

## Cultural Differences That Affect Relationships

What follows is a summary of pointers made by Katie J. Rawson, *Crossing Cultures with Jesus. Sharing Good News with Sensitivity and Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2015) 66-72.

Many Majority Western Cultures	Many Non-Western Cultures
Individualist thinking	Collectivist (group-oriented) thinking
Short-term friendships	Long-term friendships
Low obligation friendships	High obligation friendships
Time orientation	Event orientation
Goal orientation	Relationship orientation
Equality emphasis	Hierarchy emphasis
Mixed gender friendships	Mixed gender friendships less common

It is important not to treat the above broad distinctions as hard-and-fast. Cultural stereotypes must be avoided. Each person we meet should be treated as unique. Keep this in mind as you consider these general differences.

### Individualist and Collectivist Thinking

1. People's sense of identity is strongly shaped by either individualism or collectivism.
  - a. Individualists: identity is shaped by what individuals do.
  - b. Collectivists: identity is shaped by membership in a group.
2. In every society there will be some who exhibit the opposite cultural pattern.
3. Entering the frame of reference of collectivists:
  - a. Get to know their friends and family.
  - b. Collectivists may feel more comfortable in pairs when they enter new settings.
  - c. Collectivists may bring friends along to social occasions and Bible discussions. Always have more than enough food or Bibles.
  - d. When a collectivist brings friends to meet us, a certain degree of trust has usually already been built.
  - e. Getting to know the family members of collectivists will build trust.
4. Individualism and collectivism affect how groups practise hospitality and outreach:
  - a. The tendency of individualists is to seek prior knowledge of how many they will be catering for and to decide in advance how to provide what they estimate will be needed.
  - b. The tendency of collectivists is to issue an open invitation, wait and see who will come and work out on the spot, if need be, how to adequately provide for all who come.

### Short-term and Long-term Friendships

1. Those engaged in serious gospel ministry and relationship-building across cultures may be wise to focus on developing friendships with one or two persons given that friendships in non-Western cultures are often long-lasting.

2. Build relationships with those who are open to us and to Jesus, who want to welcome us into their lives, and have potential to impact their families and friends.
3. Discriminate between spending time with groups and spending times with close friends:
  - a. Issue invitations to meals and parties to entire groups, including group members you haven't met.
  - b. Make other plans for tea or coffee with the one or two people with whom you are developing a close friendship.
4. Plan regular time to spend with close friends and discover what will help the friendship to grow.
5. Spend time in your friend's home or community and become acquainted with his or her friends or roommates.
  - a. When you visit consider bringing something such as fruit for the entire apartment or family.
  - b. Being friendly and hospitable with the friends of your friend could open up the hearts of the entire group.

### **Low-obligation and High-Obligation Friendships**

1. In group-oriented societies friendships often involve high obligation. People accomplish things through connections.
2. If asked to do something you cannot personally do, prayerfully consider whether someone you know can help, while, of course, refusing to do anything that it is immoral or illegal or both.

### **Goal and Relationship Orientation**

1. When meeting with someone from a non-Western background for Bible study avoid the temptation to be too goal-oriented. Also spend some significant time catching up with your friend each time you meet.
2. When visiting friends or attending a cultural event treat the event itself as the important thing and avoid being too concerned about the time. Use the time to communicate with your friends and relax when things don't run according to time.

### **Equality and Hierarchy Emphasis**

1. The Western tendency to emphasise the equality of those of different social status expresses itself in the informal way Westerners often treat those in authority, something that may well shock people from non-Western nations.
2. When entering the world of our non-Western friends be mindful of power distance, showing proper respect for elders and those in authority.
3. If we are seen as teachers or leaders this may mean that non-Westerners will refrain from asking us questions we can't answer, so as to make sure we don't lose face.
4. For non-Westerners the emphasis on hierarchy may help them to appreciate God's greatness and glory. But it may also keep them from understanding God's desire for intimate relationship.

### **Mixed Gender Friendships**

1. Actions that are intended to communicate simple friendliness in one culture may be misconstrued as inappropriate in another culture, especially in cultures where one-to-one friendships with members of the opposite sex are less prevalent. Ask informants about proper behaviour between sexes in the other culture.
2. It may not be appropriate at all to have a friendship with someone of the opposite sex in some cultures, notably Muslim cultures. A one-to-one meeting with a Muslim of the opposite sex can be confusing and hurtful.
3. It is important for women to realise that often it is the case that if a non-Western man is not willing to seek the faith with the help of a Christian man, it is unwise to seek to be the person who will lead that non-Westerner to the Lord. If seekers are not willing to meet with someone of their own gender then this is usually a good indication that they are not genuine seekers.