

Okum, B. F., Fried, F., & Okum, M. L. Understanding Diversity: A Learning-as-Practice Primer (1999). Wadsworth Publishing, ISBN: 0-534-34810-6.

Reviewed by

Susan Wilson, Ph.D.
SUNY Cortland

Susan Wilson is an Assistant Professor teaching in the therapeutic recreation concentration in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at SUNY Cortland

“A dandelion is a weed to a gardener but a flower to a naïve observer” (p. 22)

Throughout each day I am often reminded that students are not empty vessels waiting for me to “fill them up,” but rather they arrive in the classroom with values, perceptions, and ideas that shape the way they view the material presented to them. *Understanding Diversity: A Learning-as-Practice Primer* takes a different approach to teaching and facilitating diversity education. The main focus of the book is how communication is impacted by one’s culture. Norms, values, and ethnic identities of various U.S. subcultures are discussed. The context for this discussion centers on both verbal and non-verbal communication. The authors of the text guide the reader along in their development by first examining the self and then how perceptions shape judgments of the environment.

The book is really divided into three different sections. After a brief introduction to the underlying principles, the first half of the book tries to give readers an understanding of how their communication habits are a reflection of their culture, background, and values. One chapter is entitled *Developing self-awareness: From the Inside Out*. The authors invite readers to examine such topics as conversation style, group roles, silence, and touch in terms of themselves. Students will be asked questions regarding how they perceive or react to various constructs. Another chapter is titled *Self and Verbal Interactions*. Its focus is on language and tone of voice and how those aspects within small and large groups need to be understood in terms of other cultures. The position taken within this discussion is that a communicator must know his or her own use of language and inflection in order to be a more effective communicator with others of various cultures.

The second half of the book discusses the impact of culture on emotions, self, relationships, time, and space. This section is entitled *Developing Awareness of Others: From the Outside In* and consists of four chapters. Each topic is presented in terms of how typical North Americans of European decent most often take in a particular concept and then the authors explore the topic in a wider perspective. These may include persons of another ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or nationality. Instead of providing the reader a list of tips to adhere to when meeting others who may have a differing perspec-

tive, the authors challenge the readers to examine how diversity impacts the connections made between people. For example, in the section on *Intimate Relationships* family type systems are defined and then a comparison is made between Western families and families of Japanese cultures.

One chapter within this section is entitled *Self Where It Is and Where It Ends*. The discussion here centers on the concept of self from an American perspective and how ones' definition of self changes within various cultures. The chapter also addresses cultural assumptions of self as well as differing cultural values. Gender, class, religion, race and ethnicity are also examined from varying viewpoints that may be unique to the average American college student. These chapters identify differences between cultures and common misconceptions some may have toward others.

In addition to the questions contained within each chapter there are between twenty and forty exercises to enhance the readers understanding of the material presented in each chapter. This is the strength of the book. Each exercise relates to the particular concept presented in the chapter. In each section there are at least seven or eight exercises that can be completed within the classroom, ones that may be used as homework assignments, and those that can be used as semester projects. Many of the activities take place in recreational settings that allow for a nice compliment to the concepts in programming courses. One activity asks the reader to watch a television show in which English is not spoken and write down what they think the show is about and then discuss why they thought that in terms of the cues they were given. This type of experiential learning is present throughout the book.

At our university students are required to take a course entitled *Recreation for Persons with Disabilities* to explore how programs and leadership style may need to be adapted to provide a greater opportunity for participation for persons who happen to have disabilities. Recently within this course the concepts have been examined in a broader perspective beyond persons with disabilities in response to the need for our graduates to understand diversity's impact on all aspects of recreation and leisure services. The challenge of this course is to bring experiences of diversity onto a campus whose students are predominantly white individuals of similar decent, socioeconomic status, and background. This text provides a good introduction to many concepts needed by students within our curriculum. The inclusion of the exercises also provides students with experiential learning that will broaden their understanding of diversity. This book would be a solid addition to any individuals with disabilities, programming, group dynamics, or leadership course. The book does not merely provide theoretical material for students to spill out onto exams and forget, but rather puts cultural differences in context and allows students to apply these concepts within their everyday life.

This is a strong text. The combination of theoretical and experimental learning provides a solid approach to both teaching and understanding diversity. The book covers subject matter that is important to students in recreation and leisure studies to understand in order to become effective practitioners.