

1.9—IN THE MIND OF THE BEHOLDER

We all believe that we observe reality, things as they are, but what actually happens is that the mind interprets what the eyes see and gives it meaning; it is only at this point, when meaning is assigned, that we can truly say we have *seen* something. In other words, what we see is as much in the mind as it is in reality. If you consider that the mind of a person from one culture is going to be different in many ways from the mind of a person from another culture, then you have the explanation for that most fundamental of all cross-cultural problems: the fact that two people look upon the same reality, the same example of behavior, and see two entirely different things.

Any behavior observed across the cultural divide, therefore, has to be interpreted in two ways:

- ☞ the meaning given to it by the person who *does* the action, and
- ☞ the meaning given to it by the person who *observes* the action

Only when these two meanings are the same do we have successful communication, successful in the sense that the meaning that was intended by the doer is the one that was understood by the observer.

PART ONE

In the first part of this exercise, read the description of the eight instances of behavior given below and write down your immediate response to or interpretation of that behavior in terms of your own cultural values, beliefs, or perception. The first one has been done for you.

1. A person comes to a meeting half an hour after the stated starting time.

Your interpretation: *This person is late and should at least apologize or give an explanation.*

2. Someone kicks a dog.

Your interpretation: _____

3. At the end of a meal, people belch audibly.

Your interpretation: _____

4. Someone makes the OK gesture at you.

Your interpretation: _____

5. A woman carries a heavy pile of wood on her back while her husband walks in front of her carrying nothing.

Your interpretation: _____

6. A male guest helps a hostess carry dirty dishes into the kitchen.

Your interpretation: _____

7. A young man and a young woman are kissing each other while seated on a park bench.

Your interpretation: _____

8. While taking an exam, a student copies from the paper of another student.

Your interpretation: _____

PART TWO

In the second part of this activity, you are asked to imagine how these same eight behaviors would be perceived or interpreted by someone from a culture different than your own. The particular cultural difference is described in each case. Read each behavior and the description of the culture, and then write in the space provided how you think a person from such a culture would interpret that behavior.



1. A person comes to a meeting half an hour after the stated starting time. How would this act be interpreted:

☞ by someone from a culture where people always arrive half an hour after the stated starting time

Interpretation: _____

☞ by someone from a culture where meetings never start until at least an hour after the stated time

Interpretation: _____

2. Someone kicks a dog. How would this act be interpreted:

☞ by someone from a country where dogs always carry disease

Interpretation: _____

☞ by someone from a country where most dogs are wild and vicious

Interpretation: _____

3. At the end of a meal, people belch audibly. How would this be interpreted:

☞ by someone from a culture where belching is the normal way to compliment the food

Interpretation: _____

4. Someone makes the OK gesture at you. How would this be interpreted:

by someone in whose culture this gesture is obscene

Interpretation: _____

by someone in whose culture this gesture has romantic connotations

Interpretation: _____

5. A woman carries a heavy pile of wood on her back while her husband walks in front of her carrying nothing. How would this be interpreted:

by someone from a culture where women are proud of their strength and ability to work hard

Interpretation: _____

6. A male guest helps a hostess carry dirty dishes into the kitchen. How would this act be interpreted:

by men from a culture where men never clean up after a meal

Interpretation: _____

—INSIGHT—

A given behavior has no built-in meaning; it means whatever the observer decides it means.

I believe that participant observation is more than a research methodology. It is a way of being, especially suited to a world of change.

—**Mary Catherine Bateson**

☞ *by the hostess from that same culture*

Interpretation: _____

7. A young man and a young woman are kissing each other while seated on a park bench. How would this act be interpreted:

☞ *by someone from a culture where men and women never touch in public*

Interpretation: _____

8. While taking an exam, a student copies from the paper of another student. How would this act be interpreted:

☞ *by someone from a culture where exams are not fair and are designed to eliminate students at various stages of the education system*

Interpretation: _____

☞ *by someone from a culture where it is shameful not to help your friend if you are able to*

Interpretation: _____

1.10—DEFINING CULTURE

Reading through this chapter, you notice a number of definitions of culture presented in the form of short quotations in the margins. Take a minute to reread these quotations and then note, in the spaces below, any idea, concept, or key word that is repeated more than once. Assembling these recurring phrases gives you a good working definition of culture.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

—INSIGHT—

While culture has many definitions, most observers agree on certain fundamental characteristics.

[For one possible list, see page 233.]

