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PO Box 121  
Botsford, CT 06404  
[www.nacsw.org](http://www.nacsw.org)  
888.426.4712

## **TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR ASSISTING NON-WESTERN IMMIGRANTS**

**By: Daniel N. Diakanwa, M.P.S., M.P.A.**

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## **TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR ASSISTING NON-WESTERN IMMIGRANTS**

*Daniel N. Diakanwa, M.P.S., M.P.A.*

Assisting and counseling non-Western immigrants, is a great cultural learning opportunity. It widens one's worldview and changes one's ethnocentric attitude. My experience in working with non-Western immigrants and international students has been exciting and enriching. As a native of Congo, I was able to see a great deal of similarity between my own culture and that of the Chinese, Koreans, Indians, Arabs, and most Hispanics. I was also able to learn about Western culture through attending American schools and churches, assisting Americans clients, and living in predominantly American communities. In fact, this workshop is a product of the wealth of knowledge I was privileged to acquire through assisting and counseling the culturally diverse inhabitants of New York City.

As I see it, the following Ten Commandments represent the key to assisting and counseling non-Western immigrants effectively:

### *1. Understand the basic cultural differences.*

While working with international students from non-Western countries, I heard many of them make prejudged remarks such as "Americans are unfriendly, rude, or confrontational. They are always rushing—they build only contractual relationships." Most of these students started changing their opinions as they began to understand why Americans are always rushing, why their method of greeting seems unfriendly and curt, and why you cannot just walk into their homes unannounced.

Understanding cultural differences will help services providers clear their prejudged notions about immigrants. The fact that we look at people through our cultural lenses often leads us to prejudge them. We tend to judge people according to what we consider normal in our own culture and assume that people need to do things according to our culture. Unfortunately, our prejudgment of others leads to discrimination. Very often, we discriminate against others simply because we do not understand their culture. Therefore, what we sometimes call discrimination may simply have resulted from our misperception or misinterpretation of what others do or say.

Some years ago, a Nigerian student, who was on his way to Nyack College, was picked up at Kennedy Airport by a young female Christian student wearing makeup and dressed in pants. Her appearance struck the Nigerian student, who was taught back home that Christian women should not wear makeup or dress in pants; hence he concluded that this young woman is not a Christian.

It is interesting to see how one determines who a Christian is from one's cultural perceptions and interpretations.

### *2. Control your ethnocentric views.*

As Westerners, especially Americans, we tend to think that we are superior to the rest of the world because of our technological, military, and economic prowess. As a result, we generally

see our culture as being superior and feel that the American way should be the model for others to follow.

What we often ignore is that America is a microcosm of the world because those who made this nation powerful actually came from the four corners of the world. Hence, those who are involved in helping professions must constantly check their ethnocentric tendencies vis-à-vis non-Western immigrants. The tendency to think one's race, ethnic group, or culture is superior to others constitutes a barrier to assisting non-Westerners effectively. It is interesting that many among the educated non-Western clients can easily discern our ethnocentric views and compartments, and refuse our assistance.

### *3. Do not abuse your position of power.*

Ministers, human services providers, law enforcement officers, and public servants need to realize the tremendous power they possess because of their position. They need to understand that people seeking help are generally vulnerable (at least when they are in need). Many social workers, immigration lawyers, and law enforcement officers have abused or taken advantage of immigrants in need simply because of their vulnerable positions.

As a former social worker, I have witnessed several incidents in which immigration lawyers extorted large sums of money from illegal or undocumented immigrants, and when they were unable to provide the service requested, they threatened to have the immigrants deported. I have also heard testimonies of female immigrant clients who were sexually exploited in exchange for services. There have been numerous cases of immigrant abuse and brutality by law enforcement officers as well.

According to the Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project (ILEMP), immigrants face the following human rights abuses: (1) Violation of due process, such as denial of access to legal counsel, denial of access to a telephone, failure to advise the detainee of legal rights, and fabrication of evidence. Nine percent of cases observed by ILEMP in the lower Rio Grande Valley during 1997 involved this sort of abuse. (2) Illegal or inappropriate seizure of people in illegal law enforcement raids, questioning based solely on ethnic appearance, arrest made without cause, unlawful temporary detention, unlawful deportation, and deprivation of food, water, and medical attention. Nearly 24% of 1997 cases involved this type of abuse. (3) Illegal searches, entry without warrant or consent, and strip searches undertaken without "reasonable suspicion." Cases of this nature added up to 13.3% of all abuses noted during 1997. (4) Seizure of or destruction of property, including unlawful seizure of vehicles, personal belongings, money, or documents, and intentional destruction of or damage to property. Over 9% of 1997 cases observed by ILEMP in the lower Rio Grande Valley were of this nature. (5) Unlawful cooperation with local law enforcement (7.2% of 1997 cases).<sup>i</sup>

Those who are involved in ministry and the helping professions must always seek to control their natural tendencies to dominate and control the vulnerable. They need to consider themselves guardian angels of people in need of their services and protection. Furthermore, they are urged to examine themselves as to whether or not this innate tendency is kept under control as they assist immigrants. The threats against and intimidation of immigrants have led many of them to seek help among their own people rather than suffer humiliation at the hands of ethnocentric service providers.

#### *4. Discover the immigrant's strongholds.*

Family strongholds are family taboos that make it almost impossible for Western human service providers to help non-Western immigrants or penetrate their world. These strongholds include family taboos (or forbidden things that cannot be shared with strangers), the absolute authority of the father, and demonic vows or charms used for protection or good luck. Let us take a further look at some of these strongholds:

##### *a. Family taboos*

Most non-Westerners have strong reservations about sharing or discussing things that may bring shame to the family. Saving face is so important to keeping their dignity that they keep these things family secrets.

A few years ago, the father of a Congolese family that I was helping with their immigration case died. Since it was shameful for the wife to tell me that he had died from AIDS, she told me he had cancer. I was to find out six months later from one of his relatives that he actually died of AIDS.

Another example involves a Mexican client who was impregnated by her stepfather when she was fifteen. Even though the mother was aware of it, the rest of the children and relatives were told that a stranger raped her. The secret was revealed twenty-five years later after she graduated from college and became confident enough to publicly share and condemn a wrong act that was considered a family taboo.

Becoming a family friend can help win trust and open the door to an immigrant's secluded world; otherwise, one may simply be dealing with the superficial matters.

##### *b. The absolute authority of the father*

In many non-Western families, the father is the absolute authority. He is the only access to the rest of the family. One may meet a great and polite immigrant family while not knowing the terror that the mother and children endure daily at the hands of an autocratic father. Hence, in order to break through this stronghold, one must first win the trust of the father before helping the rest of the family. This is not an easy task, especially when one is dealing with first-generation immigrants who still reason and do things according to their religious and cultural norms and values.

##### *c. Belief in demonic force, charms taken by individuals for protection or good luck*

The British TimesOnline issue of January 13, 2006, reported that according to BBC Radio 4's *Today*, a "Congolese father branded his nine-year-old son with a steam iron. A former church elder told the reporter that he was present when the boy was said to be possessed with evil spirits and alleged that the Pastor told the parents to beat him until he confessed to being a witch."

A Haitian married woman shared how she had had real sexual intercourse once a month with an invisible spirit called "mari de nuit," meaning "night husband," to whom she was married at birth through a voodoo pact signed by her father. Her husband, who was familiar with this voodoo practice, divorced her when he discovered what was going on.

While the Western world has generally moved from superstitious to scientific knowledge, most of the non-Western world is still governed by all kinds of superstitious beliefs and voodoo practices. Many natural diseases and life's failures are considered attacks from witches or

demons. The practice of voodoo, black magic, and sorcery is still prevalent, even among Christians. For instance, many African, Asian, and Latin American political leaders and financially successful people use certain relics to protect themselves, or do daily pagan rituals and observe certain superstitious rules to stay in power and be successful in life. Some non-Western Christians consult voodoo priests to solve their problems when prayer is not working. Others are afraid to give up their voodoo involvement for fear of being killed by demonic spirits. Millions of non-Western immigrants live in constant and irrational fear of witches and evil forces that they feel may harm them.

Hence, it is not easy for a Western counselor or psychiatrist to counsel or treat such clients because of their deep involvement in evil beliefs and practices. To assist them, one should not necessarily send them to psychiatrists, but to counselors or clergies (priests) from their own countries who understand how to intervene in these unusual cases. Attempting to counsel such individuals without this understanding may be a waste of time. In fact, many non-Western immigrants have been misdiagnosed simply because the counselors or psychiatrists were not familiar with their beliefs. (Scholarly work done by non-Western psychologists and psychiatrists in this specific area of counseling or treatment is available in certain university libraries.)

##### *5. Recognize the immigrant's level of enculturation*

Recognizing the immigrants' level of enculturation is helpful in dealing with their problems. (Enculturation simply means the degree to which an immigrant has absorbed the norms and values of the new culture.) Being acquainted with immigrants' country of origin, place of birth, educational background, and length of stay in the United States is helpful in determining their level of enculturation.

In my experience as an immigrant who has also assisted various non-Western immigrants, I discovered that the level of enculturation of immigrants could be measured by the amount of time spent among their own people in comparison with the time spent with people outside their culture. Many Chinese residing in Chinatown or Hispanics residing in Hispanic communities will most likely exhibit a low level of enculturation when compared with those residing, working, and attending churches in predominantly American communities.

The quantity and quality of time spent in any culture affects one's level of enculturation. Immigrants who spend most of their time in their own communities seem to have poor language skills and cultural knowledge about their new country. This in turn affects their employability and access to information necessary for their development and prosperity. Immigrant children born in the United States have a higher level of enculturation than their first-generation parents do.

The fact that they attend American schools and socialize with American kids helps them master their new language and culture. This is also true for children up to 12 years old who migrated to this country with their parents. In fact, these children are culturally richer than American kids are because they live in and are able to navigate smoothly between two different cultures, and understand at least two languages.

Knowing immigrants' level of acculturation can be tremendously helpful in assisting and counseling immigrants. In fact, it will help dilute one's prejudice and makes one more sensitive and effective in helping immigrants.

#### *6. Make time to interview an immigrant.*

Westerners, especially urban Americans, live in a fast-paced society. Work, activities, and appointments that often keep them on the go on a daily basis bombard those residing in urban America. Those who cannot keep up with this pace are left behind, and some of those who cannot compete become unemployed or homeless.

Many Western human services providers often become impatient with immigrant clients who beat around the bush in their communication. It is important to understand that most non-Western immigrants come from relationship-oriented cultures where life is less bombarded by activities. They come from societies where the pace of life is slower than in urban America. They tend to be descriptive and lengthy in communication or stall in communicating sensitive information. In fact, their language deficiency lengthens their communication. The American straightforwardness and impatience often intimidate them or make them resentful.

In order to help immigrants more effectively, human services providers must expect to spend more time with them than they do with typical American or Western clients. It is helpful to give immigrant clients specific appointments and not attend to them during hectic times. It is even better to schedule several appointments if one really wants to know and help them.

#### *7. Observe the immigrant's comportment.*

One afternoon, as I was preparing to visit a client, a social worker called me to refer a female client who was originally from Nigeria. My initial interview with her took about an hour, because she was vague in telling me what her problem was. I later found out that her brother-in-law had raped her while her older sister traveled to Nigeria. This shameful situation forced my client to leave her sister's home in search of her own place even when she could not afford it.

As soon as she left my office, I called the American social worker that referred her to find out why he thought the young woman was deceitful. His reasons for making such an assessment were the following:

1. She did not look him straight in the eye while telling her story.
2. She spent his precious time stalling instead of being straightforward.

As I analyzed this incident, I came to realize that the American social worker just did not understand his Nigerian client's culture. First, this woman came from a culture where she would be considered impolite for looking older people straight in the eye while addressing them. Secondly, while sex talk is not considered a taboo in the United States, it is shameful in her culture to describe a sexual encounter or rape to an older person or even mention the word sex publicly. Thirdly, when describing a shameful experience, a delicate or embarrassing situation, or trying not to hurt someone's feelings, many Africans would "beat around the bush" or speak indirectly.

Through careful observation, we can learn much more about the non-Western immigrant. Since we tend to determine normal behaviors by our own norms and values, we must endeavor to invest time in understanding why an immigrant makes certain facial expressions or gestures that may appear strange to us.

Numerous studies have indicated that body language constitutes about 70% to 90% of communication. According to Kramer on the TV show *Seinfeld*, "94% of our communication is nonverbal, Jerry" (*Seinfeld*, January 29, 1998). Kramer's estimate resembles those of

anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell (65%; Knapp 1972) and of psychologist Albert Mehrabian (93%; 1971).<sup>ii</sup>

Though these statistics may appear exaggerated, it is true that a great percentage of non-Western communication is nonverbal. It seems that people who use non-scientific languages or tribal languages with poor vocabulary rely heavily on nonverbal communication. Therefore, observing an immigrant's facial expressions, tones of voice, gaze, gestures, hand motions, and general postures helps disclose information that one may not be able to obtain via verbal communication.

### Helpful hints for communicating effectively with immigrants

*a. Eye Contact:* It is important to understand that many non-Westerners do not always maintain eye contact during a conversation. Intensive eye contact may be intimidating to a non-Western client. When the human services provider notices that, he or she should avoid making assessments based merely on the client's failure to maintain eye contact, as this is not always an indication of dishonesty, shyness, or lack of assertiveness among non-Western immigrants.

For many Westerners, maintaining eye contact could be interpreted as showing interest and respect. Asking some non-Western clients to look you straight in the eye when you are speaking to them can be insulting.

*b. Facial Expression:* Unlike Westerners, non-Westerners often use facial expression to do a great deal of their communication. Each non-Western subculture has its own facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, hatred, or other nonverbal expressions. It is extremely difficult to accurately read or interpret the facial expression of your non-Western clients. Hence, you should take time to observe a recurrent facial expression and try to associate it with a word or phrase often repeated before or after it in order to figure out its meaning.

For example, if facial expression X is usually preceded or followed by statements such as "I don't think so" or "Maybe not" or "I am not sure," that expression will most likely mean the same thing when expressed without words. When one becomes familiar with a client, one can always ask the client what a certain expression means.

*c. Touching:* While certain types of touching may be offensive to Westerners, they may be acceptable in many non-Western cultures. For instance, when people of the same sex hold hands while walking, Americans will most likely tag them homosexuals, whereas this behavior is normal in many non-Western cultures.

Many Africans resent being touched on the head because it connotes subjection to the one touching them. It is important to know whom to touch and when, where, and how to touch people from another culture.

*d. Distance:* It is important to understand that various cultures keep different distances apart when communicating. Latinos and Arabs like to stand very close to each other when talking, while Americans prefer to stand three to four feet apart.

*e. Smile:* While smiling is a common expression among Americans and many Hispanics, it is not a free expression among Africans, Asians, and Middle Easterners. For instance, a common expression among many Africans says, "A man should not be smiling like a woman." Therefore, an immigrant client's refusal to smile should not be wrongly interpreted from a Western perspective.

### *8. Listen more and talk less in counseling the immigrant.*

It is important to establish the fact that non-Westerners usually communicate indirectly; as a result, human services providers should be prepared to listen more and talk less when dealing with them. While it is true that Westerners do use indirect communication to deal with certain sensitive matters, it is a way of life for non-Westerners.

Non-Westerners also use indirect communication to avoid embarrassing an older person or a person in authority, or to avoid confrontation and preserve unity within a group. They value their relationships so much that they are willing to forfeit their rights on certain matters that might degenerate into an ugly situation.

It is so easy for American social workers to think that they understand immigrants by interrupting them with their own ideas thus making wrong assessment of a case. The problem with indirect communication is that it makes communication more complex. For example, when you invite an African to a party, he may say, "Thank you, I will see you or call you", instead of being direct by saying, "Sorry, I can't make it." Similarly, an Arab would prefer to describe someone infected with AIDS as someone infected with a bad disease.

I remember a time when a Nigerian student needed to borrow some money from me. Instead of being direct in his request, he said, "I lost 100 dollars while I was rushing to school this morning. I don't even know how I am going to feed myself the rest this week." He didn't have to ask me for money because he expected me to figure out from what he said that he needed a loan from me. Of course, I understood this, so I responded with "I can lend you 100 dollars." If he were an American, he could have simply asked me to lend him the money without making a long and unclear speech.

During a counseling session some time ago, a man from Trinidad described his marital problem this way: "It is now six months that my wife refused to let me get close to her." Of course, what he really meant was that his wife refused to have sex with him for six months.

The use of euphemism is very common among non-Westerners. In several African tribes, negotiators or traditional lawmakers extensively use this indirect form of communication known as parable during conflict resolution between tribes, dowry settlement between two families being united through their children's marriage and in other occasions.

Those who are involved in helping professions should pay careful attention, not only to oral, but to nonverbal expressions as well. The same should be true for law enforcement professionals who often misinterpret certain immigrant's statements or behaviors.

#### *8-1 Helpful hints*

a. Restate what you hear from the immigrant to make sure you understand. This is a very useful practice in trying to understand complex communication.

b. Help your clients to be more focused on the issue at hand because many of them are descriptive in their communication and have difficulty summarizing their thoughts.

c. Ask engaging questions in order to deal with timidity or unassertiveness and encourage your immigrant client to speak freely.

d. Participate, if possible, in the communication process with gestures such as nodding your head or making supportive comments like: "That's right," "Yes," "OK," and so on, to show them

that you are attentive to whatever they are sharing with you.

e. Try using many hand gestures to buttress certain concepts or things while conversing with them. In fact, early missionaries who did not understand or speak indigenous languages of the nations they evangelized successfully employed hand motions.

f. Avoid offensive slang or harsh words, rude manners, or zealous directness.

g. Avoid using professional jargons that some even uneducated Western clients may not even understand.

h. Avoid being confrontational and loud when in counseling sessions with them because they get easily embarrassed and defensive when people around get to know about their situation or problem from the tone of your voice. Remember that most of these people come from cultures where “saving face” is highly important.

#### *9. Treat immigrants with respect.*

Even though some non-Western immigrants come to the Western world with less to offer and more to gain, many others who held important positions and wealth in their countries bring something to offer to the West. They bring their education, professional and technological skills that are greatly needed for the development of Western nations. Some came in search of a better life while refugees were forced to leave their countries for a variety of reasons. Hence, to treat them with disrespect is unfair. They deserve to be treated with dignity just like any other human being. The fact is, they also come from cultures where respect or dignity is highly valued.

One day, when I was at the section of immigration office where travel permissions are granted, and was witness to how an immigration officer mistreated a renowned Russian professor, who had been in their office since 8 a.m. to obtain travel document to visit home, and had waited politely in line for about two hours. The attending immigration officer had asked him to return the following day for the paper. When the professor requested to know why, she yelled at him saying, “Sir, I said come back tomorrow!”

The Russian professor retorted, “I am a visiting professor in this country, I need some respect.” This woman officer, with such meanness and sarcasm, replied with: “If you are a professor, why can’t you understanding simple English?” Many people in the room laughed at her response, but I felt bad because I realized I could have been treated just like this distinguished Russian professor who happens to be lecturer at Columbia University. This humiliating experience happens to thousands of immigrants, and some of the most terrible places where immigrants are disrespected and humiliated are, perhaps, the welfare and immigration services.

#### *9 - 1: Some helpful hints*

a. Do not prejudge immigrant regardless of their appearance or language deficiency. One should bear in mind that not every immigrant is uneducated or, came to the United States by his self-will. Many well-to-do immigrants travel abroad against their will, or to seek political asylum, and if most of them had a choice; they would rather stay in their home countries.

b. Welcome them with respect and kindness as you would welcome any American client. Your welcoming attitude towards a visitor usually determines the kind of rapport the visitor would eventually develop with you. The client’s first impression of you goes a long way in determining if you can be trusted. When non-Western immigrants coming for assistance or

counseling are welcomed with respect, they will willingly cooperate with you and keep coming back. If however they are received with nasty or unfriendly attitudes, they may never come back.

*10. Affirm and encourage immigrants.*

We need to understand that when clients come to us for assistance, they probably have already been discouraged somewhere else. They therefore need someone to encourage rather than discourage them. People can be discouraged by our attitudes, tone of voice, lack of interest in their problems, or for not being given the chance to explain why they needed help.

My own cross-cultural experience has led me to believe that North Americans are generally the most affirming and encouraging people in the world. I see that in the way they encourage new immigrants in their language learning and other aspects of life.

Unlike the French, who would instantly make fun of your accent, Americans would rather encourage you in a way that makes language and cultural learning attractive. They will generally use every possible avenue to help you succeed in school or in life. They usually affirm people's academic or professional accomplishments and create openings for job opportunities to many qualified individuals. Anyone who desires success in the United States can succeed.

Encouraging immigrants is important in helping them learn their new language and adjust in their new culture. It gives them hope and motivates them toward the accomplishment of their dreams in their new country.

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<sup>i</sup> "Immigration Law enforcement and Human Rights Abuses by the Committee Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project (ILEMP), with George Kourous, IRC

<sup>ii</sup> Center for Nonverbal Studies: Home of nonverbal dictionary