

Take Off Your Shoes: Following Cultural Clues among Asians/Pacific Islanders

When working in Asian or Pacific Islander populations, how can outsiders avoid making social missteps that might offend people? How can your staff gain the trust of community members and get them to participate in your project's efforts? These are some of the issues addressed in the latest addition to the *Culture in Evaluation* series, [Tobacco Control Evaluation with Asians and Pacific Islanders in California](#).

In order to make greater progress in addressing the health and tobacco use disparities among priority populations, tobacco control projects cannot afford to ignore the role culture plays in their work. To aid in this effort, TCEC developed a how-to guide which identifies some common cultural characteristics of each of the subgroups in the Asian and Pacific Islander populations. It also offers practical advice



about customs and taboos to be aware of as you go about your evaluation activities with these groups.



The guide synthesizes the cultural knowledge collected and compiled from both first and secondhand sources. Much of what we learned came from observations of and interviews with the staff of People's CORE, a community-based organization that works on a multi-unit housing tobacco control project in central Los Angeles with Filipinos, Koreans, Pacific Islanders and Latinos who live in and around Filipinotown.

Before going into a community (or an organization) for the first time, People's CORE recommends using "social investigation" methods to learn something about the people you are about to meet-find out what you might have in common, what cultural courtesies they practice, what could offend, what kinds of food they eat, etc.-so you are not caught off guard. It is particularly important to learn the social cues and expected protocols because so much of what is communicated in Asian and Pacific Islander cultures is conveyed non-



verbally. In fact, the words being spoken can often be secondary to what is really being expressed otherwise.

Once you have gained entry into the community, do more observing than talking at first. When invited into people's homes, watch to see if your hosts take off their shoes at the door or inside. Although they would never indicate it, wearing your shoes inside someone's house is a serious social misstep. Accept whatever food or gifts are offered to you. It is considered quite rude not to. In return, you will be expected to demonstrate reciprocity in some form. Pacific Islanders particularly appreciate having a ceremonial component to events.



When interacting with Pacific Islanders or Asians, be alert to social hierarchies and greeting protocols. Elders are highly revered and are often the ones you should greet first. Younger people are expected to be respectful and defer to their elders. Make every effort to practice modesty and humility, which are expected social norms. Loud, assertive or self-important behavior is looked down upon. Try to

avoid asking direct questions that may put people in a situation where they feel criticized and "lose face." This requires somewhat of a balancing act in order to collect the information necessary for your evaluation and yet manage all of the social etiquettes of a particular culture.

We witnessed these challenges as Christine Araquel, the youthful People's CORE project coordinator, facilitated a focus group of young and senior apartment tenants. The event began in an unhurried manner by serving a few Filipino delicacies. After allowing time for small talk and late arrivals, she spoke deferentially in a quiet voice to the elders while engaging the younger attendees as well. When one knowledgeable person tended to dominate the conversation, she did not rush to cut him off but created space for other opinions to be offered. She knew it was more important to maintain a respectful and prolonged relationship with community members than it was to get to every question on her list.



The Tobacco Control Evaluation Center will continue to make a point of incorporating the cultural knowledge and best practices from projects like yours into its publications, tools and teleconferences. If you have suggestions for any of our products, especially our *Culture in Evaluation* guides, please drop us a line at tobaccoeval@ucdavis.edu

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