

## SOME NOTES ON CULTURE

There is a wide variety of definitions of 'culture':

- A culture is a way of life shared by a large group of people
- Culture is what is taught by a large group to its members
- Culture is the filter through which we see 'reality'
- A culture is a distinctive set of
  - manners (customs, practices, rules)
  - morals (values, beliefs, norms)
  - arts (visual, literary, performing, aural, etc) and
  - traditions including knowledge and history shared by a large group of people.

It doesn't matter which definition you prefer, but it is important to remember that:

- **Culture describes the group, not the individuals in it;** so, not all members of the group agree about manners, morals, arts and traditions, about what the lifestyle is, about what should be taught to the members of the group. For example, 'racing, rugby, and beer' and 'quarter-acre, half-pint, pavlova paradise' are expressions which have been used to describe New Zealand culture, but many New Zealanders are not interested in one or more of these aspects of New Zealand life.
- **Cultures are changing all the time,** as they influence each other and respond to changes in the environment; changes in manners and arts (using one of the definitions above) occur more quickly than changes in fundamental values and beliefs. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between cultures because there has been so much overlap due to interaction amongst the members.
- **Membership in a cultural group is based on your behaviour and beliefs,** not on inherent characteristics such as actual age, gender, race, sexual practices, occupation, citizenship, etc.' Being a member of a culture means that you understand how and why the group acts as it does and you know enough to be able to operate competently within it yourself. Usually, people live within the cultures of which they 'appear' to be members. For example, most people aged between 13 and 19 prefer teenage language, dress codes, music, but some people in that age group prefer older or younger cultural lifestyles and some outside that age group adopt the teenage lifestyle - both of which may be very disconcerting to others who expect them to act according to their chronological age.
- Culture is like an iceberg: **what is visible** (ways of eating, dressing, speaking, arts) **is the relatively small part;** the most important parts are not easily recognised (values, worldview, etc)
- In society, **some cultural groups have more power/authority than others,** which encourages some people to learn/adopt those cultures. For example, some women have learned to operate within heterosexual men's culture because they are more likely to get good jobs that way; many Māori have adopted Pākeha culture.
- **Sub-cultures are smaller groups** within a large culture. Nobody has ever defined how big a group has to be to constitute a culture or sub-culture, but usually either would include thousands rather than dozens of people. For example, New Zealand culture includes Māori, Pākeha, Pasifika and Asian cultures; Māori culture includes many iwi such as Ngā Puhī, Ngāti Porou, Kai Tahu; Pākeha culture includes people identifying as Irish, as Dutch, as Dalmatian, etc; Pasifika culture in New Zealand includes Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island cultures; and of course there are many different Asian cultures as well. Some of the large sub-cultures even have sub-cultures within them; for example, Christianity includes both Catholics and Protestants; Protestants include Presbyterians, Mormons, Methodists and so on.