

When we think of culture, we may think of art, dress, religion, language, food or the ‘total range of activities and ideas of a people’

(Collins Concise Dictionary’s definition of culture).

Culture also includes attitudes, understanding, values, beliefs, ideas and behaviours. It is more than, and can sometimes be different from, a person’s nationality or ethnicity.

Cultural Awareness

An understanding of cultural issues is essential for mediators. Our individual experience of culture shapes and informs our attitudes and approach to resolving conflicts. Mediation itself is not a ‘culture free’ concept and there is a danger that in their ‘impartial’ role mediators see themselves as free of cultural influences. If we assume we know or share common values, beliefs, understandings or expectations we may not ask important questions that allow people to speak for themselves.

Culture and Conflict

Conflict can arise from assumptions about people; misunderstandings or misinterpreting what is said or done in any context. Britain is a multi-cultural society, and cultural differences may add an extra dimension to any mediation process. If mediators are not aware of cultural differences and other ways of seeing and resolving conflict the mediation process is less likely to produce individual, specific, and creative solutions.

Cultural Differences

‘Worldview’ or how individuals see their relationship with others: In an individualistic culture people see themselves as autonomous: personal goals and needs take precedence over other people’s goals and needs. As a result, a short-term view of managing conflict seems natural.

In a culture of collectivism, people see themselves as connected to others; individual goals and needs are less important than the community’s goals and needs. The desire for harmony to sustain wider social relations takes precedence and a longer-term view of managing conflict follows.

- > **Communication Styles:** Verbal and Non- Verbal - As mediators we sometimes assume that direct communication is required to resolve conflict but some cultures do not like face- to- face negotiation, especially with strangers. Non-verbal differences can have a significant impact: a nod mean “no” and a shake of the head means “yes” in different cultures; avoiding eye contact is polite in one culture but can indicate evasiveness in another; silence is sometimes rude in one culture and a sign of respect in another.
- > **Attitudes to Conflict:** Some Western cultures will accept conflict as a necessary (even enjoyable) part of life. In other cultures, confrontation is generally avoided to preserve harmony.
- > **Conflict Resolution:** Some cultures favour formal, structured mediation sessions. Other cultures favour open, inclusive, informal public debate and resolution involving community members.
- > **Mediators:** In many cultures people who help resolve conflicts are well respected and have the power and authority to influence resolutions. They may advise or even coerce disputants to co-operate. The Western model of the mediator is a more as a neutral facilitator.
- > **Outcomes:** Some cultures focus on a signed agreement. Other cultures may require a ritualised apology, an exchange of gifts or reparation.

Mediators can sometimes help people explore cultural differences to enhance the mediation process and increase understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds. It is, however, always important to be clear of your own and your service's ethical base. There may be circumstances where you feel that culturally driven demands are ethically unacceptable – e.g. if a cultural requirement is to discriminate on the basis of gender.

Gazeteer of Cultures and Beliefs: <https://www.commisceo-global.com/resources/country-guides>

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Sacro, 17 Gayfield Square, Edinburgh EH1 3NX

tel: 0131 624 7263

email: infoscmc@sacro.org.uk

web: www.scmc.sacro.org.uk

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