

In other words, the strategic use of language depends on both regularity and variability; variability often only takes on strategic meaning against the backdrop of regularity. However, we do not believe that the variability itself can be regarded as culture; at least, not until (or not unless) the variability itself becomes patterned in its occurrence!

## 2.5 Culture and social groups

Throughout this chapter, we have indicated that culture, by its very nature, is associated with social groups. Within the intercultural field, there is often an implicit assumption that cultural group is equivalent to national or ethnic group, and much of the research has been conducted on that basis. Yet as Avruch (1998) explains (Quote 2.10), this is far too limited a view.

### Quote 2.10 Avruch on multi-group membership

Individuals are organized in many potentially different ways in a population, by many different (and cross-cutting) criteria: for example, by kinship into families or clans; by language, race, or creed into ethnic groups; by socio-economic characteristics into social classes; by geographical region into political interest groups; and by occupation or institutional memberships into unions, bureaucracies, industries, political parties, and militaries. The more complex and differentiated the social system, the more potential groups and institutions there are. And because each group or institution places individuals in different experiential worlds, and because culture derives in part from this experience, *each of these groups and institutions can be a potential container for culture*. Thus no population can be adequately characterized as a single culture or by a single cultural descriptor. As a corollary, the more complexly organized a population is on sociological grounds (class, region, ethnicity, and so on), the more complex will its cultural mappings appear.

(Avruch 1998: 17–18; emphasis in the original)

The fact is that there are many different types of social groups, and where members of any group share patterns of regularity in some way (as discussed in Section 2.4.1), they can be regarded as belonging to a cultural group. Up to now the field of intercultural interaction has mainly focused on national groups and organizational groups; however, it needs to incorporate these different types of group within its remit because any kind of inter-group interaction has the potential to be intercultural. In this section, we examine some different types of social groups, apart from nationality, that can be regarded as having their own cultures. For reasons of space, we can only discuss a few of them relatively briefly.

### 2.5.1 Culture and religious groups

'Religion is inextricably woven into the cloth of cultural life' (Tarakeshwar, Stanton and Pargament 2003: 377). The culture of a religious (sub-)group can be manifested in a variety of ways, including in members' values, beliefs and orientations to life, in their communicative conventions, in their policies and procedures, and in their buildings, rituals and behaviour. These cultural manifestations can have a major impact across a wide range of contexts and at different levels – personal (see Experiential Example 2.1), organizational, and regional/national.

#### Experiential Example 2.1 How can I be both a Christian and Japanese?

Teased and rejected at school for embracing a Western religion, he wondered how it was possible to be Christian and Japanese at the same time, when the two cultures had such different values. He described his religion as a suit of Western clothes that did not fit his Japanese body, and which he wished to exchange for a kimono. It seemed that Christianity was despised in Japan and he longed to visit the West [...] After the Second World War, Endo travelled to France to study, hoping to find some answers in the heartland of Catholicism; but here he simply suffered further rejection in a climate of anti-Japanese hostility. [...] Unable to find answers in Asia or Europe, and suffering from tuberculosis, Endo slipped into a dark depression. Before returning home, however, he visited the Holy Land in order to research the life of Jesus, and he discovered something he had never realized before. Jesus, too, had been rejected by those around him. [...] On his return to Japan, Endo resolved to re-tailor his ill-fitting clothes, to make them Japanese and find a Christian message that would make sense in Japanese terms. He did so in a series of novels that explored themes of rejection and salvation, focusing in particular on the choices facing those trying to reconcile Japanese culture with Christian faith. [...] And Endo must have struck a chord. By the time of his death in 1966, he was regarded as one of Japan's greatest novelists of modern times.

(Hill 2005: 53–4)

There are comparatively few culture-comparative and culture-interactive studies that focus on religious groups, so Tarakeshwar, Stanton and Pargament (2003: 390) argue that more research is needed in this area for the following reasons:

- Religion is important in the lives of people across cultural groups.
- Religion has been found to be a significant predictor of salient variables (e.g., physical and mental well-being) across cultural groups.
- Religion is associated with critical culturally-related value dimensions.
- The cultures of other social groups shape religious beliefs and practices.



### 2.5.2 Culture and organizations

Organizations can be said to have their own culture in that they can have espoused or assumed values, established practices and procedures, behavioural conventions and so on. Hofstede's (1980/2001, 1991) and Schwartz's (1992) frameworks for characterizing national cultures cannot necessarily be applied to organizations, although Hofstede lists features of the workplace and management characteristic of the value orientations he describes. By contrasting the four end points of the uncertainty avoidance and power distance dimensions, he also generates four implicit models of organization (something very similar to organizational cultures, although he avoids the term) likely to be encountered in particular national cultures (Hofstede 1991: 151–2). Other specifications may be needed and have been proposed (Concept 2.11). On the other hand, Schneider and Barsoux (2003) and others maintain there are causal connections between features of national cultures and organizational cultures; Lane, Distefano and Maznevski (2006), for example, imply that Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's orientations to life are applicable to organizational cultures.

When two organizations, such as Daimler-Benz and Chrysler or Rover and BMW, merge, clashes of culture are commonplace and it is not always clear to those involved whether it is a matter of national culture clash or organizational culture clash. Whatever their roots, such clashes may soon lead to discomfort and conflicts when, for example, the employees of the newly acquired or merged company are expected to adhere to the standardized procedures and processes or to the code

<b>Concept 2.11 Frameworks for characterizing organizational cultures</b>		
<b>Hofstede (2001: 398)</b>	<b>Handy (1976: 188–96)</b>	<b>Trompenaars (1993: 139)</b>
Process oriented – Results oriented	Power	Egalitarian – hierarchical
Employee oriented – Job oriented	Role	Orientation to the person – orientation to the task
Parochial – Professional	Task	
Open system – Closed system	Person	
Loose control – Tight control		
Normative – Pragmatic		

of conduct and values statement of the new parent company. In the same way, when individuals move from one organization to another, they may well experience acculturative stress or 'culture shock', especially if the organizations differ significantly in values as well as practices, procedures and behavioural conventions. This can be particularly noticeable if someone moves from a public sector organization (such as education) to a private sector one (such as a company). (See Chapter 7 for a detailed discussion of adaptation to different cultures.)

### 2.5.3 Culture and professional groups

Wang (2001) describes professional cultures as follows:

Professions create and sustain relatively unique work cultures referred to as professional cultures. [...] A professional culture binds members of a profession to form a professional community, ensures the continuance of a profession as a group collectivity, and guides the members to think and behave as the profession requires. Because a profession is not limited to the framework of a given organization or even a given industry or nation, its professional culture exists across the boundaries of organizations, industries or nations.

(Wang 2001: 4)

There has been relatively little research which has attempted to characterize the cultures of different professions from an interactional perspective, yet during the last few years there has been a marked increase in demand for inter-professional working. For example, in the health care sector in the United Kingdom there has been a major call for integrated community care, which requires social workers and district nurses to work together; in the education sector, the development of e-learning materials requires academics, instructional designers and technical staff to work closely together. In international business, in areas such as in product development, work in inter-professional and cross-functional teams, which frequently also bring together members of different national and organizational cultures, has been common for a long time.

A growing number of books (e.g., Freeth et al. 2005; Malin 2000) and articles are now being published which explore the issues at stake in inter-professional working. Most of them acknowledge that such ways of working are not always easy. For example, Freeman, Miller and Ross (2000) researched a number of different teams within the UK health sector, and argue that multi-professional teamwork is challenging (Research Report 2.1).



### Research Report 2.1 How effective are multi-professional teams in the UK National Health Service?

Multi-professional 'teamwork' has become the preferred model of practice promoted for many areas of health care by policy makers, professional bodies, and [...] management. Based on an assumption of beneficial outcomes for patients, the requirement of professionals to communicate 'effectively', to understand each other's contribution to the care process and to be prepared to blur the boundaries of their roles has been proposed in much recent research as the most effective form of managing patient care [...] The evidence [...] from a funded [research] project [...] showed that achieving patterns of professional interaction identified above would appear to be fraught with difficulties; the 'ideal' of effective team-working as defined in the prescriptive literature is apparently rarely realised.

(Freeman, Miller and Ross 2000: 237-8)

They found that philosophies of team-working (which were related to but not synonymous with professional divisions) influenced people's perceptions of what constituted effective communication and role understanding, how role contribution was valued, and the degree of perceived need for a shared vision within the team.

Moore and Dainty (2001) report comparable findings in the UK engineering sector. They investigated design and build project teams and report as follows.

### Research Report 2.2 How effective are multi-professional teams in the UK engineering sector?

There was evidence that professional divisions between team members had led to discontinuities and ineffective responses to unexpected variations that had occurred during the construction phase. [...] Professional priorities within the workgroup were based around traditional project-based responsibilities. The design team had a clear emphasis on design quality, whereas the commercial team on delivering the project to programme. This division emphasized the lack of a single focus for the project team, and led to an emphasis on reactive problem solving as opposed to proactive problem avoidance, and on 'best-fit' approaches rather than innovative solutions.

(Moore and Dainty 2001: 560)

Research into the cultural bases of such professional differences has been extremely limited. Wang (2001: 16) found that 'project management professionals have common work-related values and beliefs that bind them to form a professional community across organizational and

industrial boundaries and make them think and behave as the profession requires.' Ziegenfuss and Singhapakdi (1994), in a study of internal auditors, found that members were more influenced by the official standards of conduct of their professional group than by any employer requirements/threats. This suggests that policies and procedures, often based on internationally enforceable law, are an important unifying factor for some professional groups, which interestingly are then able to transcend the borders of national and organizational cultures. Health and safety at work is another area in which professional culture shaped by legal or official requirements typically exerts a stronger influence on behaviour than, for example, organizational culture. There is clearly a need for much more research in this area.

#### 2.5.4 Culture and communities of practice

Another type of social group that applied linguists and discourse analysts increasingly refer to when discussing culture is 'community of practice'. According to Wenger (1998), who is the key proponent of this concept, there are three criteria for defining a community of practice: mutual engagement of members, members' jointly negotiated enterprise, and members' shared repertoire. All three criteria need to be in place for a group to be identified as a community of practice.

Holmes and Stubbe (2003), in reporting their research into different work teams (which can be regarded as communities of practice), demonstrate how both small talk and humour varied among teams. For example, they found that in one team, humour was predominantly supportive and had a positive pragmatic effect; in a second team, jocular abuse was common; and in a third team, where status and power distinctions were strong, subversive humour was characteristic.

Holmes and Stubbe also illustrate the differences that can occur in small talk.

#### Experiential Example 2.2 Small talk in the workplace

One of our informants reported feeling quite uncomfortable initially when she began work in a new organisation where people routinely shared quite intimate details of their personal lives to an extent that would have been deemed 'unprofessional' in her previous workplace. She eventually became accustomed to this practice, and in fact valued it as an important way in which members of the group provided support to one another, but she remained aware that it presented a potential barrier to the integration of new team members.

(Holmes and Stubbe 2003: 168)



The types of cultural regularities of a community of practice are likely to be much more limited in scope than those of some other types of groups, and are less likely to include the 'deeper' manifestations of values, beliefs and ideologies. So newcomers to a community of practice may have less difficulty integrating in the 'different culture' because the range of types of cultural differences that they need to adjust to will probably be smaller. Nevertheless, differences in practice can still be a source of discomfort and misunderstanding, and should not be ignored by interculturalists.

### 2.5.5 Culture and multi-group membership

It is generally accepted that everyone is simultaneously a member of many different cultural groups and that if intercultural researchers focus on only one type of cultural group (such as country-level culture), they are ignoring the potential impact of other types of cultures (such as regional culture, ethnic culture, professional culture, organizational culture and/or religious culture). Nevertheless, in practice, there is little understanding of how these different 'cultures' impact on each other or how multi-group membership affects interaction. This is a major set of issues which the field of intercultural interaction has yet to grapple with in depth.

## 2.6 Culture and representation

It is clearly very complex to 'unpack' culture:

- the regularities of culture are manifested in numerous different but interrelated ways;
- these regularities go hand in hand with variability;
- culture is associated with infinite types of social groups that can vary in size and complexity;
- people are simultaneously members of many different cultural groups.

How then can we meaningfully describe cultural groups?

There are three particularly prevalent, interrelated dangers that we need to be aware of. First, there is the risk of over-generalizing about groups on the basis of minimal evidence. This is a common occurrence, but can be very problematic. Experiential Example 2.3 illustrates such an invalid over-generalization.

### Experiential Example 2.3 Are the English really a 'civilized people'?

I once went to see a friend. I had to take a taxi since his house is somewhat remote. The taxi driver was an English man in his fifties. He mistook our destination because of my poor English pronunciation, and drove me to a street that I had never been to. After explaining laboriously where I would like to go, he finally understood me and drove me correctly to my friend's house. He just charged me for the right route and kept saying sorry to me. Although it was my fault that led to the trouble, the driver time and again said that he should take the blame and he charged me fairly. The incident has convinced me that the English are civilized people; it reflects the degree of civilization of a nation.

(Overseas student's description of an interaction in the UK, Spencer-Oatey's research data)

Secondly, there is the risk of inappropriate stereotyping. Hinton (2000) explains that stereotyping has three important components: (1) a group of people is identified by a specific label, which can refer to any characteristic whatsoever, such as nationality (e.g., German), religious belief (e.g., fundamentalist Christian), occupation (e.g., traffic warden) or colour of hair (e.g., redhead); (2) a set of additional characteristics is attributed to the group as a whole, such as fundamentalist Christians are intolerant, or redheads are quick-tempered; (3) on identifying a person as belonging to the group (e.g., that s/he is German or a fundamentalist Christian), we attribute to him/her the additional characteristics that we associate with the group as a whole. This can result in all kinds of problems, including prejudice and discrimination. Chapter 6 explores this complex, important area in more detail.

Thirdly, it is important to avoid excessive essentialism and reductionism. When people take an essentialist approach, they assume or assert that a cultural group has certain 'essential' properties that make them one group rather than another. This, in effect, is a classic view of categories, which assumes that all category members share certain important defining features. For most social categories, categorization does not work in this way, although rather ironically group members may sometimes try to represent themselves like this.

Both the second and third risks need to be considered in the light of psychological research into categorization. In addition to the classic view of categories, two other important approaches are the prototype view and the exemplar view. In an influential series of studies, Rosch (1978) developed the idea that most category boundaries are essentially

fuzzy, and that within any given category, certain members are regarded as more prototypic or representative of the entire category than others are. The members do not all share the same attributes, but rather display 'family resemblances' in relation to a much wider set of features. The prototype of the category may not be an actual category member but may just be an abstract representation. Other theorists (e.g., Smith and Zarate 1992) who support an exemplar view of categorization argue that people's representations are not abstract in this way, but rather are based on salient or particularly memorable exemplars.

Whichever view is taken, it is clear that the cognitive representation of categories (such as cultural groups) naturally entails a certain amount of reductionism. In intercultural interaction, there is a genuine practical need to help people interact more effectively with others from different social groups, for both social reasons and task-based reasons. So can 'reductionist' descriptions of other groups ever be helpful for such purposes, and if so, what kinds of descriptions are likely to be most helpful? We touch on these crucial questions in Chapter 9.

Finally, it is important to remember that the members of a cultural group may have a strong sense of in-group identity, and may want to project that identity clearly too. Such identity concerns can play a crucial role in intercultural interaction, and we discuss these in Chapter 7.

## 2.7 Concluding comments

In this chapter we have explored a number of key aspects of culture that are relevant to our study of intercultural interaction, including: frameworks for comparing how culture is manifested in different societies, ways in which cultural groups can be conceptualized, and the challenge of representing cultural groups. The chapter provides a foundation for the rest of the book, and subsequent chapters follow up on many of the points. However, we have paid relatively little explicit attention to the impact of culture on interpersonal interaction. The next chapter turns to this issue, and explores the competencies that have been identified as most valuable for this.

### Suggestions for further reading

Ferraro, G. P. (2005) *The Cultural Dimension of International Business*, 5th edn. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. This book takes an anthropological approach. It provides excellent descriptions of ways in which cultures may differ, drawing particularly on the frameworks of Hall and of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, and explains their relevance for working internationally, especially in business.

Holliday, A., Hyde, M. and Kullman, J. (2004) *Intercultural Communication: An Advanced Resource Book*. London: Routledge. This book takes a constructionist approach to culture, and focuses on three key themes: identity, otherization and representation.

Lane, H. W., Distefano, J. J. and Maznevski, M. L. (2006) *International Management Behavior: Text, Readings and Cases*, 5th edn. Malden, MA: Blackwell. Part 1 of this book deals with many of the issues covered in this chapter. It describes Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's orientations and discusses their implications for international management. It includes a reading by Hofstede and another reading on the dangers of stereotyping.