

# Cross Cultural Competency in Research - A Starting Point

## Culturally Competent Researchers

Researchers working in international development are frequently working in contexts where the cultural background of local research partners and research participants may be very different to their own.

Understanding culture and cultural difference is complex and requires time and experience. However, researchers can begin building cross-cultural competency by developing the experience, ability to reflect on their own cultural values, identify differences with their research participants and manage these respectfully.

Researchers can also prepare for cross-cultural interaction ensuring they have a thorough understanding of the cultural values of the research setting.

Here are ten common examples of cultural values and practices that relate to research. Under each topic is a series of questions for the researcher to consider prior to commencing the research. If local research partners are involved, they may be the most reliable source of information and advice on what to do, and what not to do.

**Speaking and Listening:** When interacting both one on one and in group settings, are turns taken by everyone? Is it common for there to be a few moments of silence after someone speaks? Is responding without a pause or speaking over the top of someone a sign of disrespect?

**Communication Styles:** Is information shared in indirect ways, through the telling of stories or fables? Do people talk specifically about their own experiences or do they share information with a degree of generality?

**Animation/emotion:** Is emotionally expressive communication a characteristic of this culture or is a restrained approach and control of all emotion valued preferred? How might a researcher respond to a research participant whose communication is highly emotional?

**Gestures and Touch:** Is it appropriate to touch others; shake hands, touch people's shoulders or arms, embrace them or kiss them on the cheek? Does this change if it is two people of different gender? What is an appropriate greeting?

**Eye Contact:** Is it culturally appropriate to make eye contact with research participants during the research?

**Space:** Is the most appropriate research environment in a formal interview setting with people sitting in a face-to-face orientation or a less formal spatial arrangement with people sitting in a circle or side by side. Where would an appropriate and safe research location – somewhere private or somewhere more open where others may gather informally?

**Directness/indirectness:** Is talking directly with a person in a face to face orientation a culturally appropriate form of communication? Does the research participant have an opportunity to refuse a request or question without directly saying no?

**Time:** Do research participants perceive time as being precise and punctuality a form of respect? Does time have a more fluid cultural understanding where the "right time" to begin an activity or discussion is not determined by a clock but when all people are present?

**Clothing:** Are specific forms of dress required, including veils or head-coverings? Is the exposure of particular parts of the body and /or skin considered culturally inappropriate or offensive? Do shoes need to be removed before entering a house or building?

**Gender:** Are there cultural traditions or values that require only people of the same gender to interact with the researcher?