Intercultural skills

for international business and international relations

A manual with exercises

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1 Introduction

1.1 What is the use of this book?

Take a look at the following, real-life story.

Mr. Adams goes to China

Mr. Adams works for one of the largest transhipment agencies in the port of Antwerp. After various assignments in Brazil which went smoothly, Mr. Adams is sent to Shanghai, China, where he is to instruct port executives in modern transhipment techniques. He lectures in English and an interpreter translates what he says into Chinese for the people present. At one point, Mr. Adams, referring to the development of a computer program, wishes to say that a particular way of writing the program should be avoided because it would take too long for the results to appear on the screen; there are better ways of writing the program, which produce faster output. But rather than saying just that (e.g. "Don't write the program this way, it will take very long for the results to appear on the monitor."), he says: "Don't do it this way, because then, *you might as well get up and have a cup of coffee*."

Once the sentence is translated, the Chinese start getting up and leaving the room. It is not difficult to guess what has happened: the interpreter misinterpreted Mr. Adams's expression and announced a coffee break (or a break in any case) to the audience.

Mr. Adams, becoming aware of what has happened, calls the audience back, explaining to them that this is all a misunderstanding and that the interpreter made a mistake. The interpreter translates this into Chinese. People pour back into the room, and the course resumes where it had been left.

And the interpreter? He was never seen again. The next session, he had been replaced by a new interpreter.

After having read this book, you are likely to avoid the mistakes Mr. Adams made in China. You will have learned that, when dealing with non-native speakers and when using interpreters, it is advisable not to use expressions the meaning of which is not transparent, such as 'you might as well get up and have a cup of coffee'. This simple expression raises various culturally relevant questions. Do the Chinese have coffee breaks? If they do, do these breaks have approximately the same length as a Western coffee break? Will the Chinese interpreter understand the expression as synonymous to 'it will take more than five minutes to …'?

You will also have learned that, in a country such as China, face-saving is essential. In the story above, the interpreter was humiliated in public. Mr.

Adams calls the participants back and he can only do this through the interpreter who has to admit that he made a mistake in his translation, i.e. a professional error. This is so shameful that the interpreter literally cannot show his face any more in front of these people, which is the reason why he did not show up the next day.

In business, cultural insensitivity costs companies millions of dollars. In international relations, intercultural skills can make the difference between straining or smoothening relations between people and countries.

The classic example of intercultural blindness causing a business venture to lose hundreds of millions is the case of Eurodisney (now Disneyland Paris) which, the first few years after opening (in 1992), was losing so much money that Disney Corporation started to think of closing down the theme park altogether. In 1993, losses stood at approximately US$ one billion; they were still at around US$ one million *a day* in 1994-5.[1]

Cultural blindness was one of the main reasons, if not the most important, of this initial failure. One simple example: the parking lot followed the design of the parking lots of Disney parks in the US; they had simply forgotten that many more Europeans travel to such a theme park by bus rather than by private car. The first days, ten buses were arriving for every available bus parking space.

As the Eurodisney example has been described in detail in many textbooks, I will develop another case below (§ 1.3): the failed venture of Sephora in Japan.

1.2 Resistance to intercultural training

For a long time, communication problems in business, industry and administration that could have been tracked down to intercultural differences were overlooked because these intercultural differences were not recognized as such. It was simply assumed that, in international business, everything would go the Western (and mainly the American) way.

This attitude is not tenable anymore today, and anyone who is involved in contacts with people from other cultures (i.e., virtually all of us) can no longer adduce ignorance as an explanation for intercultural mistakes or blunders, now that training materials are readily available.

1 Disneyland Paris announced its third financial restructuring plan in 2015 and its profitability is still dubious today (www.lesechos.fr 28 February 2018), but that may not be due mainly to cultural mistakes.

Nevertheless, resistance to intercultural training is still rampant in the business world, in some countries more than in others. In a survey one of my students (Grieten 1994) carried out among approximately sixty Belgian companies involved in trade with Central and Eastern European countries, it appeared that not one of them organized any intercultural training or briefing for its employees who were in contact with those countries. Large companies may organize in-house training for their personnel, but small and medium-sized companies do not, and independent training and consulting agencies are not widespread as yet. The situation seems to be different in the Netherlands, where intercultural training is provided by several agencies and institutions, including the respectable Royal Institute for the Tropics in Amsterdam.

A first reason that is commonly adduced is that experience is what counts in this domain, rather than theoretical knowledge as it could be gathered in training sessions. This argument could, of course, equally well be applied to learning how to handle a new machine, how to use a computer program, or to learning a new language. The argument is spurious, because just as it makes sense to learn a new language by taking classes rather than immediately sending off everyone who wishes to learn it to a country where it is spoken (which is totally unrealistic), and just as it makes sense to train employees before they use the new machine or the new software that is being installed, it also makes sense to provide training in intercultural communication before launching employees into contacts with other cultures.

Having employees learn how to handle a new machine through experience only, and without any previous training for it, could prove a costly and dangerous exercise. Things are no different with respect to the acquisition of intercultural skills. No one will deny the role experience plays in becoming an expert intercultural communicator. But preparatory training is essential in providing people with the necessary tools to start, and in avoiding costly mistakes. How easily Mr. Adams's blunders in China could have been avoided by a simple intercultural training session, or by reading some appropriate materials! One cannot even begin to calculate the cost of Disney Corporation's mistake when they overlooked cultural factors while planning for Eurodisney. According to the newspaper *The Guardian* (19 August 2004), Microsoft "lost hundreds of millions of dollars in lost business and led hapless company employees to be arrested by offended governments", sometimes simply because of a lack of knowledge of basic geography, such as distributing software in the respective countries where Kurdistan is separate from Turkey, Kashmir from India or Taiwan from China, but also because of other cultural blunders, such as using chants with Koranic verses in a game software program. The news channel CNN is also notorious for its geographical errors, particularly on the maps shown. In one instance, Hong Kong was located on a map of Brazil, more or less in the spot where Rio de

Janeiro is supposed to be; in another case, the French city of Cannes was located in Northern Spain; and so forth.

A more insidious reason for not facing intercultural issues and problems, and one which is not always stated openly, is that some may be afraid of opening Pandora's box, and that things may come out of it that run against the prevailing ideology.

For a long time, the European Community, now the European Union, has avoided addressing intercultural issues. By refusing to acknowledge that intercultural differences between the member states played a role in the decision-making processes and their implementation, one could officially keep up the pretense of a common European culture with little or no internal variation on the level of politics, administration and business. Only in 1995 did the European Union put out a bid to organize large-scale intercultural training sessions for its personnel. Fortunately, more and more institutions and companies are following that trend.

Finally, in some cases people may be worried about the implications of an intercultural diagnosis to a problem, and they prefer to refuse the diagnosis itself, like the proverbial ostrich that puts its head in the sand in order to avoid facing the danger. For instance, Hofstede argues, as we shall see later, that the culture of many (though not all) South-East Asian nations strongly values *long-term orientation*, and Hofstede explicitly correlates this to economic success in the modern world. But then conversely, the economic failure of many African countries might be traced back to the fact that their cultures are much more *short-term oriented*. If one assumes in addition that most deep-seated cultural values only change very slowly over time,[2] the implication could be that there is little hope for African countries to improve their economic situation dramatically in the near future.

In fact, things are never that simple in real life, and many other factors intervene in explaining a nation's economic success or failure. It would be naive to trace it down to one theoretical dimension only. Besides, why should *economic success* be the only yardstick we use to measure a society's standing in the world?

Even if it were the case that cross-cultural research arrives at pessimistic conclusions in certain cases, the diagnosis that comes out of the cross-cultural investigation should be heeded if one wishes to change things for the better. Refusing the diagnosis is like shooting the messenger who brings the (bad) news, or refusing to go to the doctor because he possibly might discover that you are ill and need treatment …

2 Not all scholars would agree on this, but I think it is fair to say that it is the majority view, and it is certainly Hofstede's own view.

1.3 A costly example: Sephora's failure in Japan[3]

Sephora is a French chain of cosmetics stores, with over 400 outlets in Europe, including Central and Eastern Europe, and a large number of stores in the US and now also in China. Its parent company is LVMH, "the largest luxury group in the world" (www.sephora.fr 2009).

In 1999, Sephora opened its first store in Japan. It was located in Ginza, the luxury shopping district of Tokyo. Sephora had ambitious expansion plans for the country: it intended to open several dozens of stores in Japan over a period of five to six years.

Yet in November 2001, exactly two years after opening that first store in Tokyo, Sephora decided to abandon its Japanese operations entirely because of blatant lack of success in conquering the Japanese market. At that time, they had nine stores already open in Japan; they closed them down and left.

What went wrong? LVMH, the parent company, blamed the failure of Sephora in Japan on "the faltering Japanese economy". It is true that a recession, or at least economic stagnation, hit Japan at the time Sephora was opening its first stores in the country. It is equally true, however, that luxury goods typically resist the onslaught of recession rather well. Louis Vuitton stores, also part of the LVMH group, did not close down in Japan.

Several analysts believe that Sephora's own strategy is to blame for its failure in Japan.

Figure 1. Sephora at a shopping mall in San Diego, California.

3 This account is partly based on an article in the *International Herald Tribune* (30 November 2001), 'Analysts Blame Sephora's Strategy for Japan Failure'.

Above I wrote that Sephora is a chain of cosmetics stores. But even today, on its website, Sephora defines itself as a "chaîne de parfumerie", i.e. a chain of *perfume* stores. Of course, Sephora sells other cosmetics besides perfume, such as make up, hair care and skin care products. But its own definition reveals that perfume is the central product in Sephora's assortment. This is the case because in Western countries, perfume is the core product in a line of cosmetics, the product consumers will most identify with. Companies spend a fortune on designing a new bottle for a new perfume. They do not spend the same amount of money on the new shampoo flask.

Take a look at figure 1: a picture of a Sephora store, taken in a shopping mall in San Diego, California.

Above the shelves, you notice two photographs of a model holding a perfume flask in her hands. It would be hard to imagine her holding a deodorant stick or a shampoo flask in her hands, wouldn't it?

The picture also shows that when looking inside the store from outside, the only products that are visible on the shelves are perfume (this term is used here for fragrance in general). As consumers identify primarily with perfume, the visual attraction of this product will be greater than if, say, the shelves would show hair conditioner, skin cream or deodorant. It will attract them inside the store, where they may be tempted into buying various products.

In the Ginza store in Tokyo, the ground floor was devoted to perfume only. For all other cosmetics products, the consumers had to go one floor up.

What is wrong with that, you may ask? Take a look at the share of various segments of cosmetics in sales figures in Japan:

Figure 2. Cosmetics in Japan.

Skin care	39.1%
Hair care	31.3%
Make-up	25.4%
Other	3.6%
Perfume and cologne	0.6%

Source: Japan Cosmetics Industry Association 2000

In the US and in Europe, the most important segment is make up. Fragrance is a very close second, accounting for some 30-40% of cosmetics sales. While Japan is the world's largest cosmetics market (on a par with the US), sales are dominated by skin care, hair care and make up products. Perfume and related products account for less than 1% of total sales in Japan, even if the share may be rising slowly. "Perfume is not a major market in Japan", says Tomoo

Inoue in a headline article in the *International Herald Tribune* (November 30, 2001) about the failure of Sephora in Japan. The same article states:

> Sephora committed a fatal error by putting its perfumes section on the all-important first floor [i.e., the ground floor] of its stores.

Thus, the layout of the Sephora stores in Japan was similar to that in figure 1 above. In other words, Japanese women walking past the Sephora stores and looking inside would only see products they would never buy. It is impossible to quantify how much this error contributed to the failure of Sephora in Japan. The least we can say is that it did not do them any good …

Most people will find it inconceivable that the Sephora executives were not aware of the fact that the vast majority of Japanese consumers do not buy or use perfume. If so, they were presumably hoping to change the behavior of the Japanese (female) consumer: OK, women in Japan have not been using perfume up to now, but our concept and our products are so attractive that they will modify their behavior and start buying perfume from now on. Of course, sales should pick up within a reasonable time span. A commercial company is normally unwilling to wait for many years before becoming profitable in a new market.

Even so, the Sephora people have not done their homework about Japanese culture. If they were hoping that Japanese consumers would change their habits, they should have asked themselves: What *motivates* Japanese women not to use perfume? If the motivations are superficial and accidental, it may be reasonable to expect to change their behavior. If the motivations are deep and strong, this hope is illusory. Even with the best concept and massive advertising, it is not advisable to open a chain of liquor stores in a strongly Islamic country, since one is unlikely to convince devout Muslims to start drinking whisky or wine.

On the basis of many interviews I did with Japanese people, I believe the reasons for not using perfume include the following.

- *Cleanliness and naturalness*. Take your shower every morning, and you are clean: no bodily odors! If you add something to that, such as perfume, it is suspicious: perhaps then you *did not* have time to take your shower this morning? After all, cologne and perfume were originally invented to mask the bodily odors of Europeans at a time (17th-18th century) when no one took a bath.
- *Modesty*. A 'proper' Japanese woman is supposed to behave in a modest way. Anything that enhances one's attractiveness goes against this norm.
- *Individualism*. If five Western women gather at a party, the normal situation is definitely not that they would all be wearing the same perfume. Perfume is supposed to express and enhance one's individuality.

However, this goes against the group orientation of Japanese culture, where one wants to merge with the group rather than stand out from the crowd.

- *Social class.* According to my Japanese informers, perfume is also low class. A barmaid might wear perfume, but, as some of my Japanese students say, "my mother, a respectable woman, will not use perfume".

Figure 3. Japan: merging with the group.

How much money did Sephora (and LVMH) lose in this failed business venture? We will never have a precise figure, but we are clearly talking about many millions of euros or dollars. Recall that they had already opened nine stores in Japan: renting the premises, decorating the stores, putting in the supplies, hiring and training the staff (and subsequently firing them again), … One million euros per store seems to be a very conservative estimate. Sephora's loss may well amount to 10 million euros or more, apart from the operational losses they incurred during the two-year period they were in business in Japan.

Below I will explain the basic pitfalls of relying on one's own Self-Reference Criterion (SRC) and not taking cultural differences into consideration.

1.4 Another costly intercultural business blunder: Walmart's failure in Germany[4]

Above I have already mentioned two costly intercultural blunders: the Disneyland Paris case and the geographical mistakes Microsoft made. Several

4 My account is based on various articles in the press and on websites.

more will appear later in this book and I could multiply the examples at will. Here I will just briefly mention one more: the failure of the American supermarket giant Walmart in Germany. Walmart has more than 8,000 stores in some 15 different countries, including over 100 in China alone. They decided to enter the lucrative German retail market in 1997. While any analysis of the causes of their failure is bound to be complex and possibly controversial, several mistakes can be pointed out that certainly contributed to Walmart's inadaptation to German culture:

- Walmart's German locations were operated from their offices in the United Kingdom, with top-level executives speaking English, not German. The CEO for Walmart's German operations was David Wild, who is British. This created communication problems with some of the German store managers who did not speak English.
- Some of the products were not adapted to the German market. CEO David Wild himself admitted such mistakes, including the fact that Walmart only discovered too late that German pillowcases are a different size from American ones.
- Germany may be too 'green' (environmentally conscious) for a supermarket where plastic and throwaway abounds.
- Employees were required to always smile to customers, which is totally contrary to European habits. It made the employees feel embarrassed and did not go down well with the customers either (this will be analyzed in more detail under § 12.7). This also applies to 'greeters', employees who were hired just to greet customers at the doors.
- Worse, the German employees were required to chant each morning ('Walmart! Walmart! Walmart!') and do stretching exercises. They must have felt totally ridiculous doing that.
- Employees were requested to 'spy' upon each other and report any observed misconduct. Walmart even considered opening a telephone hotline for such reporting.
- Employees were prohibited from having sexual contact with each other. This is rather common practice in the US, but such a rule runs completely against European customs where a company is not entitled to interfere in such a way with its employees' private life, apart from it being illegal. The rule was struck down by German courts (similar interferences made by Disneyland Paris into the private life of its employees were also struck down by French courts).

In 2006 Walmart closed its 85 German stores (which were in part taken over by a German company) with losses of some US$ one billion, withdrew completely from Germany and will presumably never be back.

1.5 The need for intercultural training

Global trade and international relations are not a recent phenomenon. Bronze and terracotta Greek and Roman oil lamps have been found as far as South-East Asia (Batiste & Zephir 2009:21). There were international exchanges even in prehistoric times, though the speed of transmission was, of course, slower then.

But now more than ever before, economic success means doing business internationally and globally. And now more than ever, international relations between interconnected countries become essential for our planet. International negotiations, expatriation processes, international marketing, international joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions, or, simply, welcoming foreign visitors in one's own country: the list of situations where intercultural skills are needed involves almost everyone nowadays.

One word of warning. There is still the naive idea that intercultural skills are easily acquired 'on the spot' through travel and experience. The *Contact Hypothesis*, dating back to Allport (1954) states, in its simplest form (which may not correspond to Allport's position), that more contacts between cultural groups lead to better understanding. But there is ample empirical evidence that simply exposing people to different cultures does not automatically lead to mutual sympathy and improved understanding.

During the political unification of Italy, in the 19th century, naïve attempts were made to create a sense of common feeling among the soldiers from the various regions:

> One of the peculiarities of the Italian army was the obsession of trying to minimize municipal or provincial loyalties by [...] making sure that each regiment was made up of troops drawn from all over the peninsula. [...] Whether soldiers really did feel more 'Italian' as a result of being thrown together with men from other provinces is extremely questionable. There are good grounds for believing that the policy had exactly the opposite effect, with soldiers from the same region ganging together and [...] persecuting, harassing and tormenting soldiers from other regions, as one observer noted, with "quarrels, brawls and bloody scenes" (Duggan 2007:288).

More recently, attempts to improve mutual understanding between racial groups in the US by simply putting, say, African Americans and Caucasian Americans together equally resulted in failure (Van Oudenhoven 2002:143). The available evidence also suggests that self-reported intercultural skills bear no relationship to real intercultural effectiveness (Herfst, van Oudenhoven & Timmerman 2008) and that intercultural sensitivity typically lags far behind language skills (Jackson 2008).

If one throws someone into intercultural situations unprepared, they may suffer emotional distress and the company may lose millions of euros before getting it right, if ever. Most of this can be avoided through basic intercultural training.

Intercultural skills are needed as soon as you do any of the following:

- have contacts with people from different cultures, whether professionally or privately;
- buy and sell abroad: international negotiations and contracts;
- represent your country at international conferences and meetings;
- welcome foreign visitors to your country or company;
- market goods or services internationally and adapt them to foreign markets;
- work as an expatriate, including in diplomatic service or on UN missions;
- get into a joint venture or a merger with a partner from another country;
- better integrate migrant workers and minorities into the work force.

For expatriates, failure rates range from 10 to 40%. In other words, at least one in ten expatriates returns home prematurely, and in some companies almost half of them do. The cost of one expatriate returning home prematurely is likely to be higher than the cost of a fully-fledged intercultural training program for all future expats, which might have helped avoiding some (though not all) of those premature returns.

Similarly, in the case of joint ventures and mergers and acquisitions, companies sometimes spend vast amounts of money on the harmonization of their accounting procedures or their product assortment and fail to spend one penny on potential intercultural trouble spots that might arise between the two companies. According to Magala (2005:116-7), in almost 75% of mergers no attention is paid to cultural aspects. Estimates are that at least half of all joint ventures and mergers either fall apart or do not work as expected (Van Oudenhoven 2002:166). Here also, paying attention to intercultural differences and misunderstandings is likely to reduce the failure rate by a substantial percentage. A good illustration of the effects "special efforts devoted to intercultural communication" have on the success of a Chinese-American joint venture can be found in Newman (1992:74, 1995). For the impact of culture on mergers and acquisition, see for instance Jöns, Froese & Pak (2007). A case study of (Chinese) Lenovo's acquisition of the (American) IBM PC division, with its pitfalls and successes, shows that the most difficult part in it was cultural integration (Abdulai & Ibrahim 2016).

In retrospect it now seems clear that the failure of the Daimler-Chrysler merger is partly due to not taking cultural factors into consideration.

> The Germans taking part were irritated by the American's unstructured ways, while the Americans thought the Germans were too rigid and formal. A senior product development executive in Stuttgart said that "each side thought its components and methods were the best" (Gibson 2002:1-2).

> [...] there were unbridgeable differences in the cultures of the two organizations (Watkins 2007).

In the Air France-KLM merger on the other hand, cultural factors were explicitly addressed. Up to now, the merger is successful.

1.6 Cultural units: countries, religions, languages

In most publications in the field of intercultural communication for business, culture is equated with *national* culture: the culture of a country or nation state, for instance Japan, India, Australia, and so forth. This is the case in virtually all the research frameworks I mention in chapter 12: Hofstede, Trompenaars, Schwartz, the Globe and WVS studies, d'Iribarne, and many more. A look at the articles published in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, the leading journal in this field, will confirm this impression.

It is legitimate to express doubts about the appropriateness of the equation *culture = nation state*, in view of the fact that many modern nation states are themselves culturally varied. Does it make sense to refer to 'Belgian culture' when there are two linguistic communities in the country that often define themselves as culturally different from one another, plus a number of other cultural groups (an orthodox Jewish community in Antwerp, Turkish and Moroccan Belgians in many of the large cities, civil servants from different parts of Europe who work for the European Union administration, and more)?

Some arguments, however, plead in favor of using country membership as a primary cultural group.

- *A convenient number*. There are about 200 countries in the world, and substantially less if we leave out the very small microstates. This is a manageable number. Surveys can be carried out in 50 to 100 countries, as is illustrated in chapter 12. Other groupings may be either too large or too small. It is possible to study religious groups rather than countries, for instance. But there are at most half a dozen major religions in the world, and many of them group people together that are culturally very heterogeneous. Catholicism encompasses the majority of the population in Bavaria as well as in Mexico, Islam compasses most Egyptians as well

as most Indonesians … Linguistic groups, on the other hand, may well be too numerous to study culturally: estimates are that some 3,000-5,000 languages are spoken in the world.

- *Clear membership.* Countries usually have clearly defined borders and clearly defined membership. For example: I am a Frenchman living in Mulhouse, a German living in Freiburg im Breisgau or a Swiss living in Basel, usually not all of these.
- *A clearly defined societal framework*. The bureaucracies of nation states exert a dominant influence upon individual creation of cultural software and 'identities' (Magala 2005:73). Countries typically have their own unique legal and political framework, educational and judiciary system, economic strengths and weaknesses, etc.
- *Empirical evidence*. The work of many researchers substantiates the idea that countries are relevant cultural groupings. Hofstede's seminal work is an indirect tribute to the relevance of nation states (Magala 2005:2), which was not obvious at the outset:

> [...] [although] we could even wonder whether modern nations possess national characters [, t]he present book shows that modern nations do have dominant national character traits which can be revealed by survey studies and by the comparison of measurable data on the society level (Hofstede 1980:38).

If nation states were primarily collections of subcultures that do not have more in common with each other than with other subcultures inside other national borders, Hofstede and others would never have been able to ascribe different specific, culturally defined characteristics to the neighboring countries that are included in various studies.

This is not to say, of course, that other levels of cultural grouping are irrelevant and should not be taken into account. Many, if not most, nation states are composed of more or less clearly defined *subcultures* which may differ with respect to language, religion, ethnic background, etc. It is then quite possible to refer to cultural features of those subgroups separately whenever the need arises, provided the required empirical knowledge about those subgroups is available. In one study, Sigler et al. (2008) find measurable regional differences in *assertiveness* within the US: respondents from the New York Metropolitan area exhibited more assertive communication than those from the Upper Midwest, and males from the Upper Midwest showed higher assertiveness than females from that region. Here, regional and gender subgroups were taken into consideration.

In summary, for the purpose of scientific study working with national cultures has the advantage of using a clear, well-known concept and an often unambiguous definition of membership. These advantages may outweigh the disadvantage of amalgamating different subcultures within one larger

group. Simplification of a complex reality is inherent in any scientific or pedagogical effort. It is acceptable as long as the amalgamated picture is still accurate and close enough to the observable reality for it to yield an insight and understanding that may, in fact, be blurred in the more complex picture where the stress is mainly on decomposing cultures into subgroups.

It should be stressed that in any case, characteristics ascribed to a cultural group (such as a country) only make sense if interpreted as a statistical truth. They do not apply to individual cases with any degree of certainty. Understanding that people differ with respect to their sense of hierarchy (see chapter 8) and that this may explain some of their behavior in front of their boss, for instance, is more important than ascribing stronger hierarchy to France than to Great Britain. To be sure it is more likely for a French person to possess a stronger sense of hierarchy than for a Brit. But that does not necessarily apply to the next French person, the one you have an appointment with tomorrow. Similarly, it is acceptable to say that as a cultural group, Mexicans are less punctual than Germans, but unacceptable to predict the behavior of an individual Mexican or German on the basis of that (Hansen 2009). Ascribing characteristics of groups to all individuals belonging to that group is called the *ecological fallacy*, an error that will be discussed in more detail below.

An examination of the potentially strong relation between language and culture is not complete without a discussion of the widely quoted *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* (see for instance Crystal 1980:311-2). In essence, this hypothesis states that the (native) language we use shapes the way in which we view and categorize the world, including deep-seated cognitive categorization related to the way we view space, time, etc. If this hypothesis were correct, then the equation *culture* = *language* would be true in the most absolute terms, because the entire cognitive system that a human being is equipped with would then depend on the native language that human being grew up with.

At a superficial level, it is true that, for instance, the color terms that are available in the language we use will influence our perception of reality. If a language does not have a separate term for *blue* and *green* but uses one term for both (as is the case in many languages, including Gaelic, Japanese and Chinese), then the native speakers of that language may perceive the color of the leaves of the trees and the color of the sky as belonging to the same category (though this is debatable in itself). But to conclude from there that there is a one-to-one relationship between the linguistic categories that exist in our native language and the cognitive categories we are equipped with, is another matter altogether. After all, native speakers of Gaelic are able to learn English, which does have separate words for green and blue, and, as Crystal points out, "the fact of successful bilingual translation weakens the force of the theory's claims".

The prevailing opinion in contemporary linguistics is to reject the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It is in any case too controversial to be used as a definitive proof that our native language strongly determines our cognitive structures, including the value system we absorbed as part of the culture we grew up in (for a good critique, see Pinker 2007:124).

1.7 Cultures as partially overlapping entities

The Netherlands and the Flemish part of Belgium share a common language (Dutch) and a good part of their 'high culture', such as literature, theatre and historical heritage. Historically, the two regions belonged to the same cultural entity:

> There was certainly no 'Dutch', or specifically north Netherlands identity before 1572, nor any specifically southern Netherlands awareness. Indeed, it is questionable whether either of these existed before the late eighteenth century (Israel 1998:vi).

At the same time empirical evidence shows that many of the current values and practices of the Dutch and the Flemish differ widely.

Figure 4 illustrates this. While the Dutch and the Flemish share a substantial part of their 'high culture' (art, literature, historical heritage), Hofstede's data show that they differ with respect to their sense of hierarchy (Hofstede's power distance) as well as to two other cultural dimensions that will be explained later: uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. In fact, as one can see, on these three cultural dimensions the Flemish score much closer to francophone Belgians and to the French than to the Dutch.

Figure 4. High culture vs. cultural values and behavior.

	'High culture'	Hierarchy	Uncertainty avoidance	Masculinity
Netherlands	Dutch	38	53	14
Belgium Flemish	Dutch	61	97	43
Belgium French ('Walloon')	French	67	93	60
France	French	68	86	43

In other words, many Flemish belong to one cultural group with respect to their 'high culture', which coincides with their native language, and to another cultural group (a French or catholic European cluster) with respect to some other cultural features they possess.

These partial overlaps may be quite complex. In a documentary on Belgian television about a predominantly Turkish area in Brussels, many (though not all) of the first or second generation Turkish people who were interviewed defined themselves as 'Turkish and Belgian' (or vice-versa) at the same time. They explicitly saw themselves as endowed with features of Turkish culture (such as being a Muslim or having a stronger sense of loyalty toward their family and relatives) as well as with features of the host Belgian culture (such as being involved with Belgian politics and working within the Belgian economic structures). Similarly, in the UNPD report 2004, *Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*, a survey shows that the vast majority of Catalans define themselves as both Catalan and Spanish and the vast majority of Flemish as both Flemish and Belgian.

A Moroccan Belgian might well claim membership, depending on the situation, of (1) Morocco, (2) Belgium, (3) Islam, (4) Berber, and more.

1.8 The ecological fallacy

Many authors (Hofstede 1980:29, 51; Hofstede et al. 1993; Lane, DiStefano & Maznevski 2000:44; etc.) rightly warn against the error that consists in applying characteristics of groups (such as cultures) to all individual members of those groups.

> The level-of-analysis problem [...] occurs when conclusions applying to one level have to be drawn from data available at another. If the fact that the two levels do not correspond is not recognized and accommodated by the researcher, a cross-level fallacy occurs (Hofstede et al. 1993:483).

This is called the *ecological fallacy*[5] because it is based on the assumption that people will by necessity exhibit the characteristics that are typical of the place they inhabit (or originate from). For example: if this person comes from France, then he must exhibit the features that are known to be typical of that country (some are described later in this book), such as accepting high power distance (hierarchy), using interruption as a turn-taking strategy or easily adopting a sarcastic, conflictual tone in a discussion.

Of course, there can be no doubt that the culture one belongs to is *one of* the defining dimensions for any human being, but it is only one of many. Yes, if I had been born and had grown up in Uganda or China, my values and my behavior would each time be very different from what they are now, and that is true over and beyond individual characteristics that are obviously also at

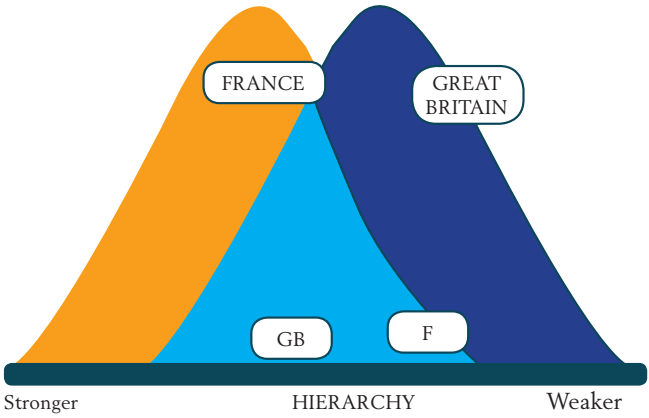
5 The term ecological fallacy (or *ecological inference fallacy*) goes back to Robinson (1950); see also the article 'ecological fallacy' in Wikipedia for a mathematical formulation of 'Robinson's paradox'.

stake. The reason for many differences in values and practices can be traced back to the cultural characteristics of the countries and societies involved.

However, it would be naive and dangerous to interpret a human being's behavior in terms of cultural origin only, and it is essential to warn against that danger. Culturally defined characteristics represent statistically established sociological tendencies and cannot be blindly ascribed to individuals belonging to a particular culture. If I learn that Japanese women tend to be shy and keep their eyes down, I cannot infer from there that a particular Japanese woman I meet later today will necessarily exhibit these characteristics. She may well be loud and outspoken.

In the same way, even though hierarchy is stronger in France than in Great Britain, you are likely to meet a French person (F) whose sense of hierarchy is weaker than that of the Brit (GB) who is also with you.

Figure 5. Hierarchy: country characteristics vs. individual.



Applying culturally defined characteristics to individuals may lead to a form of racism ('all Russians are …'). While one should warn in the strongest terms against this danger (which is inherent in any sociological description), serious scholars do not fall into this trap. Hofstede (1980:40), for instance, clearly states that he is involved in ascribing properties to *societies*, and not to individuals.

Figure 6 illustrates the fact that a human being must be defined in a multidimensional space. Many dimensions other than the person's cultural background intervene in defining the unique human being we are communicating with. Some of these other dimensions are briefly mentioned here.

Figure 6. Multidimensional (wo)man.

- *Social class.* Just as the Japanese have a different set of values and practices from Germans or Americans, people's values and practices are partially defined by the social and professional class they belong to. To put it more concretely: does a Pakistani executive share more values and practices with a Pakistani worker in his factory (same culture, different social class) or with a British executive (different culture, same social class)? The answer to this question, insomuch as it is answerable, seems to be that both factors are of about equal importance. Hofstede (1980:105) has shown that the difference, along a particular dimension such as power distance, between the culture with the highest score and the culture with the lowest score is about the same as the difference, along that same dimension, between members of the highest professional class and members of the lowest professional class in the company.
- *Gender.* Similarly, within one culture a person's values and practices are also determined by gender. In all cultures on earth, variation exists in values and practices observed among its male and its female members. Perhaps gender is more of a differentiating factor in some cultures than in others, but it would be naive to think that gender-linked differences in values and practices are minimal or non-existent in Western cultures.
- *Age.* As every marketing professional knows, the values and practices of people also depend on their age. Young and old people do not behave in identical ways: they buy different clothes, spend their vacation differently, listen to different kinds of music; nor do they have identical ideas about life and death, love and marriage, politics or art.
- *Professional culture.* Values and practices also differ depending on the corporation or institution where one works. Other things being equal, they will not be the same, for instance, in an advertising agency and a bank, or in a civil service administration and the army.

- *Corporate culture*. Each company develops its own corporate culture. In one company (such as Google), informality may prevail; in another one, relations may be more formal and more hierarchical.
- *Situational factors*. The same person may exhibit behavior that differs widely depending on the situation he finds himself in: someone who attaches high value to hierarchical structures at work may be egalitarian during leisure time spent with family or friends, or vice versa. There is also good evidence that bilingual-bicultural individuals switch between cultures depending on the language they are speaking (Van Oudenhoven 2002:45, 95). Bilingual Hong Kong Chinese react in a more Western way when speaking English and in a more Chinese way when speaking Chinese (Nisbett 2005:118). They communicate in different ways depending on the language they use (Du-Babcock 1999, 2006). They are bicultural, depending on the situation.
- *Individual features*. Over and above the various sociological factors that define human beings, a large part of the variation observed in them is purely individual. Two persons sharing the same culture, gender, working in the same corporation in similar positions, and so forth, will not be identical. Individual variation is by definition beyond the scope of sociological type investigations. Keeping in mind that individual variation is important will prevent us from falling into the trap of overgeneralization ('all such-and-such are so-and-so').

The risk of falling into the ecological fallacy should not lead to the opposite extreme, where the existence of culturally determined characteristics is denied. When I (European) am going to meet a man from Japan, I *can* make a substantial number of predictions on the basis of that person's cultural background, with a variable degree of probability (though never with absolute certainty): that his native language is Japanese (probability of nearly 100%), that he is more used to eating with chopsticks (close to 100%) and sitting on the floor than I am (probability lower than 100%), that his diet includes more fish and less meat than mine (very probable but in no way certain), that he does not change employers during his career (probability around 80-90%), that he will find it harder to openly reject a suggestion or proposal (probable but not certain), etc. The fallacy here would consist of turning these probabilities into certainties, which they are not. On the other hand, the more I have learned about culturally defined features of Japanese people (as they are described in this book and elsewhere), the less likely I am to misinterpret some of my Japanese partner's words and deeds the first time I meet him.

To sum up: use the knowledge you will have gathered in this book only to *understand* other people better, to avoid misinterpretations. Never ever use it to make predictions about an individual you meet.

1.9 A definition of culture

In the early 1950s already, over 300 definitions of culture were collected by two authors (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952; see Victor 1992:6). I am obviously not going to discuss all of them here. There is in fact no particular difficulty in understanding intuitively what is meant by *culture* in the context of intercultural studies.

In this book the term 'culture' is not used to refer to the arts, literature, music or painting and to the intellectual life that goes with these, to some kind of "refined ways of thinking, talking, acting, etc." as Webster's dictionary puts it. Whenever this meaning is referred to, the term 'high culture' will be used, as in § 1.6.

The word 'culture' as it is used in this book refers to the *values* and *practices* (Hofstede 1991:9) that are acquired and shared by people in a group. A key attribute of culture is that it is by definition something *shared* with other members of a group. It cannot be a property of individuals (Kincaid 1996:288).

A nice metaphor, also from Hofstede, is that culture is the *software of the mind*. The hardware all human beings are equipped with, i.e. our brain, is similar, apart from individual variation. But the programming that is put inside that brain depends on the culture we grew up in.

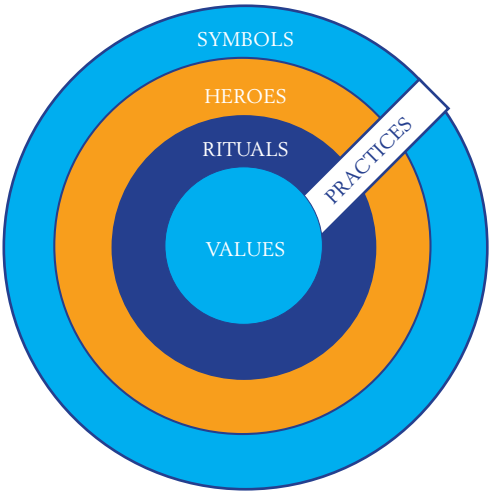
Another good way of putting it is to say that culture refers to *the particular solutions that societies give to universal problems*. Thus, feeding oneself is a universal problem, but what is considered edible and what is actually used as food varies from one culture to another, and ranges from bird's saliva to caterpillars, from live oysters to marshmallows. Finding shelter is also a universal problem, but the size, shape, interior layout, etc. of the dwellings of humans vary widely, from yurts to concrete thirty-story buildings. Children's education is yet another universal problem to be solved, and here again the solutions range from experiential learning through observing adults and participating in their activities to being immobilized for many years in a room every day with a number of other children and listening to abstract, verbal explanations by one adult person.

Culture permeates every aspect of our lives. Whether we shake hands or not, how we hold our fork in our hands (if there are forks in our culture), the amount of eye contact we establish during a conversation, the amount of moral authority our parents have over us, what we think about the causes of illness and death and a myriad of other thoughts and activities are, to a certain extent (but not completely), determined by the culture we grew up in.

1.10 Values and practices

Various authors have proposed an 'onion model' to illustrate the relationship between *values* (underlying, invisible as such) and *practices*, i.e. behavior that is visible. This is Hofstede's version of it:

Figure 7. The onion model.



Source: after Hofstede 2001:11

Such a model suggests (as does its variant, the 'iceberg' model, with a large invisible part and a smaller emerging part) that the core of a culture are its values. Values express themselves in practices, in behavior. I cannot look into someone's brain to detect if he is a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim. But if I see that person entering a synagogue, I may surmise that he is Jewish.

While it is undoubtedly the case that underlying values manifest themselves in visible behavior, I wish to formulate two caveats.

Firstly, values may remain hidden and not manifest themselves in any clear way for a long time. A person may be racist or xenophobic and be afraid to openly admit that. He may express his xenophobic feelings only in the intimacy of the voting booth.

More importantly, the above model suggests that *all* practices emanate from underlying values. This leads to the naive idea that once you understand the underlying rationale of a culture, you will be able to cope with virtually all unforeseen situations that may arise. This is variously referred to by different authors as "understanding the principles" (Peterson 2004:108-9), 'breaking the code', etc.

> To put it in a nutshell: having 'broken' the code of a given culture, one should be able to generate creative statements and perform acceptable acts in social situations one has never faced before (Magala 2005:29).

In reality, a large number of practices cannot be traced back to underlying values. And even if there was an underlying value at the outset, it may have been lost in history.

At a typical business meeting or gathering of diplomats, in many countries, the men will be wearing a colorful neck scarf called 'a tie'. The probability that businesswomen or female diplomats in the same room are also wearing a tie is extremely low. In this situation, ties are nearly obligatory for men, while they are a rare option for women. What is the underlying principle or value behind this superficial set of norms? I cannot detect anything especially deep underneath it (though a psychoanalyst might, I guess). In fact, the rationale has been lost to us many generations ago. The French word for tie, *cravate*, is etymologically the same as 'Croat'. It referred to a scarf that Croat mercenaries (in the 17th century, possibly earlier) wore around their neck and is consequently limited to males mainly. However, the businessman who puts on his tie in the morning is unlikely to know this, and even less likely to have decided he would wear a tie because he is trying to look like a Croatian warrior.

In other words, many traits of behavior are simply arbitrary and it would be vain to try and search for a 'deep' explanation of them. And even if such a 'deep' explanation is available, it may contribute little or nothing to understanding present-day behavior. Whether or not one knows the origin of the necktie makes no difference to the individual wearing it today, and whether or not you know the origin of the handshake (extending an open hand to show you are unarmed) makes no difference to the current practice of shaking hands.

I therefore agree with Usunier who writes that

> [...] a choice to be 'nearer to the surface' (I do not mean superficial) can make sense (Usunier 1998:82).

I disagree with Peterson (2004:108-9) who claims that "understanding the principles" behind the ritual exchange of business cards in Japan is preferable to "do's and don'ts" and will allow one to properly perform this operation. Varner & Beamer (1995:2) also state that "[…] lists don't tell you why you shouldn't cross your legs or say no to the coffee. And unless you understand the why of it, you may sooner or later fall on your face". This leads the two authors to offer rational explanations (in order to answer the 'why'-question) where, in my opinion, there typically are none. They 'explain' the negative attitude of some Americans toward eating raw fish (such as sushi

and sashimi) by the fear that raw fish may contain parasites (Varner & Beamer 1995:6). In my opinion, raw fish is, for those people, simply arbitrarily placed in the cognitive category of 'non-food', together with insects for instance, and no deeper or more rational explanation is called for. Even more unlikely, they 'explain' the fact that Japanese take off their shoes at the entrance to a home by the desire to prolong the life of tatami mats which are delicate and difficult to clean (Varner & Beamer 1995:183), rather than as a simple custom (probably originally based on the feeling that shoes are 'dirty') that the Japanese share with many other cultures where there are no tatami mats.

I also disagree with the idea that "cultures are coherent and made of elements knitted together in a fabric, understanding *why* enables you to understand the specific *what* of behavior" (Varner & Beamer 1995:10). Why should cultures be coherent? As a complex human construct slowly accrued over time, with various historical strata superimposed one upon another, there are likely to be internal contradictions. Cultures may believe that all human life is suffering only and people should refrain from desires (as in Buddhism) and yet indulge in a lavish, consumer-oriented lifestyle or believe in the Bible where Jesus says that "it is easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke), yet believe at the same time that the pursuit of wealth is a Christian virtue.

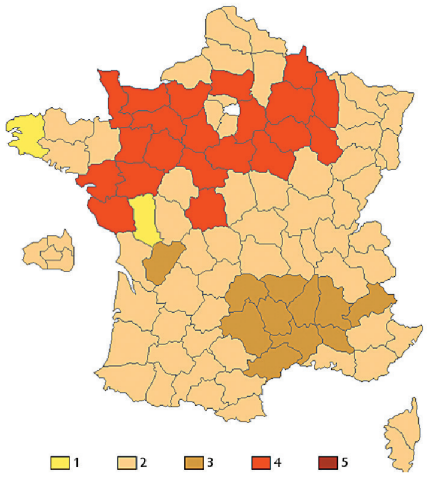
As the famous American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) wrote:

> It is not justified to conclude [...] that the whole culture must be a compact unity, that contradictions within a culture are impossible, and that all features must be part of a system (quoted in Everett 2012:319).

Good luck to anyone who tries to explain the following by referring to deeper, underlying values:

- Americans typically hold their fork in their right hand (except when cutting), Europeans in their left.
- Women have the option of wearing shoes with high heels or low heels; men do not (in most situations).
- When greeting, in some cultures people take each other's right hand and shake it vigorously (appropriately called a 'handshake'); in other cultures, they don't. Fox (2005:177) has a picture of an Athens gravestone around 410 BCE featuring a very modern handshake. The presumed historical origin of the handshake, i.e. extending the open hand to show one is unarmed, may well have been lost already at the time.
- Depending on the region, French people exchange one, two, three or four kisses when greeting (figure 8): an expression of underlying differences in value systems?

Figure 8. French kissing map.



Source: http://combiendebises.free.fr/

For a more detailed discussion of the terms involved such as ‘values’ and ‘practices’, see § 12.1.2.