

# Build Intercultural Relationships for Better Understanding of Your Neighbor

*Debra Bolton, Ph.D., CFLE*

*Extension Specialist, Southwest Research and Extension Center*

*Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D., CFLE*

*Extension Specialist, Family Studies and Human Services*

## Introduction

Have you ever thought of being friends with people who are not like you? Do people who are not like you make you uncomfortable? What would be the advantage of building a relationship with someone who is not like you? Do you criticize or judge people who are different? Often, people do not understand those who live around them. This lesson may help you discover ways to build relationships with others who are unlike you. This lesson also teaches that individual internalized preferences affect how you see the world and other persons who are different.

There are good reasons to build relationships with those who are different than you. Research shows that when social, economic, and cultural barriers among people are dissolved, communities become unified, and its members stand together in times of conflict, disaster, and other threats. When communities unify, safety increases, conflict decreases, and families thrive. The lines that separate people begin to blur.

Research suggests that humans begin to define their personal preferences from birth. Interactions with parents, siblings, and other relatives begin the process of a child's development and understanding of the local environment and culture. Other influences, such as school, church, and friends, contribute to a child's principles.

What does this have to do with building intercultural relationships? It helps you ask questions and understand why you think and behave the way you do. When you build your own self-awareness, you learn why you may turn away from people who are not like you. The more you understand about yourself, the closer it brings you to learn about those who are different on many levels: rich or poor, young or old, with different educational backgrounds, or from different origins. You build community cohesion



when you create more opportunities to celebrate diversity and build intercultural relationships

## Community Cohesion

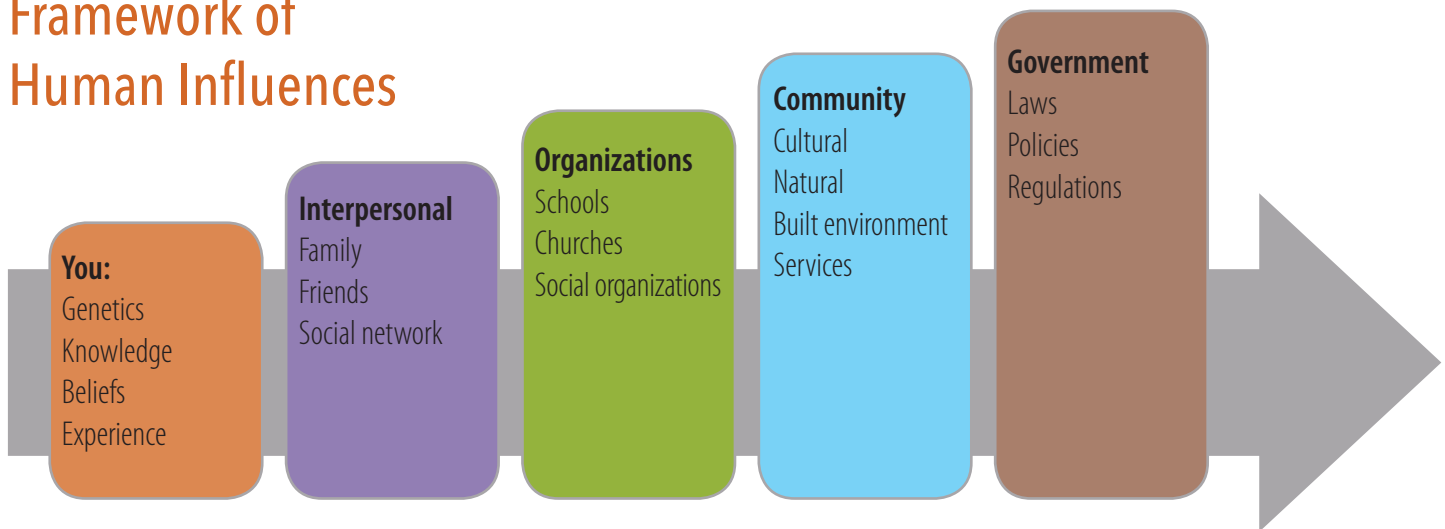
Cohesive communities share a common vision among the people who live there. Individuals and families in those communities feel a sense of belonging. People in those communities appreciate and place a value on each other's backgrounds and circumstances. Cohesive communities support strong and positive relationships among its people.

**Common Vision:** When community members recognize shared visions for the future (job security, safety, access to education, health care, housing, food, and other human necessities), they find more in common than not. Also, a community's common vision recognizes the individual contributions made by its members possessing a variety of talents and skills.

**Sense of Belonging:** Community members feeling a sense of belonging understand their rights and responsibilities to that place. They know what others expect. They also know what to expect in return. When people feel a sense of belonging to their communities, they trust the institutions that decide among the different interests of its people.

**Barriers to Sense of Belonging and Community Cohesion:** When people do not feel connection to their communities or to each other, they become isolated.

# Framework of Human Influences



Isolation contributes to a sense of mistrust of others, mistrust of community institutions (schools, places of worship, governmental entities, health care facilities, etc.), and to a general discomfort or unhappiness. Communities without cohesion tend toward the corrosive effects of intolerance and exclusion.

## What is Culture?

Think of “culture” as a pair of prescription eyeglasses. Cultures work as lenses through which people view the world. Cultures tell members of society how to behave in the world and help individuals know how to act in a variety of social situations. Most people know their own cultures quite well. What if your own cultural lens helped you see cultural differences as something to inspire new knowledge or new learning? Consider this as food for thought.

What forms cultures?

- » Families
- » Ancestors
- » Work (career choices align you with others who choose similar paths)
- » Friends and other associations (people with similar ideas and preferences)
- » Hobbies (could be a “culture” of scooter or horseback riders)
- » Faith communities
- » Other belief systems (activities that gather people together)
- » Public leaders

Interactions with other people contribute to the cultural process and defines people as humans. Culture and biological heritage are transmitted through language, literacy, artistic expression, and other tools to teach young people and others.

## Framework of Human Influences

This framework shows the building blocks of people’s likes and dislikes, self-concepts, beliefs, world views, and political views. Humans cannot say, “I don’t have a culture” when considering they are born into many cultures without ever leaving their communities. Each person experiences these influences differently.

## Personal Biases

Your personal biases surface as a subconscious reaction to what is familiar and what is different. People view their environments, interactions with others, and approaches to tasks based on their preferences, or biases.

- » You like what you know, and you know what you like.
- » You view your environments based on what you know and what you learned during your development.
- » You may look at difference as “wrong.”
- » You may find it difficult to see people and experiences in neutral terms.

## Implicit and Explicit Bias

Describing and discussing the terms implicit bias and explicit bias may help you understand your subconscious reactions to people, events, and tasks.

The Ohio State University’s Kirwan Institute studies race and ethnicity. The Intercultural Development Instrument can be used for understanding biases. As an important caution, however, it may be good to know that intercultural sensitivity and acceptance is strongly correlated to multicultural experience and the ability to consider multiple frameworks in human development. Additionally, the IDI offers explanations on humans’ two types of biases.

**Implicit Bias:** The attitudes or beliefs that affect your understanding, actions, and decisions, which are acted upon involuntarily (in the subconscious).

- » Activated without a person's intention or control.
- » Everyone possesses implicit biases. Implicit bias generally favors an individual's ingroup.
- » Implicit biases do not always align with your "explicit biases."
- » Researchers continue to document the effects of implicit bias across domains of work, education, law enforcement, and other "real world" situations. For example, in an orchestra audition in which musicians auditioned behind a screen, significantly more women were accepted for employment.
- » Implicit biases can be "unlearned" by gaining awareness of them.

**Explicit Bias:** The attitudes and beliefs that humans have about each other, events, and tasks on a conscious level.

- » Activated with a person's intent or control.
- » When you feel threatened, you may draw group boundaries to distinguish yourselves from others.
- » When you perceive your biases as valid, you may justify unfair treatment of others.
  - » Long-term unfair treatment may have a lingering effect on its victims. Example: Landlords and housing developers refusing to allow minorities into select neighborhoods, regardless of ability to pay. This results in generational inequality.
  - » Unfair treatment may appear justified when public leaders engage in such behavior.

## Building Relationships

Most people engage their personal biases without thinking when they meet people for the first time, they experience an event or activity for the first time, or when they eat an unfamiliar food for the first time. So how do you begin to build a relationship with someone who may come from a different country, have a different culture, have a different outward appearance, or possess a different faith, or belief system? Finding common ground can be an excellent place to begin. Here are some points to consider.

- » You both belong to the human race.
- » As humans, you share many of the same desires for your life and family:
  - » Nurture your children to adulthood;
  - » Desire a comfortable environment free from harm;

- » Strive for financial success and well-being; and
- » Hope for a day when you may rest from hard work (retirement).
- » You eat locally available food.
- » You are vulnerable to aging, diseases, extreme weather, and negative influences.

If you can begin to look at others in terms of what you have in common, you are ready to learn more about one another.

## Advantages and Implications of Building Intercultural Relationships

Building relationships with someone from a different culture, with a different ethnic background, from a different socio-economic level, or even from a different family gives people greater knowledge of one another. From a positive point of view, these relationships may lead to social progress, social unity, and social stability. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2040, the United States population will see a shift to "pluralism." Pluralism happens when there is no one dominant cultural or ethnic population. As the population moves toward pluralism, the ability to build intercultural relationships helps people move toward social unity and to integrate "minority" communities into mainstream societies. Opposite of the "melting pot" concept, which implies homogeneity, intercultural relationships move people toward heterogeneity, or the "tossed salad" concept. The "tossed salad" notion implies that identities and cultures remain intact, but integrate to make a whole community.

## Recommendations

When people live in communities where everyone is alike, they tend toward mistrust of those who look and behave differently. They may not see the need or have the desire to explore outside their communities. When that sentiment exists, it becomes difficult to embrace others who are different because of origins, traditions, circumstances, and the other factors that make people unique. Use this lesson as a starting point to nurture your own outreach to others by considering these recommendations to building intercultural relationships.

- » Be deliberate about learning from others.
  - » Ask direct, respectful questions, such as: "How is the U.S. different from your country of origin?" "What about living in the U.S. do you enjoy?"
  - » Create environments conducive to dialogue: All humans need to eat, thus a possible avenue for dialogue is sharing meals.

- » Put a human face on those you do not understand or fear.
  - » Foster friendships with individuals from groups you do not understand.
- » Find opportunities to travel to other countries with experienced travelers.
- » Align yourself with those experienced travelers who embrace a variety of cultures and feel comfortable with interacting in populations from different socio-economic levels.
- » Look for the truth when you hear negative comments or stories about those who are different.
- » Volunteer with groups outside your usual circles of friendships and other associations.
- » Remember that difference is simply difference and stands on its own without being better or worse.
- » Promote equality of opportunity and inclusion for individuals or groups outside the “mainstream” or dominant culture. Are you receptive to outside groups integrating in your usual circles of association?
- » Observe mindful comparisons; in other words, practice non-judgment of others.
- » Look for opportunities to interact with those who are different.
- » Equip yourselves to live and thrive alongside those from many different backgrounds.
- » Look for cultural liaisons: individuals who can act as bridges from one community to another.

## Conclusion

When most people think of immigrants, they think of people who have come to the United States in the past 30 years. The dominant population does not think of itself as immigrants. With that in mind, consider responses from ethnically diverse subjects in rural communities who have emigrated in the past 20 years. Their responses may help you understand that people who are seen as different because of their origins may not be so different after all. Researchers found common ground when they asked, “Why did you come to the United States?” Answers included:

- » This is a place where I feel safe and protected.
- » My children will be well educated here.
- » I feel respected here.
- » I live here, because we all have common goals for our children.
- » I can be involved with schools, libraries, and churches.
- » I know our neighbors, and I am not afraid.
- » This local government cares about me and my family.
- » I feel pride for my neighborhood and community.
- » Help and support comes in the times of need.

These are indicators of a cohesive community. A cohesive community supports intercultural relationships because it chooses to acknowledge others as individuals who have more in common with the local community than not. It adopts the concepts of opportunity and inclusion for individuals or groups who “don’t look like us.”

Remember who you are and understand the influences that shaped your points of view, your preferences, your ways of knowing, and your biases.

### Authors:

*Debra Bolton, Ph.D., CFLE, Extension Specialist, Southwest Research and Extension Center  
Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D., CFLE, Extension Specialist, Family Studies and Human Services*

### Reviewers:

*Jill Martinson, Bertha Mendoza, and Kathryn Schieferecke*

References may be found in the leader’s guide for this lesson, MF3341.

Publications from Kansas State University are available at:  
[www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu](http://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu)

Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only. No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned.

Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights reserved. In each case, credit Debra Bolton, *Build Intercultural Relationships for Better Understanding of Your Neighbor, Fact Sheet*, Kansas State University, August 2018.

**Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service**

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, J. Ernest Minton, Interim Director.