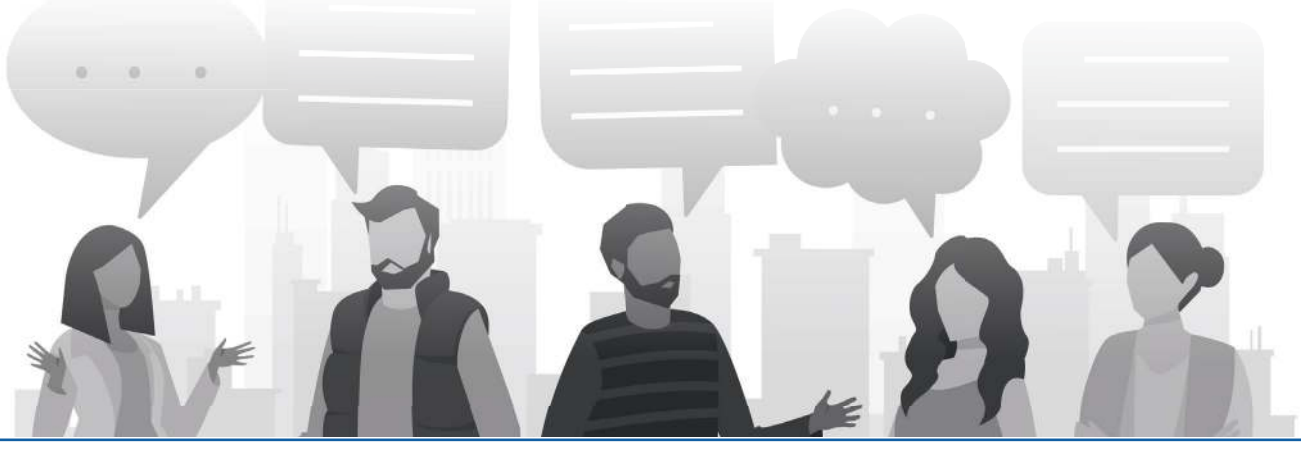
PART I

INTRODUCING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION



1 From Culture to Cultural Identity Concepts

In this chapter, we develop a working definition of culture that outlines its key aspects and notes important links between culture and other dimensions that can shape behaviour in cultural encounters. We then examine four popular cultural identity concepts that partially draw on very different values.

AIMS

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

1. **define key aspects of culture;**
2. **distinguish between four popular cultural identity constructs;**
3. **describe the potential impact of these constructs on cross-cultural life and work;**
4. **explain the extent to which these constructs are connected to questions of power.**

KEY TERMS

culture – cultural identity – monocultural – traditional multicultural – traditional intercultural – transcultural – intercultural identity

1.1 Approaching Culture

TASKS

- How would you define culture?
- Would you limit this to the literature, music and similar products of a nation, or does it go beyond that?
- Does your local football club have a culture, or does culture start at national level?
- Does culture exist at a wider geographical (e.g. European) or religious (e.g. Christian) level?
- Think of examples that could help us understand the concept and compare these examples with Figure 1.1, which shows culture as a blend of three women dressed in traditional East Asian, Indian and Arab attire beside a globe symbolising connection and unity, yet also differences across the world.

Figure 1.1 *Culture* by Alíz Kovács-Zöldi

In our global and increasingly virtual world, encounters with people from other cultures often occur on a daily basis. This might be face to face, for example at university, the workplace and in the neighbourhood, or on Instagram, Facebook or other social media networks. It also happens in a more mediated way, for example through the cultural interactions seen in television series, films and advertising. Yet, what culture actually is, remains difficult to define. Little has changed since Raymond Williams noted that it is 'one of the three most complicated words in the English language' (1985, p. 87), with discussions connected to questions of power hierarchies continuing (see Delanoy, 2020; Nakayama, 2020). Nevertheless, we aim to provide a working definition that you might want to build on and amend as you continue with your studies, read new articles on the topic and explore your own experiences.

1.1.1 Hofstede's Pyramid

A good starting point for the development of that working definition is the widely disseminated pyramid of 'mental programming' (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 6), which is divided into three parts: the top level is entitled 'personality', the middle 'culture' and the bottom 'human nature', with black lines clearly separating each of these parts from the others. The pyramid highlights that our behaviour,

which might lead to challenges in encounters with other people and/or to the development of new social relationships, is not exclusively shaped by 'culture'. Factors like 'personality' and 'human nature' have to be taken into account as well. Personality includes traits such as 'the Big Five': extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness and neuroticism (Marsh et al., 2010), all of which could be inherited and/or learned. Human nature refers to instincts and basic emotions like fear, anger, sadness and shame, which are inherited, but we might want to add cognitive and storytelling abilities too (Harari, 2015, pp. 36–41; Gottschall, 2012). At the middle of the pyramid, we find 'culture' as something *learned* and *specific to a group*, and that is certainly a good starting point for a working definition.

The fixed boundaries indicated by black lines in Hofstede's pyramid should however be questioned: you might know from experience that cultural contexts can have an impact on both the expression of personality traits and the stories that we tell each other. Extraversion, for example, could be supported or met with scepticism: Ferraro describes numerous case studies in which US American individual extraversion was regarded as problematic by Japanese participants in joint business meetings (e.g. 2010, p. 64). On the other hand, individuals and stories can shape culture, especially if they become popular. For example, Van Assche et al. (2019) highlight clear parallels in xenophobic, ultraconservative and ultranationalist re-imaginings of the US, UK and France, when they compare the social-psychological underpinnings of Trumpism, Brexit and far-right parties on the European continent. In particular, the authors link this to a revival of tendencies towards prejudice, social dominance orientation and authoritarianism (2019). While this should not be misunderstood as a simple return to the early twentieth-century fascism that led to WWII, it shares key aspects with that fascism (Griffin, 2008, p. 186). At the same time, it shows even more similarities with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European nationalism, which culminated in WWI and allows for a transfer of such social-psychological research to forms of extreme nationalism in other parts of the globe, including Xi Jinping's China and especially Putin's Russia. The renewed dissemination and internalisation of aggressive 'My country first' stories by politicians like Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Marie Le Pen, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin stand in contrast to earlier more intercultural and transcultural images of these cultures as well as alternatives (such as from Biden in the US), but it connects with colonial, neocolonial and/or other imperialist heritages. Overall, this highlights a substantial degree of *imagination* and *mediation* in the construction of culture (Jackson, 2014, pp. 66–68), to which we will return in our discussion of different cultural identity constructs in this chapter.

Finally, depending on the context, each of the three basic aspects of mental programming in Hofstede's graph might become more or less important depending on the situation. For example, if an ultranationalist mob decides to hunt you and your friends on the streets because you said that you would like to bring

down a statue of a historic racist who continues to be celebrated as a national hero by that mob, then instincts (human nature) might guide your behaviour more than culture or personality. On the other hand, in academic discussions at university, personality and culture might be much more in the foreground than human nature. This highlights *dynamics* that we would like to add to our working definition of culture.

Overall, these examples indicate that boundaries between personality, culture and human nature should be imagined as fluid, dynamic and open, rather than static, which might be better expressed with a dotted curved and not a straight line.

TASKS

Prepare a presentation with one example each for the impact of a personality trait, a cultural aspect and human nature on an encounter that you have had with another person, or that you have seen or heard of. Then explain to what extent and exactly how the encounter was shaped by the factor mentioned, and which other factors may have played a role.

1.1.2 Other Key Aspects

Think of an *iceberg*: you can only see a small part, which is out of the water, while most of it remains hidden beneath the water. Frequent illustrations of culture, so-called 'iceberg models' (e.g. Matejovsky, 2011), draw on this image to stress that most cultural features remain *invisible* – like most parts of an iceberg. These invisible features include norms, beliefs, assumptions and, above all, values. One reason for their invisibility is that they are not always consciously learned (like writing usually is), but programmed or conditioned through model behaviour that you follow or sanctions that you try to avoid. Unlike behaviour or cultural artefacts, which tend to form the *visible* part of cultural icebergs, values cannot be directly (e.g. photographically) captured, but need to be deducted, for example through surveys and interviews, or observation of behaviour.

Now, think of an *onion*: it has a core and then different layers until you reach the peel. Popular 'onion diagrams' build on this image to highlight the links between different aspects of culture. Most of them show cultural values as core because they are considered key for cultural practices that tend to be linked to beliefs, attitudes, behaviour and rituals, but also for the development of systems and institutions. All this can be put into the different layers, and there is a variety of onion diagrams to choose from (see Spencer-Oatey, 2004, p. 5; Hofstede Insights, 2020). While the cultural aspects of these layers have to be imagined in dynamic interaction (rather than stable as they are in popular onion diagrams),

there can be little doubt that core values, or 'shared ideas about what is right or wrong' (Jackson, 2014, p. 53), tend to remain relatively stable if compared with actual behaviour and artefacts. In this sense, we want to amend Benessaieh's summary of culture as 'a stable system of practices and beliefs' (2010, p. 13) by adding *values* as key aspects and highlighting that we also have to expect *dynamics*, which are a result of people's interaction, their negotiation of meaning and contributions to (or interventions against) particular cultural aspects (i.e. beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and rituals).

Finally, the association of culture with a particular collective deserves to be considered in more detail: if that collective could be defined as 'a community or population large enough to be self-sustaining' (Jandt, 2010, p. 15), then we have to imagine a broad spectrum of cultures. From a territorial perspective, we might have to distinguish between local (Hong Kong in China, New York City as 'the Big Apple'), regional (e.g. Bavaria in Germany and Andalucía in Spain), national and supranational cultures (the United Kingdom and the European Union), and consider the tensions that come with that. Cultural identification can, however, also be linked to different affiliations within a territory, for example in football with 'São Paulo FC' rather than 'SE Palmeiras' (both of which are in São Paulo), or 'Seville' instead of 'Betis' (both in Seville). Such affiliations would traditionally be summarised as 'subcultures', but there is growing acceptance that for the development of intercultural competence as 'social action competence' the difference between 'intercultural' and 'intracultural' tendencies is at best a gradual one, because very similar principles apply (see Bolten, 2020).

TASK

Take some time to reflect on yourself: to which cultures at local, regional, national and supranational level do you belong? To what extent do these cultures complement each other and where do you see conflicts? In which way and how exactly have you contributed to (or against) cultural identity constructs at these levels? Now, exchange these ideas in smaller groups with members of your class. What are the differences, and what is the common ground?

1.1.3 In Summary

We can now argue that **culture** refers to learned, programmed or conditioned values, beliefs, assumptions and norms common to a larger (self-sufficient) population that expresses these characteristics in particular patterns of behaviour, rituals, artefacts and institutions. Due to its largely unconscious and conflictive acquisition, which is a consequence of priming through a wider spectrum of stories, it is predominantly mediated, invisible and imagined. At the same time, culture is dynamic, because people contribute to (or intervene against) these stories, that is retell, rewrite, adapt and negotiate them, or try to develop alternatives.

Understood as such, cultures can be described in their historical continuities, for example you could say that from the eighteenth century until the early 1960s, racial segregation norms were a key feature of US American culture. They should, however, also be discussed in their discontinuities, because norms can be learned, questioned and replaced by other norms. For example, racial segregation was declared unlawful in the US Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964/1965, which had an impact on the lives of black people, though it did not end discrimination, as has been highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement more recently.

With focus on such learning experiences, Welsch reminds us that 'our understanding of culture is an active factor in our cultural life':

> If one tells us that culture is to be a homogeneity event, then we practice the required coercions and exclusions. […] Whereas, if one tells us […] that culture ought to incorporate the foreign and do justice to transcultural components, then we will set about this task, and then corresponding feats of integration will belong to the real structure of our culture. The 'reality' of culture is […] always a consequence too of our conceptions of culture.
>
> (Welsch, 1999, p. 201)

It might be worth adding that we do not always do what we are told. For example, in National Socialist Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union and Pinochet's Chile, many people rejected the regime's coercions and exclusions and fought for a more inclusive transcultural society, although they knew that this could mean jail, concentration camp or death penalty. Similarly, numerous people challenge the coercions and exclusions of contemporary authoritarian and non-authoritarian regimes, despite the knowledge of the regimes' power to put them in jail, indefinitely prolong these jail sentences and/or kill them, even if they are in exile in other countries. The treatment of Uyghurs by the Chinese authorities, critics and dissidents by the Russian and Belarusian governments, and foreign suspects by the US military at Guantanamo are just a few examples that critical interculturalists might want to consider in this context.

Drawing on our basic working definition of culture in context, we would now like to explore common ground and key differences in cultural values in greater depth. They tend to culminate in different identity constructs, that is, different concepts of self that define how we see ourselves and our place in the world.

TASK

Define your identity in three words. Compare your answer with that of your classmates.

Between you, the answers to the above tasks will probably fall into several categories: some of you may have put references to your sex or gender, or your nationality, or

your ethnic background; others will have put religious affiliation, marital status, or character traits. The concept of **cultural identity** is a complex one, but one that is important for the study of intercultural communication. Reginald Byron provides a basic definition, according to which identity relates to the 'properties of uniqueness and individuality, the essential differences making a person distinct from all others, as in "self-identity"' but also to 'qualities of sameness, in that persons may associate themselves, or be associated by others, with groups or categories on the basis of some salient common feature, e.g. "ethnic identity"' (Byron, 2002, p. 441).

Identities are not, however, monolithic, fixed or static: Tope Omoniyi reminds us that identities are dynamic and constructed in interaction (Omoniyi, 2006). Bonny Norton similarly defines identity as 'the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future' (Norton, 2013, p. 4). In other words, the way you have defined your identity in the task above will very much have been influenced by how you saw yourself in the context you have completed this task in, and in relation to others around you.

In the next sections of this chapter, we will dissect identity construction in more detail, in particular with reference to different approaches to culture. This will lead us to distinguish between monocultural, traditional multicultural, traditional intercultural and transcultural identity constructs, the last of which are in line with leading intercultural perspectives today.

1.2 Back to Our Island: Monocultural Identity Constructs

In his reference to perceptions of culture as 'a homogeneity event' linking up to 'coercions and exclusions', Welsch (1999, p. 201) highlights key features of **monocultural identity** constructs, which are also known as 'island' or 'container' concepts of culture (Eriksen, 1993; Moses & Rothberg, 2014, p. 31). These concepts shaped European colonialism and nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the construction of most new nation states in the twentieth century. They continue to inform neo-colonialism in different parts of the globe and, above all, the rise of populist ultranationalism in different shapes and forms, for example in the underpinning of far-right parties on the European continent, English Brexit, Trumpism in the United States, Xi Jinping's China and Putin's Russia. Characteristic is the link to populist images of 'the people' forming in 'their' national culture a *separate*, *homogeneous* and *essentialist* community with boundaries with other cultures clearly demarcated (Benessaieh, 2010, pp. 13–14).

The island metaphor captures that concept particularly well, because islands have clear boundaries (surrounded by water) and – if left untouched (think of Robinson Crusoe's island in Defoe's novel) – tend to develop their own fauna and flora, which links up to ideas of difference of the whole. From there, it is only a

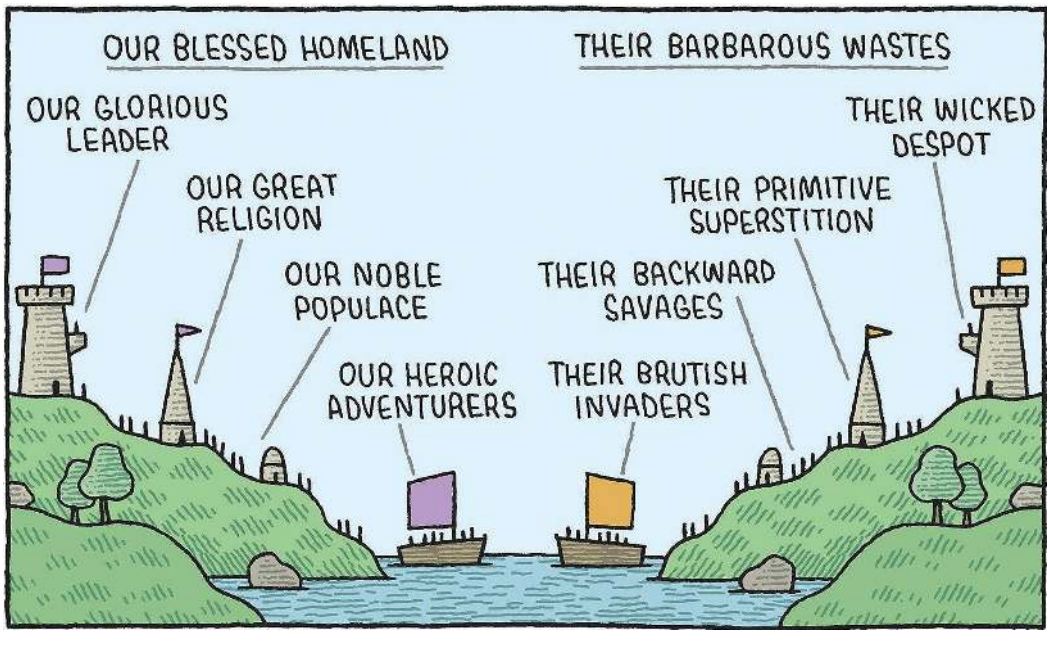


Figure 1.2 'Us vs. Them' by Tom Gauld

small step to assume that one's island will continue to develop in its own way, that is, remain fundamentally different from other islands, which connects to essentialist ideas (focusing on an imagined essence).

If such a simplistic island image is naively transferred to human cultures, we tend to end up with rigid oppositions (e.g. 'the Mexicans' as completely different to 'the Americans' in former US American president Donald Trump's tweets; see the discussion in Chapter 4), and from there it is only a small step to invent cultural hierarchies, because people tend to claim superiority for their 'own' culture. Evolutionary psychologists explain this rigid in-group thinking as 'tribalism' and link it to a stone-age mindset that modern humans have still not managed to overcome: 'We are genetically primed and culturally shaped to alert, defend, and aggress […]. This extends to the protection of our way of life' (Hobbs, 2018, p. 1). This 'priming' can be explained by the sheer length of the era of tribal life of humans and their evolutionary ancestors, which was formed through several million years of close face-to-face contact in groups that did not usually exceed 75 individuals (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997; Keltner, 2009, p. 57; Clark & Winegard, 2020). Tom Gauld's caricature (Figure 1.2) illustrates the hierarchy and conflict-drive linked to monocultural 'priming', which was finally – in the last few thousand years – extended to much larger 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983) as, for example, kingdoms and nations. This cooperation between large numbers of strangers through fictional stories (Harari, 2015, p. 41) has cleared the way for large-scale wars and genocides.