

## An introduction to intercultural competence in the workplace



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# Introduction

## Introduction

Welcome to this short online course on *Intercultural competence in the workplace*. Over the next two weeks you'll explore what role culture can play in a range of professional settings, and learn how you can analyse situations in your own workplace in which intercultural competence is required. The overall aim of this course is that you'll develop a mindset that allows you to critically evaluate different notions of culture as a first step towards developing the ability to mediate between cultures.

Terms like 'culture' and 'identity' are very broad and difficult to grasp. This first week focuses on activities around understanding and applying different facets of the terms 'culture' and 'communication', as well as 'intercultural communication'. In Week 2 you'll learn to identify how your own socialisation can impact norms around verbal and non-verbal communication.

## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- consider culture in ways that are not reductionist and essentialist
- understand the properties of human communication and what intercultural competence entails and requires
- apply the notion of complex and dynamic identities to your own experiences
- have a critical understanding of national culture and be able to apply the concepts 'othering' and 'belonging' to intercultural encounters.

# Open Centre for Languages and Cultures

This course has been developed from [LG004 - An introduction to intercultural competence in the workplace](#). The Open University has launched a dedicated learning centre called [The Open Centre for Languages and Cultures](#). OpenLearn is supporting this project and is providing adapted extracts of all courses on The Open Centre in our dedicated [Language and cultures hub](#).

The Open Centre for Languages and Cultures is the exciting new home for non-accredited language and intercultural communication short courses. You can study a wide range of language and language related subjects with us anywhere in the world, in any time zone, whatever your motivation – leisure, professional development or academic. It's the one-stop shop for engaging with languages, professional communication and intercultural dialogue.

Our short courses allow us to be agile and responsive to the needs of learners who want to be part of a global society. We offer non-accredited short courses in a range of subjects including modern languages and languages for business and the workplace. We are also leading the way in developing short courses for academic research methods and pre-sessional English with IELTS, which will be available for registration in due course.

The Open Centre for Languages and Cultures is an international leader in online language learning and intercultural communications, built on our pioneering pedagogy and research.

## What makes the Open Centre different?

- The OU is the leader in online learning and teaching with a heritage of more than 50 years helping students achieve their learning ambitions.
- The short courses are underpinned by academic rigour and designed by native speakers experienced in producing engaging materials for online learning of languages and cultures.
- The graduating nature of the courses means that learners can build up their language and skills over time.
- Learners will also gain a better understanding of the culture(s) associated with the language(s) they study enabling the development of intercultural communication skills.
- Learners can mix and match the short courses and study more than one course at a time.

Once this course is complete you will be directed to OpenLearn's hub for language content where you will be able to build on your newly found language skills.

Now that you're fully prepared, it's time to start on [Week 1](#).




# Week 1: Thinking about culture and communication

## Introduction

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University short course [LG004 - An introduction to intercultural competence in the workplace](#). This course was written for the Open Centre for Languages and Cultures and consists of 10 Units, which add up to an overall study time of 40 hours. This taster course introduces you to Units 1 and 3. Unit 1 explores how culture can be understood in non-reductionist terms, and outlines crucial properties of human communication. Unit 3 zooms in on another integral part of intercultural communication: different notions of identity, and how our own idea of who we are and who 'the others' are influence our attitudes and how we behave with each other.

To get you attuned to the topic, have a look at the excerpt below.

### Activity 1

 10 minutes

In his global bestseller, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Harari argues that language is one of the key reasons why homo sapiens came out on top, as this allowed our species to create the glue that would hold large groups together. Can you tell what this glue is? The answer to this question is in the text below.

Read the following extract from *Sapiens* and deduce which term is used in the original text but left blank here. Type your answer in the box below the text.

Ants and bees can also work together in huge numbers, but they do so in a very rigid manner and only with close relatives. Wolves and chimpanzees cooperate far more flexibly than ants, but they can do so only with small numbers of other individuals that they know intimately. Sapiens can cooperate in extremely flexible ways with countless numbers of strangers.

Any large-scale human cooperation—whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city, or an archaic tribe—is rooted in common \_\_\_\_\_ that exist only in people's collective imagination. Churches are rooted in common religious myths. Two Catholics who have never met can nevertheless go together on crusade or pool funds to build a hospital because they both believe that God was incarnated in human flesh and allowed Himself to be crucified to redeem our sins. States are rooted in common national \_\_\_\_\_. Two Serbs who have never met might risk their lives to save one another because both believe in the existence of the Serbian nation, the Serbian homeland, and the Serbian flag. Judicial systems are rooted in common legal \_\_\_\_\_. Two lawyers who have never met can nevertheless



combine efforts to defend a complete stranger because they all believe in the existence of laws, justice, human rights—and the money paid out in fees.

Excerpt from: Harari, Y. N. (2014) *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind* New York. Random House, pp. 25–27.

What term is missing?

Provide your answer...

---


### Answer

The word we were looking for here is 'myth'. The term 'myth' doesn't imply that religion or nation states are not real. Harari's version of reality aligns with those of famous linguists like Noam Chomsky, who argue that our world exists because we created words and meaning for it. While the extent to which this is true is controversial in science, you should definitely take away from this excerpt how powerful language is, and that it is central to each culture or society. Verbalising ideas, beliefs and values helps to unite individuals into groups. You can study how this grouping is achieved, and thereby learn to understand how others see the world.


# 1 Reflecting on culture

The term 'culture' carries many different meanings and is understood in different ways. In this activity you'll reflect on what culture means to you, and then you'll relate your understanding of the concept to definitions used within the social sciences. As you'll find out later, our understanding of culture has important implications for the way in which we approach intercultural encounters.

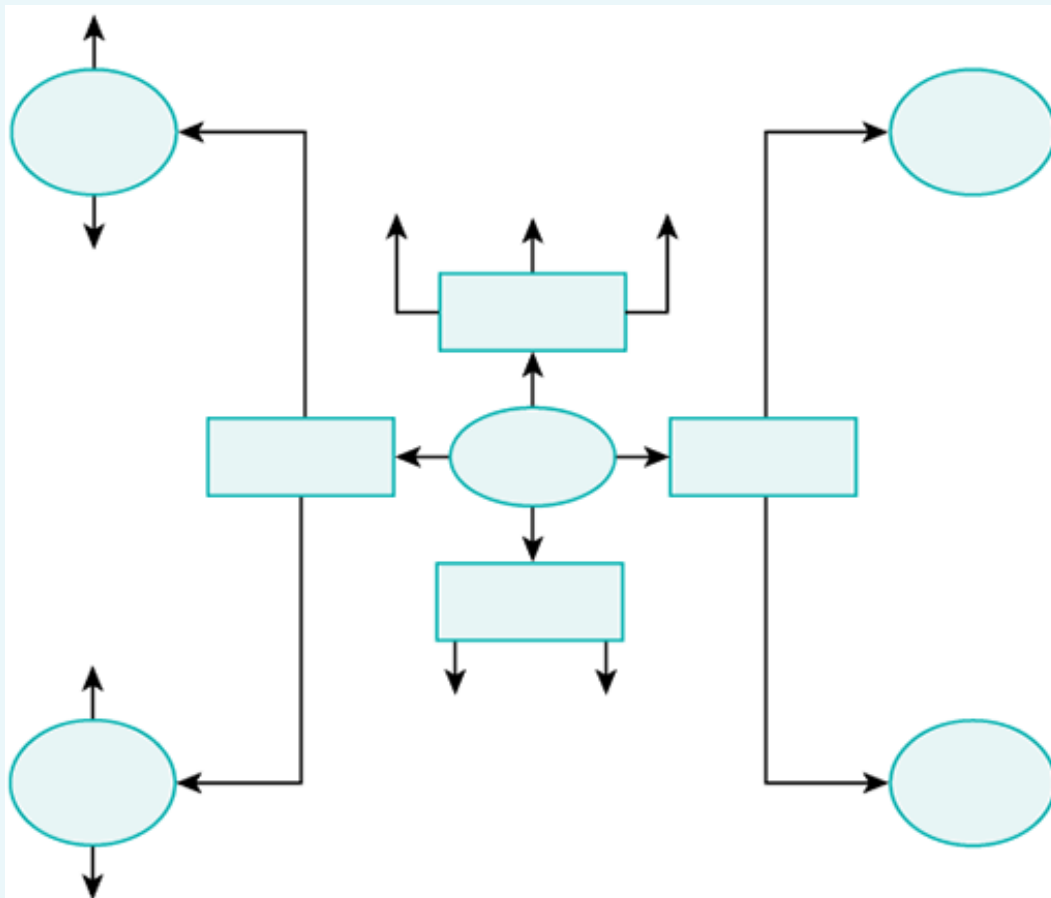
## Activity 2

 *Approx. 1 hour*

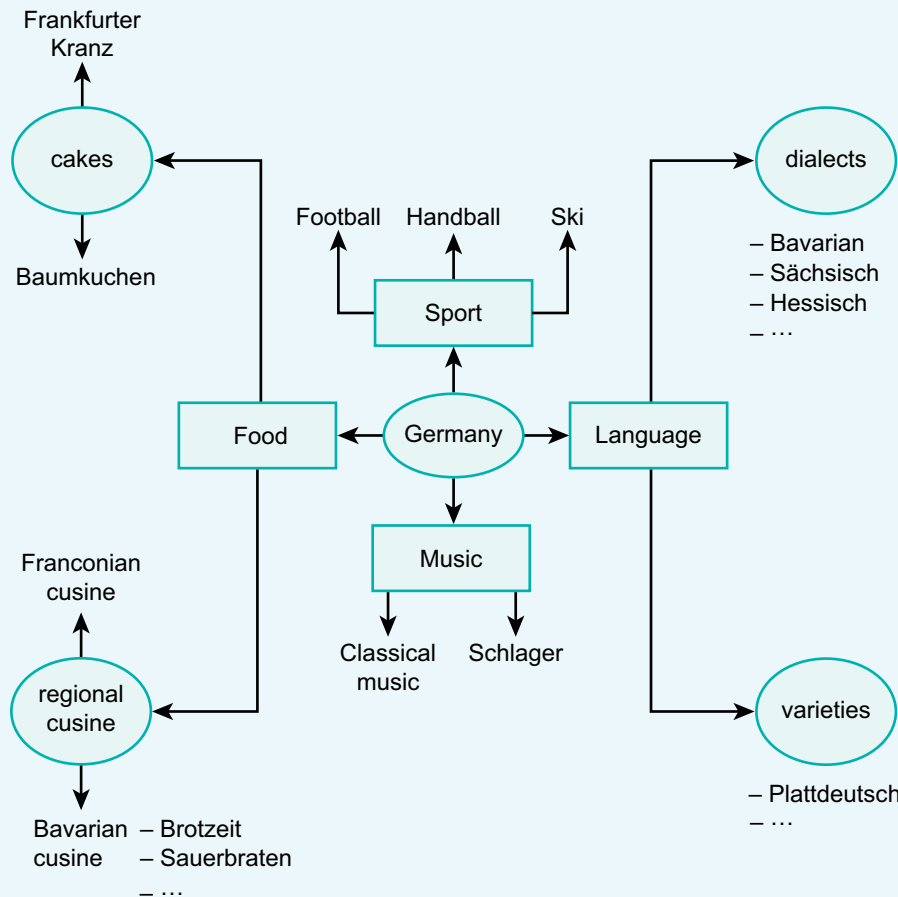
### Part 1

 *20 minutes*

Let's unpack the incredibly broad term that is culture. Imagine someone asked you what your culture was. What would you answer? What is your culture made of? Does it include your nationality, a language, a sport? Draw a mind map like the one below on a piece of paper with examples of your culture, and once you have done so, try to summarise your understanding of the term 'culture' in two sentences, in the box below. You can click 'reveal answer' for an example of a completed mind map if you need any inspiration. Your answer should, and will look different – there are no right or wrong answers here.



**Answer**



How would you summarise the term 'culture' based on your mind map?

*Provide your answer...*

**Part 2**

15 minutes

Now, read suggestions by academic scholars on how to define the term 'culture'. The following two quotes are from academics who study the impact of culture on the workplace. Each quote is followed by a little more information on these authors.

'Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes members of one group or category of people from another.'

(Hofstede and Hofstede, 1984 )

Geert Hofstede is one of the most famous scholars in the field of Intercultural Communication. He and his research team conducted a global study with thousands of IBM employees, and developed the 'Cultural Dimensions Model',

which identified systematic differences between almost all national cultures in the world.

‘Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member’s behaviour and his/her interpretations of the “meaning” of other people’s behaviour.’

(Spencer-Oatey, 2008 )

Helen Spencer-Oatey is a highly influential scholar in Applied Linguistics and Intercultural Communication. She is based in the United Kingdom and has published books on intercultural politeness, global leadership and intercultural interactions.

---

### Part 3

 15 minutes

Now compare these quotes with your own definitions. Answer the following questions:

What aspects of culture do these quotes highlight that you might have not considered in your definition from Part 1?

Which aspects of the authors’ definitions have you also come up with in your own summary?

*Provide your answer...This aspect of Hofstede’s definition is new:*

*Provide your answer...This aspect of Spencer-Oatey’s definition is new:*

*Provide your answer...These aspects are shared between my definition and their definitions:*

---

### Part 4

 15 minutes

Lastly, there are some fundamental differences in the two definitions you were just shown. These differences represent the two dominant views of what culture is. Finish the sentences below to establish what these differences are.

*Provide your answer...Quote 1 emphasises*

*Provide your answer...Quote 2 acknowledges*

---

Now you have shared your thoughts on the differences, please click 'discussion' to reveal more on the scholars' definitions.

.....

### **Discussion**

Geert Hofstede puts an emphasis on the divisive nature of categories emerging from studying culture. He assumes that there are clear characteristics that all members of a group share, which distinguish them from other groups. It is also assumed that culture determines the way a group member acts, and thereby takes away the agency of the individual. Spencer-Oatey acknowledges the complexity of the notion of culture and treats the boundaries of factors that are shared by a group as fluid. She also places more emphasis on people's behaviour and their view of the world, thereby bestowing an individual with agency.

These two quotes represent two different schools of thought: positivism and constructivism. Hofstede is one of the most famous scholars to apply a positivist worldview and positivist research methods to the study of culture. This approach is highly influential in the fields of Management and Business, but is also controversial, as culture is usually equated with nationality and groups are assumed to be homogeneous. Constructivist approaches assume that culture is both dynamic and stable, multiple and complex, and it is 'constructed' through interactions with others, treating nationality as one of many variations of culture. Do not worry if this distinction does not make much sense to you just yet. By the end of the course this will be much clearer.


## 2 Ingrid Piller on culture

In the following section you will be presented with three examples of concepts of culture that Ingrid Piller describes in her book *Intercultural communication: A critical introduction*. Ingrid Piller is an Australia-based Professor of Applied Linguistics. She has published books on Intercultural Communication and Multilingualism that are widely read by scholars around the world. She is also the editor of the online blog *Language on the move*, which you should definitely check out!

In the examples below, culture is invoked differently depending on the contexts. What this means will be illustrated with examples from the contexts of tourism marketing, international business travel and government communications. You'll be presented with text excerpts for each context, and after reading them you'll try to assign one of the following labels to each example:

- a. culture as a national asset
- b. culture as challenge
- c. culture as citizenship.

### Activity 3

 30 minutes

#### Tourism marketing

Nowadays, each country uses dedicated websites as marketing tools (for example, [visitiran.ir](http://visitiran.ir) or [canana.ca](http://canana.ca)). These websites provide country-related news and are part of the branding of a country geared towards an audience that has an interest in travelling to the country, either for leisure or on business. The following lists are headings that Ingrid Piller found in the 'culture' section of two tourist marketing websites for Ecuador and Russia. Have a look at them and consider the question below.

The 'culture' link on [Ecuador.com](http://Ecuador.com) takes the reader to these subheadings:

- History of Ecuador
- Ecuador flag
- Language in Ecuador
- Translation
- Ecuador music
- Ecuador dress
- Ecuador cuisine
- Art in Ecuador
- Sport in Ecuador
- Events in Ecuador
- Ecuador recipes
- Ecuador money
- Shopping in Ecuador
- Ecuador newspapers
- History of Ecuador [yes, again]
- Ecuador radio
- Ecuador television.

On [Russia.com](http://Russia.com) 'culture' comprises these headings:

- Art galleries
- Russian theatres
- Language
- Newspapers
- Art in Russia
- Russian money
- Russian recipes
- Russian radio
- Russian TV.

---

### International business travel

What understanding of culture is displayed here?

- 1. Culture as a national asset
- 2. Culture as challenge
- 3. Culture as citizenship

.....

### Answer

The headings from Russia.com and Ecuador.com reflect an understanding of 'culture as a national asset'. This understanding is usually linked to 'high culture' – the arts, (often classical or traditional) music, or theatre – but also to 'popular culture': folklore and customs. 'Country facts' like official languages, flags and symbols, national currency and popular media outlets are also included.

---

The excerpt below is an example of how culture is invoked in travel advisories. Piller used for this example [www.internationalsos.com](http://www.internationalsos.com). This includes the provision of 'customised, destination-specific briefings containing important security, medical and cultural information'. Have a read through the example below and try to answer the same question as above:

#### *General Advice*

Conversations with Brazilians, as with other Latin Americans, may take place at a much closer physical distance than travellers are accustomed to in their home countries. Avoid making the sign of thumb and forefinger forming a circle with other fingers pointing up, known as the 'okay' sign in some nations; it has an obscene meaning. If entertained in a home, flowers and a thank you note sent the following day are appropriate. Do not send purple flowers, as this signifies mourning. Brazilians shake hands when greeting and leaving. A souvenir from the visitor's home country is an acceptable gift of appreciation. Casual clothing is acceptable. The Catholic Church is an important part of Brazilian society.

#### *Business*

Both men and women shake hands when meeting and departing. Women will often exchange kisses with one another by placing their cheeks together and kissing the air. The pace of negotiations may be slow; developing a personal relationship is important. The best time to call a Brazilian executive is between 1000–1200 and 1500–1700. Business is usually not discussed during a meal and will only begin after coffee is served. Business dress for women is important and should be conservative. Manicured nails are also considered very important.

### *Tipping*

It is customary to tip 10% for most services. Gas station attendants, barbers, and restaurant servers receive tips regularly. Parking assistants expect around BRL1. Taxi drivers do not expect tips; however, many people typically round up the fare as a tip.

### *Business Hours*

Mon–Fri: 0830–1730.

(Piller, 2017, p. 11–12)

---

What understanding of culture is displayed here?

- 1. Culture as a national asset
- 2. Culture as challenge
- 3. Culture as citizenship

---

### **Answer**

The right answer here is ‘culture as challenge’. Practical ‘country facts’ and advice on interpersonal relationships and non-verbal communication are provided. Standards of physical proximity, gift giving, dress codes or greetings are listed to avoid offending individuals of another nationality.

---

### *State control*

This final example is a news item from 2013 (and did not appear in I. Piller’s book). In the article, journalist Olga Khazan investigates how homophobic sentiments and laws targeting the LGBTQ+ community have gained traction in Russia in recent years. She spoke to several activists and scholars in search of an explanation of how homophobia is being linked to a Russian national identity:

‘To the degree that a given society that is insecure about its political, social, economic, and uniting cultural identity, it will mask that insecurity with a swaggering show of gendered strength,’ said Yvonne Howell, a Russian professor at the University of Richmond.

[...]

‘[M]any Russians today view Church affiliation as a way to reaffirm their “Russianness,” as Masha Lipman, the chair of the Carnegie Moscow Centre’s Society and Regions Program, told me via email. Roughly 80 to 90 percent of Russians identify as Orthodox Christians, but almost none attend services even monthly. Instead, in a 2007 (Russian) poll on the subject, the majority of respondents said religion for them was a “national tradition” and “an adherence to moral and ethical standards,” while only 16 percent said it was about personal salvation.’

The Church’s head, Patriarch Kirill, has been outspoken against ‘social ills’ like alternative sexual orientations.

[...]

‘While there is plenty of homophobia in Russia, I think the Soviet state continued the Tsarist Orthodox state’s direction of being a moral and tutelary state – the continuity of state influence over moral choices never died away. Hence it is relatively easy for the post-Soviet state to return to Soviet-style regulation. And since the Soviet state



and now, even more, the Russian state is built on oppositions of us versus them, it is easy for the authorities to say “we” are x, not y. Homosexuality makes an easy “y,” alas.’

(Khazan, 2013)

What understanding of culture is being discussed in this article?

- 1. Culture as a national asset
- 2. Culture as challenge
- 3. Culture as citizenship

.....

**Answer**

This last example reflects ‘culture as citizenship’. Scholars quoted in this article argue that sexual orientation was strategically linked to national culture to fulfil a political goal. According to them, a hegemonic notion of ‘Russian culture’ is invoked against equal rights of other citizens based on a particular identity, in this case sexual identity (*Hegemony* refers to the domination of one group over another. *Hegemonic notion* or *structures* refer to actions that reinforce power and control of the state or the ruling class.). Minorities everywhere that engage in different practices to the majority are often discriminated against on the basis of culture: in such cases, their ethnicity, religion or dress codes are depicted as conflicting with or rejecting ‘our’ culture.

## 3 Culture as a verb

All of the prior three examples have something in common: their authors understand nationhood as the basic unit for culture. Definite noun phrases such as 'Brazilian culture', 'Chinese culture', 'Ecuadorian culture', 'Ghanaian culture' or 'Russian culture' trigger what Ingrid Piller refers to as a 'presupposition of existence':

A presupposition is a proposition that remains constant under negation. A textbook example in the pragmatics literature is 'The king of France is bald.' Even if you challenge this statement by negating it and turn it into 'The king of France is not bald', the definite noun phrase continues to presuppose the existence of an entity such as 'the king of France'. In the same way, even if you were to negate the content of 'culture' in the various examples I have quoted (for example, 'Chinese culture does not include historical sites, a treasured past, etc. '), the status of 'Chinese etc. culture' as a real entity remains presupposed.'

(Piller, 2011, p. 14)

In the tourist marketing campaigns or travel advice examples you engaged with, individuals of the same nationality were assumed to be a homogeneous group who share the same views and practices. Applying generic rules like 'The Catholic Church is an important part of Brazilian society' and 'Manicured nails are also considered very important' to every one of the 211 million people living in Brazil, regardless of their faith, status, age or background might not actually help visitors, but could mislead them.

One approach towards overcoming such presuppositions that lead us to make rather simplistic assumptions is to understand 'culture' as a verb. A noun refers to a specific object (the book, the statue, the toothbrush), and a verb refers to an action (to talk, to run, to laugh). A noun is definite and static, whereas a verb is dynamic. When applying this idea to culture, then culture becomes something that people do, instead of something that people have. This difference might seem small and maybe even irrelevant now, but this distinction is in fact very consequential for how we conduct and understand intercultural communication.

### Activity 4

 30 minutes

Below are three statements. Which ones see culture as a verb, and which see it as a noun?

1. Culture is not something that exists outside of and precedes intercultural communication. Instead, intercultural communication is one domain where 'culture' as concerned with the specific – and different – ways of life of different national and ethnic groups is constructed.
  - Noun
  - Verb
2. The study of intercultural communication equips us with knowledge about social groups and their shared practices and beliefs, which we can use to predict what behaviours and expectations members of this group find normal.
  - Noun
  - Verb

3. Culture is an ideological construct called into play by social actors to produce and reproduce social categories and boundaries, and it must be the central research aim of a critical approach to intercultural communication to understand the reasons, forms and consequences of calling cultural difference into play.

- Noun
- Verb

.....  
**Answer**

Culture is often imagined to be a noun because it is so much easier. It reduces complexity and allows us to predict how people behave. It is also widely assumed that nationality is the one key characteristic which determines cultural values of others. As mentioned above, this is usually misleading and emphasizes differences over similarities. People become caricatures without any agency.

Thinking of culture as a verb is a useful strategy, because it shows that equating nationality with culture will not help with developing intercultural competence. The assumption that one's nationality is the root of their views and behaviour does not offer any answers to the challenges that minorities in diverse societies face, and brushes over factors like regional differences, social class, multilingualism, mobility or personal experiences and choices, just to name a few. The hope is that this course will allow you to start seeing culture as something that people do, and not as something that is simply ascribed to them.

The second half of this week will give you a little break from the idea of culture. The following seven activities focus on different facets of communication. As a final step in this week you'll read a text that combines the two concepts – culture and communication – and you'll have your first opportunity to answer the question: What is intercultural communication all about?


## 4 Properties of communication

'Culture is communication and communication is culture'

(Hall, 1959)

The study of intercultural communication is not about theorising about how culture affects an individual's or a group's mindset – rather, it involves the critical evaluation of how people's behaviour is affected by dominant norms and values in their environment. The way you behave communicates meaning to others, whether you intend it to or not, and the following activities are meant to draw your attention to the processes and the many different styles of human communication.

### Activity 5

 20 minutes

In this activity, you can see nine different attempts by scholars to define communication. None of these definitions are complete: they all address a different aspect of human communication. Below you can also find nine different properties of communication, and nine different quotes by scholars. You can find all of them in Jane Jackson's *Introducing language and intercultural communication* (2014, p. 74–75). Read through all of the definitions and drag and drop the appropriate name for communication properties next to the definitions.

Process

Dynamic

Interactive/transactive

Symbolic

Intentional and unintentional

Situated and contextual

Pervasive

Power-infused

Cultural

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Communication is 'a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed' (Carey, 1989).

'Communication is the process by which we understand others and in turn endeavour to be understood by them. It is constantly changing and shifting in response to the total situation' (Anderson, 1959).

Communication is 'the process by which individuals try to exchange ideas, feelings, symbols, meanings to create commonality' (Schmidt et al., 2007).

The words we speak or the gestures we make have no inherent meaning. Rather, they gain their significance from an agreed-upon meaning. When we use symbols to communicate, we assume that the other person shares our symbol system . . . these symbolic meanings are conveyed both verbally and nonverbally' (Martin and Nakayama, 2010).

'Unintentional messages are not purposeful but may be transmitted by action as well as by words' (Tubbs, 2009).

'Communication is dependent on the context in which it occurs' (Neuliep, 2012).

'If two humans come together it is virtually inevitable that they will communicate something to each other . . . even if they do not speak, messages will pass between them. By their looks, expressions and body movement each will tell the other something, even if it is only, "I don't wish to know you: keep your distance"; "I assure you the feeling is mutual. I'll keep clear if you do"' (Argyle and Trower, 1979).

'Communication is the mechanism by which power is exerted' (Schacter, 1951).

'Every cultural practice is a communicative event' (Kress, 1988).

## 5 Communication is a process

As you'll be analysing communication strategies throughout the course, it is worth taking a closer look at some of the proposed properties of communication outlined previously. The next activities will unpack properties that are quite complex and ambiguous. Most of the activities will be based on interactions that you'll be very familiar with, as you are faced with them on a daily basis. The aim of these little exercises is for you to become more consciously aware of the aspects of communication that you can influence to minimise misunderstandings.

Consider the following two assumptions:


- a. An interaction has a beginning and an end. Communication as a process does not.

A conversation might start when people greet each other, but it relies on a foundation that is built over time, based on previous interactions with that individual. Interlocutors refer back to topics they have spoken about before or continue previous discussions. When you meet somebody for the first time, communication might have started prior to this point. You might have heard about them from others, or the context in which you meet them might tell you something about them before an interaction starts.

- b. Communication is irreversible.

Remembering what other speakers have said in the past also bears a risk, as we cannot take back what has been said. We can apologise for it, but it might have a lasting negative impact on the relationship that we are trying to build.

### Activity 6

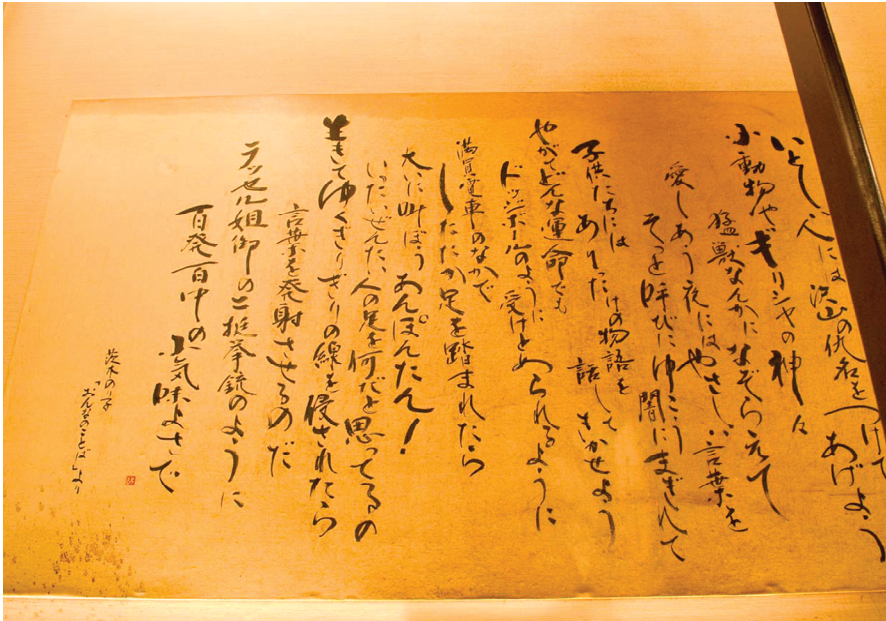
 10 minutes

These two assumptions highlight how people build relationships with others. Take a few minutes to reflect on a professional relationship that you have: Has there been an interaction in the past that has shaped how you communicate going forward? Have certain statements (written or verbal) made a lasting impression and changed the way in which you communicate?

*Provide your answer...*

## 6 Communication is symbolic

Communication is symbolic in many ways. Written language is made up of letters, and non-verbal communication often relies on the use of gestures that carry symbolic meaning. The English alphabet, for example, consists of a set of arbitrary symbols – its 26 letters – that represent sounds. Not all languages have alphabets that help learners understand how to pronounce single letters and words, however. Japanese, for instance, has three different alphabets: letters only represent sounds in two of them, and in a third, which is based on the Chinese alphabet (*kanji*), single symbols represent ideas.



When learning how to speak and write, people learn how these sounds and symbols can be combined in a meaningful way to communicate our ideas and emotions. As you read in the excerpt from the book *Sapiens* at the beginning of this week, this ability is what sets us apart from other species.

Our use of symbols to communicate is not restricted to words. Hand gestures and facial expressions are also important ways through which meaning can be conveyed. But, as can happen between different languages, the same non-verbal symbols can mean different things in different cultures.

### Activity 7

 15 minutes

Take a look at the following examples and consider how their meaning differs even though their presentation is the same. Can you match the meaning with the right country? Keep in mind, quite a few of these gestures are actually ambiguous in each country too. This means that a single gesture can have different meanings in different regions, or that a single gesture can have multiple different meanings in the same region. When this is the case, the meaning of a gesture depends on its context. Think for example of the facial expression 'raising an eyebrow'. Depending on what has been said, this expression can mean that something is surprising, or that the person raising their eyebrows does not approve of something that has been

said or done, amongst other meanings. As you'll see in the activity after this one, context is crucial for interpreting meanings.

Now try to guess where a gesture has which meaning:

---

### *Horns*



USA

Portugal

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Rock on

Your spouse is unfaithful

---

### *Thumbs up*





Britain

Iraq

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Approval

Insult

---

Link the following body gesture to its various meanings

*Wink*



North America

France

Nigeria

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Romantic invitation

Being complicit

Parents signing to children to leave the room

---

Now consider the movement of nodding one's head.

No

Yes

Match each of the items above to an item below.

In Sicily it means . . .

In the rest of Italy it means . . .

.....  
**Answer**


This exercise shows just how arbitrary our use of symbols is. What may be a gesture of friendship in one community may mean the opposite in another, so it is important to make yourself aware of at least some of these gestures when collaborating interculturally. It is also important to remember that these meanings are never absolute. Take the 'wink' for example. Within the same culture, winking can have romantic connotations, depending on who you are winking at. It might also show that something was joke or might signal complicity within a group of people. The interpretation of different gestures depends on the context in which they are being used. This contextual property of communication will be the focus of the next task.

## 7 Communication is situated and contextual

Do you know the idiom 'heard it through the grapevine'? Nowadays this can refer to a rumour, but it has its roots in a particular practice.



### Activity 8

 20 minutes

#### Part 1

Read the following two stories and consider which one is a more plausible back story for this now commonly used saying.

##### Option 1

Early telegraph wires looked similar to grapevines, which lead to people using the phrase when a message came via a telegraph. During the American Civil War commanders communicated with each other through this medium, and enemies listened in to intercept battleground reports and also sent false reports. Receivers of messages during the conflicts could not tell which report was true, which resulted in this saying.

##### Option 2

Helpers on vineyards were usually locals, and while harvesting the grapes with fellow townspeople, the latest rumours were exchanged. When these helpers passed on these stories to people who did not work in the vineyards, they'd mysteriously claim that their source of information was 'the grapevine'.

Where does the idiom 'heard it through the grapevine' come from? Please select:

- Option 1
- Option 2

---

## Discussion

As can be deduced from this example of an English idiom, our language use reflects our environment. Language is ever-changing, and the words or phrases people create, as well as the way people talk about certain topics, displays shared practices and values and norms they hold.

---

## Part 2

One common example of the situatedness of language use is the linguistic choices people make when making a request. Depending on the context, which includes the relationship with other speakers, people will phrase a request differently to accommodate the often unspoken rules of formality and politeness.

In this Activity, you'll read three variations of the same request. Then match the nuances to different contexts. The examples below would be typical phrases used in countries with English as an official language.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



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## Answer

The same meaning [the request for salt] is mitigated in different ways to accommodate the relationship dynamic at hand. These rules are by no means fixed – you might even disagree and say that at your family dinner this request would be phrased differently. This is one of the main difficulties in intercultural communication. In an unfamiliar setting, it can be tricky to navigate what behaviour is found appropriate because the rules are not fixed. It is important to find the right degree of politeness to avoid offending someone.


The importance of situated language use becomes very apparent when examining talk in the workplace. The jargon used for tasks that are highly specific would not make sense to individuals outside of a trained group of professionals. Language use at work also reflects how interlocutors understand their professional role in relation to others.

## 8 Communication is power infused

While power imbalances are not always obvious, they are present on a micro level (interpersonal interactions) and on a macro level (for example the official languages of a nation). For intercultural communication, the choice of language in an interaction is one of the most obvious factors that can reflect power imbalances. The use of English as a *lingua franca*\* gives an advantage to native speakers of English and to those who have access to English classes or learning resources that enable them to become proficient speakers. Not being fluent in the shared language used in an interaction makes it more difficult to communicate one's stance and also makes it harder to understand the interlocutor's ('interlocutor' is the technical term for someone who takes part in a conversation) stance.

\* A *lingua franca* is a 'bridge language', or a 'vehicle language'. It connects people who do not speak each other's native tongue. English as a world language often functions as a *lingua franca*: If managers from China (first language Mandarin) and Brazil (first language Brazilian Portuguese) speak English with each other, then English becomes the *lingua franca*. If one of the managers from Brazil spoke Mandarin with managers from China, because he learned it in school, then Mandarin is not the *lingua franca* as it is the native tongue of one of the speakers.

### Activity 9

 20 minutes

Power imbalances in interactions are often more obvious in professional contexts. Professional hierarchies are enacted and enforced through language use, as well as through non-verbal communication. It is noticeable when an individual fails to adhere to these unspoken rules and norms.

In this next activity, you'll study two scenarios for the same setting. One will focus on non-verbal communication, and one on verbal communication. See if you can recognise what the social hierarchy at hand might be, even though you know nothing about the backgrounds of the individuals in these examples.

#### *Scenario 1: Non-verbal communication*

The health sector is a professional context that everyone has first-hand experience with. People might not have medical knowledge or be employed at a doctor's surgery or hospital, but the vast majority of people will spend time in these environments as a patient at least once in their life.

Imagine you are at a hospital ward and experience the scene below. You have an urgent question that you would like to ask a more senior doctor.



How do you identify them? Write your thoughts in the box below. Think about both non-verbal and verbal cues.

*Provide your answer...*

Now you have shared your thoughts, please click 'answer' to check your answer.

**Answer**

There are several factors that people might associate with senior staff. There are expectations around their clothing: depending on where you are in the world, the colour or style of a uniform reveals an individual's profession and status within it. Studies show that uniforms have a great effect on individuals, as people tend to accept a diagnosis more readily or have less resistance to following instructions from someone in a uniform. You might also look for someone who is older, as you might think that this indicates more years of professional experience. People holding health professions are often stereotyped: many people expect women to be nurses, and men to be doctors. This can lead to people seeking to speak to a male member of staff instead of a female, even though gender does not reflect one's professional status anymore. You might also look for behaviours: a senior doctor might be the one giving instructions to colleagues or explaining something to doctors with less experience. They will also be the ones that are not interrupted or disagreed with when making a suggestion.

**Scenario 2: Verbal communication**

Now, let's imagine you are still in the hospital. You are visiting someone whose bed is by the window, and your back is facing the rest of the room. Two doctors enter the room, and you overhear the exchange in the transcript below.

Who is the more senior doctor – Stuart or Susan? Which part of the transcript gives it away? Write your thoughts in the box below.

- 1 Stuart Okay so what's the discolouration of his skin then?
- 2 Susan Don't know of any other causes that makes the skin look yellow that aren't
- 3 jaundice
- 4 Stuart Well do you think it's yellow?
- 5 Susan YES I DO, I think IT's YELLOW
- 6 Stuart alright okay alright alright okay it's yellow (sharp intake of breath)
- 7 Susan What colour do you think it is?
- 8 Stuart he he he he
- 9 Susan Orange? Blue?
- 10 Stuart Well he he he he he he he okay I'll tell you what, all might be revealed
- 11 Susan right

(adapted from Rees and Monrouxe, 2010)

*Provide your answer...*

Now you have shared your thoughts, please click 'answer' to check your answer.

### Answer

At first glance, the question in line 1 could seem like a genuine information-seeking question, which would mean that Susan is either Stuart's equal or has more expertise. However, it becomes clear at several points in the conversation that this is not the case. Firstly, in line 4, Susan gets defensive, showing that she understood the question to have the purpose of doubting her knowledge. Instead of defusing the situation, Stuart starts a joke at the expense of Susan that is continued until line 6. Susan's reaction in line 11 shows that she is in fact waiting for the right response to the question by Stuart, entertaining or tolerating the joke at their expense.

These behaviours point to a professional relationship between a student and a teacher. Stuart's more powerful position is enacted through questions that test the knowledge of the other doctor, and the joke Stuart makes at their expense.

If you think about your own workplace, this might seem familiar. Employees would not normally playfully ask their employer questions to test their knowledge, and such jokes might be more expected between co-workers of an equal rank who know each other very well.

Intercultural communication pays attention to how such power imbalances are enacted across cultures. Hierarchies might technically be the same in medical, classroom or business settings across the globe, but the behaviour through which such organisational structures are achieved can differ.



## 9 Communication styles


During their primary socialisation, people learn what verbal and non-verbal communication is common and acceptable in their communities. People might not always follow such norms, but they nevertheless understand the behaviour expected from them when they socialise with acquaintances, colleagues or family members in their community.

The choices that speakers have regarding how they phrase a complaint, or a request, are referred to as communication styles. Our communication styles do not just depend on our upbringing: they are also personal choices that are context-specific while also being informed by learned norms. Communication styles contain a wide range of verbal and non-verbal linguistic elements, and the choices speakers make regarding them carry meaning. Said choices are made based on the speaker's audience, as well as on their own preferences. Communication styles affect, for example, how you organise and present information. Imagine for instance that you would like to go and see a movie with a friend. Would you 'sell' the movie and going to the cinema differently to a friend who watches movies and shows as a hobby in their free time from the way you would to someone who is very selective about what films they see?

In the same vein, compare for a minute how you might try to convince someone to read or watch something with how another person close to you does this. Are there differences in your styles of how you present something that you are a fan of?

For another example, think back to Activity 8. You were asked to match requests for salt with the appropriate context. Different degrees of politeness and directness are context-specific, and as children we usually learn who we need to be especially polite towards and why. Politeness and directness are however also a personal choice. You might have colleagues at work who you find overly formal, just the right amount of polite, or even rude. This is also due to your own personal preferences, and theirs.

### Activity 10

 20 minutes

In this Activity you will read two transcripts of encounters between Participants A and B. Your task is to firstly identify the social action that is being performed, and secondly to think about whether you would use the communication style by Participant A, and in what context. You can then check the background to the transcript in the comment.

Here is one example:

Participant A: I honestly didn't mean to –

Participant B: You lied.

Participant A: I didn't. Sorry you feel that way.

Social action: Apology

Personal preference and assessment: Participant A's apology seems a dishonest apology, as Participant A apologises for how their actions were perceived, and not for the action itself. I do not like non-apologies, so I usually avoid them. I could imagine using it for strangers when I do not actually feel like I have done something wrong.

Background: This is an excerpt of a service encounter. Participant A is a waiter, and Participant B returned a dish they feel they were misled about.

**Encounter 1:**

Participant B: Somebody needed to tell him.

(2 seconds silence)

Participant B: Don't you think?

Participant A: Mm, I don't know. Maybe it should have stayed between them.

Social action:

*Provide your answer...*

Personal preference and assessment:

*Provide your answer...*

---

### Discussion

Background: The social action depicted in this transcript is a disagreement. A disagreement is a risky undertaking, as it can potentially irritate, hurt or embarrass the other person. There are several degrees of directness that can be used to defuse or escalate such a situation. Participant A is not openly criticizing Participant B here, but instead suggests that a different approach might have been right. Depending on where you are in the world, such a response can be taken as harsh, or as indirect and polite.

The silence in this transcript is, however, somewhat more universal: Research shows that the initial brief silence communicates to Participant B that a 'dispreferred' response will be given. This means that people can discern from a pause that only lasts one millisecond that the interlocutor will say something they might not want to hear. Participant B's follow-up question shows as well that they have noticed that something was not right. In spoken interactions, agreements and other preferred responses are given fairly quickly. Interlocutors might not immediately respond verbally, but facial expressions or body movements usually give an almost immediate positive response. People only hesitate when the easiest option – a preferred response – cannot be given.

---

### Encounter 2:

Participant A: It was really quite easy.

Participant B: No, this is outstanding!

Participant A: I'm glad you like it.

Participant B: Thank you so much for taking the time to do it, she'll be delighted! You are amazing!

Participant A: Ah, don't be daft.

Social action:

*Provide your answer...*

Personal preference and assessment:

*Provide your answer...*

.....  
**Discussion**

This is an interaction where Participant B praises or compliments Participant A for a costume they made for Participant B's daughter. The social action is 'receiving praise', and Participant A seems to be uncomfortable and downplays what they are being complimented for. Receiving praise can elicit a sense of embarrassment for some, or a feeling of being desired and celebrated by others. This is often linked to one's self-confidence or sense of self-worth and is therefore a very personal matter. Across cultures there can also be different norms around the speech act of giving and receiving compliments. This often revolves around what relationship two individuals should have so that it is perceived as appropriate to pay compliments, and how 'easily' they are given.

## 10 This week's quiz

Check what you've learned this week by taking the end-of-week quiz.

[Week 1 quiz](#)

Open the quiz in a new window or tab (by holding ctrl [or cmd on a Mac] when you click the link), then return here when you have done it.

## Summary of Week 1

This first week introduced you to different ways in which we can understand the term 'culture', as well as different nuances to the term 'communication': Throughout the [open university short course](#) you would build on this and continue to critically evaluate notions of culture that rely on a presupposition of existence, and you would study how you can apply the approach of 'culture as verb' to interactions at work.

So how does culture in fact influence how you talk and think? Culture encompasses our beliefs, values and attitudes. These influence what we pay attention to, how we interpret the world around us, and how we behave. If a society values harmony highly for example, then an individual who is a member of that society might prefer an indirect communication style in order to ensure that others are not feeling offended or humiliated. Culture also has an impact on how we expect speech acts like apologies or complaints to be designed and structured.

We all tend to assume that the way we do things is the norm, and that is why a 'life in the global village' requires reflection on your own behaviour and perspective, as well as curiosity and open-mindedness for those who do or see things differently from you. The two units of this taster course focus on interpersonal communication.

Intercultural competence goes beyond deep cultural knowledge – it also encompasses attitudes like open-mindedness, respect and curiosity, as well as skills like sociolinguistic and cultural self-awareness. Cultural self-awareness is important - you cannot try to see the world through someone else's eyes if you don't know where your own views and values stem from. Next week you'll do activities which let you discover what makes up your own identity, and then you'll explore identity types that elicit a sense of belonging (and 'othering'!), like national identity.

To shift our level of awareness from the ethnocentric to the geocentric, we must challenge ourselves to leave our comfort zone. Whatever narrow identity we were born into, it is time to step out of it and into the larger world. We can still cherish our own heritage, lineage, and culture, but we must liberate ourselves from the illusion that they are separate from everyone else's.

(Gerzon, 2010)

Now go to [Week 2](#).



# Week 2: Culture and identity

## Introduction

Culture, language and identity are closely intertwined, and this connection is especially relevant in intercultural communication. To begin, you'll explore approaches to 'identity' which will become relevant again throughout this course. In the first activities you're encouraged to reflect on your own identity, while finding out about the key identity types used in intercultural communication. Secondly, you'll focus on national identity, as this is a type of identity that is often equated closely with culture. You'll develop an understanding of how national identity is constructed and find out why the 'culture as nation' perspective can be tricky. Lastly, you'll learn about the concepts of 'othering' and 'belonging'. Othering often operates based on the aforementioned notion of culture as nation, and also enables discrimination based on other facets of culture and identity.

The concept of 'identity' is a relatively new, modern-day concept. Although nowadays we might use the term daily because the idea has manifested itself in the popular realm, a few hundred years ago the concept was widely unknown and a few philosophers theorised about the existence of identity. From a western perspective, the beginnings of assumptions that individuals have an identity lie in the Enlightenment movement and its push towards secularisation (the separation between state and religion) through human reason. Since then, significant thinkers such as Locke have changed our ideas of what an identity is and how it is shaped, and today disciplines like psychology and sociology still do not agree on the properties of an individual's identity.

The disciplines of psychology and sociology are home to two dominant perspectives on identity that are relevant for this course. In the discipline of psychology, researchers focus on the individual and understand identity to be a result of one's mental traits and dispositions. For psychologists, identity is 'the property of persons' (Côté, 2006); culture is about groupness (the feeling of being part of a group), and identity is, too. Sociologists on the other hand understand identity as relational, making it a 'property of interactions' (Côté, 2006).

This means that our sense of self is shaped by our interactions with others and that our language use also shows how we position ourselves in relation to others.

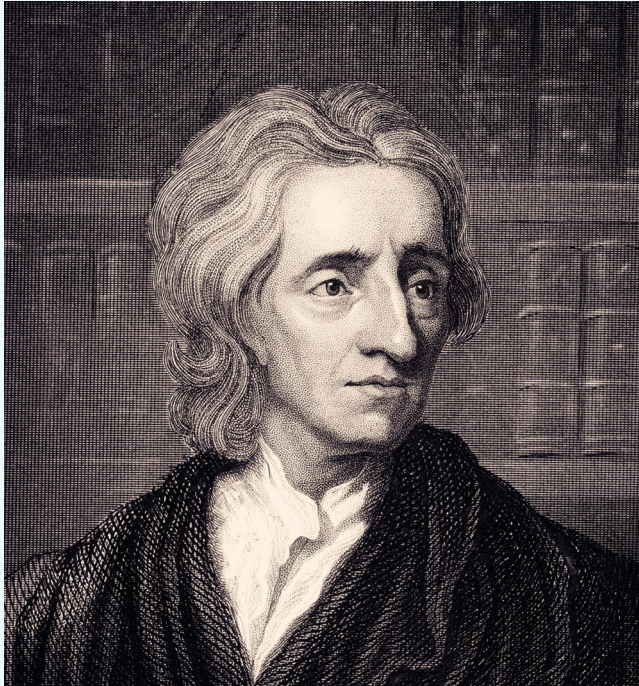
## Enlightenment



The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement in Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was driven by the idea that every human possessed the power of **reason** which enabled them to analyse their environment and to create conditions for their own happiness. The Enlightenment's notion of reason and humanity had a strong impact on politics, philosophy, science, art and religion. It for instance critiqued predominant forms of government, like the monarchy, and favoured democracy. People were also increasingly seen as individuals with their own agency, instead of simply being guided by divine destiny.



## John Locke (1632 – 1704)



John Locke was one of the first thinkers who was concerned with what constituted personal identity. He argued that people were born with an empty mind ('tabula rasa'), and that one's views and identity were formed through human consciousness and experiences. This stood in contrast to the then dominant Christian notion in which everyone was born sinful, and that one's soul was one's personal identity. He wrote down this perspective in the influential work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

### Activity 1

 10 minutes

Before moving on to the role of identity in intercultural communication, check whether the aforementioned explanations made sense to you. Below are two statements, one matches the approach that identity is a property of interactions, and the other that identity is a property of persons. Drag and drop the example next to the idea of identity.

Identity as a property of interaction

Identity as a property of persons

Match each of the items above to an item below.

'The fact that he praises even the most obvious lemons on display shows that he is a salesman first and foremost.'

'Car salesmen are mostly male, as men are more naturally interested in cars.'

---

### **Discussion**


There is a subtle difference: When one's identity stems from interactions with others, the professional identity of a car salesman emerges through the person's behaviour, and if it is understood to be the property of a person, then the interaction does not shape it, but simply shows what kind of identity the car salesman had all along.

# 1 What is your identity?

The distinction between the approaches from psychology and sociology stems from a difference in the interpretation of how social reality is constituted: is identity fixed and exists independently of human consciousness ('objectivism')? Or is identity a public phenomenon, a performance and practice that is observed and made sense of by others and ourselves ('subjectivism')?

The materials forming this course contain studies and insights from both subjectivist and objectivist perspectives. We aim to demonstrate what the different implications of each perspective are for intercultural encounters, and how these two schools of thought can prepare and enlighten you.

## Activity 2

 15 minutes

Make a list of five to seven factors that you feel define your identity (e.g. age, nationality). Then, try to rank them according to how important a role you think they play in making you who you are. Briefly explain why you think the higher-ranking factors play a more important role in forming your identity than others. This list will be used again later on in this week.

Your list:

1.

*Provide your answer...*

2.

*Provide your answer...*

3.

*Provide your answer...*

4.

*Provide your answer...*

5.

*Provide your answer...*

6.

*Provide your answer...*

---

7.

*Provide your answer...*

---

Your explanation:

*Provide your answer...*

---

.....

### **Discussion**


This list is probably unique, as all of us have our own, individual identity which is shaped by different factors. Some of us might find our ethnicity highly defining, while others may not see their ethnicity as a big part of their identity. The significance of single factors in forming our identities can change over time – our idea of who we are is not fixed. A typical example is the traditional progression from being young and single with the identity of an independent bachelor or bachelorette, to becoming part of a partnership or marriage. Expectations around what the role of a husband or wife entails are not universal either, with clear differences across religions, generations and cultures, and they also change overtime, for instance, when the role of being a parent is added. Our professional identities, as another example, only start to develop once we start our job and are shaped by our impressions of others who share our profession.

## 2 Socialisation processes and identity types

How do we know what our own culture is, and what our identity is? We learn answers to these questions by observing, interacting with and imitating others around us in our daily lives. The process through which we learn about our own culture through observation, interaction and imitation is called **enculturation**. It starts with how our family and social circle raise us and is a process which is never really finished. We learn how to be a member of society (to be 'socialised') by adopting beliefs, customs, norms and worldviews and by starting to act according to them. Even if we do not agree with dominant norms and customs, we orientate ourselves by them even when resisting them.

Our sense of self is arguably also socially constructed as it is only through interactions that we learn how others see us. Through feedback from others, we develop an understanding of how we would like to be seen ('avowed identity') and how people actually see us ('ascribed identity'). Regardless of the context we are in, we usually make an effort to present ourselves in a particular light through both verbal and non-verbal communication. Some researchers even claim that we always put on a performance of 'who we are'. If an individual however rejects our avowed identity, this can have a negative impact on relationships. One example of this would be the unease we might feel when we greet a stranger for the first time, especially in a professional context where there are a number of uncertainties involved: What degree of formality is appropriate? What title should we use? What small talk is expected? These questions arise mostly because we want to avoid ascribing the wrong professional identity to someone else. We do not want to undermine the authority of our colleague, and we also do not want to project that our professional identity is either inferior or superior to theirs.

### Activity 3

 20 minutes

Reflect on your childhood and try to identify two childhood memories of events that made you who you are today, or which shaped or influenced your identity in a meaningful way. If you aren't sure where to begin, you can watch the video of a TedTalk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, The danger of a single story, for some inspiration (a transcript is available when you follow the link to the website).

Video content is not available in this format.



Then, try to answer the following two questions:

- What was the impact of these childhood memories?
- Why did these particular memories have such an impact?

You can write your memories and reflections down either in your own notebook or in the box below, which is only visible to yourself.

#### Memory 1:


*Provide your answer...*

### Memory 2:

Provide your answer...

You might find that it is not often the case that you can pinpoint a single incident that changed you, or who you want to be. This process can be slow or only become clear in retrospective. In the field of intercultural communication, everyone's identity is seen as dynamic and complex. What people believe in and who they want to be can be contradictory and can be temporary and evolve over time. Depending on our age, the people we meet and our context, different facets of our identity can matter more or less – in fact, often we only realise how strongly we feel about an identity when it is contested by others.

### Activity 4

 10 minutes

To test this, briefly revisit [Section 1](#) and think about situations in which any of these identities you have listed could become salient and also ones where they do not matter at all.

Let's say for example that you are a surgeon for a living. Your professional identity as a surgeon is highly relevant if you are providing consultation at a hospital on whether a surgical procedure would be beneficial or safe for a patient. It can also be salient outside of work, for example when you are at home with your children, your partner or another person you live with and one of them is feeling unwell. Your medical expertise will give your suggestions and assumptions more authority. This part of your identity might however not matter at all when you attend a gym class or play a sport with your friends. In such situations, your identity as a hobby athlete or as a health-conscious adult is at the forefront.

With this in mind, fill in the table below using three of the identity types you listed in Section 1.

Identity type	A situation where it is salient	A situation where it is not salient
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...




## 3 Identity types

As you can see from completing the activities in Section 2, you have multiple identities that matter to you depending on the context and which develop because of the way you were raised or because of people you have met.

In the next activity, you'll take a closer look at a number of dominant identity types that can become relevant in the workplace. These types are powerful because the identification with a community can generate a strong emotional response: this can take the shape of a shared sense of pride and achievement, or a shared set of obstacles that have to be overcome to achieve equality with the majority or dominant group. Intercultural communication aims to build bridges between people who identify with different communities, and there might be more of these community types than you might think.

### Activity 5

 20 minutes

Before starting the activity, let's identify some crucial identity types. To start, our 'personal' identity refers to the summary of qualities and characteristics that distinguish us from others, whereas our 'social' identity represents affiliations with groups and roles and their emotional significance.

'Class' identity matters in some societies more than in others. This kind of identity is an identification with other people who share our own socioeconomic status.

'Physical' identity is something we might not consider in case we think our physical characteristics are simply 'normal'. We might however identify with people who share experiences with us based on physical factors that are not as common in our group. This can refer to appearances, like having a beard, or physical disability. You might be able to think of some examples yourself!

Now see if you can match explanations for a few other, equally important, identity types by yourself. Have a look at the terms and definitions below, drag and drop the definitions to the correct terms.

... is identification with and perceived acceptance into a larger group with whom we share values, beliefs, and traditions.

... are based on either physical characteristics and/or cultural beliefs and practices.

... refers to the sense of 'feeling at home' with more than one group and can be the result of additive bilingualism.

... is an enactment of the identification with or resistance to societal expectations of an individual based on their sex.

... refers to a sense of belonging to a political or geographical unit or location, and a sense of shared ideas about 'ways of being' with individuals who were born and/or raised within the same borders.

... refers to a perceived groupness of people with similar cognitive abilities or mental disorders with shared life experiences as a result.



Match each of the items above to an item below.

Cultural identity

Racial and ethnic identity

Multicultural and multilingual identity

Gender identity

National and regional identity

Mental identity

Another important type of identity is professional identity. To begin with, there is a difference between organisational and professional identity. Can you guess what it is? Drag and drop the definitions to the correct type of identity.

A felt connectedness with individuals anywhere who have the same job as we do.

An identification with a professional, social or cultural organisation.

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Professional identity refers to ...

Organisational identity refers to...

### Discussion

Organisational identity does not necessarily refer only to the workplace. It can also refer to religious organisations or to an educational facility. You might still refer to groups of people in teams, clubs or institutions you have been part of as 'us' and feel a sense of loyalty and pride even after you have moved on.

When this happens in the workplace, organisational identity is often closely linked to organisational or corporate culture. Organisational culture concerns what behaviour is expected or deemed appropriate within an organisation, what values are emphasised and what hierarchy is enacted, as well as the degree of formality and the use of specialist language or jargon. Many textbooks in management studies claim that organisational culture often shares characteristics with the national culture of where a business was founded.

Looking back at how many identity types there are, which of these identities do you think have an impact on our language use?

- Multilingual, class and gender identity
- Multilingual, regional class identity
- Cultural, ethnic and gender identity

- All of the above

### Discussion


The correct answer is: all of the above

Now that you have received an overview of how identities emerge and what communities people might identify with based on shared experiences and views, you will zoom in on one identity type that seems to be the most prominent sometimes: national identity. Especially when abroad, people tend to give a lot of weight to this aspect of others and themselves. This is also the case when we work in international teams: University courses that prepare management students for such scenarios, almost exclusively focus on national identity and national culture. In the next step you will therefore explore what national identity consists of, where it comes from, and how disputed it is.

## 4 Introducing national identity

National identity can seem quite clear-cut on the surface: We associate a particular flag, an anthem, an official language, a capital, important historical events, food and music with it. Such official agreements on national symbols usually lead to the assumption that national cultures are homogenous. You will explore whether this assumption holds in the next few activities with examples from the UK and Singapore.

### Activity 6

 50 minutes

Read the quote below on national identity and try to fill in the blank:

Having a national identity is like having an \_\_\_\_\_. You know you've got it somewhere, but you are not sure where it is. And if you're honest, you would have to admit you're pretty vague about what the small print says.

(McIlvaney, Herald, 6 March 1999, cited in Bechhofer and McCrone 2009)

What word are we looking for?

*Provide your answer...*

---


### Discussion

The right answer is 'old insurance policy'! Did you guess it – or something similar? This quote is a metaphor for the difficulty in defining one's own national identity and it describes how 'nationalism is simultaneously obvious and obscure' (Billig, 1995).

## 5 British, English, Scottish?

Watch this video, [What does being British mean to Britain?](#) about the British national census in 2011 and national identity. Following this, answer the questions below.

### Activity 7

 20 minutes

1. What characteristics seem to have an impact on whether participants see themselves as English only or British only? Share your answer to this question in the discussion below.

*Provide your answer...*

#### Discussion

Ethnicity, age, class, heritage

2. According to how it is portrayed in this short clip, what do you think is the difference between Englishness and Britishness?

*Provide your answer...*

#### Discussion

According to the video, 'British' seems to be a less restrictive, more inclusive label. More people seem to feel accepted here. This video was made in 2013 and if you live in Britain, you might have felt that labels like Welsh, English, Scottish and British have undergone more changes in light of Brexit (see also [Wincott, 2018](#) and [Pattie and Johnston, 2017](#), for example).

You might have noticed that the interviewees struggled a bit with explaining exactly why a certain label applied to them. Why do you think is that? Note down your thoughts in the box below.

*Provide your answer...*


#### Discussion

Identifying with a culture is usually not a conscious decision. Emotions like the feelings of belonging and acceptance build up over time and are sometimes difficult to link to tangible moments or events.

## 6 Good and bad English in Singapore

In 2020, a survey on Singaporean national identity was conducted, with valid responses from 1000 Singaporean adults. This survey is a bit different from the spontaneous, open questions that BBC journalists in the video clip asked people across the UK, as the Singaporean survey contained only multiple-choice questions, limiting the breadth of answers. Have a look at the website [Singaporeans on National Values and Identity | Ipsos](#), which sums up the responses on national values, characteristics and identity, and answer the following questions.

### Activity 8

 40 minutes

Countries usually define their nationality either on the grounds of ethnic nationalism or civic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism links an individual's nationality to their ancestry as well as to shared cultural practices, making nationality hereditary. Civic nationalism, on the other hand, requires its members only to adhere to the laws, to respect the constitution and freely elected institutions.

Judging from the answers that Singaporeans gave in the survey, what nationalism seems to be promoted in Singapore?

- Civic Nationalism
- Ethnic Nationalism

At the bottom of the survey, you can see how different age groups valued aspects of national identity differently. Which three factors vary the most across generations? Select the right ones!

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### Discussion

Generational differences in attitudes towards national identity or values tend to reflect different lived realities. For example, significant improvements in public transportation might be valued by those who have witnessed their development but are taken for granted by those who grew up with a functioning system. Different

generations also tend to vote for different parties, in accordance with their different needs and circumstances. At the time the survey was conducted, Singapore had a conservative government which in general tends to be more widely endorsed by the older population, whereas younger voters might be more open to liberal or progressive parties.

For this next activity you will focus on the fluctuation of attitudes towards languages in Singapore. Singlish is a language widely spoken in Singapore, and in contrast to the official languages of Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil, it is exclusively Singaporean. Languages often lie at the heart of national identities, so why do Singaporeans feel so differently about Singlish? Read through a [commentary by the author Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan](#) and answer the questions below.

1. What is Singlish?

*Provide your answer...*

.....  
**Answer**

Singlish is an English-based creole language or dialect that is widely spoken in Singapore. It is an unofficial language and the only one in Singapore that is not affiliated with a particular ethnic sub-group, as is the case with languages like Tamil (mostly spoken by Singaporeans originally from India) or Mandarin (usually the first language for Singaporeans with Chinese roots). It is instead a mix of languages spoken in Singapore.

2. Why is Singlish considered 'bad English'?

*Provide your answer...*

.....  
**Answer**

While Singlish has its own systematic grammar, it is not standardised. Singlish is mostly used in informal contexts. Most of its loan words are from English, and the Singaporean government's concern is that speakers of Singlish unlearn how to speak 'proper' English by also dropping words or particles that are not needed to make sense of a sentence like they do in Singlish. Another worry is that widely spoken Singlish is bad for the country's image, as it might suggest that Singaporeans are uneducated and therefore cannot speak formal English.

3. What different attitudes do younger and older generations in Singapore have towards Singlish?

*Provide your answer...*

.....  
**Answer**

Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan explains that her father does not approve of her novel written in Singlish, or of her speaking Singlish. Her father associates 'Queen's English' with better career opportunities, and in a national context also with high ambitions for the young country. For Tan, speaking Singlish allows her to be her 'true Singaporean'

self and she understands it as a 'direct reflection' of who Singaporeans are, with the language being all around them and a mix of everything they bring to the table. This clear distinction in attitudes towards what national identity consists of shows why concepts of national culture or identity are not fixed or stable but are rather fluid. Who people want to be and how they see themselves is also always a response to the environment they find themselves in.

## 7 Banal nationalism

It seems natural to most of us to have a specific national identity and to be fluent in the official language of our country. Out of all the identities you have read about in this week, national identity seems often be understood as the most defining and central aspect of our own culture. When studying intercultural communication, it is very easy to fall into the trap of equating nationality with culture (often called a **'culture-as-nation' approach**). We assume that we share the same national identity with anyone who was born in the same country as us and we tend to assign such homogeneity to people born in other countries. By doing so, we do not only overlook how diverse every country is: we also accept state ideologies as natural facts.

The concept of the national state is relatively new; our understanding of borders, citizenship and legitimate leadership would not have made sense to people who lived in our hometowns a few centuries ago. They might also not have understood what language we are speaking now. In order to be able to critically evaluate how national identity affects our own and others' sense of culture, we can try to take a step back and look at national identity, nationalism and national symbols and myths as something strange, or constructed, instead of seeing them as normal aspects of everyday life.

Especially helpful with starting to question every day, mundane practices as assumptions are Michael Billig (who coined the term **'Banal Nationalism'**) and Benedict Anderson (who refers to national states as **'Imagined communities'**). Both scholars outline how national states were created in modern history. Anderson's focus lies on the processes that lead to a feeling of community with people we have never seen or met, who grew up in different regions from us, and might speak in a different language or dialect that could be unintelligible to us at home. Michael Billig problematises how we speak and think about nationalism; we tend to use the term only for others who attempt to force radical changes to sovereign states already in existence, and do not apply it to sentiments towards our own national state.

Nationalism is used for attempts to achieve independence, secession, or reunification, but once such processes are completed, where do nationalist sentiments go? Billig claims that they remain and are reproduced in everyday routines, leading to "remembering without conscious awareness" (Billig 1995 p. 42). It is important to note that Billig does not understand nationalism as a social movement but as an ideology which permits national states to exist and to be upheld. This ideology has become common sense or taken for granted. Billig also argues that this naturalised nationalism is often overlooked when studying national identity and nationalism. He illustrates this by describing the different uses and functions of national flags.

### Activity 9

 40 minutes

Read this text on [waved and unwaved flags](#) and answer the following questions.

1. How does Michael Billig explain the difference between symbol and signal with regards to flags?

Symbol:

Signal:



---

### Discussion

The flag as a signal has a pragmatic use. It does not convey a sentiment but conveys a practical message, for example marking which ship in a fleet carries the commander. National flags today mostly carry a symbolic function. This is for instance the case during protests, where the flag symbolises that the group carrying it are 'true' national citizens, or when a flag hung at half-mast communicates that an individual who has passed away was important to the nation. Billig (1995) furthermore states that flags which aim to signal a particular message are consciously noticed, whereas a flag as a symbol does not carry a clear message to which people need to respond.

2. What is a mindless flag?

*Provide your answer...*

---

### Discussion

Billig (1995) uses this phrase to describe flags that go unnoticed. Looking at 'routine' flags that are stitched to jackets of officials or hung from buildings does not initiate a conscious remembering or response. This does not mean that people would not notice if those flags were changed or removed, however.

3. Consider the example of Belfast given in the text. With the city divided politically between unionists (who want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom) and nationalists (who want Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to unify), and Protestants and Catholics respectively, single neighbourhoods use flags to express which side they are on in this ongoing conflict.

Think about how your country's national flag is used. Can you think of some examples? Where is the use of the flag 'routine' and unnoticed, and on what occasions do flags carry a specific message?

*Provide your answer...*

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### Discussion

Citizens psychologically identify with a nation through the internalisation of national symbols as well as of a grand narrative which gives historical events a meaningful coherence and offers a collective sense of creation and purpose. Such narratives include 'social myths' which distinguish one nation from another and appeal to the 'collective self' of the nation.

In this second activity, you will first read an example for a social myth before thinking about one that you are familiar with due to your own national culture. The following story is told by people identifying as Syrian-Lebanese in Brazil.

The Legend of the Town of Marataízes

There once was a group of peddlers who sold their wares in the interior of Espírito Sant, going from place to place by mule. One of the peddlers was named Aziz and his wife (a colloquial Arabic word for “wife” is “marat”) was considered the leader of the women who stayed behind as the men went out to sell their goods. These women went out every day to wash clothes in a place called the “Turkish bath.” Over time, the town that grew up around the place where the women washed their clothes came to be called Marataízes in honor of the wife (“marat”) of Aziz.

(Lesser, 2013)

This myth allows Brazilians of Middle Eastern descent to claim that their Brazilian nationality is original or authentic. The symbols like the *Monumento Amizade Sírio-libanesa* strengthen this notion as it portrays the arrival of Syrian and Lebanese migrants in Brazil and their positive impact.

Have a look at the image of the monument and read the explanation below.



Community leaders understood that nationalist rhetoric contained the discursive space to promote Arab-Brazilian identity. A campaign to raise money to build a monument to the Syrian-Lebanese community led to donations from rich and poor, from immigrant and Brazilian-born. The sculptor could have been a nobody and the statue could have been stuck at the end of a little street. Instead, Ettore Ximenes, a renowned Italian sculptor whose work was associated with Brazilian nationalism, was commissioned to build a monument that would be placed in São Paulo's Parque Dom Pedro II, the most prestigious government area in Brazil's largest city. For everyone involved, a monument by Ximenes in the Parque Dom Pedro II represented the pinnacle of achievement.

"Amizade Syrio-Libanesa" (Syrian-Lebanese Friendship) was a 50-foot tower of bronze and granite. The base was divided into four sections. Each of three sides contained relieves representing "Syrian" contributions to world culture: the Phoenicians as pioneers of navigation, Haitam I's discovery of the Canary Islands, and the teaching of the alphabet. The fourth side was the "symbol of Arab penetration in Brazil," represented by the "the commerce [that has led to] great prosperity." The top of the monument was composed of three life-sized figures. At the back stood a female figure representing the Brazilian Republic, "whose glory is the glory of the Brazilian fatherland." In front of her a "pure Syrian maiden" offers a gift to her "Brazilian brother," an indigenous warrior, "with the same love with which she was welcomed upon arriving in this land blessed by God."

(Lesser, 2013)

Can you think of a national myth that you learned in school, from family members or elsewhere about your home country? How does it make you feel?

*Provide your answer...*

## 8 Othering


So far, you have completed activities that focused on your own identity and on shared identities. In a final step in this week, let's think about the identities of others, or how people might imagine them to be. In this context, the term **othering** is often used. Othering refers to the practice of distinguishing between 'us' and 'them'. This practice contrasts people who we identify with – who look like us, talk like us, or who we assume were raised like us – with those who we find are behaving and thinking differently to ourselves. We tend to be a bit kinder towards our own group and more suspicious of those who are 'the others'.

Othering happens based on a variety of assumed group memberships that we find define who we are. As explained earlier in this week, one such key membership is often nationality or national identity.

We tend to think that those who share the same national identity as us, are like us in some way. This communality can be our place of birth, certain values, our native language, or our cuisine. Then, there are the others: those who we perceive as different who do not claim to be members of our group, and those who we think are unlike us but who do claim group membership.

In this next activity you will try to see your own group (which in the literature usually referred to as 'ingroup') from the eyes of someone who is not a member of your group (or part of an 'outgroup'). In short, you will treat your own culture as 'other'.

### Activity 10

 40 minutes

The key to this activity is the process of examining your culture and the views others have of that culture. Think about the extent to which these views reflect real differences, and to which they are stereotypes which hide a different or more complex picture.

To get started, take a look at *The Guardian* (2012) newspaper's [Europa section](#) and scroll through the set of articles in which journalists from different countries reflect on the typical stereotypes of their cultures and the extent to which they reflect real cultural characteristics. Pick one article to read on a culture you are familiar with.

Make notes on the following question: What claims about an individual's identity do these stereotypes make? For example, do they claim to predict a person's preferences or character traits? Use the box below to make notes.

Provide your answer...

Next, collect information on how your national culture is seen by those outside of it. To do this you can use internet resources, news articles, or popular blogs or magazines to explore what people from other cultures think about your own culture and people. Following your research, name three key assumptions that seem to be dominant perceptions about your national culture and list them below.

1.

2.

3.

When you look at your findings, where are the disparities between your perceptions of your own culture and those of outsiders?

**The stereotypes you found:    Your personal experience on those matters:**

1.

*Provide your answer...*

2.

*Provide your answer...*

3.

*Provide your answer...*

What do you think causes misperception or bias?

*Provide your answer...*


**Discussion**

The disparities you have found might stem from the tendency of people to make generalisations about groups they are not very familiar with. While people see the nuances to their own nationality, and the regional, generational or linguistic differences, people who have fewer insights tend to assume that other nations are much more homogenous than they actually are. The act of making assumptions about one's personality based on a category like nationality is referred to as stereotyping.

## 9 Belonging

A key figure in attempts to counter the processes of othering is John A. Powell, the Director of the Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley. Powell argues that othering is a result of anxiety. If people feel that their group, their status or the social order they are familiar with is threatened, they can react by projecting these fears onto others and blaming them for problems their society is facing. In the article [Us vs them: the sinister techniques of 'Othering' – and how to avoid them](#) for *The Guardian*, Powell (2017) explains how othering is harmful for societies and what everyone can do to counter this tendency. Powell's suggested alternative of **belonging** addresses structural and interpersonal actions that are the result of othering and offers an alternative approach which strives for inclusiveness and mutual respect. John Powell is based in the United States, so naturally the power structures and political events of this country are central to his work and to the piece he contributed in the British press.

### Activity 11

 40 minutes

The aforementioned article explores reasons for othering and shares examples of consequences of systematic othering. Read his article "Us vs Them" [here](#) and think about the following question.

What examples of othering and belonging does Powell give in this text? Write down one example for belonging, and one for othering.

Examples of othering

#### Discussion

Examples of othering:

- President Trump downgrading Mexicans as rapists and drug dealers in order to legitimise efforts that reduce immigration into the United States via its southern border.
- The systematic expulsion of the Rohingya in Myanmar. The Rohingya are descendants of Arab traders who lived concentrated in a single state of the Buddhist country Myanmar, practicing Islam and having their own language and culture.
- *Unite the Right* rally in Charlottesville in the US. A group of people, who were mostly of white ethnicity and male, protested against the removal of Confederate monuments which represent the Confederate States of America along with these states' historic demand to keep slaves.
- President Nixon's law and order campaign which led to mass imprisonment of the Black population in the US.

Examples of belonging

#### Discussion

Examples of Belonging:

- Multiculturalism in Canada and the notion that Canada is not white and Christian, but that any ethnicity and religion can be authentically Canadian

In his commentary given to the *The Guardian*, Powell mentions the act of 'bridging'. Watch the short clip [Bridging: Towards A Society Built on Belonging](#) and think about the following question:

What attempts of bridging have you encountered in the society that you live in, or at your workplace? What groups are involved and what strategies were applied?

Provide your answer...

Minorities subject to othering are not always communities connected by race, ethnicity or religion – this also applies to other aspects of culture, like disability or mental health.

Watch the following [TED Talk](#) on the divide between hearing and deaf worlds and answer the following questions.

- a. Think about whether the parents, the school and the former partner of the described deaf girl made attempts at bridging. Why do you think this did not work?

Provide your answer...

### Discussion

You might argue that the people in the life of the deaf girl in the story are pursuing the approach of belonging because they are trying to include her in their community. They offer help by ignoring her 'condition', and by protecting her. This however does not make her feel like she is part of the hearing community, but instead leaves her feeling like she does not fully belong anywhere. The girl does not want to have to rely on others to get by; she wants to be independent.

- b. Consider the speaker's suggestions for people who have a family member or friend who is deaf. How can they support their deaf loved ones? Are these recommendations examples for 'bridging' as Powell imagines it?

Provide your answer...

### Discussion

Instead of forcing the girl to be part of the hearing community, the speaker suggests that she should instead be encouraged and enabled to be part of her 'own tribe', the deaf community. For the speaker, those who hear should build bridges with the deaf community by learning their language or by attending deaf events.

The experiences this speaker describes are closely linked to concepts of integration, assimilation and marginalisation.

## 10 This week's quiz

Check what you've learned this week by taking the end-of-week quiz.

[Week 2 quiz](#)

Open the quiz in a new window or tab (by holding ctrl [or cmd on a Mac] when you click the link), then return here when you have done it.



## Summary of Week 2

Like the terms culture and communication, *identity* is widely used in everyday, mundane conversations. We can talk about it without knowing an academic definition, but in order to use the term to analyse and evaluate intercultural interpersonal communication, a bit more clarity is crucial.

It is important to note that the idea of an identity is fairly new, and scientists are not necessarily in agreement on how identity is formed and how it can be researched. The opposing ideas of a fixed, observable identity versus a socially constructed and fluid identity is similar to the contrasting views on culture that you were introduced to in Week 1. In this course, identity is seen as an interlocutor's complex and dynamic sense of self: People have multiple identity types, and they can all change and don't always matter in every context. People have an avowed and ascribed identity, and usually strive to be seen by others in a way that affirms their own understanding of themselves. This desire is also referred to as *face*.

This week set a clear emphasis on national identity – not because it inherently outshines other identity types, but because it has been ascribed a special role in politics, sports, the media, and many more areas in the public sphere. When talking about culture, one's identity and culture are often equated with one's nationality. Tasks in this week (and across this course, for that matter) aimed to show you that this is a very simplistic and often misleading assumption. People who are supposed to be part of the same 'imagined community' often do not agree on what their national identity stands for, or what their national values are. National myths and local languages are crucial in creating a sense of togetherness, but they don't create identical people.

Lastly, identity and culture are about groupness: This means that certain categorisations make us feel like we know who is one of 'us'. This usually also means that they are others, who are not 'like us'. Othering refers to the tendency to view those who are not part of one's group as inferior, or incompatible. It leads to stereotyping and self-fulfilling prophecies.

While John A. Powell explains the negative consequences of othering as well as solutions to this major obstacle to intercultural communication with ease, it is very challenging to shake certain biases off, especially when they are unconscious. This course seeks to lend you a hand with this through reflection and authentic examples from various workplaces. We hope that you'll continue your studies with the Open University on our short course:

[LG004 - An introduction to intercultural competence in the workplace](#)

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### Week 2

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### Videos

#### Week 2

Section 2 Socialisation processes and identity types, Activity 3 video: The danger of a single story, Ted Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

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