

Part 2

Cultural dimensions – an approach

Culture encompasses a society's values and norms

According to *Tylor's* definition, culture refers to "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society".¹

This early definition was already drawing a link between culture and society, thereby describing the subjectivity of values and norms.

From a cultural-psychological viewpoint, culture is a "transindividual" knowledge symbol or system of symbols² that people use to apply significance to the world and thereby give it meaning. To put it simply, culture involves:

- **Values** = right vs. wrong, and
- **Standards** = good vs. evil

These catalogues define the "software" of thought³ and the boundary conditions framing thought and action. But as *Hofstede*⁴ points out, this software does not predefine thought.

Decisions are made within cultural boundary conditions. Decisions outside cultural boundary conditions feel unfamiliar at the least, and generally "wrong".⁵ Values and norms have a significant influence on the individual's feeling of self-worth.⁶ Doing something that goes against this catalogue therefore has direct consequences on a person's mental state. Observing someone else violating this canon of values leads to confusion at the least, if not rejection or revulsion.

Furthermore, that other person's abilities will be devalued overall. To make these unconscious reactions conscious, simulations are used in intercultural training to place participants in a constructed imaginary culture.

1 *Tylor*, (1871)

2 *Straub* (1999), p. 185.

3 See *Hofstede* (1991), p. 4.

4 More on this in *Hofstede* (1991) pp. 5-7 and section 2.3 of this article.

5 See *Berslin* (1993), p. 208 or, in more detail, *Birkenbihl* (1997).

6 See model according to *Birkenbihl* (1997), p. 41.

Participants in this culture behave completely different than Western norms dictate. For example, they touch each other repeatedly. On the other hand, ritualised touching, such as shaking hands, is forbidden. If this group meets "normal" consultants, i.e. those socialised according to basic Western principles, the two groups denigrate each other.⁷ In the words of the participants: "They don't know how to behave – so they must be stupid too." "I can't believe that these consultants have any professional skills seeing as they can't even say hello properly." The consultants on the other side are unsettled by the obviously different behaviour; this generally leads to displacement activity, such as exaggerated laughter or coughing fits. The refusal of the opposite party to carry out certain "normal" actions, such as sitting down or touching specific things, is judged as backward and "stupid". The other culture is seen as "inferior" and "behind the times".

It is fascinating to observe how quickly the new culture is adopted and even adhered to. One important step is the "de-role-ing" after the simulation.⁸ This procedure makes it clear to the participants how quick and far-reaching cultural imprinting is, and how easily other people can be denigrated due to cultural differences.

The cultural model of *Tromenaars*

In order to identify the bearers of values and norms, we have to record the various different levels of culture. As shown above, in addition to the visible and formal parts of culture, there are also informal and unconscious parts, which form fundamental anchors to cultural understanding. *Kluckhohn* and *Strodtbeck* (1961) initiated the description of cultural levels; work which *Geertz* (1973) and *Hofstede* (1980) continued.

⁷ "Towers for Derdia", a simulation invented by *Tromenaars* as edited by Ute Clement– in the repertoire of the Institut für Systemische Beratung. www.systemische-professionalitaet.de.

⁸ Otherwise, people may not come out of the simulation and may continue to walk around in the role for six months afterwards.

The investigations were based on the observation that there was no such thing as a "normal" company but that instead, social systems alter depending on the context.

Furthermore, individuals and companies cannot be understood if the significance assigned by specific environmental conditions cannot be understood. So, for example, meetings in which errors are discussed are seen as useful feedback by Americans, but remind Chinese employees of the self-criticisms from the days of the Cultural Revolution.⁹

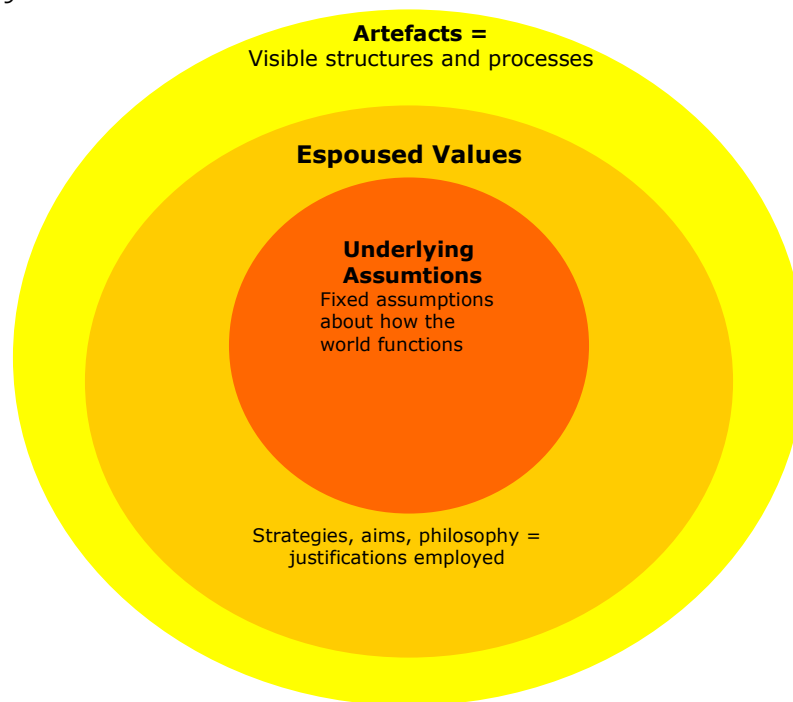


Fig. 1 Cultural levels¹⁰

The inner core of the "onion model" describes the unconscious set of values that all people carry inside themselves. So in the Western world, shaped by Christian values and scientific knowledge, it is initially clear that infectious diseases are caused by pathogens and not by evil spirits. Assumptions at this level are not usually challenged – the only reason to question them would be considerable discomposure. The events that would lead to such questioning are generally traumatic. Some of these values and norms are not consciously accessible to us. They are an integral part of our understanding of the world.

⁹ Example in *Tromenaars* (1998), p. 19, although *Tromenaars* compared American and German reactions in his example. The Chinese reaction to this method comes from a training course in the chemical industry and the comments from the Chinese trainees in an international management programme for the automotive supplier industry, which discussed "lessons learnt". ¹⁰ According to *Tromenaars* (1997), p. 22 and "Kulturkorridor Europa" in *Scholz* (2000), p. 828; www.onpipe.info/Images/Sn1.gif.

The second level covers the perception of norms. This is where decisions about priorities are made.¹¹ The anchored values and norms are conscious and are drawn on as justifications for action.

Infringements of these values are unsettling.¹²

In an exchange programme for young managers from Air France and Lufthansa, a young Air France employee took leave of his superior with the words: "I can't work today, I'm so in love!" His superior let him go without asking any further questions. From this example, it is clear how culturally specific these values are. It is unlikely that it would have occurred to a German employee to use being in love as an excuse and whether a German boss would accept it as such. However, since we are capable of thinking about whether these values are appropriate, we can reach accommodations in this area.

The third level reveals culture. This area includes art and food, clothing and all other expressions of lifestyle. For organisations, this also includes the shape and type of buildings, the furnishings and the rituals. We can also make observations about the corporate culture in this area. For example, the fact that there is or is not a canteen in a company, how and where employees eat and how the staff's social environment is shaped are all fundamental expressions of a corporate culture. The canteen is a place where important observations about employee interaction can be made. Who eats with whom, who is allowed to sit where, are there – as in some Mercedes Benz AG dealerships – different coloured chairs in the canteen for administrative and workshop employees.¹³

This makes it clear at which levels a conscious influence can be had and that there are areas that cannot be used. The underlying assumptions can be very obstructive when it comes to intercultural understanding. The supposed equality of educational achievements or working behaviours also falls into this category. For example, a university degree carries the assumption that the person in question has learnt to work scientifically. However, an Italian law student, for example, has to sit only oral examinations up until his or her finals.

¹¹ Paid work generally takes precedence over pleasure. It is important to have a job. Idleness, seen as laziness, is impermissible. Working causes stress and, if possible, should not be too much fun.

¹² *Tromenaars* (1997) p. 25.

¹³ However, there is a practical explanation for this: The workshop employees are often dirty and their clothes leave marks on the chairs. That being said, the two areas of the canteens were separated by partitions and in very different states of cleanliness and order.

The final examination is the only written work in the degree course. The changeover of the German university system to bachelor degree programmes is intended to make it possible to compare degrees internationally. However, the content of the degrees and the exams has not been adjusted. And yet the working methods and problem solving patterns that students learn during their studies are far more important. In trainee programmes with participants from around the world, it becomes clear that not only do degrees not lay the same foundations, they intensify differences in problem solving. The attempt to exchange students internationally has only a minimal effect on absorbing these differences.