

Excerpt from David Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World*, Chapter 4

The first step toward becoming more culturally intelligent is to become more aware of our own cultural identity, which includes the varied cultural domains we're exploring in this book—socioethnic culture, organizational culture, and generational culture. To ignore the reality of one's own cultural identity is just as nonsensical as ignoring that of people in the other cultures with which we interact. We have a universal tendency to think that other people do things for the same reasons we do them. After all, we learned to do what we do by observing others around us. But as we become more aware of our own culture and its values, we're less likely to project our values onto the Other. Understanding our own culture protects us from assuming the actions of the Other mean the same thing as when we act that way.

As we become more aware of the assumptions and values on which our own behavior and thinking rest, we can begin to contrast these assumptions and values with those of the Other. And going through this process with ourselves helps to sensitize us to the immense shortcomings of stereotyping others according to cultural norms.

So back to my original question, how American are you? Marketing guru Kevin O'Keefe, in his book *The Average American*, chronicles his search from New Hampshire to Hawaii to find the most average American. He poured [*sic*] over surveys and census data and talked with lots of people in pockets all across the country, trying to find a person who best embodied what it means to be American. Here's a quiz based on O'Keefe's findings to see how American you are:

Are You an Average American?

1. How close is the nearest Wal-Mart to your home?
 - a. More than a 20-minute drive
 - b. No more than a 20-minute drive
2. Do you believe you are living the "American dream"?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. Are you tolerant of all races?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. Can you name the Three Stooges?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. Can you name the three branches of the federal government?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
6. Do you prefer smooth or chunky peanut butter?
 - a. Smooth
 - b. Chunky
7. Do you drink the milk in the bowl after the cereal is gone?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

8. Do you live in a home that's between 10 and 50 years old?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
9. Do you drink coffee?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
10. Do you believe sexual education is inappropriate in school?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Okay! Start humming the "Star Spangled Banner" and check your answers against those of most Americans surveyed in O'Keefe's study.

Answers:

1-b 2-a 3-a 4-a 5-b 6-a 7-a 8-a 9-a 10-b

[Livermore's scoring is 0-3: You march to a different drummer; 4-6: You're somewhere between average and not-so-average; 7-10: You're a full-fledged American.]

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O'Keefe's book is filled with fascinating stories of Americans he met throughout his study. A few of the other characteristics he cites as descriptive of most Americans include:

Most of us [60 percent] live in the state where we were born.

More than 80 percent of us believe in God and call ourselves "Christians".

And we're generally satisfied with the way things are going in life.

We eat an average of 4.2 meals a week in restaurants or some kind of place where our meals are prepared for us. For many of us, that place is McDonald's, the fast-food restaurant that is within three miles of most American homes. In between trips to the golden arches, we love to snack on peanut butter. Most Americans eat peanut butter at least once a week. Peanut butter is the most common American food, far more common than apple pie. The average American consumes three pounds of smooth peanut butter annually.

Most of us earn enough money in thirty-six days to pay for our food consumption for an entire year. As Americans, we're better off financially than 99 percent of the people who have ever lived, including many royalty. Our homes are the largest in the world, and most of us live in the suburbs. Even 40 percent of our nation's poorest live in the burbs. And though we make up only 6 percent of the world's population, we represent 59 percent of the world's wealth.

I live in the city (not the suburbs). I prefer crunchy peanut butter. I can't remember the last time I went to McDonald's. And I was born a couple of states away from where I live. These departures from the "average American" and a whole series of other characteristics about me have often caused me to think of myself as atypical when it comes to being American. Maybe you can relate. But here is what is fascinating about

O’Keefe’s discovery. The areas where I differ from the majority of other Americans doesn’t necessarily mean I’m *not* an “average American.” In one sense, there really is no such thing as an “average American.”

If you feel as if I am contradicting myself, bear with me. Those of us who are Americans are strongly shaped by the value of individualism—the right to individual freedom and choices. As a result, most all of us have some idiosyncratic characteristics that set us apart from most other Americans. This is one of the primary theses of O’Keefe’s book. An “average American” will have some key points of difference from other “average Americans.” We all have something that is not all that average about our lives. And that very uniqueness is part of what it means to be American because of how individualistic we are. Interestingly, the mass-media world has felt the reality of this. The days of true mass marketing are over, and Madison Avenue now talks about niche marketing instead. The last television show a majority of Americans watched was the final episode of *MASH*.

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So how can we even go about describing a culture as individualistic as American culture, where “difference” is one of the most “common” traits? My reluctance to describe American culture is further exacerbated by thinking about the many subcultures that exist across the American landscape. The variations between the North and the South, the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest, not to mention diaspora groups scattered in every state, generational subcultures, and the many other cultural groupings we’re addressing in this book are further reason to be cautious about how broadly we can apply any description of American culture.

These concerns are the very reason I wanted to begin the knowledge CQ part of this book by looking at our own national cultures rather than jumping right in with theoretical concepts about knowledge CQ. Examining how we are like and unlike our national culture makes us better students of how to apply cultural understanding to others.