

Letter From the Desk of David Challinor  
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One of my recent letters discussed how humans seem to be genetically programmed to speak when they reach about 18 months and can hear language spoken to them. Language, self-identity, courtship and mourning behavior are common to all humans, varying only in relatively trivial detail according to local cultures. The more I have traveled and lived in other societies, the greater I find the similarities between humans than their differences. Differences are interesting to observe, but is it really important whether you eat with fingers, a knife and fork, or a pair of chopsticks? Eating together is a common social occasion in all cultures, although the food varies in how it is prepared and consumed. These minor differences between societies are generally induced culturally at an early age and are usually unconsciously acquired. In fact, there is a term for units of cultural transmission – “memes” – as described by Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Fortunately, our cultural behaviors do not seem to be hard-wired and many of us have little difficulty adapting to new local customs. This letter will examine some of the culturally induced variations in human behavior and how they might have been adopted.

Eye contact is a good mannerism to consider first because it plays such a contrasting role in different societies. In the social group in which I was raised, you were expected, even as a child, to look directly at whomever was addressing you. Fortunately, this was easy for me, but I vividly recall shy contemporaries for whom eye contact was virtually impossible. Little did I know then that in many cultures, particularly in southeast Asia, eye contact as we practice it is considered bad manners, especially when conversing with a stranger. Why is this so? It may have to do with the feeling of personal space that each of us possesses almost from childhood. In American culture, when our population was expanding across the continent, we were dependent on the wagon boss to lead us; when we began homesteading, families often lived isolated lives. We thus had to trust the wagon boss and welcome the stranger who arrived on our doorstep. The latter was a source of news and a person whom we assumed was nonthreatening. Eye contact, therefore, might have been a way of bonding with those on whom we were so dependent. Our North American lifestyle contrasts sharply with that of the Old World where people have been living closely together for millennia. Avoiding eye contact with strangers may have been one way to gain privacy in a cramped world.

We can only surmise what the root causes for cultural behavior are, and doubtless there are many working together. For example, there is in some societies a fear of “the evil eye.” If a stranger does not look at you directly, then you are less likely to be subject to whatever misfortune the evil eye will bestow. In some Asian countries, subjects were not supposed to look directly at their rulers; it was perceived as too invasive or somehow lacking in respect. In present



times, this attitude could be both inefficient and awkward. I learned from a colleague that the present ruler of an Asian nation solved the problem of avoiding eye contact by wearing dark glasses in public. So identified was he with his sunglasses that his statue in the city square portrayed him wearing a pair of them.

People staring at others is another culturally induced or tolerated behavior. When traveling to remote places, we have all watched local children staring at us unabashedly. Adult Americans generally do not focus on others for long, but I remember vividly a couple staring at me and my wife during a concert intermission in Europe. I later learned that this was not considered unusual behavior in this particular European culture. Such close scrutiny would be viewed as invasive in America. For example, in a crowded elevator most of us look at the ceiling or straight ahead, doing our best to stand apart and avoid physical contact.

How we space ourselves varies with degree of crowdedness. In a church or movie theater, unrelated individuals tend to scatter themselves fairly evenly, but in huge cavernous spaces, people will assemble more closely. In fact, North American architects have a standard per person space configuration for public areas of about 6 to 8 sq. ft./person, but this space allocation can shift rapidly with a change in context. For example, a large room used for a formal reception would have only half the capacity tolerated for a jazz concert, where the listeners feel comfortable being close together.

A key indicator of the limits of personal space within cultures is the degree to which touching is tolerated. Outside immediate families, public touching is rare in northern Europe, but becomes increasingly common as one moves south towards the Mediterranean coast. North Americans behave more like northern Europeans than southern ones. In the 1960's, a research project actually recorded the number of touches between pairs of conversing adults in coffee shops in various cities. The results showed that touching averaged 180/hour in San Juan, PR; 110/hour in Paris; dropped to 2/hour in Gainesville, FL; and finally, none in London. Other observations have shown that waitresses receive higher tips when they touch their diners briefly, but waiters do not benefit from touching. A high social status seems to confer a greater right to touch others, a right not normally available to low ranking individuals. However, in most societies including the US, high ranking people such as the President and certain celebrities have to tolerate considerable unsolicited touching. The benefit to the "toucher" is not clear, but it might be considered merely a good luck gesture. Up to WW II, but rarely today, it was common when passing a French sailor to ask "Puis je toucher le pompon?" The sailor would bend his head so that the passerby could touch the red pompon on the top of his uniform hat for good luck.

The frequency and nature of touching between sexes varies greatly between cultures. Americans of all backgrounds are generally more tolerant of touching an unrelated person of the opposite sex than southern Europeans and particularly those in the Far East. This tolerance has been changing in the US where unsolicited touching of females by males has been increasingly

limited both legally and socially, particularly in the workplace. Yet it was interesting to see on the  
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front page of *The New York Times* (6/30/99) a photo of Governor Bush of Texas kissing an unrelated young girl while he was campaigning. These cultural “rules” do change and are not always rational, but they serve as fascinating examples of how each of us is culturally conditioned to behave in certain ways within our own societies.

For those of us who have been fortunate to live in other societies for any length of time, we can recall how easy it was to modify our culturally induced behavior to fit the local customs, as well as to adapt many commonly used phrases. For example, handshaking is taken for granted in most of North America and Europe. Its origin, I believe, was to indicate that you were not carrying a weapon and that your intent was peaceful. Plains Indians usually held up their right hand with the palm facing you to demonstrate a lack of threat. In India and Nepal, when you greet a stranger or friend, you clasp your straightened fingers together, face the person you are greeting, bow your head slightly and say “Namaste.” It is amazing how quickly you find yourself emulating those around you, no longer automatically thrusting out your hand to be shaken.

It is obvious from the above examples that we behave and speak as we do because of a combination of inherited genes and cultural background. Of the two sources, genes seem to have the strongest influence; certain behaviors and abilities are found only in humans and in no other mammals: symbolic speech, laughter and the ability to read and write. Although virtually all people are capable of laughing, they do not have to be taught to do so in the way they must be taught to read and write. Cultural controls on our behavior can be strong, especially relating to diets and certain rites such as marriage or entering puberty. In many societies these cultural patterns have successfully withstood the global pressure for monoculturalization. Indeed, the taboos against some foods can be so strong that people have died of starvation rather than violate them. Maintaining such culturally induced behavior is most easily accomplished in isolated populations, even those in the midst of heterocultural societies. Although it may be burdensome to maintain traditions outside the mainstream, there will always be those who feel it is worth the effort.

Humans are difficult to analyze subjectively because each of us carries our own cultural baggage full of irrational biases. Nonetheless, it is fascinating to speculate why people behave the way they do. Although it is unlikely that we will ever understand completely all the reasons for our varied behaviors, we should rejoice in our differences and, more importantly, understand and accept that we are all one genus and species inhabiting a finite world.

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