

Boiled Eggs and Jumping Fishes

by Richard Burgess

At first glance, human values seem to be pretty universal. After all, most people agree that it's not a good idea to make a habit of killing people. Stealing is not to be encouraged either. And if you asked people from different backgrounds and cultures to say what was most important to them, most of them would mention family. In the same way, they would probably all mention hospitality, politeness and kindness as important human qualities.

However, when we start going into detail, differences arise – between individuals and, more importantly, between cultures and societies. When *is* it OK to kill someone? (For example, when they've killed somebody else? Or when they've passed on secrets to your worst enemy?) What *is* stealing? Or rather, what belongs to me and what belongs to all of us? Who do we define as family? And how do we show hospitality and politeness? It is these differences that can cause problems between cultures and individuals. Here is an example:

In Bulgaria hospitality means pressing your guest to have another helping of dinner. In Japan politeness means always accepting food when it is offered. Imagine the catastrophic results when the Japanese guest dines with the Bulgarian hostess ...

Family values

When you talk about "your family", who do you mean? If your background is Norwegian, the chances are you are referring to your parents and your siblings (brothers and sisters). Perhaps you would also be thinking of your grandparents, perhaps a favourite aunt or uncle. In many places in Africa and the Pacific the terms "mother" and "father" also refer to both parents' brothers and sisters and no distinction is made between cousins and siblings. Even friends of the family can be referred to as "grandfather" or "brother" and treated as such. Now this obviously has its advantages (just think of the confirmation presents!) but it also means added responsibility. Members of the same family

are expected to look after each other in case of sickness and to share their wealth.

In some cultures family loyalties are so important that they are above the law. You have probably seen films about the mafia, where any insult to family honour – not to mention the killing of a family member – must be avenged on the principle of "an eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth". Such "vendettas" are common in societies that have no centralised legal system. (Indeed, they were common in Norway until the Middle Ages.) The difficulties arise when such values and rules live on within a modern legal system. In cultures where family responsibilities are strong it is often taken for granted that, if you reach a position of power, you help family members by getting them jobs or other financial advantages. Not to do so would be immoral. In Norway, however, this would be called corruption.

Nowhere are the differences between family values more obvious than in attitudes to old people. In the Far East the oldest members of the family have the highest status. They are admired for their wisdom and treated with great respect. Looking after them is seen as an honour as well as a duty. In the West, on the other hand, eternal youth is the ideal. We spend millions on cosmetics and surgery to avoid looking as if we are "past it". When we are "past it" and no longer able to look after ourselves, it is accepted that we belong in an institution to be cared for by strangers.

Wealth, poverty and ownership

If you won a million *kroner*, what would you spend it on? Your answer to this question says a lot about your values. Would you put it in the bank to pay for your education? Would you go on a shopping spree? Or would you make a gift to your favourite charity? Cultures differ in their attitudes to wealth. In many western countries, it is quite acceptable to show off your wealth. A grand house and a smart car tell the world that you have been successful – and success is a virtue in itself. Among the Navajo Indians, however, there is a saying about people who act like this: "He behaves as if he had no relatives." Among them it is taken

The Sopranos – a special kind of "family" (@Scanpix)



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for granted that any money you make will be shared with your family – and that means your cousins too! In Madagascar, one of the poorest countries in the world, they spend a large portion of their small earnings on the graves of their forefathers, decorating them with beautiful stones and ornaments. After all, the Madagascans argue, this is the place where we end up spending most time. An eternity, in fact!

And what of those that have no money, or in other ways fall on hard times? Whose responsibility are they? There is a marked difference here between, for example, Britain and the US. Britain, like Norway, has a well developed welfare state that provides a sort of safety net for the poor and needy. They are seen as being the responsibility of the state, to be paid for through taxation. This is rather different from America, where public welfare is viewed with suspicion. According to the American view, we are all responsible for our own destinies and poverty can be overcome by hard work and initiative. If this seems hard-hearted, it is worth pointing out that Americans are great believers in voluntary work and spend more time on fund-raising for charities than Europeans do.

Is it possible to own the air? Or the rain? An absurd idea, you might say – but for many Native American tribes the idea of owning the land was equally absurd. So when European settlers came and offered to buy the land, the Native Americans didn't know what they meant. In many cases the "payment" was just seen as a friendly gift to the chief. When the fences came up they felt betrayed. Perhaps Norwegians are not so far removed from Native Americans in this sense. Certainly the idea of *Allemannsretten* – that everyone should be allowed access to the countryside, including private land – is mostly unknown in the rest of Europe.

Gender and sex

"A woman's place is in the home." It is no more than a couple of generations since this would have been seen as a fairly uncontroversial statement by most people in Norway. It is after all less than a century since women were allowed to vote. Today equal opportunity for men and women is seen as a basic right, guaranteed by Norwegian law. But there are still cultures that believe that women should have a subordinate role to men, both in the family and in society. For people from these cultures, both men and women, the idea of gender equality and "women's liberation" is worrying. When two opposite and deeply held values live within the same society, there are sure to be tensions.

When it comes to values, nothing causes more debate than sex. We cannot even agree



Cosmetic surgery (©Scanpix)

Gender roles in the 1950s (©Scanpix)



on what sex is and what it isn't. A Norwegian woman who breastfed her baby in an American café was arrested and charged with indecent behaviour. What is seen as perfectly ordinary clothing in one culture may be seen as sexual provocation in another. Issues like sex before marriage, homosexuality and contraception are guaranteed to get pulses racing and voices raised. This is partly because sexual taboos often have a religious connection. It may also be because sex has to do with basic human instincts. When we see these instincts expressed in a way we are not used to, we feel threatened.

Value conflicts

In a famous fantasy novel from the 18th century, *Gulliver's Travels*, two neighbouring countries are locked in an endless, bloody war. The cause of the war is that they cannot agree about which end you should start eating a boiled egg from – the round end or the pointed end. The author, Jonathan Swift, is making fun of the very real religious wars that had been fought in his time in which thousands lost their lives because of theological disagreements. It can indeed seem ridiculous that human beings are willing to fight over the "small print" of our values, when we agree on so much of the headlines. After all, all the major religions preach a similar message of peace and goodwill to all men – and women.

In an increasingly multicultural society, different sets of values must live side by side. This is a challenge, certainly – but also an opportunity. By getting to know each other, we can learn to see our own values for what they are: just one of many different ways of looking at the world. In fact, we learn that they *are* values, and not universal truths. To quote an old Chinese proverb: "The fish doesn't know it is swimming in water before it has jumped above the surface."

1 (Mis)understanding the text

A classmate is having a very bad day and keeps misunderstanding the text. Help him by correcting his statements and questions:

- So some cultures think stealing is OK?
- Why do the Bulgarians force their guests to eat dinner?
- Apparently, in Africa and the Pacific everyone is related.
- And the poor Navajo Indians have no relatives at all!
- In America everyone lives on public welfare.
- But why did European settlers give the Native Americans fences as presents?
- So it's illegal to have sex in an American café?
- Did they really fight religious wars about eggs?

2 Find someone who ...

Make questions out of the points given below. Go around class and find someone who can help you answer the questions. For each question, you must write down the answer you have been given and the name of the person who has given it to you. You can only ask one person one question. Afterwards, go through the questions in class and tell your classmates who gave you the answer and explain what the person said. Find someone who ...

- has two or more siblings
- knows why a Japanese guest dining with a Bulgarian hostess might be in trouble
- can tell you what a *vendetta* is
- knows what Madagascans spend their money on
- knows how Norwegian voting laws changed in 1913
- knows what "prevensjon" is in English
- can tell you what Jonathan Swift's famous novel was called
- can explain why the text is called 'Boiled Eggs and Jumping Fishes'

3 Vocabulary

Match these examples of behaviour with the abstract words below.

- She started out with nothing and made a fortune selling healthy fast food.
- He always made his guests feel welcome.
- He seems pleasant on the surface, but I think he's up to no good.
- The children were brought up to say "please" and "thank you".
- She stuck by her husband in spite of all the scandals.
- If I earn any extra money, I give it to the poor.
- It turned out that the "expenses" he was claiming were all false.
- He looked so cold and wet that she offered to drive him home.
- As captain it is my job to make sure all my passengers are safe.

hospitality, kindness, politeness, responsibility, corruption, suspicion, initiative, loyalty, charity

5 Writing

The first four sayings and expressions below are mentioned in the text. The last four are not. Write in your own words what they all mean in practice.

- "An eye for an eye – a tooth for a tooth."
- "He behaves as if he has no relatives."
- "A woman's place is in the home."
- "The fish doesn't know it is swimming in water before it has jumped above the surface."
- The grass is always greener on the other side.
- A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
- Look before you leap.
- Like father, like son.

4 Talking – values and nationality

Norway, Britain and the US are all developed, western nations. But some would argue that they have different values in some areas. The sentences below each express an attitude or a value. Sit in pairs and discuss whether you associate them with one or more than one – or none – of the three countries:

- We must look to the future, not to the past.
- Traditions are important for identity.
- It is best to be honest and say exactly what you think.
- You should not pretend you are better than others.
- Don't impose yourself on people you don't know.
- Don't take yourself too seriously.
- Aim to be best.

Are there any values or attitudes not mentioned here that you associate with these nations?