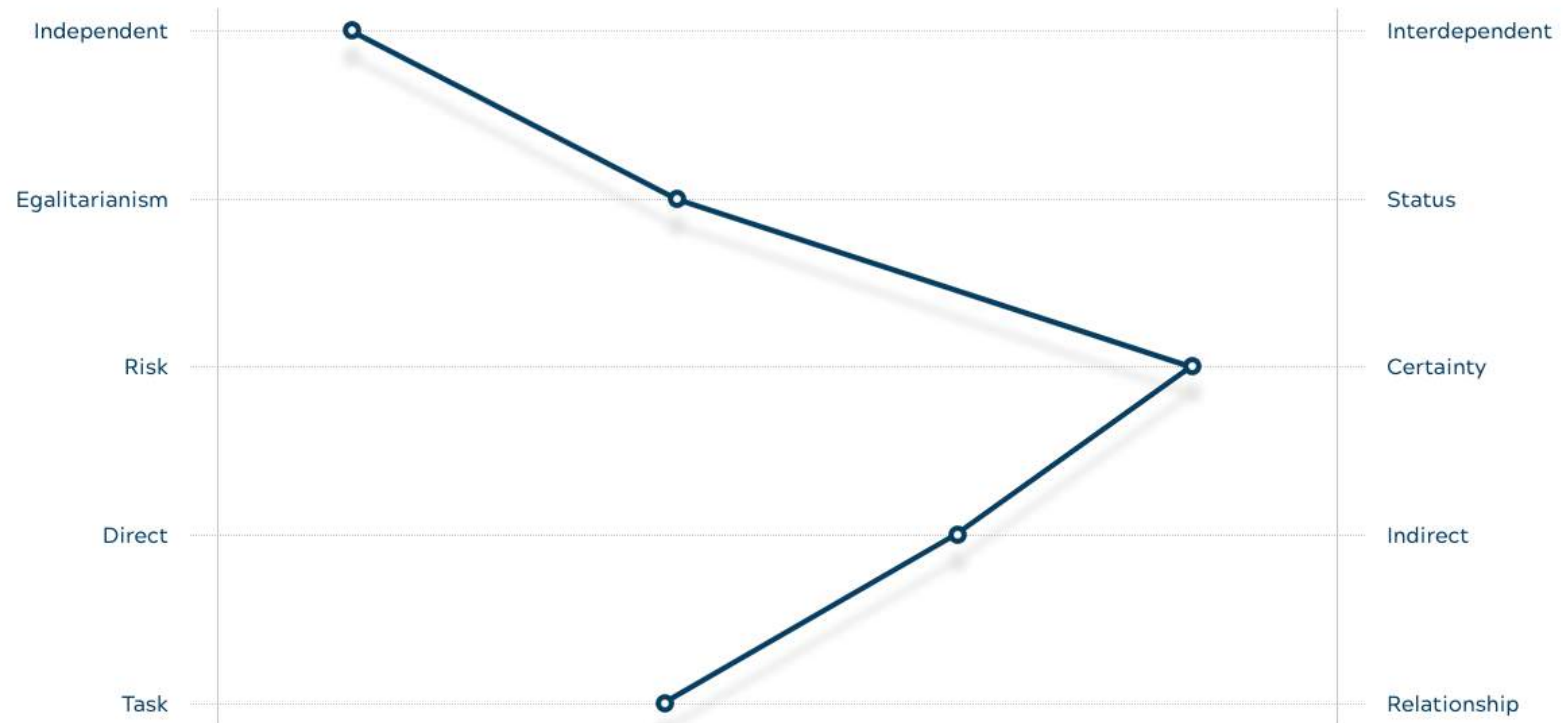
- GlobeSmart On –increase self-awareness
- FREE for the MIT community:
<https://globalsupport.mit.edu> (Take this assessment!)
- 5 different spectrums of characteristics examined
 - ▣ Independent – Interdependent
 - ▣ Egalitarianism – Status
 - ▣ Risk – Certainty
 - ▣ Direct – Indirect
 - ▣ Task – Relationship



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GlobeSmart: Dana's Profile

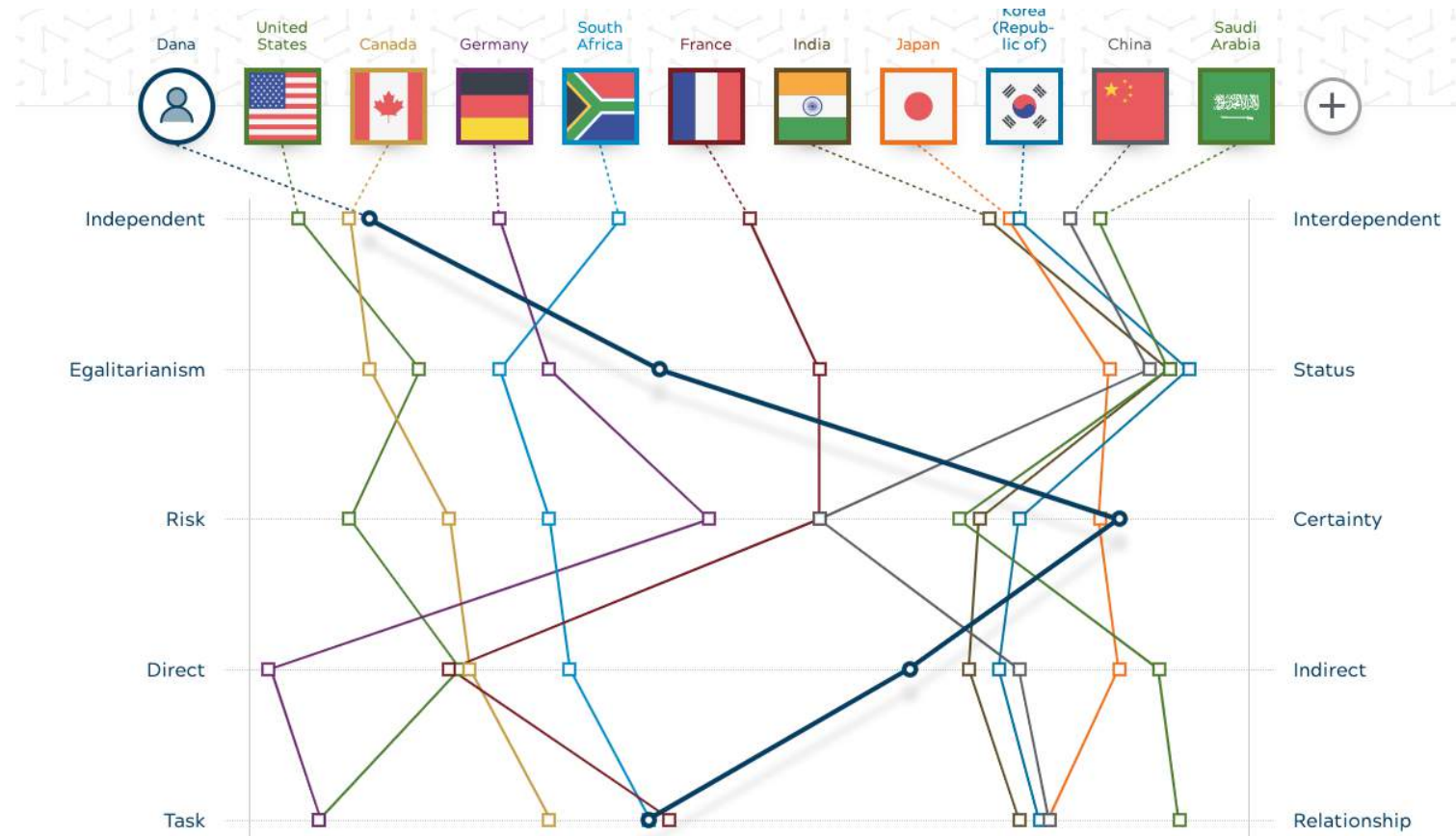


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Placement of points on each dimension for the selected group are based on the median of the data collected and are not intended as a definitive statement about any group or individual.

GlobeSmart Profile Comparisons



Placement of points on each dimension for the selected group are based on the median of the data collected and are not intended as a definitive statement about any group or individual.



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Get to know U.S. culture by making American friends

- Helpful to have a cultural informant
- Americans who have traveled/studied abroad are usually more open to making international friends

Peaches vs. coconuts

- Stereotypes of Americans: friendly but superficial
<https://iso.mit.edu/americanisms/american-friendship/>
- Article: [The Paradox of American Friendliness](#)
 - ▣ Friendliness vs. intention to be friends
 - ▣ Peach vs. coconuts
- Visual – Americans are like a peach, warm & fuzzy on the outside; hard pit inside, hard to crack (they are very private and don't want to rely on friends too much; they really value their space and privacy)
- Many other cultures could be considered a coconut: hard to crack but once you do, the inside is sweet (always a friend)

Friendship in the United States

- Students have different classmates every year in elementary (primary) school
- In middle school and high-school, classes switch every hour like MIT; different classmates in each class
- Students make friends in classes but often get to know each other better through common activities



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Friendship in the United States, cont...

- Americans meet and develop friendships through similar activities, roommates, school, and work
- Americans considers many people “friends”: acquaintances, people they see occasionally, only at church, only in school, and they also have “best friends.”
- Americans are busy- if they say “Let’s get coffee!” they could have the best intentions but forget about it or not have time. It’s usually not personal. They highly value their privacy and personal space (including time)

How to make new friends

- Same classes or department; Attend same event
- Similar Hobbies/activities
- Ask for email, social media info, or phone number
 - Sometimes asking for email address is less 'personal'
- Propose several dates/times and follow up again before giving up. Also, send a confirmation the day before or day of (otherwise, they might not show up..)
- Don't be afraid to be rejected!



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Friendship & Dating

- Dating and relationships can be confusing, even for Americans! Asking someone for a cup of coffee could be considered a “date.”
- Clarify if it’s a date or friend meetup - ask if you’re not sure.
- If one person pays, it could be interpreted as a date; if not sure, just split the bill.
- “Let’s hang out” - could be friendship or romantic interest - if you are interested, you could just go and see what the vibe is; if you want to make sure it’s as a friend, you should clarify: “Sure, as friends, right?”