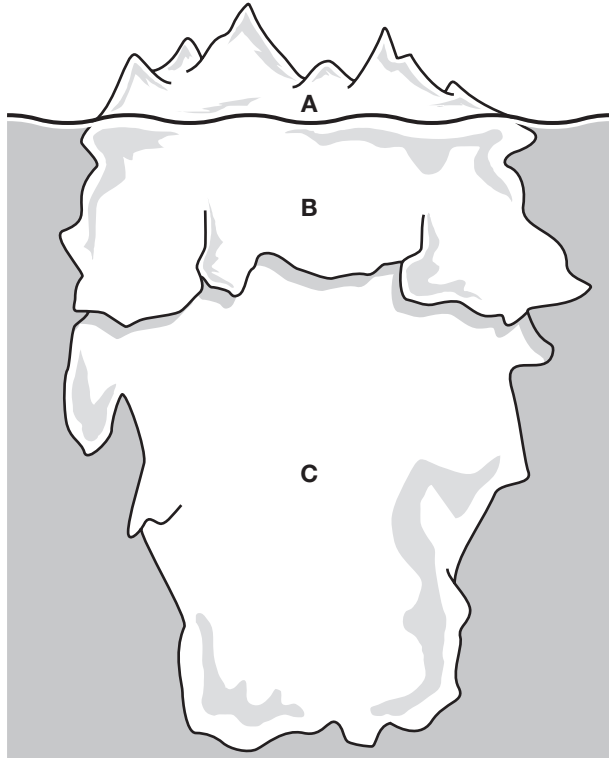


# 1.3 The culture iceberg

When you observe people from a certain culture, some characteristics – such as dress and the way people greet each other – are easy to see. Others are not so easy.

Culture is sometimes compared to an iceberg, some of which is visible, but much of which is difficult to see, or invisible.



1 Look at the list of components of national culture, and place each one in one of the three categories:

- A things which you can recognise quite easily
- B things which take some time to recognise
- C things which you recognise only when you are very familiar with a culture.

Artefacts: art and architecture	<input type="checkbox"/>	Humour	<input type="checkbox"/>
Balance between work and home	<input type="checkbox"/>	Organisation of companies	<input type="checkbox"/>
Corruption	<input type="checkbox"/>	Personal friendship	<input type="checkbox"/>
Democracy	<input type="checkbox"/>	Physical gestures	<input type="checkbox"/>
Directness of speech in business	<input type="checkbox"/>	Press and other media	<input type="checkbox"/>
Driving habits	<input type="checkbox"/>	Punctuality in business	<input type="checkbox"/>
Emotion shown in public	<input type="checkbox"/>	Social life: public and private	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family life	<input type="checkbox"/>	Social organisation and class	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gender – roles of males and females	<input type="checkbox"/>	Treatment of outsiders/foreigners	<input type="checkbox"/>
Greetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	Values and beliefs	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 2 Are any of these more important than others in understanding a particular national culture with which you are familiar?
- 3 Add any other elements which you think are important in defining a national culture you know.

1 Why does culture matter?

# 1.4 Cultural briefing

## Aims

- To examine the usefulness of cultural briefing for people going to live, work or holiday abroad.
- To identify the most important elements in cultural briefing.

## Procedure

- 1 Check students' understanding of the term 'cultural briefing'. If necessary, explain that it consists of finding out about a culture or country you are about to visit or have contact with. Ask for examples of when it might be necessary, such as a first business trip to China or Peru. Ask the students for some elements which they think would be included in a cultural briefing. Discuss these points briefly in pairs or small groups and compare results.
- 2 Present task 1 and briefly check that students understand the words in the list and what they have to do: at this point they are not expected to know the information, simply to think what it would be most useful for them to know, based on their previous conceptions of the target culture. Working in pairs or groups, students select the six most useful things they would like to know. For example, Western students with little knowledge of China may feel that the sheer size of the country will make regional differences important, or that the 'inscrutability' of the Chinese may make silence a useful attribute in some situations. Ask a spokesperson from each group to present the results, allowing time for comment and discussion.
- 3 Present task 2. This time the target culture should be to some degree familiar, so the exercise should be similar to the previous one, but slightly quicker and easier. Students could work individually. Compare results, asking for explanations of why certain points were chosen. (For example, in culture X, visitors should be aware that pre-planning for meetings is very important.) Present and compare results.
- 4 Present task 3, which may be done for homework. The presentation, by an individual or a group, should take the form of a cultural briefing as described above. If it is written, photocopy the students' work and distribute it to the others.

## Outcomes

There is no 'correct' selection of components from the list, as it will depend on individual experience and taste. But make students aware of the fact that some items are practical, such as tipping in restaurants, while others are more abstract, such as respect for authority. Usually the former are easier to identify than the latter. It may be interesting to ask students to compare the balance between the two in the different selections.

## Development

Cultural briefing is available in many types of book and document (see Further reading below), and on a growing number of websites. It has an important role in preparing people to cope with living in a new cultural environment. Encourage students to explore this area as much as they wish. However, make them aware that cultural briefing, without direct experience, may also encourage the formation of stereotypical views. Encourage them always to be cautious about views unconfirmed by their own experience.

## Linked activities

1.5, 2.5, 2.7, 3.3, 3.4

## Further reading

For the cross-cultural trainer it is always important to match the method of training to the kind and amount of information to be covered. For a useful discussion of the difference between briefing, orientation, training and education, see pp. 117–34 ('Modes of cross-cultural training: Conceptualizing cross-cultural training as education') in

*International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 10, by Janet M. Bennett, 1986

and pp. 69–95, 'Intercultural Communication Education and Training Goals, Content and Method', in

*International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 29, No. 1, by Virginia Milhouse, 1996.

## 1.4 Cultural briefing

Cultural briefing is the process of finding out about another culture, especially in preparation for a period of residence, a business trip or a holiday.

Some types of information can be learnt about beforehand, such as the organisation of the public transport system, and forms of address (Doctor, Mr, etc.), but it may be better to discover others through direct experience.

Look at the list below.

- 1 Choose a country whose culture you know little about, and from the list pick out the six things you would find it most useful to know before you visited the country on a business trip.
- 2 Choose a country whose culture you are familiar with, and do the same.
- 3 Prepare a short introduction (spoken or written) which would be useful for people about to make a business trip to that country.

Attitudes to alcohol	Political system
Attitudes to foreigners	Preparation for meetings
Dealing with emergencies	Public transport
Demography – population spread	Regions
Formality of dress in business	Religion and its importance
Geography	Respect for authority
History	Shop opening times
Hospitality	Silence – its acceptability in conversation and meetings
Housing standards	Thinking – analytical or intuitive?
Local products	Tipping in restaurants
Meal times	Titles – Mrs, Dr, etc., and their equivalents
Money – paying restaurant bills	
Physical distance between people when they speak	

# 1.5 Cultural briefing: The Swedes

## Aims

To present the idea of cultural briefing and to evaluate its usefulness.

## Procedure

**1** If your students are not from Sweden, introduce this activity by asking them what they know about Sweden.

- Where is Sweden?
- What's the landscape like?
- What about the weather?
- What do you know about the people?
- What do you know about Swedish culture?

If students are from Sweden, ask them what they think people from other cultures know about Sweden and the Swedes.

**2** Ask students to read the introduction and task 1. Check that they understand the sentences in the list and what they have to do. Make sure they understand that at this stage they are not being asked to discuss the relative truth of the statements, but simply to choose the six most useful ones for the visitor. It is not necessary to put the six things of most value in order of importance.

**3** Working individually or in small groups, students should prepare their lists.

Each group should prepare their list on paper, whiteboard, flipchart or OHP transparency. Compare results and ask for justification of each choice.

**4** If the class contains students with experience or knowledge of Swedish culture, move on to task 2. Invite them to give their views on the validity of the statements, and on how the information they contain can help guide the visitor in everyday life and business. Students do not necessarily have to agree with the statements (those referring to humour and the 'Swedish model' may easily be challenged), but discussion of the issues they raise should be seen as a useful awareness-raising exercise.

## Outcomes

This activity should draw out the distinction between geographical and political facts on the one hand, and more subjective areas such as moral or social values on the other. It should show that it can be relatively easy to explain and discuss the former objectively, but the latter require more careful thought.

Suggestions for the two main categories of information:

More objective/practical: 1, 2, 3, 7, 13

More subjective: 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16

The activity should highlight the different degrees of importance attached by students to different types of information. This in turn should show how cultural briefing needs to cover a wide range of topics in order to meet a wide variety of needs.

## Development

You may decide to extend this exercise to your students' own cultures. Ask them to create a list for people visiting their countries. Compare lists and see if many common features emerge, such as a majority of practical tips, revealing a pragmatic approach; or subjective ones, showing a more interpretive attitude. Raise the question:

Does the choice reflect on the culture itself, or more on the student choosing the topics?

## Linked activities

1.4, 2.5, 2.7, 3.4

## Further reading

Culture also influences our judgements as to which and what kind of information is important in any given situation. See

*Perception and Identity in Intercultural Communication*, by Marshall R. Singer, 1998, Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

For excellent monographs on various cultures, visit the website of the Intercultural Press at <http://interculturalpress.com>

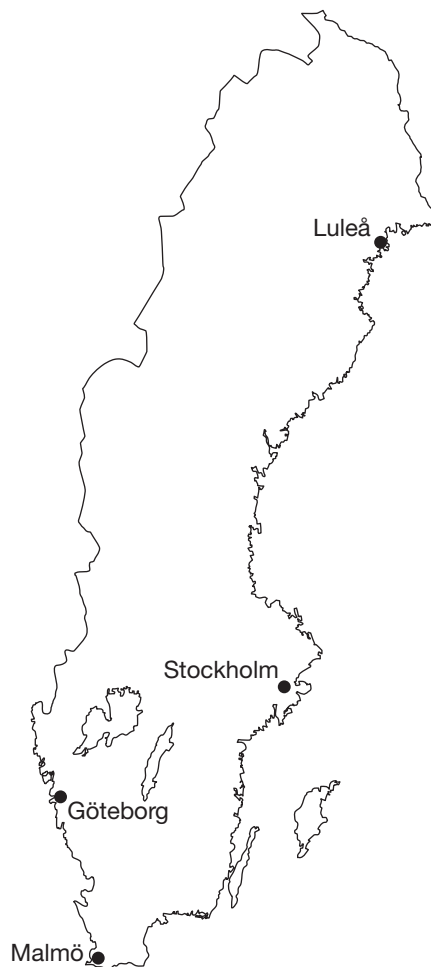
## 1.5

## Cultural briefing: The Swedes

Look at the following information prepared for someone who is about to go on a business trip to Sweden, and who has little previous experience of the culture or the country.

1 Choose from the list below the six things you think they would find most useful, and the six least useful.

- 1 Sweden has almost nine million inhabitants with a low population density (about nine million people in about 450,000 square kilometres).
- 2 It is a kingdom with a constitutional monarch.
- 3 The prime minister and the cabinet are responsible to Parliament.
- 4 The 'Swedish model' or 'middle way' represents a mixture of caring socialism with individual capitalist entrepreneurialism.
- 5 Differences in income are less marked than in many other countries.
- 6 People tend to be shy, reserved and not very talkative.
- 7 Public and private sector services such as transport and restaurants tend to work efficiently.
- 8 Swedes tend to speak English well, and to be well travelled.
- 9 At school they learn to think logically and to behave in a restrained manner.
- 10 Teamwork is common and appreciated.
- 11 Gestures and physical contact are not generally approved of.
- 12 Swedes usually plan appointments well in advance.
- 13 Holidays are usually taken between late June and early August.
- 14 People feel attached to their local region.
- 15 Humour is less important than in some other cultures.
- 16 Sensitive subjects such as sex or religion are often avoided in conversation.



2 If you know something about the Swedes, say whether you think the statements are valid or not.