

I define culture as the collective mental programming of the people in an environment. Culture is not a characteristic of individuals; it encompasses a number of people who were conditioned by the same education and life experience. When we speak of the culture of a group, a tribe, a geographical region, a national minority, or a nation, culture refers to the collective mental programming that these people have in common; the programming that is different from that of other groups, tribes, regions, minorities or majorities, or nations.

Culture, in this sense of collective mental programming, is often difficult to change; if it does so at all, it changes slowly. This is so not only because it exists in the minds of the people but, if it is shared by a number of people, because it has become crystallized in the institutions these people have built together: their family structures, educational structures, religious organizations, associations, forms of government, work organizations, law, literature, settlement patterns, buildings and even, as I hope to show, scientific theories. All of these reflect common beliefs that derive from the common culture.

One well-known mechanism by which culturally determined beliefs perpetuate themselves is the *self-fulfilling prophecy*. If, for example, it is believed that people from a certain minority are irresponsible, the institutions in such an environment will not admit these people into positions of responsibility. Never being given responsibility, the members of the minority will be unable to learn it and very probably will actually behave irresponsibly; so everybody remains caught in the belief. Another example: if it is believed that all people are ultimately motivated by a desire to accumulate wealth, those who do not want to accumulate wealth are

considered deviant. Rather than be considered deviant, people in such an environment will usually justify their economic success, thereby reinforcing the belief that wealth was their motivation.

Although we are all conditioned by cultural influences at many different levels - family, social, group, geographical region, professional environment - this article deals specifically with the influence of our national environment: that is, our country. Most countries' inhabitants share a national character that is more clearly apparent to foreigners than to the nationals themselves; it represents the cultural mental programming that the nationals tend to have in common. It has its roots in a common history, or rather a shared set of beliefs about the country's history, and it is reinforced because the nation shares among its members many culture-shaping institutions: a government, an army, laws, an education system, a TV network. Most people within a country communicate quite rarely with people outside, much less so than with people from other groups within their own country. One of the problems of the young Third World nations is the integration of culturally diverse groups into a common 'mental programming' that distinguishes the nation as a whole.