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Re-Learning American History Shapes Americans' Cultural Exchanges

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Re-Learning American History Shapes Americans' Cultural Exchanges

Every February, Americans celebrate [Black History Month](#). [President Ford's](#) 1976 proclamation of February as Black History Month was an effort for mainstream Americans to learn more about Black history and culture. If we understand more about other cultures, then we have a greater chance of better interpreting what they say and do, and of making ourselves understood to people who differ from us.

Prior to 1976, Black history received little coverage in elementary and high school students' textbooks. One would think that devoting an entire month to finding out more about Black history would help to mainstream more information into American education. However, it seems to have had the effect of [maintaining marginalization](#) and keeping Black history separate--something that we cover only in February, if we choose to do so. Thus, many Americans remain ignorant regarding the cultural accomplishments of Black Americans.

photo - legacy

Unfortunately, Black culture (and the role of African Americans in American history) is not the only culture of which Americans lack awareness. Recently, when [President George W. Bush](#) was visiting Iraq, an Iraqi reporter hurled his [shoes](#) at him. Following the incident, not only did Iraqi protestors hold their own [shoe protest](#) in response to Bush's visit, but the company that makes the shoe received over 370,000 [shoe orders](#) from around the world as people sought out humorous souvenirs. This act, and the response to it, provides evidence of the growing frustration other cultures feel with Americans and our inability to communicate effectively with the global community. Many Americans likely remain unaware that in Arab cultures, throwing shoes at someone is a very serious insult, or that Iraqis once hurled footwear at the statue of Saddam Hussein as American soldiers pulled it down following the 2003 invasion.

Obviously, if we do not know about other cultures' symbols, we cannot respond appropriately. This lack of understanding impairs our ability to communicate with people in a variety of contexts. America is expected to become increasingly diverse over the next several years as minorities will become [the new majority](#). This likely means that Americans' families, [workplaces](#) and neighborhoods will involve more interaction with people who are culturally different. Consequently, making an effort to improve our cultural understanding is important to our daily lives. It is also important to the nation, as globalization motivates us to reach out to international businesses, and crises require global input.

What causes Euro-Americans' misconceptions of people who are culturally different from the mainstream? We have four primary sources of information about other cultures: (1) information learned in schools, (2) what we learn from media, (3) what our families teach us, and (4) what we glean from our own experiences.

Our schools teach a history about America which we wish existed. For example, every November elementary classrooms across America likely feature bulletin boards with Native Americans and pilgrims smiling at one another and sharing a festive meal. What we are less likely to learn about in school, however, is how [Columbus](#) used Native Americans as slaves or how they were forced to convert to Christianity. Author [James Loewen](#) spent two years reviewing American history textbooks before he wrote his critique, [Lies My Teacher Told Me](#). In his book, he points to many inaccuracies that Americans learn about their history. While he says that every country has its lies, he feels that the United States wins the [ethnocentrism contest](#).

Even in higher education, European accomplishments are often placed above those of other cultures. It is important that our students learn about the contributions Muslims made to the study of [mathematics](#), that the

[Iroquois Confederacy](#) adopted a constitution complete with checks and balances in the 16th century, or that the first public speaking text was created by an Egyptian named [Ptahhotep](#), well before the Greeks began their exploration of the field. If students know how people of other cultures have contributed to their worlds, they may have a greater respect for and understanding of those cultures.

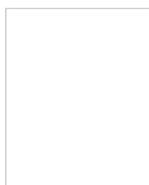
The media, however, often under-represents and stereotypes other cultures. It is unfortunate that our children may form impressions of Native Americans from watching depictions of [cowboys and Indians in westerns](#). Or, that they might discern what it means to be [Arab](#) based on the movies [Aladdin](#) or [Rules of Engagement](#). The media is dominated by the voices of White men, who maintain great [influence](#) over programming. Therefore, whether they intend to distort those images or not, it is clear that their lack of knowledge about other cultures results in distortion.

Moreover, the American media has now been [consolidated](#) so that it is owned by a few major corporations, such as General Electric, Time Warner, Disney, and Viacom. Even the news, which Americans would likely regard as objective, has become impacted by [corporate interests](#). News production is now largely a business. News broadcasts need to be cost effective so investigative journalism gets reduced and the news becomes more entertaining than informative. These factors serve to further distort what we've come to know about people from other cultures.

Family members are certainly primary to what children first learn about other cultures. But family members' perceptions are also influenced by school and the media. Many Americans have limited experiences with people from diverse backgrounds, so their experiences are shaped by a culture's prototype. That is, if an experience with a person from another culture reaffirms the stereotypical depiction, then the experience is evaluated as typical. If the interaction contradicts the anticipated exchange, then that becomes one experience set against a large number of media depictions that may seem more common or representative.

Consequently, individuals have to take the lead in the re-learning of history. We need to seek out information that will inform us and challenge our views. Information about other cultures is readily available at the library, online, or by simply asking people we encounter from other cultures. When I teach Intercultural Communication, I ask students to interview people of other cultures. The feedback has been that people really like being asked about their history and cultural practices. If we make an effort to communicate with people from other cultures, we will have a better chance of having mutually satisfying exchanges.

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