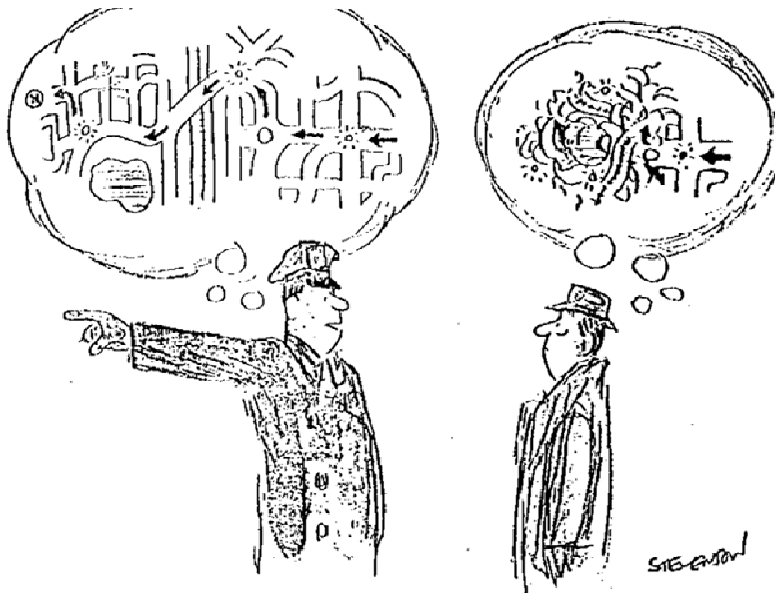


CULTURAL MODELS

By Stephanie Fryberg and Raji Rhys

We may have the same academic destination in mind, being a successful student or faculty member, but we may have different ideas about how to get there.

One way we organize and understand our social world is through the use of cultural models or culturally shaped mental maps. Cultural models are made up of culturally derived ideas and practices that are embodied, enacted, or instituted in everyday life (Fryberg & Markus, 2007). These ideas and practices provide information about how to be a person, about what is good, what is right, and, importantly, what is not. Cultural models give form and direction to individual experiences by shaping and informing perception, cognition, emotion, and motivation. These models are so ingrained in our everyday lives that we often presume that other people share the same ideas and practices. For example, in the academy, while we may have the same academic destination in mind (e.g., being a successful student or faculty member), we may have different ideas about how to get there or about what constitutes success when we get there.



The structure and function of a model

In the academy, cultural models play a pivotal role in the everyday experiences of students, faculty, and staff. For example, while some ideas about being successful members of the academy may be supported by the culture of the academy, others are not. When an individual's ways of being are not supported by the culture of the academy, they may experience the academy, among other things, as unwelcoming and rigid in its standards.

The culture of the academy refers to the implicit and explicit patterns of ideas, values, and practices that emerge over time (i.e., they are historical products), but that are widely shared and tacitly instantiated in the everyday functioning of the academy (D'Andrade, 1981; 1995; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Shore 1996; 1999; Sperber, 1985). The culture of the academy gives meaning and structure to everyday activities and sets up guidelines for rewarding different ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. For example, the culture of the academy provides guidelines for evaluating academic ability, and, as such, it provides specific images of

what constitutes success. In other words, being successful, like any other behavior or activity, requires engaging in culture specific meanings and practices (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Li, 2003; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997; Tomasello, 2000). If a person does not participate in the culturally prescribed way, then she or he is at risk of not being seen as successful.

In a series of studies by Fryberg and Markus (2007), they found that the cultural models of education held by American Indian, Asian American, and European American university students were both similar and different. European Americans were more individualistic in their construction of self and more self-focused in their future academic goals, whereas both American Indian and Asian American students were more collectively oriented in their understandings of self and in their future goals. While both American Indian and Asian American students endorsed some individualist aspect to self, their goals and aspirations for a college education were more family and community-oriented.

Interestingly, American Indian and Asian American students also expressed this family and community orientation differently. Asian American students put school first because it was what their family would want, whereas American Indian students were more likely to put family and community needs ahead of education because it was the "right" or "good" way to be a family and community member.

One consequence of these cultural models is that they may lead to misconceptions on the part of students and faculty. For example, if an American Indian student decides to leave campus because of a family or community emergency, then she or he may need to ask a faculty member for an extension or for permission to miss class. While this may not reflect the individual's commitment to education, but rather their commitment to family and community, it may be perceived as such on the part of the faculty member. Moreover, if the faculty member rejects the request, then she or he may be asking the student to pit family and community needs against acquiring a formal education. In the end, the student may decide to leave campus because it is the "right" or "good" way to be a student and family/community member according to her or his cultural model. Ultimately, however, the student may end up performing less well in the class or may decide that the faculty member is uncaring and insensitive.

In fact, given the tacit nature of cultural models, when the American Indian student asked the faculty member for the extension or for permission to miss class, she or he may have presumed that the faculty member would have done the exact same thing given the same situation. That is, they may presume that others hold the same cultural model. In the end, when the faculty member does not respond in the anticipated manner, the student may see the faculty member and the academy as being foreign to them, as "not me," and the faculty member may perceive the American Indian student as falling short of the high expectations of the academy.

In order to meet the ongoing efforts to diversify the academy, students and faculty must be "eternally vigilant" in recognizing how the cultural images of successful students privilege the dominant group and potentially undermine those who are historically underrepresented in the academy. The problem may not be that the culturally underrepresented students are falling short or that they are not excellent, but rather that faculty are unable to see them as excellent because they do not fit their cultural model or stereotype of a "successful student."

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