



## Gestures in Different Cultures: Being *Hand-y* & Playing *Footsie*

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for Diversity Matters

### SUMMARY

In all Muslim and most Asian cultures, it is considered very rude to present or receive an object with the left hand. The right hand is always the hand of choice.... When inviting people from other cultures to follow you or to sit down with you, do not use the index finger to point to the location.... Never assume that someone from another culture wants to shake hands at all. This is a peculiarly Western greeting.

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### Handed-ness

In all Muslim and most Asian cultures, it is considered very rude to present or receive an object with the left hand. The right hand is always the hand of choice.

In Islamic culture, the right hand is used for taking food, a communal event during which one scoops one's viands with flat bread from a common bowl in the center of the table or mat. Scrupulous hand-washing is absolutely required before meals. The left hand is used for hygiene and toileting and is considered inherently filthy. This is one reason why the right hands of thieves and other criminals are punitively amputated. Not only does this present a major inconvenience to the miscreant, but he or she is thereby virtually excluded from any social interactions.

Although the rationale is not exactly the same in Asia, the right hand is considered more polite because usually more adroit and dominant. However, when presenting or receiving a very important gift or document (a business card or guest gift), both hands are used to register one's careful appreciation of the object.

(You say you are left-handed? Use the right hand, anyway. In these cultures, children are strongly encouraged to develop skill with the right hand regardless of natural tendencies.)

## **Top of Mind**

Never place your hand on the head of an Asian, even that of a young child (unless invited to do so). The crown of the head is the residence of the soul in Buddhism and Hinduism. Such a gesture may offend or even frighten away the soul -- a life-threatening situation.

## **Hand Signals**

When inviting people from other cultures to follow you or to sit down with you, do not use the index finger to point to the location. Such a gesture is used to direct or beckon animals. Rather, stand aside a bit, bow slightly to the individuals, and with a low, sweeping motion with the back of the hand, indicate your wish that they accompany you to the seating area. (Similarly, when hailing a taxi in a major city where many cab drivers are foreign nationals, never show the raised palm of the hand. This is considered an aggressive gesture. Rather, hold out the back of the hand at thigh level, about 18 inches from your leg. The driver will usually stop for you immediately.)

Do not use the familiar American "OK" sign or the "thumbs up" sign with people from non-American cultures. These can express rude sexual connotations -- even sexual insults -- in many societies. (A Westerner "thumbing" in an African country was beaten nearly to death by a carful of passengers who thought he was being offensive.)

Do not slap a foreign national on the back, especially an Asian. This is considered aggressive and invasive behavior. The "hail fellow well met" intention fails to translate.

## **Shaking Hands**

Two basic rules: (1) Never assume that someone from another culture wants to shake hands at all. This is a peculiarly Western greeting. (2) If you are a male, never attempt to shake hands with a woman from another culture unless she extends her hand first. The same might be said for non-American men, but it will not be so offensive (read invasive) to offer your hand to a man. Women may touch each others' hands gently and warmly. In many cultures, the "macho" bone-crushing grip of Western men translates as aggression. Many Eastern and Middle Eastern men may just brush the palm of your hand with a very gentle pressure. Although this may seem effeminate to Western men, it is seen as genteel and well-mannered (non-aggressive) to other cultures. Practice this with friends and notice their reactions!

## **Playing "Footsie"**

The sole of the foot is considered "dirty" in most cultures. To expose the sole of one's shoe to a person (sitting across from you) is tantamount to "mooning" the person. Very disrespectful! This may require crossing the legs in a manner that keeps the sole of the shoe pointed toward the floor, rather than the typical leg-crossing of most Western men that rests the ankle or calf of the crossing leg on the thigh of the other leg.

Did you know that in Hmong culture (a mountain group from Laos settled largely in Wisconsin and other Northern states), if a woman taps the top of a man's foot with her foot, she is indicating that she is available for sex? Who knew!!

Never place your foot or leg in such a position that someone would have to step over it. This action is inconsiderate at best -- rude at worst.

**For information about how to obtain presenters from different cultural backgrounds with expertise about multiple cultures and religions, please contact Susan Schubert, 614.864-5111  
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