

4 - Responding appropriately to cultural difference and managing intercultural communication

AIM: To address some basic issues arising from cultural difference and to provide some suggestions for managing intercultural communication.

What is culture?

By “culture” we mean a set of shared attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and values that help to shape behaviour and give rise to distinctive artefacts. According to this definition, some aspects of culture are visible (behaviour, artefacts) and others are not (attitudes, beliefs, values). When we focus on the outward signs of culture, especially “high culture” – literature, painting, sculpture, music –, we tend to associate cultures with countries and nations. The reality is much more complex, however: there are cultural differences not only between regions of the world, major religions and countries, but also between specific ethnic, religious, linguistic or regional sub-groups within countries. Thus, although we may know the country, region and specific ethnic or religious group to which a person belongs, it is not possible to predict his or her behaviour in a specific situation. For this reason, it is usually better to avoid speaking about cultures and exchanges or conflicts between cultures, and to speak instead about the “cultural background” of individuals, their cultural affiliations, and intercultural encounters among people who perceive themselves or are perceived by others as culturally different from one another.

Communicating in an intercultural setting

Communication is effective to the extent that the participants succeed in understanding one another. We have a natural tendency to interpret the messages we receive on the basis of our own beliefs and assumptions. But when communicating with people whose cultural background is different from our own, we need to be alert to the possibility that we may misinterpret their intended meanings, and that they may misinterpret ours. This is not always easy, because it may not be obvious that there are differences between the message we receive and our interpretation of it. The capacity to identify and correct mistaken or misleading interpretations in an intercultural setting is an important intercultural competence.

Managing intercultural communication

One way of avoiding intercultural misunderstanding is to make communication as explicit as possible, explaining and providing details about issues that may appear obvious in a mono-cultural setting, and repeatedly checking that the people we are communicating with have understood what we mean. Experience suggests that if we do this, we will not only enhance the quality and effectiveness of communication but foster the development of positive relationships, learning new things about ourselves as well as about people from a different cultural background.

If you adopt this approach to intercultural communication when providing language support, you will reduce the risk of misunderstandings with and among the refugees in your group and increase the likelihood that they will come to see cultural diversity as an asset.

Not all differences are cultural

At the same time, it is important to recognize that not all differences between people are to be explained in cultural terms. Although a group of refugees may share the same cultural background, they may nevertheless have different opinions, different perceptions of priorities, different expectations, different preferences, different attitudes towards others, and different behaviour patterns. These differences are due to the fact that each refugee is an individual with personal characteristics and a personal history.

Consider the following two descriptions of language support groups

1. The group divides itself by gender and members do not respond to your questions until the most senior person has spoken or gives the floor to someone else. They wait patiently to receive information and instructions about what to do and do not ask questions. There are only two young men who seem ready to engage more actively in the learning process, but they refrain after seeing how the rest of the group behaves.
2. Women and men interact freely with one another. Most group members participate actively and ask questions when there is a need for clarification or they want to know something. However, a few group members remain passive, avoid eye contact, do not respond to questions and generally keep a low profile.

In either group some members may find the situation normal and feel comfortable with it, while others may be surprised and even frustrated. The behaviours described, however, may be motivated by a variety of factors:

- some members of the group may be behaving as they would in their country of origin.
- some, having recognized the importance of group solidarity, may be behaving in the way they think the group expects, which is different from the way they would behave at home.
- some may be behaving in accordance with personal views they have developed since leaving their country of origin.

This variety confirms that, while cultural practices play an important role, we should not try to explain everything through culture. We should also avoid labelling and stereotyping.

Creating an intercultural space for language support

A good way of minimizing the risks of intercultural conflict and misunderstanding during language support is to encourage the group to create its own culture, with agreed rules and shared meanings. This means making clear that the group is a safe space in which individuals are allowed to express themselves, their needs and opinions and all group members agree to show openness, respect and solidarity towards one another. In some cases, it will be necessary to gently encourage group members to allow themselves to behave in a way that might be significantly different from the way they would be expected to behave in their country of origin.

Politeness

The meaning of politeness and the way it is expressed can vary widely from one cultural context to another. Some members of your group may consider it important to be addressed and to address other members by their family or full name, including titles like Professor or Doctor. Others consider that this is not important and that politeness is manifested in attitude and behaviour: not interrupting when others are speaking, not speaking for too long, expressing ideas as personal opinions rather than absolute truth (“I

think that ...”, instead of “the reality is ...”), or simply being punctual. Some people may find it normal to treat senior group members with deference, while others find this unacceptable, believing that all group members should be treated in the same manner. Negotiating a common understanding of politeness plays an important role in establishing an effective group culture.

Names

Names can be a source of misunderstanding and frustration if the diversity of traditions represented in the group is not made explicit. For example, in many cases a name written in a non-European language may be transcribed in a variety of ways in the Roman alphabet. Some may prefer a spelling that encourages a pronunciation similar to that in the language of origin, while others are happy to accept variations. In Europe, we are used to one or two given names and one or two surnames, prefaced by Mr, Mrs or Ms in polite forms of address. In the cultural context of members of your group the situation could be different. Perhaps their names are structured in the same way as in Europe, but they address another person formally by using Mr, Mrs or Ms followed by that person’s first name. Alternatively, names can include elements that are not names but adjectives or words indicating relationships. In some cultures, people are addressed in multiple ways and not only by the name written in their identity documents; and some refugees may come from areas where no distinction is made between first name and surname.

See also Tools 3 – *Ethical issues to be aware of when working with refugees* and 14 – *Diversity in working groups*.