

Intercultural competences



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Patrick T.H.M. Janssen

2nd Edition

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Second Edition

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Preface

Cultural differences do exist

In my preface to the first edition in 2018, I wrote that one of the reasons for writing an educational book about intercultural competences was the idea that little was known about culture, cultural differences and what competences are needed to bridge those cultural gaps.

Four years later, little has changed. On the contrary, the impression that I got is that people increasingly pretend that we are all the same. It seems that people are finding it difficult to accept that we, Homo sapiens, are a group animal and that we ultimately like to live in groups and think in boxes. Research has shown time and time again that people feel more stress-free when they know which group both they and others belong to. That makes life comfortable and clear.

It still is the case that the majority of people all over the world find it difficult to accept that communication between people from different (sub) cultures is fundamentally different from communication between people with the same cultural background.

Precisely by denying or minimizing the cultural differences between (sub) cultures or people from other countries, we approach each other in a 'normal' way for us, because the consensus is 'deep down we are all the same', which is absolutely not true.

Deep down, in our basic assumptions about how the world works and how the world should be, we are sometimes radically different from each other, sometimes even diametrically opposed.

Almost everybody believes they are 'right' or 'correct' or 'behaving normally' from their own perspective, and yes, they are. There is no right or wrong when talking about cultural differences. This misunderstanding is the reason that miscommunications and irritations arise, which often lead to conflicts.

Proper science-based information about culture, cultural differences and intercultural competences turns out to be even more vital than I initially thought.

Lifelong learning

A second reason for writing this book is that learning intercultural competences and intercultural communication is grossly underestimated. It is difficult and usually takes years to master.

One of the biggest pitfalls in intercultural communication is that people initially think they can do it without any outside help, and that learning

intercultural competences is actually superfluous. As I mentioned before, people find it difficult to grasp that others are fundamentally different.

Only when people actually have contact with people from a different culture for a longer period of time, for example in multicultural cities, or if they live and work in another country or work at an international company, do they realize after some time that their normal ways of communication don't seem to work. There is no 'normal' between people from different cultures.

The result is that people become frustrated, goals are not achieved, multicultural teams fall apart or function moderately, poorly, or not at all. Expats return disappointed to their country of origin. Students quit their internship and return home. Research shows that in a multicultural environment having intercultural competences is the biggest determinant of the difference between success and failure. Barring exceptions, intercultural competences do not come naturally: they must be learned and practiced. Hence this book.

Intercultural communication is a lot more difficult than people think. Especially without the associated competences.

What should I do?

The third reason that I wrote the first book was that as an entrepreneur, researcher and lecturer I discovered that a lot of information in books and websites is limited to providing and repeating existing theories and concepts. That too has not changed much in the past four years.

Professionals, administrators, politicians, teachers and students are left with the question of what exactly they have to **do** in order to function and communicate well in an intercultural environment. How can you convert those models and all that cultural knowledge into practical skills? It turned out that very little had been written about it. There are some tips here and there, but most researchers stopped after noticing the differences and then compiling a model. Other intercultural sources are limited to mainly personal and anecdotal tips without a scientific basis.

In this book I have proposed practical solutions and applied the existing theories so that they can actually be used. I strive to present more practical solutions in the future.

From scientific basis ...

These applications and practical solutions must, of course, have a scientific basis. This book is therefore emphatically written from a scientific point of view.

The problem with talking and reading about culture is that people usually immediately judge and condemn. It is my intention to let the reader reflect from a scientific point of view: not to judge, but to see how it works. See different perspectives. Learn how to apply theory in practice.

Therefore, for the second edition I conducted a more extensive research of the literature, and one of its interesting conclusions is that research of

interculturality is actually quite new. It is only since the middle of the last century that serious research has been done about differences between cultures, with the research divided across anthropology, psychology and sociology. This book therefore provides a brief overview of the most important models and theories of the past 50 years.

Hofstede's model receives extra attention, because it is ultimately one of the most widely known and leading models in this field. Hofstede's model has had to endure some criticism, but this criticism has also been refuted. In addition, it is one of the few models, along with the GLOBE project and Trompenaars Hampden-Turner, that has statistical validation, and pretty much the only model that has actually been reproduced by other researchers. In my opinion, Geert Hofstede's model really deserves a revival, respect and the honor that it is due.

... to practical applications

In the past four years I have been able to clearly distinguish which models and theories are of scientific value and which are less so. Some models offer tools that allow people to measure their cultural profile. I have also made a distinction between scientifically substantiated models and models based on observations and anecdotes, such as those of Meyer and Lewis.

Richard Lewis's model, in particular, has been largely restricted because it turned out that they could not provide a dataset or scientific basis on which the theory and assessment tool were based. In order to incorporate a suitable practical model and assessment in my book, I entered into a partnership with Emergence Global (International Research Institute for Interculturality). Together with Anne-Marie Dingemans, we developed the Dingemans and Janssen model, a scientifically-based model with a practical approach and applications. Emergence Global's culture test has a scientific basis, gives many practical tips when you compare country cultures and offers cultural country data. To represent the more practical models, I have highlighted this model too.

Special thanks to Anne-Marie Dingemans of Globalizen and Emergence Global: for her feedback, but above all for the in-depth scientific knowledge of interculturality.

Ir. Patrick T.H.M. Janssen
Fall 2021, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

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PART 1

What is culture?

Part 1 of the four parts in this book deals with the awareness of what culture really is and how culture is interwoven with our daily lives. Part 1 provides the basic background for a better understanding of the other three parts.

It is difficult to give a single, fixed definition of culture. Thus a 'dynamic definition of culture' makes clear that culture can have many forms, but is bound to a number of conditions and characteristics. In **Chapter 1** the four most defining conditions and characteristics of culture are explained. With these, the definition of 'culture' can be understood and recognized in daily life.

Chapter 2 explains how the cultures of the world as we know them have come about. The origins of our cultures range from 200,000 to 40,000 years ago in Africa and Europe respectively. When people spread out across the globe, different groups made different choices with regard to solving the problems that they faced; the process of making those choices (that led to tangible consequences in the form of cultural expression) is explained.

Ultimately, this book is about the competences required to interact with people from another culture. This can only take place successfully once it becomes clear who someone is and what their most important values and communication styles are. (Individual) people do not belong to one specific culture, but are part of multiple cultures within a society. In **Chapter 3** the concepts of country culture, identity, subculture and stereotype are explained. Some subcultures, such as ethnicity, gender and religion, are explored more deeply.



1

Dynamic definition of culture

1.1 Introduction

Culture is a concept that is difficult to pin down. It has no single, all-encompassing definition. When people talk about culture, the meaning depends on the context; for example, in the corporate world people often talk about 'company culture', but groups in society can also have their own 'subcultures', such as students, football supporters or hard-rock fans. In addition, there is the more general concept of culture, which usually refers to the country or society that people grow up in.

This chapter explains some important terms and definitions that are necessary to better understand the concept of culture and the contents of this book. Culture is not defined as art; visual art, music, dance and theatre are not aspects of culture as it is addressed in this book.

Culture determines a much larger part of our lives than we think or would like to believe. How we define culture depends on a number of things. This chapter describes four conditions and characteristics of culture in order to reach a workable definition.

Awareness (what do I know)

- Culture is a complex concept for which there is no single definition.
- Culture has four characteristics: culture comes from a group, it is taught, it is relative and it gives meaning to the world around us.
- Culture determines a very large part of who we are and what our life looks like.

Knowledge (models, concepts, theories)

- A definition of what culture is and what it is not.
- What values are.

Competence (what can I do)

- Understand the limits of what culture is.
- Recognize culture and cultural issues in daily life.
- See and explain what aspects of daily life are determined by culture.
- Be able to recognize your own comfort zone and values.

David's diary

The text below is an excerpt from the book *Alleen maar nette mensen* (*Only decent people*) by Robert Vuijsje (2011). It gives a very blunt, street-smart image of how cultural groups in the Netherlands see each other.

The multicultural society

People called 'immigrants' think all day long about what it means to belong to a group of people called immigrants; with every social interaction they are reminded that they are not in their own country.

Dutch people never think about what it means to belong to a group of people which they call immigrants.

The group of people called immigrants want to know exactly who you are.

For the Dutch it does not matter what group someone else belongs to – they are all in the group called immigrants.

Dutch people see no difference between an Antillean and a Surinamese, or even between a Turk and a Moroccan.

Turks are angry with Moroccans because they give them a bad name.

For the same reason, Surinamese negroes resent Antilleans because they wear too

much gold, do not speak Dutch and are stupid. All ugly slaves were put out of the boat on Curaçao. The beautiful slaves were allowed to sail to Suriname.

According to Antilleans, Surinamese think that they are elite.

When a Dutchman forms a new relationship with someone that belongs to the group of people they call immigrants, everyone knows he was unable to 'do better'. Surinamese negroes think that Surinamese Hindus are arrogant.

Hindus find negroes lazy and stupid.

Dutch people think that all South American, African, Eastern European and Asian women living in the Netherlands are whores.

Antilleans from Curaçao believe that Arubans are arrogant because they have lighter skin.

Arubans think that Curaçaoans are lazy and stupid – they give Antilleans a bad name because they are all criminals.



For Dutch people it is normal to crack jokes about lazy Africans who always arrive late to appointments and about Moroccans who lie and steal. They never do this in the company of people they call foreigners.

Another Dutch joke: black men cheat on their wives every day while Dutch men do not cheat, they just go to whores. Easier, safer and cheaper in the long run.

City negroes say that Bush negroes are retarded natives. City negroes come from Paramaribo (the capital of Suriname), Bush negroes come from the interior of Suriname. Bush negroes believe that city negroes think they are elite.

Israelis believe that Dutch Jews are sissies, meaning if they had lived in Europe in the Second World War they would have taught those Germans a lesson.

Dutch Jews find Israelis barbarians who treat Palestinians in a horrible way.

Dutch people from Amsterdam know that Dutch people from the South always lie because they are Catholic. They also know that people from the north North and East are backward farmers.

All Cape Verdeans live in Rotterdam. Nobody sees the difference between a Cape Verdean and an Antillean. Cape Verdeans are angry because Antilleans give them a bad name. Dutch people subconsciously assume that the people they call immigrants are less clever and diligent than native Dutch.

People who call themselves immigrants know that they are always disadvantaged at school and in the workplace.

Negroes think of slavery every day, but no one outside this group ever thinks of it.

Jewish people think about the Second World War every day, but no one outside this group ever thinks of it.

Dutch people know that Jews are stingy and think they should stop mentioning the War. Jews do not trust the Dutch. What happened in the Second World War can happen again. Only then does it not happen to Jews but to Moroccans.

Surinamese and Antilleans think Africans are rough, rude and too black. They dance strangely and live with 20 people in a single flat. African men are rapists who do not know that 'No' means 'No' and always want paid sex with little girls. African women have moustaches, beards and bad skin.

According to Africans, Surinamese and Antilleans think they are better, just because they speak Dutch.

People from Amsterdam look down on the rest of the Netherlands while the rest of the Netherlands think people from Amsterdam are arrogant.

It's not just Turks; all people the Dutch call foreigners are angry with Moroccans, because they give all foreigners a bad name.

Moroccans are angry with everyone.

Vuijsje, 2011

1

1.2 Culture is connected to a group

Culture always relates to a group of people, but that group of people can vary. People are always part of various groups that each have their own culture. Someone who lives in the Netherlands is a 'Dutchman', but also a 'European' or a 'Frisian'. In addition, someone can feel connected to their city or neighborhood.

Beyond identifying yourself with a country, you – as an individual – belong to various additional cultural groups or subcultures. You belong to the youth or the elderly, you belong to a certain religion or ethnicity, you belong to the supporters of a certain football club and so on.

Subcultures

Everyone is a member of multiple subcultures, most of which will exist perfectly alongside each other. For example, you might be woman, 19 years old and born in the countryside, with parents born and raised in the Netherlands; you play football, love hard-rock, enjoy drinking beer with friends and study at university in Amsterdam. There are at least eight subcultures present here.

But some subcultures have values that may not go so well together, which can lead to problems for people who have to deal with this. Think of adopted African children who grow up in Northern Europe – they are raised as German, French or British within many of the subcultures mentioned earlier such as school, football, beer-drinking and hard-rock. However, the outside world will often interact with them based not on those aspects but rather on their skin color or ethnic background. ‘Where do you come from?’, ‘How long have you been living in Belgium?’, or worst of all: ‘Do you speak English?’. This can lead to an identity crisis along the lines of ‘what culture do I actually belong to?’.

Cultural identity

In short, it is important to realize that a personal (cultural) identity always belongs to a group and also comes from that group.



Trio tribe, indigenous inhabitants of Southern Suriname

Culture could be defined as the differences between groups, or as Geert Hofstede (2005) puts it: *The collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one group from those of another group.*

Culture

So, what is your cultural group?

Since the beginning of human culture (see also Chapter 2: Where does culture come from?) people started to form cultural groups. The first group we encounter as infants is our family: father, mother, brothers and sisters. The second group is our extended family: grandparents, aunts and uncles, but also people we see often such as servants, friends of the family, neighbors, etc. Those are the ones we learn to like and love. In the first three years of our life, we learn to identify ourselves with what is called the 'in-group'. Those groups we do not identify ourselves with are called the 'out-groups'.

In-group
Out-group

In the past century, psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists have explored this phenomenon, and it is now a scientific consensus that humans see the world in in-groups and out-groups. It is a natural occurrence that people will prefer the company of, and have an affinity with, their in-group rather than the out-group. To favor your in-group is a natural part of everyday life. It is a normal way to protect yourself from strangers and foreign ideas that might harm you; it is a consequence of self-concern. It is also known as 'we' versus 'they'.

Hofstede (see Chapter 6), and later the GLOBE researchers (see Chapter 5), did extensive research on this. Hofstede found that although all people in the world experience a 'we' versus 'them' feeling considering their in-group, that feeling is not equally distributed among the various cultures in the world. There are a lot of countries/cultures where the in-group is really big. In those countries, which Hofstede calls collectivistic, people identify themselves as part of a we-group.

We-group

There is also a smaller number of countries where the we-group is really small (up to maybe one or two parents), so small that children quickly identify themselves as 'I' instead of 'we'. Hofstede calls these countries individualistic.

1.3 Culture is learned

Culture is learned. It is not in the genes that we receive from our parents. Our genetic DNA is more or less the same the world over; that is our universal human nature, both for you and for me, for your teacher, for a New Zealand Maori, for an American Harvard professor, for an African tribe in Sudan and for a Chinese farmer in the countryside. All people feel the same things – joy, anger, sadness, fear, hunger, the urge to procreate, a need for hygiene, wanting to play, fight and love– but how you show (or hide) these feelings and how they are expressed varies from culture to culture.

For example, anger is expressed clearly and instrumentally in German culture. This means that one can see that someone is angry because that person behaves angrily. There is a clear pattern of behavior that German people have learned to recognize as angry behavior (shouting, arm and other body movements, specific swear words) and the meaning of that type

Pattern of
behavior

of communication is that someone feels anger. Emotions are clearly visible in Northern European cultures, where people appreciate and expect clarity and truth. If someone behaves angrily and it turns out not to be a real expression of emotion, one feels cheated because the emotion shown was not genuine. People who grew up in a German culture have learned as a child what anger is and how it is exhibited.

Emotions

In Asia, however, emotions such as anger are much less visible. In Asian cultures, when someone is angry, it is normal to avoid showing it. For Asians it is far more important to avoid damaging relationships with those around them, and openly showing emotions such as anger might cause irreparable harm to relationships and/or reputation.

People of all cultures feel anger, but how that anger is dealt with and how it manifests itself is learned behavior.

The learning of culture first occurs through upbringing. What Westerner has never heard from their parents: 'Don't eat with your hands, use your knife and fork'? As a result, most Westerners grasp from an early age that eating with a knife and fork is the norm (not that this 'norm' is always observed, mind you!). But what do you think a child in Japan has been told? To also eat with a knife and fork?

Socialization

Secondly, culture is learned through socialization. By interacting with others in kindergarten, primary and secondary school, sports clubs, friendship circles, companies and so on. It is a process of learning your cultural identity, learning the rules, norms and values of a society. During the interaction with others in your childhood, you learn the culturally accepted social skills that you need as an adult to function in your society. For example, you learn how to behave according your gender role.

Cultural programming

Software of the mind

How we express ourselves, what actions we take, how we communicate, how we think and what opinions we have all fall under what Geert Hofstede calls 'cultural programming'. Hofstede starts from the analogy of a computer, in which culture is the operating system of our brains. This 'software of the mind' ensures that we behave according to the norms of the cultural groups in which we live. Think of how smartphones operate – all phones basically do the same thing in that they offer internet access, make calls, send messages, play videos and so on. This can be compared to universal human nature in which all people are the same, e.g. they eat when they are hungry, want to be liked, love their children, get angry with injustice and have an instinct for survival. Smartphones all do the same basic things, but some have different operating systems – there are phones that run on Android (e.g. Samsung) and others on iOS (e.g. Apple). This can be compared with cultural programming. A standard Frenchman has a different 'operating system' than a Japanese person. All people want to eat, only some have learned to perform that behavior with a knife and fork while others do it with chopsticks. Of course, culture is from a group, so when comparing cultures, average examples of standardized individuals are used. This does not necessarily apply to everyone: nature and statistics dictate that behavior follows the law of normal distribution or bell curve, meaning that some individuals will deviate from 'normal' behavior despite their cultural programming. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Schein 1997)

EXAMPLE**Hello gorgeous, who are you?**

'Hello gorgeous,' I said. 'I'm David. Who are you?'

'Who am I?' She asked. 'Look at my teeth here.'

This was real life. The real human who showed the other human what was written on her golden teeth. On the right side of her teeth there was 'row' in small letters and on the left teeth 'anda'.

'Ro-wan-da?' I asked.

'That's my name,' she said. 'Rowanda.'

I asked why she had those golden teeth.

'Status?' She opened her mouth so that I could look closely. 'So they see that I'm elite?'

I asked if Rowanda could cook.

She could not. She lived with her mother. Who always cooked. Rowanda wanted to learn.

Her eyebrows were shaved off. There were only two tattooed black stripes.

'I put them there,' she said. I asked why.

'I don't know.' Rowanda shrugged. 'My mother has it too.'

Vuijsje, 2011

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1.4 Culture is relative

Although you have your own identity, growing up in a society means that everyone belongs to several groups. Some groups are part of a larger whole, for example, your family, street, neighborhood, city, region and country. Who you are, who you believe yourself to be, depends on your relative position to the group(s) you are part of. When your favorite football club from your city plays against another city, you identify yourself as a football fan of your club. However, when you watch the World Cup, these allegiances disappear and you identify yourself as a supporter of your country. Students in the same school may come from different regions of a country. Those from rural areas might feel more at ease with each other than with students who grew up in the city. This can play a role in the overall dynamic of a school. However, when a competition with other schools is held, the differences within the school will relatively disappear in light of the differences with other schools. Subconsciously, everyone is constantly wondering how they should behave towards others according to their cultural norms.

Relative position

When confronted with a different culture, similarities tend to fade into the background and differences tend to come to the foreground; in other words, the 'cultural dynamics' have changed. Consider your relationship with your teachers in the classroom – you are the student in that relationship, but the minute you take a part-time job giving hockey lessons to younger children you no longer occupy the role of a student; you have switched roles and are now a teacher with your own students. Similarly, culture is dependent on the roles and the position you occupy within it.

Cultural dynamics

Read the text below carefully and consider who might have said this.

'They are so arrogant. At every meeting they have to make their point and draw attention to themselves. But if the boss gives his opinion, the others adapt quickly and eventually he makes the decisions.'

Could this have been said by a Dutch person about a German?

That is a possibility, because Germans have the reputation of being more dominant than the Dutch. Germans also place more focus on prestige. But this could just as easily have been said by a Nigerian about the Dutch, because when compared to Africans, the Dutch come across as more dominant and arrogant.

Or could this have been said by a German about a French person? Because Germans tend to think of the French as arrogant?

Perhaps a Frenchman said this about a North American, because French people find Americans arrogant?

When a Dutch person does business with a North American and the focus is on the length of time for an investment to become profitable, the North American will be surprised by the long-term vision of the Dutch. Americans often want to see a return on their investment within six months, whereas Dutch people do not find it unusual for a company to need 2-3 years to make a profit. Conversely, the Japanese think that the Dutch are short-term planners, because Japanese companies focus primarily on long-term continuation of the company; thus waiting a period of ten years for an investment to be profitable is not exceptional.

EXAMPLE

A blunt story

Some time ago, during a Friday afternoon drink, I was sitting in the kitchen of two of my Dutch friends and one of them was talking about her previous internship in Israel. She told us about all the places she went to and how beautiful and interesting it was. 'The only thing is that... well, you know, I really had to get used to their rude and blunt behavior. In the beginning I felt constantly offended at work, I felt really depreciated in how they told me how to do things.'

The other Dutch friends nodded understandingly, but I had no clue what she was referring to. 'What are you talking about?' I asked all puzzled. 'Well, the Israelis are really blunt and not polite at all! They just tell you in a loud voice what you did wrong or how they want it done. Also, my co-worker told me that my dress was making me look fat! Can you imagine?'

What? I couldn't believe my ears! Dutch people complaining about people from another country being blunt and impolite? This was greatly upsetting to me. The Dutch have a very bad reputation when it comes to their politeness. When I told my family in Indonesia that I was going to the Netherlands for my studies I often got the reply: 'How will you manage those blunt Dutch people over there?' Or: 'A friend of mine is working there and he has learned to avoid his Dutch colleagues, because they always tell him how he can improve his work.' And of course: 'Avoid those terrible Dutch men! They will ask you out but will pick you up by bike or public transport!' And so on.

This scene in the kitchen of my friend's house made me realize how relative things are. It explains so much about the stereotypes and prejudices that people in different countries have about one another. Or rather, how everything seems to depend on perspective. I wonder, for instance, what people in the Netherlands think of the Indonesian focus on punctuality.

Anonymous student, 2020, Amsterdam

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1.5 Culture gives meaning

Through our culture we are able to give meaning to the world around us. 'Culture' is a collection of implicit agreements that have been made explicit, leading to how we see 'our' world. Sometimes this can involve the simplest of things.

Give meaning

While sitting at the lunch table, someone asks: 'Can you pass me the bread?'. Her neighbor will pass her the bread because she understands within a fraction of a second the meaning of both 'bread' and 'pass'. Both people speak the English language, and having a language in common is one of the pillars of culture. Thus, when bread is asked for it is asked for politely, meaning that this simple action/reaction falls within the normal range of expected speech patterns understood by two people who have both learned it during their upbringing. In addition, both participants understand that there is a tacit agreement in the sentence. If the respondent was to take the question literally (automatically giving rise to some equally inherent cultural humor) they could answer the question with a simple yes or no, i.e. 'Can you pass me the bread?', 'Yes', followed by no action at all! Instead, both people understand that an action is expected rather than a verbal answer, namely actually passing the bread. Why do you think that this question is asked so indirectly instead of being given as an order? Why not say simply: 'Give me the bread'?

The implicit agreement is that if we want to be polite, we ask the question indirectly instead of directly. For example, if you want to know what time it is from a stranger in a public space you do not simply ask: 'What time is it?' but instead say 'Excuse me, do you know what time it is?'. We give meaning to our communication by using direct or indirect forms of communication.

All these implicit agreements were taught to us during our years of early childhood by our parents, our school and our friends; in short, the whole of society around us taught us these things (a process we call 'socialization'), which taken together form a huge collection of mental information about the meaning of the world around us. We call this mental collection of information our 'frame of reference'.

Look at the photo and answer the following two questions:

- Who are these people?
- What is happening here?



In cultural terms, what is the meaning behind this picture according to your particular frame of reference? Or to look at it another way, what does your brain tell you about what this picture represents?

Most likely you have, within a few seconds, surmised that these are business people and that a meeting or deal is in progress. Almost instantaneously our brains give meaning to an image in which there is only a minimal amount of explicit information. This is not slow and reasoned, it is fast and instinctive; our consciousness has hardly any influence on the thought process as our brains are perfectly capable of giving meaning to the world around us without recourse to a lengthy internal dialogue.

'If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.'

— Abraham Maslow

When you walk into the supermarket and see something in the fruit section that is about 20 cm long, in a bunch, curved and yellow, you know immediately that these are bananas. Conversely, when you hear the word 'banana' you see a banana directly in front of you – you know it is yellow and how a banana should taste.

Our brains need only minimal information to impose meaning on the world around us, expanding outwards from our central, default frame of reference, i.e. our culture. For simple items such as objects and products – a pen, a chair, a car, a highway, a suit – this does not present an issue, but for things like rituals and traditions it becomes somewhat more complex. When you take the European meaning of the word ‘banana’ with you to South America, you’ll discover it has more meanings than you think: which banana do you mean? The big green ones, the small sweet ones or the red ones?



Various bananas

A standard greeting in one culture can be understood very differently in another. For example, a handshake does not take the same form everywhere – in parts of Northern Europe a fast, firm handshake is the norm while in parts of Southern Europe, Central and South America, a handshake is longer and warmer. In Turkey a very strong handshake is considered rude and aggressive, while in some African countries a weak handshake is the standard. In Islamic countries many men never shake hands with a woman outside the family.

A circle made with the thumb and forefinger (see image above) does not mean the same everywhere. In Northern Europe it stands for ‘OK’ while in the world of diving (a subculture unto itself) it is a standardized indication that everything is fine. In Japan, however, the same gesture means money, in other words a request for the bill. In Arab countries it represents the evil eye which means misery, while in Brazil it is obscene!

Here is a description of an object: I have a thin cylindrical rod in my hand, it is made of plastic and metal, it is roughly as long as my hand and thinner than my finger, one end is a point, the other a cap. What is it? In general, few people will be able to give a direct and convincing answer to this question, as it could be almost anything. Certain information to give the object more specific meaning is lacking, and one of the things that can help provide that meaning is context. When I add context to the object, by saying that I am a student taking notes in class, it becomes much clearer what it is... obviously it's a pen.

Context

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Context is the environment in which something is located. Not only objects, but words, non-verbal communication and many other things derive their meaning – or different meanings – from their environment or context. Saying 'I love you' to your mother has a different meaning than when you say 'I love pizza'.

EXAMPLE

The chicken in New York

Do you know the story of the chicken in New York? Anthropological researchers showed film footage of Manhattan to members of a primitive tribe in Papua New Guinea. They wanted to confront these people with modern life, people who never had taken one step out of the jungle and knew nothing about the Western world. As a kind of shock therapy, they were shown scenes of crowds, skyscrapers, cars, bridges, highways and airplanes for an hour. In retrospect, they were asked what they had seen. Their answer? A chicken.

What? A chicken? Why? Where? It was footage of New York! Did they even look at the screen? However, when researchers reviewed the film more carefully, it turned out that very briefly – for a fraction of a second – a man with a chicken walked across the shot. Only that chicken was recognized by the jungle inhabitants. All other images of the metropolis went in one eye and out the other, as it were. There was simply no mental frame of reference, no hook on which the tribe could hang all those images of taxis and apartment blocks; there was only a place for that chicken.

Dijkgraaf, 2006

The image of the pen and that chicken come from the memory of people. When people see 'something' they compare and contrast it instantly with similar things they already have stored in their memory. In the context of culture, this memory can be seen as a sort of chest of drawers in which observations and experiences from the past are filed. This is called their frame of reference.

People cross-check what they see against their own culturally determined frame of reference to ascertain what it is and what its meaning might be; the meaning people give to things depends strongly on the context.



The guinea pig as a pet

What does a guinea pig mean to you? A cuddly pet? A guinea pig is a first pet for many children in the Netherlands. But what do you think children from Peru see in this picture? Do they see the same thing?



The guinea pig as food

In Peru guinea pigs are eaten, so Peruvian children will see a meal in this image rather than a cuddly pet! The meaning of objects, products, behavior, rituals and traditions depends on the context.

1.6 Inside the comfort zone: looking through cultural glasses

Your own culture gives you a sense of security, it gives meaning to the unknown world around you. Culture is like a pair of glasses through which you view the world. When a Danish person looks at the world, he or she sees the world through 'Danish' glasses. For example, if a meeting starts at 10.00 and three people come in at 10.20, when viewed through Danish glasses these people are late, because in Denmark meetings should begin on time. But if the three latecomers are Italian, they are not actually late at all, because viewed through Italian cultural glasses, meetings only begin when everyone is there; or you can come in later (not being late) when something else is more important. For Italians, meetings are about the people present and what is discussed rather than the precise time. Another example of looking at the world is when we talk of seeing things through the proverbial 'rose-coloured glasses'. When we are in love, we see everything through rose-colored glasses, everything appears rosy and beautiful, and we see absolutely no imperfections in our partner. Even if our friends try to warn us of negative traits in that person we dismiss them and even get angry, because everything we are seeing and experiencing is through the rose-colored glasses of our infatuation.

Rose-coloured glasses



Rose-colored glasses

Our cultural glasses work exactly like this – we 'translate' everything we see through our cultural glasses. We take our own culture as the standard through which everything is given meaning; this can sometimes cause a shock to the system, especially when travelling. At a market in South America, you might encounter a whole stall full of cute guinea pigs; most tourists will be alarmed to discover that these animals are meant to be eaten. Conversely, South Americans look very surprised when European tourists pick up guinea pigs and start petting them.

Cultural glasses

Contrasting this feeling of security – our ‘comfort zone’ – is a feeling of discomfort. When people are confronted with a different culture they mostly experience uncomfortable feelings. People can feel defensive, attacked or isolated, which can result in disapproving or angry reactions. Some common reactions are:

‘Why can’t those people just behave?’
‘If they come to live here they have to adapt to our ways.’
‘Use your common sense!’
‘Act normal!’

Normal

To the last of which one could respond: ‘OK, let’s act normal.’ But what is normal? Your idea of normal or my idea of normal? And whose common sense are we talking about? Yours or mine? Common sense is different for every culture, so when dealing with other cultures it might be wise to just park our own interpretation of what constitutes common sense. During intercultural communication it is preferable to let go of our idea of what is normal.

Adjust Deny

Most people try to avoid confrontations when confronted with a different culture. Common reactions to avoid confrontations are to adapt yourself (even though you disagree) or just deny there is any difference in culture or that you feel any discomfort.

EXAMPLE

Dutch student Henk knows that he is expected to have his opinion ready in the classroom even if the teacher does not ask for it. Spanish student Juan has learned that he has to keep his mouth shut during lessons and only speak when the teacher asks him something. Dutch students think that Juan must feel unhappy because he is not allowed to speak his mind, but Juan is surprised when he hears this and replies: ‘No, this is how we students should behave... as a student I love to listen to my teachers as they have the knowledge I need, right? As a student it’s better to keep quiet and listen.’

In communication between people of different cultures, common sense works against us. Therefore, in intercultural communication it is better to hold back on making a direct interpretation of the other person’s intent until you know a bit more about their culture.

Comfort zone

The comfort zone has to do with our values and beliefs – what do we hold to be ‘true’, how one should behave and what is ‘possible’ and ‘not possible’. The comfort zone consists of our familiar daily products, patterns, behavior and routines. It is the framework that makes the world look orderly.

The cultural comfort zone is our anchor in an otherwise drifting world – a much needed ‘center of gravity’ that secures the meaning of things, without which the world around us becomes very difficult to live in.

EXAMPLE

How many kisses?

In Belgium, an excessive number of cheeks is kissed. One, two, three times. It is all possible and it is unclear to me how many kisses are given on which occasion, which leads to uncomfortable moments time after time. I discovered this when I was at a birthday in Belgium for the first time. I held out my hand to introduce myself, but my hand was ignored or not even noticed, and the lips that were puckered were already on my cheek. And while we kiss each other on the cheek, you gasp your own name in the other's ear. After that we have to wait and see if there are any more kisses and if so, how many. I get totally uncomfortable about it, and often turn red when I can't properly estimate the number of kisses. On this particular birthday people expected me to kiss everyone hello, even the men! That was a bit too much for me, so I ended up with a rude 'Hi everyone' and a long arm wave that was looked at with surprise by the Belgians.

Anonymous student, 2015

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1.7 Outside the comfort zone: confronting values

Below are some pictures of people getting on a train. Can you indicate which image is outside your comfort zone? You must make a choice. In other words, if you were in the same railway station, which image corresponds to your 'normal'?





To fully understand what a comfort zone is, and what values are, you have to answer this question as honestly as possible. This is not about what you believe a desired situation should be, but what you actually believe and expect your reality to look like.

Can you describe what exactly you think of as 'my comfort zone' when looking at these pictures and explain why that is so?

Most Northern European cultures have 'efficiency' as one of their most valued assumptions on how people should go about their life. This becomes visible in choosing the best way to board a train. For Northern Europeans, boarding a train in India looks so inefficient that they would feel very uncomfortable with it.

We take our comfort zone so much for granted that we find it awkward and sometimes even inappropriate to discuss our own assumptions (Schein, 1997).

This is how you can find out what your values are: if you find yourself in a very uncomfortable position, you realize what you value. It is like trying to explain to a fish what water is. He won't understand until you take him out of the water. He still doesn't really understand what water is, but he knows that he misses it dearly and can't live without it. The same goes for our cultures and our basic assumptions and values. We don't understand them until we are confronted with other values.



There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'

— David Foster Wallace

Even if you grow up in an environment with two cultures, the culture of the country you grew up in, went to school in, is your programmed culture. What we find most normal is also what we find most comfortable.

Finally, two more photos. Which of the two are you most comfortable with?



Most Dutch and Scandinavian people have difficulty with these, because both images are uncomfortable but for different reasons. Two different values are attacked here in these two situations: one representing the abuse of power (i.e. how a boss should normally deal with employees) and the other representing the abuse of personal space. When people assume that personal space is important, people value their personal space. It becomes a cultural value. This value of personal space comes with its' own set of rules (norms), so everybody knows how to behave normally.

In short, contact with others can produce feelings of discomfort, indicating that you are outside your comfort zone and may have to deal with people who have different values and corresponding norms about 'how things are done'. This also teaches you what your values are.

Summary

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- ▶ Culture has to do with groups of people. Small groups such as a family, and large groups such as countries. Individuals are part of many kinds of subcultures. We are all part of an in-group.
 - ▶ Culture is not in our DNA, culture is taught by the people around us and this is called socialization. Culture can be seen as a kind of operating system that controls our brain. This programming of our brains ensures that we behave according to the values and norms of the cultural groups in which we live.
 - ▶ Culture only becomes visible in relation to other cultures. In other words, culture is relative. When cultures collide, the differences between them will come to the fore and the cultural dynamics will have changed. Your own culture is your perspective on the world.
 - ▶ Culture gives meaning to the world around us. It makes communication, social protocols and doing business instantly recognizable to those within that culture. Without a common frame of reference, it would be harder for people from the same culture to understand one another. Culture is the rose-tinted glasses we wear and through which we perceive the world. The meaning of an object, a behavioral pattern or a ritual depends on the context –if the context changes, the meaning does too. A particular gesture or behavior in one culture can mean something completely different in another.
 - ▶ Our comfort zone gives a sense of security, clarity, and therefore comfort. Another culture feels uncomfortable because it falls outside the comfort zone. This has to do with the value we give to our deepest assumptions on how life should be., i.e. what we believe to be ‘true’, ‘normal’ or ‘possible’.
 - ▶ Our norms and rules come from things we value. Values are defined by the value we give to assumptions once made about our world. When people assume that personal space is important, people value their personal space. It becomes a cultural value. This value of personal space comes with its own set of rules (norms), so everybody knows how to behave ‘normally’.
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Questions and exercises

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- 1 Write down at least five (sub)cultural groups that occur in all cultures.
 - 2 Which cultural groups do you belong to?
 - 3 By whom are people culturally programmed?
 - 4 How were you culturally programmed? What is your normal?
 - 5 Which roles do you identify for yourself?
 - 6 Explain how people from different cultures sometimes do not understand each other.
 - 7 Using an example, explain what cultural context is.
 - 8 What is the connection between norms and values?
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