

EDUCATOR RESOURCES



Culturally-Responsive Communication with the Black Immigrant Community

Culture includes the traits and behaviors of a group of people, as defined by their language, social customs, religion, music and arts. Culture includes how people think, act and live their lives¹. In this resource, we will discuss the use of culturally-responsive communication with Black immigrants. You may find some of this information useful for understanding your non-immigrant audiences, as well.

NOTE

Cultures change over time when new knowledge, beliefs and norms are introduced, so the cultural norms discussed in this Toolkit may not apply to everyone. Show your audience that you are open to their knowledge and beliefs!

Culture and Communication

Culture is an important part of communication. It affects the words that are used to express thoughts and ideas. It also affects how information is understood. If your audience includes Black immigrants, remember that the cultures of their origin countries may shape their communication styles and perceptions.

Language

When working with Black immigrant populations, language barriers may limit your ability to get your message across. African and Caribbean immigrant populations represent up to 2,100 languages and dialects! Only three percent of these immigrants report speaking no English; 75 percent report speaking English very well². Caribbean immigrants are more likely than African immigrants to speak English well, and the majority of Black immigrants from the Caribbean speak only English at home³. Nearly 30 percent of African immigrants and 23 percent of Caribbean immigrants report that they are limited English proficient (do not speak “English only” or do not speak English “very well”)². Immigrants originally from Cuba, Haiti and Dominican Republic make up a large percent of Caribbean immigrants who speak limited English. It is important to know your audience well and consider using an interpreter to make sure you can deliver your message. See the table below for other common languages spoken by Black immigrants²:

African Immigrant Languages	Caribbean Immigrant Languages
Amharic/Ethiopian	French
French	French Creole
Kru	Patois
Cushite/Beja/Somali	Spanish

Sometimes, ideas and phrases are expressed differently in other languages. For instance, Haitian immigrants may refer to chest pain as “stomach pain,” which can cause confusion when seeking medical care. The French Creole word for screening refers to HIV screenings, which can be confusing when discussing breast cancer or other screenings with French Creole speakers⁴. It is important to explain the terms or words that may be confusing to your audience.

Some English-speaking immigrants may experience difficulty being understood due to accents or unique dialects. Some immigrants, due to the dialect they speak, use English words in ways that are not common in American English. For example, the Gullah dialect, common in South Carolina and Georgia, combines English with African tribal languages. Gullah sounds similar to English, but uses different grammatical structures and different pronunciations of English words⁵.

Non-Verbal Communication

In order to have clear and effective communication with people of a different culture, it is important to understand not only the culture of the person with whom we are speaking, but also our own culture, behaviors and biases. Always remember that the way a person communicates may be influenced by his/her culture. More importantly, 80 percent of communication is nonverbal. So, your actions really do speak louder than your words.

Considering your level of eye contact is also important when interacting with people from other cultures. Many Black immigrants come from cultures with power distance, where some members of society have higher status than others. People of perceived lower status do not give direct eye contact to people of higher status⁶. Before looking someone directly in the eye, step back and perceive how the person is interacting with you and act accordingly.

Tips for Non-Verbal Communication with Black Immigrants

The following tips describe non-verbal social cues to consider when interacting with Black immigrants. These will not apply to all Black immigrant cultures, so it is important to do your research and ask questions of your host before your event so you know which customs may apply:

- Be mindful of cultural gender roles. In Black Muslim cultures, men and women may not wish to shake hands with the opposite sex.
- Avoid pointing with your index finger. In some African cultures, this gesture is considered offensive. Use an open hand with your palm facing down when offering direction.
- In some African countries, sitting with your legs crossed is considered standoffish or offensive. Sit with your legs side-by-side.
- In some African cultures, showing the bottoms of your feet is considered offensive. Do your best to keep the soles of both feet on the ground.
- Do not show offense to your audience members standing or sitting very near to you, especially while talking. Some Black immigrant cultures like to be in closer proximity to the person they are speaking with than is typical in U.S. culture.
- If there is food at your event, eat with your right hand. In some parts of Africa, the left hand is considered unclean. Passing food with the left hand may also be insulting to some immigrants from Africa.
- In some Caribbean cultures, hugging or kissing in public is reserved for family members. Do not hug unless initiated by your audience member.

- Speak loudly enough for everyone to hear, and avoid whispering or conducting quiet side conversations. In some African cultures, whispering is a sign of gossip.
- Remember to ask permission before photographing attendees at your program. Some cultures object religiously or spiritually to photography.

What do you see when you look at this picture?



Do you see an older woman or a younger woman? Would you believe that this image shows both an older woman and a younger woman?

In this image, you can see an older woman, with her mouth slightly open and her chin nestled in what looks like a fur collar. You can also see a younger woman, with her head turned away and a ribbon or necklace around her neck. If you see the older woman, try to change your viewpoint to see the younger woman. If you already see the younger woman, try to find the face of the older woman.

As people with our own beliefs and experiences, we often miss information that does not fit our beliefs. As a result, we can interpret experiences, conversations and events differently than others around us. If we take time to learn about other people's experiences and beliefs, we can learn new ways of looking at the world. Sometimes, what we see can surprise us!

It is important to be able to change your viewpoint and understand that there is always more than one way of looking at something. Similarly, in the communication process, it is important to understand that there are many ways to communicate a message. And, many ways a message can be understood by others.

Communication Tips

Below are tips to guide you when you are communicating with someone of a culture other than your own:

- Be aware of differences, respect them and use them as a learning opportunity.
 - Do not assume that everyone's beliefs and behaviors are like yours.
 - Do not push your cultural beliefs onto others.
 - Avoid making decisions about other people based only on their culture.
 - If your audience includes immigrants from a certain country/region, take some time to learn about words or terms that they commonly use.
 - Clarify any words or terms that might be confusing to them.
- Listen carefully to make sure that the person you are speaking to understands your message.
 - Try to choose the best wording and tone of voice to avoid misunderstandings.
 - Remember that English is one of the hardest languages to learn. If you are speaking in English and it is not the person's preferred language, take your time and be patient.
- Speak openly and honestly when you sense your message is not getting across.
- If you don't understand, ask again, respectfully.
- Speak with sincerity and not with jokes.
- Pay attention to body language.
 - When you are speaking, try to avoid crossing your arms or placing your hands on your hips. It can seem like you are not being patient.
 - Always look and listen for "hints" of frustration (deep breaths, sighs, etc.).
 - Follow cues of the other person. Mirror body language and eye contact.

1 Beebe, S. A., Beebe, S. J., and Redmond, M. V. *Interpersonal Communication: Relating to Others*, 4th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2005).

2 "2012 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates," U.S. Census Bureau

3 Thomas, K. "A Demographic Profile of Black Caribbean Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute (2012).

4 Allen, J.D., Mars, D.R., Tom, L., Apollon, G., Hilaire, D., & Iralien, G. "Health Beliefs, Attitudes and Service Utilization among Haitians," *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 24, no. 1 (2013): 106-119.

5 Mufwene, S. "The Ecology of Gullah's Survival," *American Speech* 72 (1997): 69-83.

6 Neuliep, J.W. *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014).