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'One Commitment, Many Contexts: Safeguarding Across Cultures'

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The Importance of Culture for Human Lives, for Respect, Dignity, and Safeguarding in the Church and Beyond

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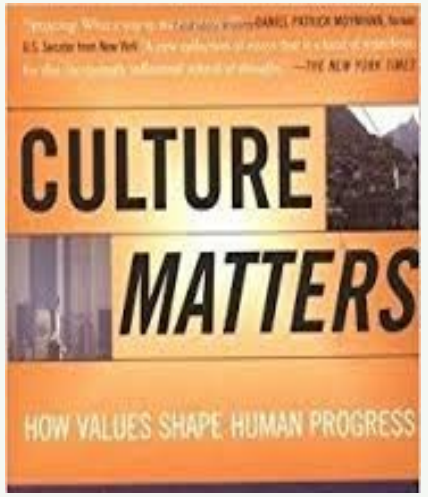
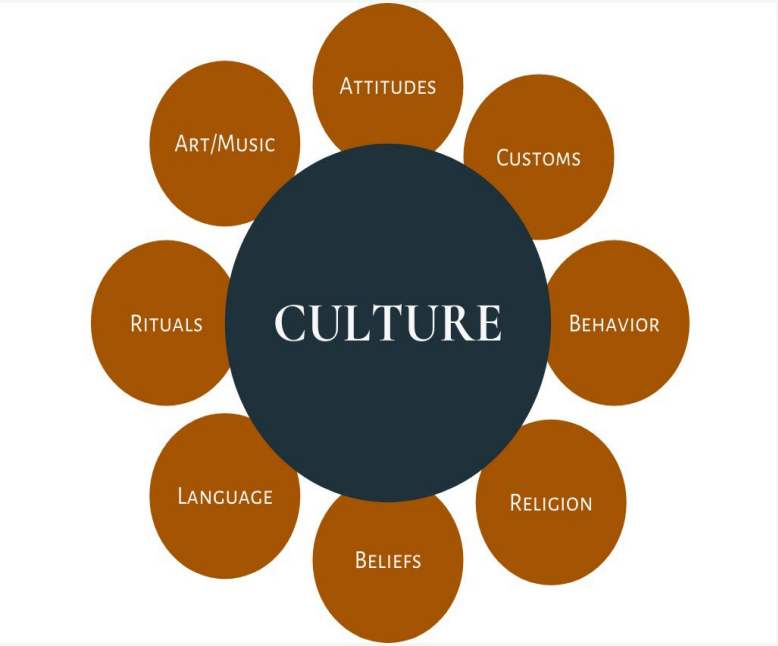
INTRODUCTION

- Culture often used loosely, yet fundamentally shapes meaningful human life (David Read, 2012)
- Culture underpins identity, cohesion, wellbeing, and sustainable societal development (Howson and Dubber, 2014).
- Culture distinguishes humans, shaping identity, relationships, and shared citizenship experiences across societies
- Edward B. Tylor, first to formally define the concept of culture as *"…that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"* (1871: 1).



The Role and Dimensions of Culture

- Culture serves as the fundamental social and emotional foundation of human existence, providing stability and a sense of security within a family unit.
- Culture fundamentally shapes individual and collective self-perception and the valuation of others.
- Culture encompasses society & social structure, language, religion and beliefs, arts and literature, education & customs and traditions



Fundamental Characteristics of Culture

- Culture is acquired through **learning**.
- Culture is collectively **shared** among members of a society.
- Culture exhibits **integration** among its various components.
- Culture is **dynamic** and subject to change.
- Culture demonstrates **adaptability** in response to environmental and social changes.
- Culture encompasses both **material and non-material elements**.

Understanding Cultural Influences on Safeguarding Practice

- Culture provides the unseen framework for everyday human behaviour, shaping values, norms, and everyday social practices
- These cultural elements influence perceptions of harm, protection, and responsibility
- Safeguarding meanings differ across societies due to cultural beliefs and structures.
- Thus, cultures shape how safeguarding is understood, applied, and experienced

Cultural Competent Safeguarding

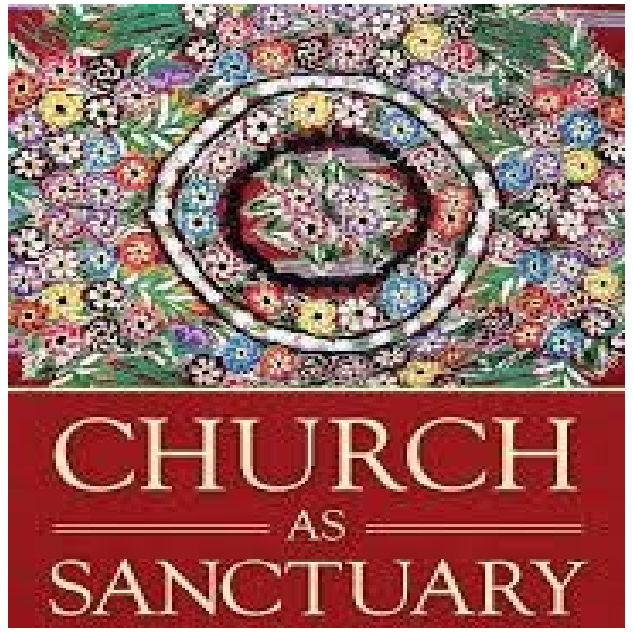
- **Principle of Cultural Relativism**
- Cultural context is essential for designing and implementing effective safeguarding practices
- Safeguarding requires understanding individuals' backgrounds, religions, and community norms
- Culturally competent safeguarding demands balanced, person-centred approaches that avoid stereotyping and address barriers.
- Recognise cultural norms, but assess cases individually without normalising harmful behaviours.

Cultural Competent Safeguarding

- Culturally competent safeguarding addresses diverse abuse definitions, reporting barriers, sensitive support, and institutional authority contexts
- It addresses bias, language barriers, and ensures person-centred communication using trained interpreters
- Jeffrey Sachs, “differential diagnosis" compared to cultural applications in safeguarding, both approaches emphasise context over one-size-fits-all, though they operate on different scales.
- **Safeguarding principles always supersede culture; practices that cause significant harm, such as female genital mutilation or forced marriage, can never be excused or minimised as "just cultural**".

Church as a Healing Sanctuary with Culturally Competent Safeguarding

- Church functions as a sanctuary offering healing, protection, and spiritual support for communities
- Culturally competent safeguarding ensures safety while respecting diverse beliefs, values, and backgrounds.
- The church, too, in addressing abuse, should challenge contexts where theological concepts are misapplied to justify control, suppress dissent, or compel forgiveness.
- Pastoral care for victims and survivors should be empathetic, non-coercive, and prioritise the healing process over institutional protection.
- Beer & Zollner (2025) argue that effective safeguarding requires strategies tailored to specific cultural contexts.
- Effective prevention depends on understanding differing cultural perceptions of authority, child development, and vulnerability.
- Therefore, a rigid, uniform approach is insufficient and safeguarding measures must be adapted to local contexts to protect children and vulnerable adults effectively.



Conclusion: The Church, Broader Cultural Contexts, and Safeguarding

- **Culture matters in Safeguarding**
- Safeguarding practice should consider cultural backgrounds to ensure respectful, effective, unbiased care delivery.
- Professionals must avoid generalisations and stereotypes, prioritising listening to lived experiences over assumptions.
- Practitioners should respect identity, language, beliefs, and culture must never justify abuse or neglect.

THE END