



Bringing the  
learning *home*

# Cultural relativism & analysis



A *resource* for studying abroad  
Australian Learning & Teaching Council

Produced by Greg Downey,  
Jan Gothard, & Tonia Gray

2012  
**Resources**



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# Cultural relativism & analysis

## Instructions

The resources in this document are intended to accompany the Instructor's Guide provided for the module, Cultural Relativism and Analysis. These materials should be easier to photocopy for students to support the re-entry workshop outlined in that guide.

The documents should be distributed prior to the meeting for the workshop. This resources booklet contains a brief overview for students of cultural relativism and analysis as well as worksheets for the following exercises:

### Pre-departure

1. Bau Haus brainstorm: hypothesising about cultural meaning
2. The 51<sup>st</sup> state: an American student in Sydney

### In-country

3. DIVING while overseas: cultural reflection and analysis

### Re-entry

4. Beer for fighting, beer for singing: Inebriation across cultures.

Your instructor may provide other exercises based on the materials in this resource handbook.



# Resources

# Student. orientation

When crossing cultures, students, like other travellers, often encounter different customs and attitudes that they find strange, off-putting, or even objectionable. One of the key skills and attitudes that we think may help you to learn more from your inter-cultural experience is an understanding of how to make greater sense of different customs in relation to your own cultures. But, just as essential, is training yourself on the limits to cultural relativism, realising that 'understanding' another person requires neither approving nor giving up one's own opinion, even if it does, almost inevitably, lead to growth and greater knowledge. Cultural relativism highlights an important intellectual skill that studying abroad seeks to develop, and a tool that can improve your ability to function while in another cultural context.

American Robert Gordon, in his book *Going Abroad: Traveling like an Anthropologist* (2010), in a clever and engaging book, **encourages students to travel 'like an anthropologist,' that is, to move close to the ground, engage with local people, and treat studying abroad or exchange as a kind of 'field work,' investigating other cultures and places.** As Gordon points out, traveling like an anthropologist can make travel 'more productive and intentional,' allowing you to 'break out of the commoditized package version of travel abroad' (ibid.: 2).

Many Australian students choose to study abroad or go on exchange to 'Anglophone' or English-speaking countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada. In a 2010-2011 survey, we found that 66% of our students were departing for countries where English was the primary language, and a significant proportion of the rest were spending their time abroad in programs where instruction was to be in English, even if the host country was not Anglophone. Moreover, Australian familiarity with English and American culture, especially through the media and shared heritage, led many students to believe that cultural adaptation would be easy, although they often worried about the arduousness of cold weather.

This collection of readings and accompanying workshop are designed to help you maximise cross-cultural learning, even when because of cultural cross-fertilisation and globalisation, you may feel that you are in familiar settings when traveling abroad.

'**Culture shock**' may occur when you confront really profound cultural difference, but '**cultural stagger**' is more likely if you have travelled or will travel to a place that appears familiar (we talk more about this in the Adaptation module). Whether you experience shock,

or just a less severe sense that things are kind of strange, we want you to ask, ‘Why?’ What is about this new place that makes you feel strange? Why do they do things differently?

## An anthropological understanding of cultural relativism

Among many cultural commentators and conservative pundits, the concept of ‘cultural relativism’ has taken a beating, equated to moral nihilism (that is, having *no* moral values) or bland ‘political correctness.’ Some observers worry that cultural relativism, stereotyped as the old aphorism, ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans,’ demands social conversion, ‘going native’ or losing one’s own distinctiveness and moral compass. When anthropologists talk about cultural relativism, however, they do not mean **moral relativism**. Anthropologist Robert Gordon (2010: 25) explains:

The doctrine of cultural relativism suggests that one should try to judge and interpret the behavior of others in terms of their traditions and experience. This does not mean that one should not make judgments; it simply means that one should suspend judgment while engaged with aspects of that particular culture.

Although we agree with Robert Gordon, we believe that the best way to learn cultural relativism as a skill is to clearly distinguish it from *moral* relativism: leave judgment out of the equation as a separate issue. **Cultural relativism leads to greater understanding, not to either judging or refusing to judge.** If you want to judge somebody else’s behaviour, judgment is a different step, after you understand what other people think they are doing. Cultural relativism helps with that earlier step: understanding how people’s actions or beliefs make sense to them or what motivates them.

We use an iceberg as a metaphor to explain the relationship between what you observe, and the rest of culture. What you observe is just the tip; under the metaphoric water are the invisible assumptions, concepts and meanings that support the visible tip of cultural expression. We can’t assume that a practice has the same meaning it would have if we ourselves were to



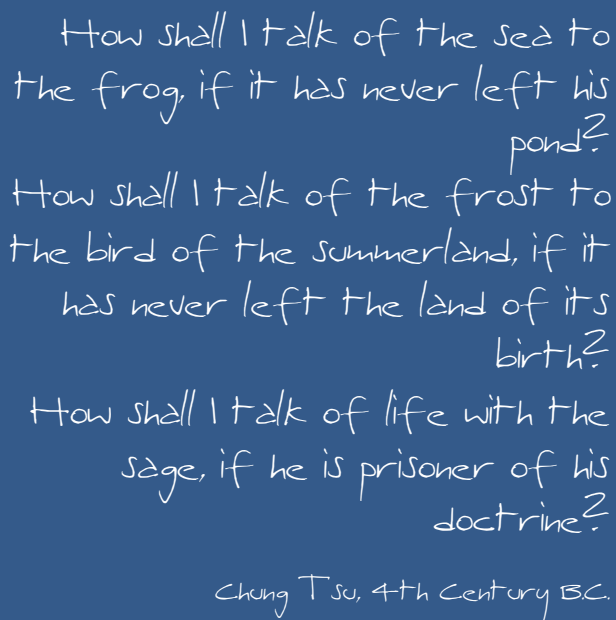
# Orientation



do it. Cultural relativism, as anthropologists use the concept, is a tool for understanding people on their own terms, as best we can, across cultures. If we are to judge, at least we should do so from a basis of understanding rather than ignorance.

## The DIVE model for cultural analysis

We suggest that you use the **D.I.V.E (Describe–Interpret–Verify–Explain) model** to remember an important way that you might contend with cultural difference. Brewer and Cunningham (2009:14) came up with this explanation to help people learn from cultural difference. The DIVE model encourages you, not to make snap judgments, or blanket generalisations, not to feel like you have to join in to fit in, but rather to investigate, think of many possible interpretations, and try to imagine what another person's perspective might be.



How shall I talk of the sea to  
the frog, if it has never left his  
pond?  
How shall I talk of the frost to  
the bird of the summerland, if it  
has never left the land of its  
birth?  
How shall I talk of life with the  
sage, if he is prisoner of his  
doctrine?  
Chung Tzu, 4th Century BC.

We think that cultural relativism is both a powerful analytical method and a practical tool for interacting with people who do not share our own customs or perspectives in life. In the materials that follow, and in the workshop that goes with them, we provide examples of each phase and exercises to cultivate more active cultural analysis.

If we treat cultural difference more like a puzzle than a problem, less like an obstacle and more like an enigma or mystery, we often find that we can explore without feeling like we need to judge or join in. As we look around, we see even more reasons to travel and study abroad, as we can enjoy

the clues that cultural differences give to other people's ways of life and world views.

## Four stages: D.I.V.E.

### Describe

As richly as possible but with minimal judgment, either positive or negative, **try to describe the practice, event or other feature of life.** The very act of describing can help move you away from evaluating and comparing, asking yourself to study other ways of life or culture more closely with a measured eye so that you can get the details correct. Striving for good description also feeds your curiosity and reinforces your observation skills, helping to turn a

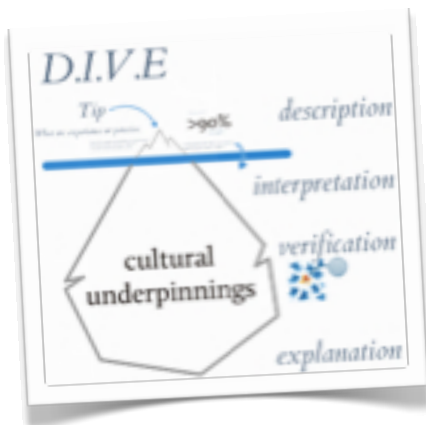
student's reflective skills on other people and ways of life, and not just their own learning and development (all of which are important, we hasten to add).

## Interpret

In the second phase of the DIVE model, we encourage you to try to interpret a practice, to think about why people do it, what it means to them, and possible origins for a practice. Interpretation of any new experience is almost inevitable; you would have a hard time *not* interpreting. The DIVE model in our approach encourages a creative and open-ended interpretive phase, and we encourage you to think about multiple possible interpretations rather than settling on your most immediate reaction as a final verdict.

## Verify

The crucial third phase of the DIVE model for cultural analysis is to verify or validate your preliminary interpretations so that you can choose among alternative interpretations or test what you think is happening. Snap judgment sometimes does not stand up to verification, but many travellers never test their initial impressions. Verification can happen through specific investigation, asking people in the host country, and examining whether our interpretation is part of a broader pattern.



Students who are in-country together sometimes ‘verify’ only by consulting with fellow students from their own home country. This narrow validation (a potentially very biased one) poses significant dangers, as homogeneous groups can simply confirm each other's pre-existing prejudices, ethnocentric judgments and stereotypes. Verifying instead with members of the host culture, or with visitors from other places, can be enlightening, as they may have competing interpretations or see cultural practices in quite different light.

## Explain

Once we have a validated interpretation, we can ask bigger questions about the source and significance of patterns of cultural difference. Explanation of cultural phenomena tends to be ‘restless,’ as you will notice: sometimes many interpretations are possible. This tentativeness is not just the result of our investigations being incomplete; cultural phenomena themselves are often quite complex, as multiple causes may feed into a single phenomenon, or a practice might mean different things in different contexts. Some of the richest symbols are those that mean different things to different people, and the longer a tradition is around, the more it tends to accumulate new interpretations.

# Bau Haus brainstorm

A student traveling to Korea, Ray K., happened across a 'dog café,' a hangout where the proprietors had a number of dogs that patrons could sit with while they enjoyed drinks or talking. His account, together with photographs of the dogs, captures both the excitement of discovery and Ray's eye for detail as he explored the phenomenon of the 'Bau Haus':

## IF YOU ARE A DOG LOVER – MUST MUST MUST READ

First of all the name of the cafe is Bau Haus and it's in Hongdae, just a station away from Sinchon, so it's awesome. Basically you can feel like owning a dog, without the fuss of feeding and cleaning up after them.

I must say the idea intrigued me, and I wondered the insurance that needs to come with it ie. dog bites person or person bites dog etc. BUT nevertheless, it was a smart idea, I think.

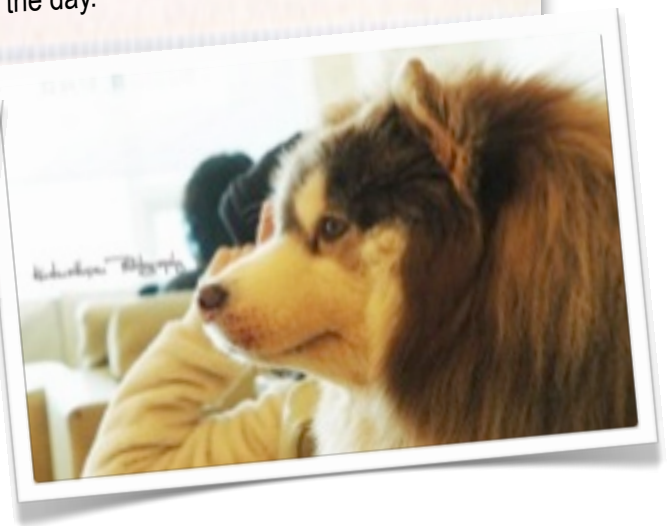
They only offer Cold drinks for around 5000 KRW (AUD\$5) upwards, so it is pretty decent since you can play with the dogs and stay for as long as you want. You can also buy them treats to win their puppy love. Oh yes, they love you more if you have treats of course. Little like bribing, so they have been taught well.

The dogs are hug-able, pet-able, but not ride-able, nor are they edible. 😊

Although in my mind I did. Ride them, that is.

They are amazingly huge and furry and would give you love under one condition: Scooby Snacks. So you can judge their popularity by how FAT they are.

ㄷㅅㅅ is quite possibly the most popular of them all. His fur is like Chocolate... and he modestly begs for treats just by sitting next to you with his tongue out. I gave him like 5 by the end of the day.



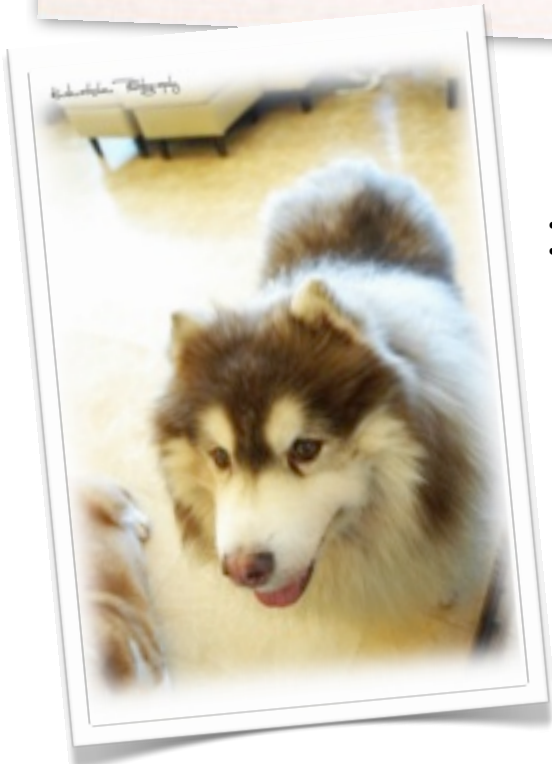


'Bau Haus - dog cafe' available at <http://tiny.cc/hy8du>.

I also love this guy. The shopkeepers must have drawn eyebrows on him, which I found hilarious.

Although they were smart enough to not put hot drinks on the menu, spillage does happen, dogs will be jumpin' on tables and your lap sometimes (the small ones quite possibly), but they are all well-behaved.

Also I know what you're thinking, they must stink right? (Interesting fact: 'Bau' in Indonesian means 'Smelly'.) Surprisingly, not at all really. The room is well air-conditioned with a lot of sprays and odour-killing technology. If you are allergic to dogs, I don't know why you would want to come here.



## Interpretation questions

You can get started thinking about your interpretation by comparing the context Ray describes to your home (comparative approach) or by thinking about how you might try to verify competing interpretations.

- Where do you hang out with your friends or meet during the day in your own peer groups? Why is that?
  - What other options might you choose, and under what conditions would you choose them?
  - What could someone visiting from overseas tell from your choice of hangout?
- 
- Would the Bau Haus do well in Australia? Why or why not?
  - Judging from what Ray writes, do Koreans have similar relations to dogs as Australians do?
  - What sort of questions would you ask Ray to better interpret Bau Haus? What would you ask to better understand the dog café?

# The 51<sup>st</sup> state:

## An American student in Sydney

One thing that may help you to prepare for cross-cultural misunderstanding and the need to re-interpret is to reflect on how your own culture might be misrepresented or misunderstood by outsiders. The following passage is from a paper by Merlin Luck and Hedley Reberger (2007) discussing their own experience orienting US students arriving in Sydney:

There are many examples of how cultural differences can lead to an incorrect judgement of values – based on a misunderstanding and lack of context. As students develop their intrapersonal perspective of culture, they learn to step back and ask ‘why?’ ‘Why is this different here?’ rather than jumping to a value judgment.

For example, during the IES Sydney orientation, students are taken on a guided walking tour of downtown Sydney, through the botanical gardens and around to the Sydney Opera House where they embark on a sunset dinner cruise on the harbour. During the walk, they stop at a public bathroom. Inevitably they walk out murmuring to each other with furrowed brows. Upon a little coxing they sheepishly express concern at the fact that the public bathroom has a needle disposal bin, and that they didn’t realize Sydney had such a problem with drug addicts. Furthermore they seem concerned that their drug use is encouraged through the provision of the needle disposal bin. It makes sense that they jump to this conclusion, based on their own frame of reference – and straight away, the student has had a negative experience, and formed a negative assumption about Australian values.

The IES staff member then explains that Australia will often have needle disposal bins in public bathrooms, and that the explanation is very simple. It’s not that there are a lot of drug addicts in Australia, but like in any country there are some. Australia has very strict workplace and public safety laws, and in order to protect the staff that clean those toilet facilities, and the public that use them, it makes sense to offer a safe disposal of syringes. The reality is that many of the disposed needles are often from medical users (such as diabetics) rather than addicts.

From: Merlin Luck and Hedley Reberger. 2007. ‘Australia, The 51st State - Student learning and intercultural development.’ Paper presented at the 2007 ISANA International Conference ‘Student success in international education’, 27-30 November, Adelaide, Australia.

- How might a fundamentalist religious figure misinterpret practices that are common in Australian popular culture? What other groups might struggle with Australian cultural practices?
- Has anyone in the group been in a situation where their sense of humour was misinterpreted? What other practices do you have that someone might misinterpret?
- For a traveler to Australia, what people, places or things would likely be their first impression of the country? What do students expect would be the most difficult things for a visitor to see, notice or understand if the visitor only came for a week or two to Australia?

# DIVING while overseas: cultural reflection & analysis

## **Questions to help with cultural interpretation**

You may or may not have the chance to engage in discussions about cultural difference or analysis while you are on exchange or studying abroad. If you do, the following are some of the questions that we use to spur ourselves when we attempt to interpret instances of cultural difference:

- What examples of closely related or linked practices can you think of in your host culture?
- What practice at home might this practice be seen as replacing or substituting for?
- Who in a society is most engaged in a practice or opinion? Who seems to be absent or dissenting?
- What interest or purpose might a practice serve? Who benefits?
- Does anyone seem to have authority, and, if so, on what basis?
- What values or ideals are implied by a practice? (Or, conversely, what practices seem to be linked to an ideal or principle, or inconsistent with it?)
- How might different people experience a phenomenon? How did they act?
- Do there appear to be different opinions within a society about an institution?
- Does the practice look new, changed, or established? Do people act confidently or seem to have to negotiate or consult?
- What sort of large-scale historical, social, political or economic processes might be in play?
- What sort of small-scale psychological, interactive, or personal motives might be involved?
- What other sorts of practices, institutions or attitudes support the phenomenon being considered? What else has to happen for this practice to be possible?
- Which emotions seem to be experienced by participants?
- What do they say or do that might indicate what they are experiencing?
- What sort of pacing does the event or activity have? Fast? Urgent? Slow? Undirected?
- What do participants seem to ignore or overlook that might be obvious to an outsider?
- What do people do that you don't expect?
- What appear to be the alternatives or choices that members of the society make to produce this phenomenon?
- How are people interacting? Do the rules or patterns of interaction seem to change?
- What symbols, insignias, logos, or signs are present?
- What training or preparation is necessary for an event or phenomenon?

If you come up with an interpretation, and you'd like to move to try to verify it, ask a fellow student or someone from your host country. Or look in a local newspaper; Wikipedia hosts an extensive list of English-language newspapers from countries around the world that you can consult (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:English-language\\_newspapers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:English-language_newspapers)). If you can read your host country's language, the selection is even wider ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Newspapers\\_by\\_country](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Newspapers_by_country)).

# Warning!

## **A cautionary note on critique**

Although we warn against overly quick judgment, students and other travellers will almost inevitably evaluate and compare their home and host cultures. Evaluation is normal, as is ethnocentrism to some degree; no one can suddenly shed two decades or more of socialisation just because they've traveled across a few time zones. Some students will do the opposite, finding so much to like about their host country that they will begin to think that home compares badly.

Ultimately we are not advocating that students throw away their moral compass or their ability to compare different cultures. In fact, increased global awareness can lead students to feel strongly about injustice or social problems in other places of which they were not previously aware.

Our goal in advocating an analytical cultural relativism is not to rule out judgment but rather to postpone it, and in some cases, to mitigate evaluation with a proper consideration of what is at stake. Judgment should be coupled with understanding, not allowed to prevent or stop dead greater understanding. So make sure to let students know that it is okay to weigh the benefits of different approaches to social problems, but that they should try to get sufficient information that their judgments are well informed.

# Beer for fighting, beer for singing: Inebriation across cultures.

In the following reflection, Luke traverses a number of points of cultural difference between French and Australian life, focusing specifically on men's behaviour in bars and nightclubs. Although the post is a bit long and rambling, and Luke does use some judgmental language in places (including to criticise fellow Australians), the discussion shows in specific ways how multiple forms of interpretation, verified and unverified, start to build up to a complex, robust explanation for differences in social patterns:

While we were out I kept noticing things different about the drinking culture in France. All the bar people drink while working, but they're all just generally more ... responsible? Maybe that's why we have such strict laws in Oz.

At one point I saw the bar girl filling up this keg with beer – it was kind of like a gigantic transparent tube with a tap, and I thought 'here we go'. But no, the gentlemen who bought it simply kept it next to them, refilling their glasses politely and drinking it in a responsible amount of time. I was floored. In Australia, the sole purpose of such a contraption would be to pass it around drinking it as fast as possible and sculling it beer-bong style. Later that night I saw some guy buying a massive bottle of Champagne at the bar, which wasn't weird until I saw him taking it back to his table. It was four young guys with Champagne glasses, taking photos of themselves. Not allowed in an Australian bar, haha. The men also all kiss each other hello. Often on the lips. So different!

On the subject of diverging cultural conceptions of acceptable masculine behaviour... they're really into their foosball [a table-top soccer game] over here, apparently instead of pool? Can you imagine four beer-bellied, tattooed, shearing, singlet-sporting Aussie blokes crowded around a foosball table in a pub? VBs in one hand, handles in the other? We were just sitting next to a foosball table, and these three French guys asked us if we wanted to play. Jean-Paul, being a more experienced European traveller than I, immediately declined. I was on the verge of accepting when another one turned up, making their number an even four – and lucky for me 'cause they have CRAZY skillz. It would've been pretty embarrassing.





I think it has something to do with passion – that's why the Europeans love soccer so much. We're too cool, laconic. Emotive displays make us cringe. We're embarrassed by the idea of a sport where scoring is so rare that it necessitates explosive outbursts of joy, a sport that encourages you to play-up your injuries – it's just not cricket ... Aussie men need a pub game where they can stoically stand back, an appropriate distance from one another, drinking their beers, taking stock, and casually sauntering up and knocking a ball into a hole with a big stick, not the intensity of foosball, squeezed in around a table yelling. Maybe it's all the pulling and spinning and gyrating of those little knobs that doesn't appeal to us, I don't know.

Their clubs reflect this kind of thing as well. Obviously there's all the Dance RNB Hip-Hop Pop stuff we get in Western clubs, but there's also this weird kind of ballady-folkie-empowering anthem-type stuff that's sung in some European language which gets a reaction out of them that the other stuff doesn't. They all stand around in a circle swaying and singing along and waving a pointed finger around in the air for emphasis. It's kind of cool and kind of cringey, I

think because it's related to something that was in fashion for the rest of the world in the nineties, which originated in Europe but never died out there....

I think the clubs we went to were more fun/nostalgia-oriented and less cool-oriented. Let's just say I thought I'd danced my last Macarena when I stopped going to school discos, and I had no idea I remembered all the words to 'Mambo No. 5'.



'Boulangerieboulangerieboulangerieboulangerie'  
available at <http://tiny.cc/smjgu>.

Luke's reflection and accompanying set of photos, touches on a range of subjects – masculinity, drinking customs, musical taste, public displays of emotion, sports preferences – demonstrating how a set of cultural practices may be inter-related. In this case, the author has taken an anthropological perspective, seeing culture, not as isolated or unrelated traits, but as a fabric of interwoven attitudes and practices. To do analysis is to start to unravel that fabric, to see how threads connect together a pattern of cultural difference.

More specifically, the subject of cultural differences in inebriation is a continuing source of fascination, not just to anthropologists, but also to international travellers and exchange students more generally. Marshall (1979:1) pointed out that the effects of alcohol are an ideal forum for noting cultural variation: 'The cross-cultural study of alcohol represents a classic natural experiment: a single species (*Homo Sapiens*), a single drug substance (ethanol) and a great diversity of behavioural outcomes.' Travellers are often startled when drunk people behave in unfamiliar ways overseas, whether it's crying in their beers, singing boisterously, fighting with their mates, or demonstrating very little change at all until they abruptly fall asleep on a table or pass out.

Alcohol-related practices may be different in your host culture than in your home:

- Where do people typically drink alcohol in your host country?
- Where do students typically drink? With whom? Is everyone in the group the same age? Same sex?
- Is alcohol consumption 'gendered'? That is, are men's and women's drinking behaviours distinctive?
- Are there legal constraints on the consumption of alcohol? Are they enforced? Are there conditions under which those regulations can be broken with tacit approval?
- What do people do while they drink? Games? Karaoke? Singing? Watching sports on television?
- What do they drink? Does everyone in the group drink the same thing? Do individuals drink different sorts of alcohol at different events?
- How is alcohol priced or taxed?
- How do people behave when they get inebriated? What emotions do they seem to experience?
- Do people do things while drunk that they don't when they are sober? What do people seem to think inebriated people want to do? Dance? Take off their clothes? Sing? Fight? Tell stories? 'Hook up'? Is inebriation a license to do certain acts that are otherwise stigmatized? Is alcohol a legal defense?
- Is alcohol consumption seen as a problem by the community?
- How do people respond after they have drunk too much? Is getting drunk a source of shame or social stigma? Do people forget when they or someone else has been drunk?



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