

UNIT 2. Welcome and introductions

This unit examines how our own cultural background shapes how we interpret behaviours, emotions and distress.

It encourages reflection on how our assumptions might affect how we communicate about mental health.



UNIT 2. Cultural Perspectives & Assumptions

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To understand why cultural competence in mental health is important for migrants and refugees, we must first look at **how** our **cultural background**, as well as the cultural background of others, **shapes how we see the world and how we act within it**. Culture is not just something “they” have, it also deeply influences our own interpretations and expectations.

In this unit, we will examine:

- How culture works as a set of “lenses” through which we perceive behaviour.
- The difference between visible and deep culture, using the iceberg metaphor.
- How our own assumptions affect teaching, learning and practice.
- Why unchecked assumptions can lead to misunderstanding, stereotypes and loss of trust.
- How reflective practice can help us move from ethnocentric to **ethnorelative** positions.

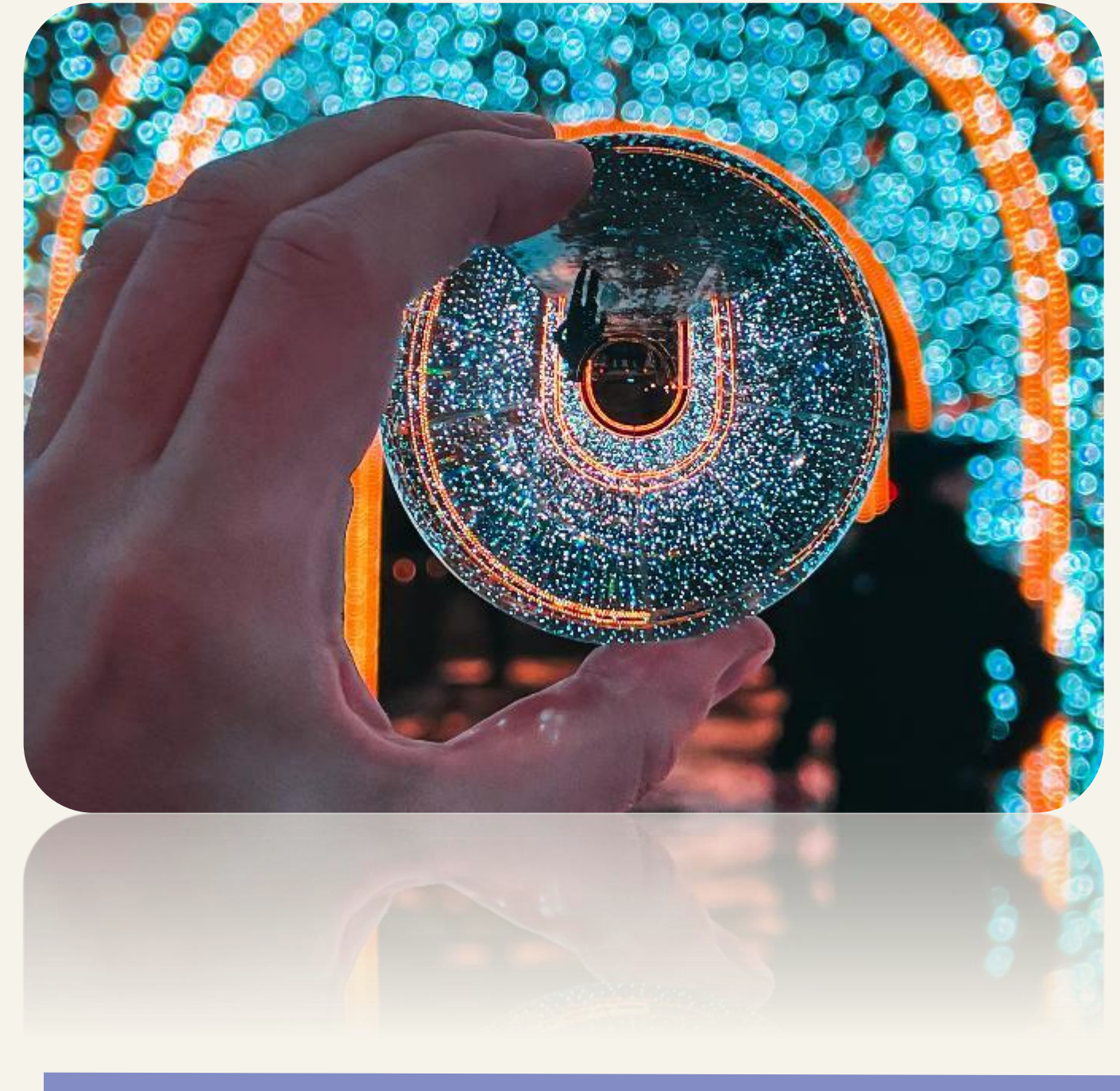
***Ethnorelative** is a perspective that views and appreciates cultural differences as valid and meaningful, recognising one's own culture as just one of many possible ways of life. It stands in contrast to ethnocentrism, which judges other cultures based on one's own cultural standards and sees them as inferior.*

UNIT 2. Culture as “Lenses”

Culture can be understood as a lens: it filters what we notice, how we interpret it and how we respond. This means that no perception is ever “neutral.” Our **upbringing**, **values** and **experiences** influence the meanings we assign to behaviours.

For example, silence in a classroom may be seen as a lack of engagement in one culture, but as a form of respect in another. Similarly, direct eye contact might signal confidence in one context, but disrespect in another.

Recognising that we are always looking through cultural lenses helps us to question our assumptions and avoid misinterpretations.



UNIT 2. Our own lens matters

It is tempting to focus only on the cultural background of others, but our own assumptions are equally powerful. As educators and professionals, we also carry expectations and “defaults” shaped by our culture. These influence how we interpret behaviours and how we react.

One useful framework here is the **Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity** (DMIS) developed by Milton Bennett.

It describes a progression from **ethnocentric stages** (where our culture is the central standard and others are judged against it) to **ethnorelative stages** (where we recognise that multiple cultural perspectives can be valid).

Essentially, Milton Bennett’s model encourages us to move from seeing our culture as the ‘norm’ (ethnocentric) to recognising multiple valid perspectives (ethnorelative).

UNIT 2. Implications for Practice

When cultural assumptions go unchecked, they can create significant risks:

- **Stereotypes:** We may apply rigid generalisations rather than seeing individuals.
- **Misinterpretation:** For example, interpreting silence as disengagement instead of cultural restraint.
- **Loss of trust:** Learners or clients may feel misunderstood or judged, reducing their willingness to participate or share honestly.

These risks show why **cultural self-awareness is not optional**. It is central to accurate, respectful, and effective practice.

For Example:

Imagine a student who remains mostly silent during class discussions.

- In one cultural frame, this is seen as a lack of interest or motivation.
- In another, it is a sign of respect for the teacher's authority or a preferred mode of learning through listening and reflection.

The behaviour is the same, but the interpretation changes depending on the lens. Our responsibility is to pause and ask: "What other explanations might exist?"