

Talk with me

Volunteer language mentors
for refugees



MANUAL

for an Intercultural Training
for Young Refugees



Why do we need to learn about cultures?

In the countries we grow up, we learn how things should be done, what is expected of us, how we should behave, how things are organized and done, how we communicate, what family “normally” look like, how we express ourselves, what to eat, which music we listen to, how to work, study, spend free time etc. Thus, as we learn from our parents, family members, neighbors, teachers etc., we are shaped by the culture we grow up and live in.

But of course cultures can differ: not only from country to country, but also within one country. For instance, you might see the world differently depending on whether you come from a big city or were raised in a small village in a rural area.

But still – the culture we grow up in has an impact on our way of thinking, our values, behavior, communication etc.

Some of these differences are obvious, visual “signs” of a culture, like the way we dress and typical gestures we make. But of course, there are many “invisible” dimensions of culture which are not written down or explained, but which are felt and expected. Most of the time, we are not aware of these cultural dimensions.



“Visual signs” of culture:

In order to make participants aware of the visual signs of culture, we use the exercise “gestures” in mixed groups. How to express:

- Yes – no
- Agreement – disagreement
- Liking something – disliking something
- Expressing: “You are stupid or a fool!”
- Expressing: “You are great!”
- Hello and goodbye
- Stop
- Go away – come here
- Attracting attention

Then we talk about different signs of cultures, for example:

- Eating habits and traditions
- The concept of beauty
- Greetings
- Getting introduced and introducing yourself



“Invisible” dimensions of culture:

Then we discuss the different ways of doing things in different countries or cultures, e.g.:

- How to get to know each other
- Behavior towards family members
- Friendships: How to find friends and typical things you do with friends
- Leisure time
- Accepted physical distance: concept of nearness/closeness and distance
- Accepted loudness in public and private place
- Role of men and women
- How to get to know a girl- or boyfriend
- Direct – indirect language
- Concept of time/punctuality
- Concept of hygiene, cleanliness

It is important to understand the different dimensions of culture and to be open-minded about them. If you have intercultural competences, you are able to interpret and understand different situations better and to avoid intercultural conflicts and misunderstandings.

Dimensions of cultures

How do we acquire culture?

Exercise 1: Ask the participants: “How do you “get” a culture? Are you born with it? Do you “pick it up” by living in a specific country?”

Write down the ideas and order them.

The result will be that there are at least three methods of “acquiring a culture”:

1. **Learned** (formally and informally, consciously and unconsciously, through language, art, etc.)
2. **Shared/transmitted from generation to generation** (family, peers, media, school, church)
3. **Based on symbols** (gestures, clothes, objects, flags, religious icons, with language probably being one of the most important and influential means)

Being in a new country means that you have “missed out” on learning about the host culture. So you have to compensate for what you have missed out.

How do we learn about a new culture?

Exercise 2: Think of situations here in your new country, where you didn’t understand what was happening, where you had the feeling you were misunderstood or where you found that things are handled in a way that is different from how they were done in your home country. Think about cultural differences and some of the challenges you have faced in communications with others.

The trainer will try to explain the situations in a way that is appropriate to the language level of the refugees. The trainer might use the “Dimensions of cultures” theory of Geert Hofstede (see section “Intercultural training for young voluntary language mentors” in the “Curriculum for language mentors”).

It is important to be aware of important hidden rules, expectations, and values in your new country.

To get an idea of how to present this in easy language, we have developed a presentation about local culture, which might be an

inspiration for you. Below you will find a presentation about German culture.



But do not forget: every person is an individual, so do not judge them and do not have any prejudices only based on nationality! Everyone is different – so be open-minded!

Stereotype: Germans love rules

- Rules and regulations are important for Germans
- The Germans stick by their rules
- Anyone who violates the rules has to expect a penalty
- People tend to expect the worst





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