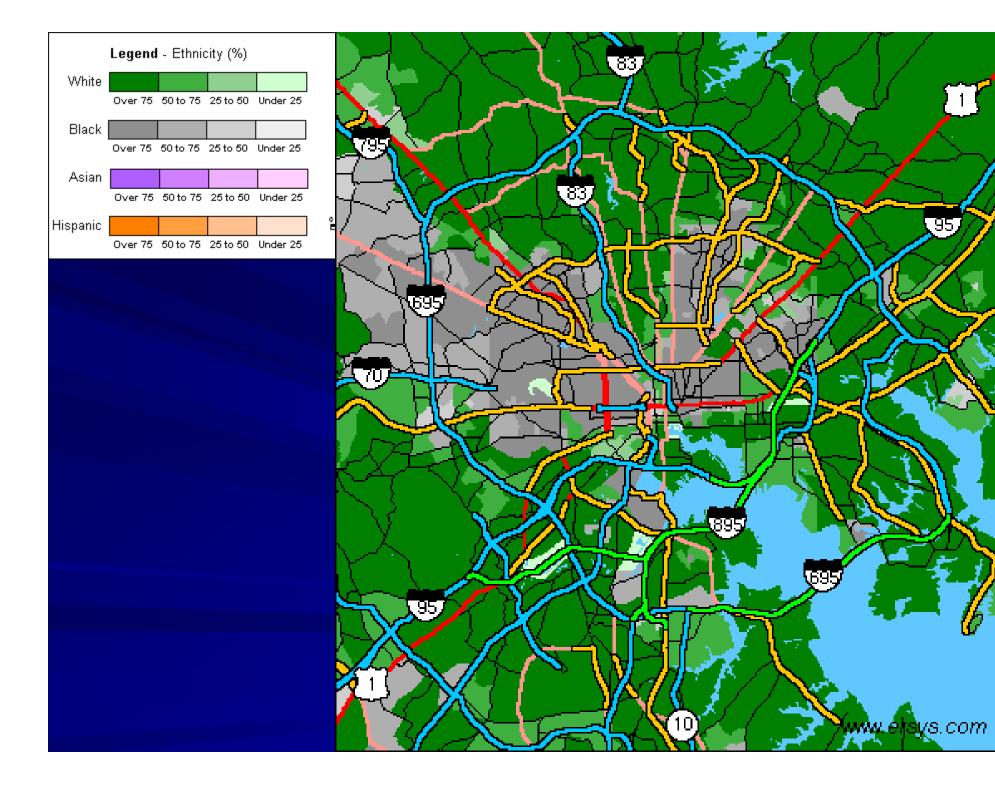# Understanding Cultural Differences

CE 105 Civil Engineering Projects

Tim Ellis, Ph.D., P.E.

Department of Civil Construction and Environmental Engineering

Iowa State University

November 18, 2009

Background

Ph.D.	Clemson	1995	Environmental Systems Engineering
M.S.	Georgia Tech	1988	Environmental Engineering
B.S.	Drexel	1984	Civil Engineering

1990 - 1991	Senior Environmental Engineer. Engineering-Science, Inc. Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.
1989 - 1990	Project Engineer. Engineering-Science, Inc., Fairfax, Virginia.
1984 - 1987	Engineer in Operations. City of Baltimore, Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant, Baltimore, Maryland
1981 - 1983	Project Engineer (Coop). Wilson T. Ballard Company, Owings Mills, Maryland.

Legend - Ethnicity (%)

White — Over 75 | 50 to 75 | 25 to 50 | Under 25

Black — Over 75 | 50 to 75 | 25 to 50 | Under 25

Asian — Over 75 | 50 to 75 | 25 to 50 | Under 25

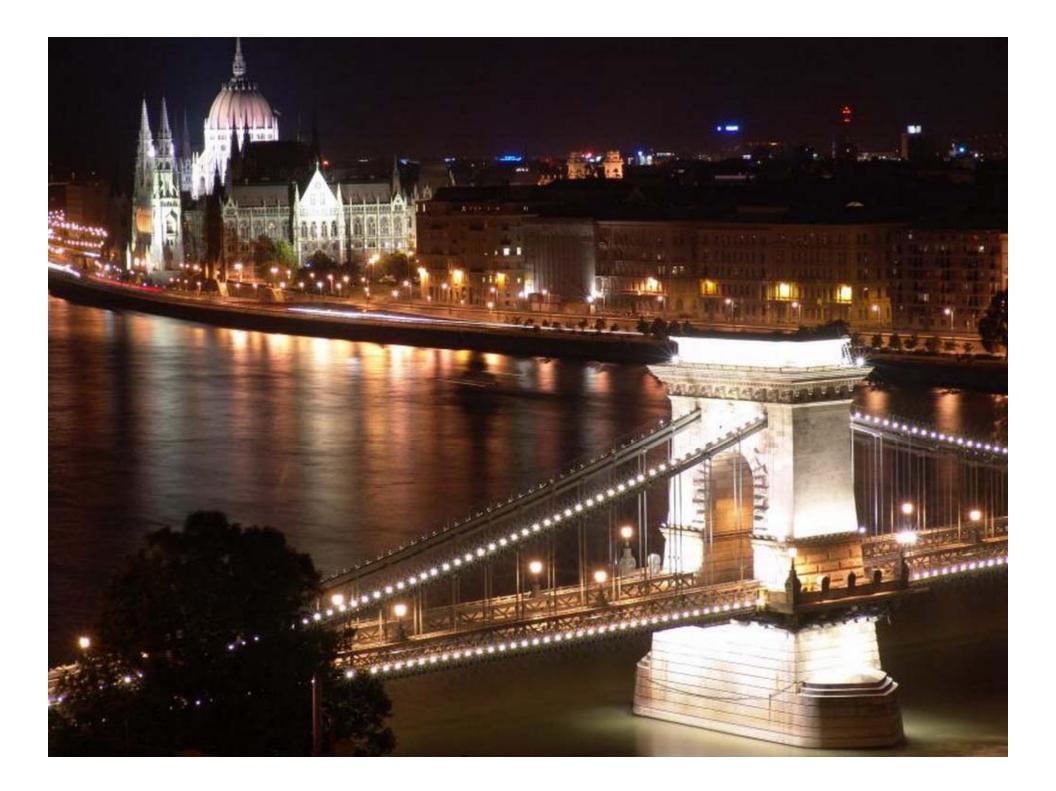Hispanic — Over 75 | 50 to 75 | 25 to 50 | Under 25

www.esys.com

Saif 2006

Why understanding cultural differences is important

- You *will* work with people from other cultures (probably starting in this class)
- You *will* have the opportunity to travel
- The "world is flat"

Hot vs. Cold Climate
(from Lanier text)

- Hot climate cultures are
  - relationship based
  - Communication must create a "feel good" atmosphere
  - Society is feeling oriented
  - Efficiency and time do not take priority over the person
  - Inappropriate to talk business upon first arriving at a meeting or on the phone

Cold climate cultures

- Task oriented
- Communication must provide accurate information
- Society is logic oriented
- Efficiency and time are high priorities and taking them seriously shows respect for the other person

Direct Communication

- Short direct questions show respect and professionalism
- "Yes" is yes and "no" is no
- An honest direct answer is information only (does not reflect on how the person feels about you)
- You can say what you think and it will not be taken personally

Indirect Communication

- All about being friendly
- Every questions must be phrased in such a way as to not offend
- Use third party for accurate information
- Yes may not be an answer to your question
- Avoid embarrassing people

Individualistic Culture

- I am a self-standing person with my own identity
- Every individual should have an opinion and can speak for him or herself
- Taking initiative within a group is good and expected
- One must know how to make one's own decisions
- My behavior reflects on me and not on the group

Group Oriented Culture

- My identity is tied to the group (family, tribe, etc.)
- My group protects and provides for me
- Taking initiative within a group can be greatly determined by my role
- I do not expect to have to stand alone
- My behavior reflects on the whole group
- Team members expect direction from the leader

Inclusion Cultures

- Group oriented
- Individuals are automatically included in conversation, meals, and other activities of the group
- Possessions are to be freely used by all: food, tools, etc.
- Not desirable to be left to oneself
- Rude to hold a private conversation or make plans that exclude others present

Privacy Culture

- Enjoy having time and space to themselves
- People are expected to ask permission to borrow something or interrupt a conversation
- Each person is considered to be the steward of his or her possessions
- In a community setting, it might be common to label one's food tools, etc. to set them apart from the groups common possessions
- It is acceptable to hold private conversations or make exclusive plans

Hospitality – Hot Climate

- Spontaneous often without advance invitation
- Context for relationship
- Usually in the home
- Host takes care of the needs of the guest. Guest pays for nothing
- Gift is usually expected
- Food and drink involved
- Travelers are taken in and provided for

Hospitality – Cold Climate

- Taken very seriously and planned for
- Not spontaneous – advance notice is expected
- Travelers are expected to make their own arrangements other than what is specifically communicated to the host ahead of time
- Guests need to expect to pay for their transportation and restaurants if visiting the US. If the host plans to pay he will usually say so.
- Hospitality is a special occasion taking the full attention of the host

High Context

- "Who you are related to" matters
- "Who you know" matters
- Better to overdress than under dress
- Watch to see how others respond to a situation in order to apply appropriate behavior
- Honor the people you are dealing with
- Ask a local person who has lived overseas what is important to know
- Use manners, respect rules, give attention to appropriate greetings

Low Context

- Who you know is important, but what you know is more important
- Don't be offended by casual atmosphere
- Lack of protocol does not mean rejecting, nor is it dishonoring
- Leave your rules at home
- Address people by their given names unless others use titles

Time and Planning –Hot Climate

- **Hot Climate**
  - Not oriented around the clock
  - Event oriented
  - Spontaneous and flexible
  - Respond to what life brings
  - Saving time is not as important as experiencing the moment
  - Recognize that structure is required in some areas of life (e.g., military)
  - Informal visits are part of the event

Time and Planning – Cold Climate

- **Cold Climate**
  - time oriented
  - Structured approach to life
  - Enjoy using time efficiently
  - Plan their day
  - Expecting the event to begin on time
  - Visiting or informal chatting happens before or after the event

Practical Next Steps

- Look for a culture interpreter
- Read up on history
- Find a bookstore in host country to see what other foreigners have found valuable
- Before leaving home, find other people from that country who can talk about their home
- Try to find out about what values are important to the people

Practical Next Steps

- Be aware of culture shock and culture stress
- On returning home be aware of reverse culture shock
- Look for others who have travelled to share your experiences with (those who haven't travelled may not care)
- Learn phrases in the local language or dialect (even a small attempt shows that you value their culture)
- Go to listen and observe, don't pass judgment until you know the reason behind their customs