

Intercultural Competences



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Patrick T.H.M. Janssen

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Preface

One of the most frequently asked questions I received while writing this book was: 'cultural what?' followed by a blank stare. And this is why I wrote this book: still, little is known about culture, cultural communication and intercultural competences.

Many people are still unaware that knowledge about culture and cultural communication are necessary competences in our current society. It is still generally unknown that communication between people from different cultures is essentially different from 'normal' communication. Precisely because people approach each other normal, because 'deep down we are all the same', miscommunications and irritations arise that often lead to conflicts. And deep down we are not – and I can't stress that enough – not the same.

As an entrepreneur and consultant in South America and as a teacher of cross-cultural communication in the Netherlands, I soon found out that leaders, professionals and teachers were pondering the question of what exactly they had to do in order to perform well in an intercultural environment. How to convert models and cultural knowledge into practical skills? It appeared that very little was published about that.

With this book I have tried to propose a solution for this caveat by linking the existing theory to practical skills.

A second reason for writing this book is that intercultural communication is grossly underestimated. One of the biggest pitfalls in intercultural communication is that people initially think that they can do it themselves – without any help from outside – and that learning intercultural competences is actually superfluous. Only when things go badly wrong, people find out that their normal way of communicating does not appear to be effective. There is no 'normal' between people from different cultures. The result is that people get frustrated, goals are not achieved, multicultural teams quickly fall apart in subcultures and stop performing. Expats return disappointed to their country of origin and – after losing millions of euros – companies realise they could have done things differently. In short: Intercultural communication is a lot harder than people estimate.

Research and experience show that in a multicultural environment, having intercultural competences is the most important determining factor between success and failure. Apart from exceptional cases, intercultural competences do not come naturally: these must be learned and practiced. Hence this book.

Thirdly, this book is explicitly written from a scientific point of view. The problem of talking and reading about culture is that people usually judge and condemn immediately. It has always been my intention to let the reader / student look and reflect from a scientific point of view: not judging, but observing practical situations. Learn how to apply the theory in practice.

A word of thanks

Writing this book has not been an easy process. After a quick start, the dreaded 'writer's block' struck. The main idea of 'oh just write an educational book' turned out to be not writing, but mainly reading shelves of cultural literature and talking to colleagues in the field all over the world. Without the professional help of a number of people, this book would not have come about. In random order I want to thank the following people in particular:

My friends from the 1990's in Ecuador who showed me the importance and humour of cultural communication and inspired me. In particular Nathaly, Clarissa, Stephanie, Cherise, David, Reece, Tony and Laszlo and last but not least, the Quicha Indigenous people of Sani Isla on the Napo river who taught me that time was not linear, that the experience of time was, in fact, determined by relationships. This was beginning of my quest for the hidden values of cultures.

Thanks to Petra Prescher from Noordhoff publishers for her enthusiastic guidance, Maaïke Jongepier for her role as a second reader in the cultural field: thanks for checking for inconsistencies. Geert Hofstede for reading chapter five and Caroline, Richard and Ric Lewis for the necessary input on chapter six.

For this English translation I want to thank Anne-Marie Dingemans for checking the content, Jocelyne Abela, James Lehmann, Gabriel Stevens and Nesin Ozdogan for editing my imperfect English. Thanks for the quick response in my time of need.

In addition to this professional help, I have been fortunate to have the support of friends who were always on call for a well-deserved glass of beer and an amazing amount of patience to listen to my complaints how hard it is to write a book. Thanks to Anja de Bakker, Mariska van der Linden, Robert Stompff and the members of the Vrijmibo group (you know who you are): without your support, love, beer and resilience to listen to my endless whining, this book would not have come about. Many thanks! Finally, I am happy that I can dedicate my book to my parents, Theo and Joke.

Ir. Patrick T.H.M. Janssen
Amsterdam, April 2019

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PART 1

What is culture?

Part 1 of the three 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 Parts 2 and 3.

1 Dynamic definition of culture

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 – *What is culture?* – a conceptual framework is given within which 'culture' can be described, insight is provided as to what culture is in daily life and an explanation given as to what is meant by culture in this book.

2 Where does culture come from?

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 old in Africa and Europe respectively. When people fanned out across the globe different groups made different choices with regard to solving the problems they faced; the process of making those choices (that led to tangible consequences in the form of cultural expression) is discussed.

3 Cultural identity

Ultimately, this book is about the competencies 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 are. Individual people do not belong to one specific culture but are part of multiple cultures within a society. The concepts of country culture, identity, subculture and stereotype are explained.



1

Dynamic definition of culture

1.1 Introduction

Culture is a concept that is difficult to pin down and there is 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 sets forth some important terms and definitions that are necessary to better understand the concept of culture and the contents of this book. Culture is not meant to be art; visual art, song, dance & drama are not definitions of culture as discussed 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 does not give a single definition, but a conceptual framework to get a workable definition of culture.

Awareness (what do I know)

- That culture is a complex concept for which there is no single definition.
- That culture has a number of properties and boundaries.
- That our culture determines a very large part of who we are and what our life looks like.
- That misunderstandings may arise because people from other cultures might impose a different meaning on things we think of as normal.

Knowledge (models, concepts, theories)

- A conceptual framework of what culture is and what it is not.

Competence (what can I do)

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

David's diary

The text below is an excerpt from the book *Alleen maar nette mensen* (*Only decent people*) from Robert Vuijsje (2011). It gives a direct, streetwise 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 the 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, red.), 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 the Amsterdam know that Dutch people from the south always lie because they are Catholic. They also know that people from the 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.

Robert Vuijsje, Alleen maar nette mensen, Nijgh & Van Ditmar, Amsterdam 2011.

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 neighbourhood.

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.

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

But some subcultures may not line up so well together, which can lead to problems for people who have to deal with this. Think of adopted dark African children who grow up in Northern Europe – they are raised as German, French or Dutch within many of the familiar subcultures 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 appearance or their ethnic background. ‘Where do you come from?’, ‘How long have you been living in the United Kingdom?’, 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?’ One could define culture as that which distinguishes the members of a group from those of another group. In short, it is important to realise that a personal cultural identity always belongs to a group and also comes from that group.

Cultural identity



Culture always relates to groups of people.

1.3 Culture has been taught

Culture has been taught. 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, food, the urge to procreate, hygiene, playing, fighting and loving, but how you show (or hide) these feelings and how they are expressed differs from culture to culture.

Anger is expressed clearly and instrumentally in Dutch culture – one can see that someone is angry because that person behaves angrily. 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. (*Part 3 of this book explains in more detail the expressive or instrumental use of emotions in communication.*) People who grew up in a Dutch culture have learned as a child what anger is and how it is exhibited. In Asia, however, emotions such as anger are much less visible and if someone is angry in Asian culture it is normal to avoid showing it. For Asians it is far more important to avoid damaging relationships with those around you as openly showing emotions such as anger might cause irreparable harm to relationships and/or reputation. People of all cultures become angry but how that anger is dealt with and how it manifests itself is learned behaviour.

The learning of culture is firstly done through education. What Westerner has never heard from their parents: ‘Do not eat with your hands, use a 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 knife and fork? Secondly, culture is learned through socialisation – by dealing with others in kindergarten, primary and secondary school, sports clubs, friendship circles, companies and so on.

Socialisation

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’ (see Chapter 5 for the Hofstede model). 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 the universal human nature in which all people are equal, e.g. eating when you are hungry, wanting to be liked, loving your children, getting angry with injustice and the survival instinct. Smartphones all do the same basic things but some have

Cultural programming

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 which achieves the same basic human result but according to a different set of protocols. A German has a different ‘operating system’ to a Japanese. All people want to eat, only some have learned to perform that operation with a knife and fork while others do it with chopsticks. Of course, this may not necessarily apply to everyone – some individuals will feel more ‘in their place’ in a different culture despite their upbringing and cultural programming.

EXAMPLE 1.1

Hello Gorgeous, who are you?

‘Hello Gorgeous,’ I said. ‘I am 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-hand teeth ‘anda’.
 ‘Ro-wan-da?’ I asked.
 ‘That’s my name,’ she said. ‘Rowanda.’
 I asked why she had done those golden teeth.
 ‘Status?’ She opened her mouth so that I could look closely. ‘That they see that I am elite?’
 I asked if Rowanda could cook.
 She could not. She lived with her mother. She always cooked. Rowanda wanted to learn.
 Her eyebrows were shaved away. There were only two tattooed black stripes.
 ‘I put them there,’ she said.
 I asked why.
 ‘I do not know.’ Rowanda shrugged. ‘My mother has it too.’

Robert Vuijsje, Alleen maar nette mensen. Nijgh & Van Ditmar, Amsterdam 2011

1.4 Culture is relative

The dynamics of culture mean that everyone belongs to several groups. Some groups are part of a larger whole – for example, family, street, neighbourhood, city, region and country. Identifying yourself can vary depending on your relative position to the group(s) you are part of. When your favourite football club from your city plays against another city you identify yourself as a football fan of your city’s 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, meaning those from rural areas might feel more at ease with each other than with students who grew up in the city; all of this can play a role in the overall dynamic of a

Relative position

school. However, when a competition with other schools is held the differences within the school will virtually disappear relative to the differences with other schools. Subconsciously, everyone is constantly wondering how they should behave towards others according to their cultural norms.

When confronted with a different culture, similarities tend to fade into the background and difference tend to come to the fore; in other words, the 'cultural dynamics' have changed. Consider your relationship to 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 student, you have switched roles and are now a teacher with your own students. Similarly, culture depends on 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 a decision is made.'

Could this have been said by a Dutchman about a German?

It is a possibility because Germans tend to be more dominant and straightforward than the Dutch (or more 'Linear-Active' as Lewis calls it in Chapter 6); Germans also place more focus on prestige.

But this could just as easily have been said by a Nigerian about a Dutchman because with respect to Africans, the Dutch come across as more dominant and arrogant.

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

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

When a Dutchman does business with a North American and the focus is on the length of time for an investment to start paying back, the North American will be surprised by the long-term vision of the Dutchman.

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 survival, thus in the long term a wait of 10 years for an investment return is no exception.

EXAMPLE 1.2

A perspective on awful food

Some time ago I was sitting in the kitchen and my Dutch roommate was telling us about his trip to the UK. He told us about the places he went to and how beautiful it was. 'The only thing is that ... well, you know, in the

evening we had to make our own salad, otherwise it would be hard.’ My other Dutch roommate nodded understandingly, but I had no clue what he was referring to. ‘What are you talking about?’ I asked a bit puzzled. ‘Well, British food is awful! They eat really unhealthy, a lot of fats, no vegetables. We needed something light and nice to take a break from all that junk food.’

I could not believe my ears! Dutch people complaining about food from another country? This was greatly upsetting to me. The Dutch don’t have a very good reputation when it comes to their cuisine. When I told people in Italy that I was going to The Netherlands for my studies I often got the reply: ‘How will you manage with the food?’ Or: ‘A friend of mine is working there and he always tries to eat, because his Dutch colleagues eat sandwiches at their desks. They do not take lunch breaks.’ And of course: ‘The food is awful, you’ll only find peanut butter ...’ And so on. This scene in the kitchen of my student house made me realize how relative things are. It explains so much about the stereotypes and prejudices the people in the South and North of Europe have about one another. Or rather, how everything seems to depend on perspective, even if it’s not ‘North’ versus ‘South’. I wonder, for instance, what people in the U.K. think of the Dutch focus on punctuality.

Beatrice Landoni, student from Italy

Wageningen Resource Magazine, no. 14, March 10, 2016

1.5 Culture gives meaning

Through our culture we are able to give meaning to the world around us. Culture is a collection of agreements that have been made explicit, leading to how we see ‘our’ world.

Sometimes this can be the simplest of things.

When sitting at the lunch table and someone asks: ‘Can you pass me the bread?’, your neighbour will pass you the bread because he or she understands within a fraction of a second the meaning of both ‘bread’ and ‘giving’. 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 this simple action/reaction falls within the normal range of expected speech patterns understood by two people who have learned it commonly during their upbringing. In addition, both participants have understood 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 humour) 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 to actually pass the bread. Why do you think this question is asked so indirectly instead of being given as an order? Why not simply: ‘Give me the bread’?

The tacit 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 make sense of our communication by using direct or indirect forms.

All these tacit 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 'socialisation') 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'.

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?

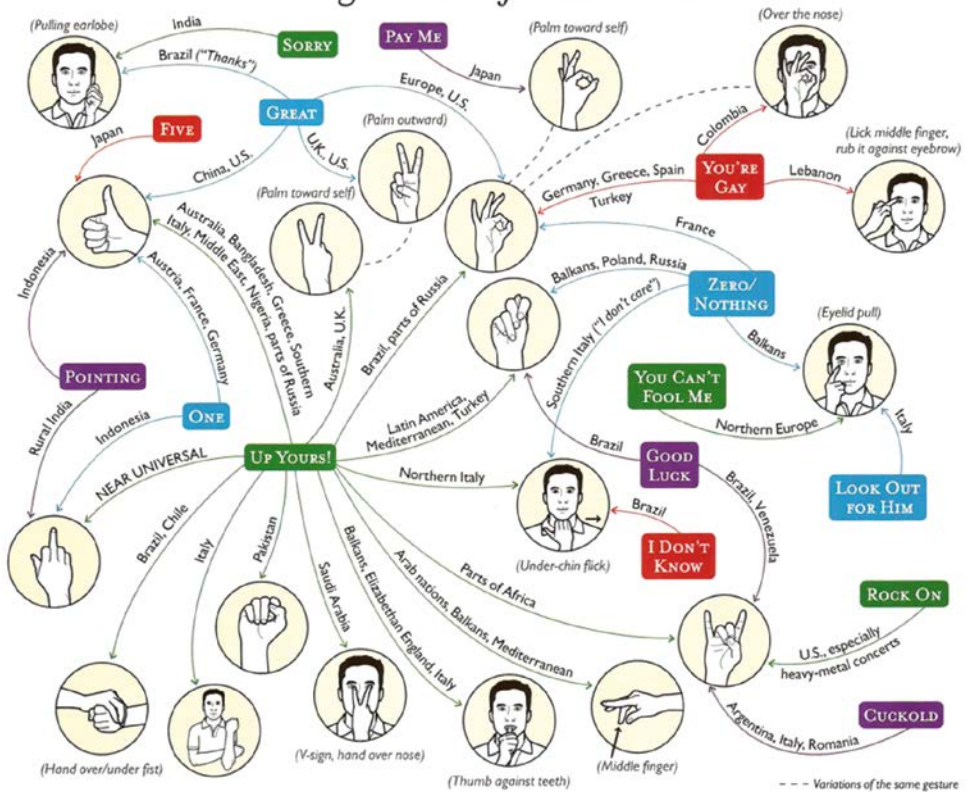


Various bananas

A business greeting in one culture can be very differently understood 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.

Etiquette 101: Hand Gestures

The Tangled Web of Hand Gestures



Examples of non-verbal communication: hand gestures

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 standardised 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!

Problems arise when we talk about abstract things that cannot immediately be perceived. For example, what does 'being on time' mean for you? Does it mean arriving at precisely the agreed time or does it mean to the nearest 5 minutes? Perhaps 'being on time' means that you should arrive in advance of the specified hour? Or maybe 15 minutes later, or an hour later? The same kind of ambiguity can apply to things like 'politeness' and 'leadership' – what do these terms mean to you?

In different cultures things can have a completely different meaning because people from that culture have a different frame of reference.

1.6 Meaning through context

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 as it could be almost anything. Certain information is lacking to give the object more specific meaning 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 writing notes in class it becomes much clearer as to what it is... obviously it's a pen.

Context

Context is the environment in which something is located. Not only objects, but words, non-verbal communications and many other things derive their meaning – or different meanings – because of their environment or context.

When you say 'I love you' to your mother, it has a different meaning than when you say the same to your boyfriend or girlfriend.

EXAMPLE 1.3

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.

Translated from: Robbert Dijkgraaf, 'The chicken in New York', NRC, Nov. 11, 2006

The image of the pen and chicken comes from the memory of those particular people. When people see 'something' they compare and contrast it instantly to 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 in which it is located.



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, behaviour, rituals and traditions depends on the context.

1.7 Culture is a comfort zone

Your own culture gives you a sense of security, it gives meaning to the unknown world around you. Culture is like a pair of spectacles through which you view the world. When a Dutchman looks at the world, he or she

sees the world through 'Dutch' spectacles. For example, if a meeting starts at 10.00 and three people come in at 10.30, when viewed through Dutch spectacles these people are late because in the Netherlands meetings should begin on time. But if the three latecomers are Italian they are not actually late at all, because viewed through Italian spectacles meetings only begin when everyone is there; for Italians, meetings are about the people present and what is discussed rather than the precise time.

Another example of a way of looking at the world is when we talk of seeing things through the proverbial 'rose-tinted spectacles'. When we are in love we see everything through rose-tinted spectacles – everything appears rosy and we see absolutely no imperfections in our partner. Even if our friends try to warn us of negative character traits in that person we dismiss them and even get angry because everything we are seeing and experiencing is through the rose-tinted light of our infatuation. Our cultural glasses work exactly like this – we 'translate' everything we see through our cultural spectacles. 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 traveling. At a market in South America you might encounter a whole stall full of cute guinea pigs but 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

Comfort zone

Opposing this feeling of security – our 'comfort zone' – can be a feeling of discomfort. When people are confronted with a different culture this can give rise to an uncomfortable feeling. People can feel attacked or insulted 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 adjust 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 different 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.

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, while 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 teacher as they still have the knowledge I need on tap. As an apprentice it's better to be 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.

**Intercultural
communication**

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The comfort zone has to do with our values and convictions – what do we hold to be 'true', how you should behave and what is 'possible' and 'not possible'. The comfort zone consists of our familiar daily things, patterns 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 'centre of gravity' that secures the meaning of things, without which the world around us becomes unviable.

EXAMPLE 1.4

How many kisses?

In Belgium, an excessive amount 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 on 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 tucked 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 much. 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 swing that was looked at with surprise by the Belgians.

Shirley-Digital, Flemish Kissing Culture (Vlaamse kuscultuur), Jan. 12, 2015

1.8 Outside the comfort zone: that's not how it should be

Below are some pictures of people you might see on a beach. Can you indicate with each image whether it falls inside or outside your comfort zone? In other words, if you were on the same beach, which image corresponds to your 'normal'? Does what you see fit with your sense of what does and does not 'belong'?

Please note: this is not about whether this or that is 'allowed' or whether 'everyone should choose by themselves what to wear', but what you honestly think and feel about this deep within yourself.

Can you indicate which image makes you feel most comfortable and least comfortable?



Can you describe what exactly you think of as 'abnormal' when looking at these pictures?
Almost everyone in The Netherlands and Northern European countries will find themselves most comfortable with the photo of the women in bikinis. (Again, this is not about whether someone can wear what they want, be it a

thong, a bathing suit, a burkini or nothing at all; it's about what *you* think of as normal and what falls within *your* comfort zone.) By extension, most people in The Netherlands will find themselves *least* comfortable with the photo of the woman in burkinis; this is because everyone who grew up in Dutch culture has acquired notional values about how one should dress and behave on a beach. People who do not participate in this tacit agreement about beaches, e.g. women in burkinis or nudists, give the people who do a feeling of discomfort.

The burkini is an external expression that a person belongs to a type of subculture, in this case religious, that is known as Muslim. However, many other people belonging to the same Muslim subculture who were born and raised in the Netherlands will also find the women in bikinis the most 'normal'. When they go to the beach in summer, Dutch Muslims will be expecting the beach to be full of people in swimsuits and bikinis and would be surprised if all the women were wearing burkinis. Perhaps they believe that a burkini should be the norm, based on their religious subculture, but that is different from the Dutch norm. Even if you grow up in an environment with two cultures, the culture of the country you grow up in, go to school, 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 people have difficulty with these because both images are uncomfortable but for different reasons. Two different values are under attack in these two situations; one representing the abuse of power (i.e. how a boss should normally deal with those under them) and the other representing the abuse of personal space.





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 convictions about 'how things are done'.

Resume

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- ▶ Culture is to do with of groups of people. Small groups such as a families and large groups such as countries. Individuals are part of all kinds of subcultures.
 - ▶ Culture is not in our DNA, culture is taught by the people around us and this is called socialisation. 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 recognisable 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 spectacles we wear and through which we perceive the world.
 - ▶ The meaning of an object, a behavioural pattern or a ritual depends on the context – as the meaning changes so too does the context. A particular gesture or behaviour in one culture can mean something completely different in another.
 - ▶ Culture gives a sense of security; it gives meaning to the unknown world around you and creates a comfort zone. Another culture feels uncomfortable because it falls outside the comfort zone and at its core this has to do with our values and convictions, i.e. what we believe to be 'true', 'normal' or 'possible'.
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Questions

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- 1 Write at least ten (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 did you learn about where you belong and from whom did you learn that?
 - 5 Which roles do you identify with 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 a frame of reference?