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CULTURAL THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

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Quick! (Time yourself if possible.) – Find the Z in the first column of letters, as fast as you can. Then do the same in the second column.

IMVXEW	ODUGQR
WVMEIX	GRODUQ
VXWIEM	DUROQG
MIEWVX	RGQUDQ
WEIMXV	RQGOUD
IWVXEM	GUQZOR
MXEZVW	ODGRUQ
VWEMXI	UQGORD

Most people are much faster with the second column, where the shape of the surrounding letters – all those roundy Os, Gs, and Qs - is very different from the strongly-diagonal Z. The distraction of the diagonal-heavy Ws, Vs and Xs in the first column makes the Z harder to see.

I was thinking of this classic study in pattern recognition last week when I was talking with teachers in a bilingual school in Central America. At the headmasters' urging, I asked about any cultural differences they'd observed in how teachers teach, students study or parents parent. Some could rattle off a long list, consistent with what I'd expect.

But to my surprise, others really couldn't. (Yes, I'm aware that some power, status, and cultural factors were at play and that the host national teachers naturally felt protective about their school. And, although I tried to be as respectful and culturally sensitive as I could, my questioning approach surely felt more trustworthy to some teachers than others.)

But I witnessed a similar surprise recently when my intern interviewed American doctors who work in multicultural settings in Boston, asking about any cultural differences they'd seen. Most could come up with exactly NONE, even though they were immersed in them every day.

Why do some people recognize cultural patterns more easily others? And, importantly, what can we do to help people see them more easily?

As the Z-finding exercise above illustrates, if the pattern is just slightly different from your surroundings (or you're only seeing a fragment of the difference), it will be harder to note than if the pattern is loud and starkly different. This is why people

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who are living in a new culture rarely say there are no cultural differences – they're the Z amidst Os and Ds and it's very clear to them.

Practice, experience and motivation are what lead to expert pattern recognition. Through repeated exposure to closely-matching sequences, the doctor gets expert at recognizing patterns of symptoms, the musician at detecting composer-specific riffs, the graphics designer at distinguishing Arial from Century Gothic.

That's what we do in cross cultural training – we help people recognize cultural patterns and pick them out of the chaotic array of their lives. We set the stage for legitimate, sensitive inquiry about difference. Then we introduce a concept; define it; compare it to other related values; and then offer a range of examples in different settings – in the workplace, with neighbors, between parents and children. In this way, we train people to see its core, skeletal features so they can pick it out themselves when it shows up in the office or on the street. With time, the Z pops out of the Vs and Ws as clear as a bell.

Anne publishes e-notes on a regular basis on all topics of culture and family assimilation. To sign up go to: <http://www.interchangeinstitute.org/html/enotes.htm>

Dr. Copeland is a licensed psychologist with expertise in cultural transition and clinical psychology. Prior to founding The Interchange Institute in 1997, Dr. Copeland was Associate Professor of Psychology at Boston University, where she conducted research and research supervision in psychological aspects of family process assessment, ethnicity, cultural influences, immigration, development, developmental disabilities and affective development. During her tenure at the University, she relocated with her family to work in London in 1988, where she was the academic advisor for Boston University's British Programmes. After leaving her full-time position at the university, she served as Adjunct Associate Professor until 2007, continuing her role as mentor and research advisor to Psychology graduate students.

Dr. Copeland has written several books on topics of families and transition (Studying Families, Sage 1991, and Separating Together, 1997), and has authored over 60 research articles, chapters, and professional presentations. She has also written extensively, through The Interchange Institute, for people moving into or out of the United States, including Newcomer's Almanac, a newsletter for international newcomers to the United States published monthly since 1994, Understanding American Schools, Global Baby, A Smooth Beginning, and other support materials.

Dr. Copeland provides cross-cultural training for individuals and families moving to and from the United States. She also trains others to deliver tailored, individualized cross-cultural orientation programs. She developed and conducts International Writers' Club meetings for international newcomers in her community; essays from these Clubs about cultural differences are published in school newsletters, enhancing intercultural understanding throughout the school community.

Dr. Copeland has directed several research studies on expatriate families' experience, including two multinational in-depth analyses of the social, familial, and personal aspects of moving to a new country. Recent work focuses on the personal and family side of international short-term assignments, and on the role of one's home – its design and layout – on one's expatriate experience.