Transcultural Leadership: Cultural Dimensions and Their Significance for Leadership

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected work environment, the question of culturally sensitive leadership approaches is gaining importance. Leaders today operate in multiculturally composed teams, collaborate with international partners, and must consider different cultural influences, expectations, and communication styles. The central question that arises is: To what extent does a person's cultural heritage influence their way of thinking and interpersonal relationships? This article examines the theoretical foundations of transcultural leadership in relation to cultural dimension theories and analyzes why cultural sensitivity is essential for effective leadership.

1. What is Culture?

Etymology and Fundamental Definitions

To comprehend the significance of culture in leadership contexts, one must first examine the concept of culture itself. In colloquial usage, culture is frequently conflated with nationality, which represents an overly reductive and fundamentally flawed understanding. This raises the question: what, then, constitutes culture?

The term "culture" derives from the Latin verb *colere*, meaning "to build, maintain, cultivate, take care of" (Welsch, 1999). In its broadest interpretation, culture encompasses everything that people creatively produce – material, normative, and symbolic aspects such as techniques of food preparation, clothing production, architecture, and much more. In the scientific literature, numerous definitional approaches exist that vary depending on discipline and focus.

In the field of intercultural communication, definitions emphasize the invisible, normative dimensions of culture, encompassing the implicit rules of social life that frequently remain both unwritten and unspoken. Hofstede et al. (2010: 6) define culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the member of one group or category of people from another". Spencer-Oatey (2008: 3) offers a more comprehensive definition:

"Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural norms, and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour.“ Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952: 181, cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2012: 2) understand culture as "patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values".

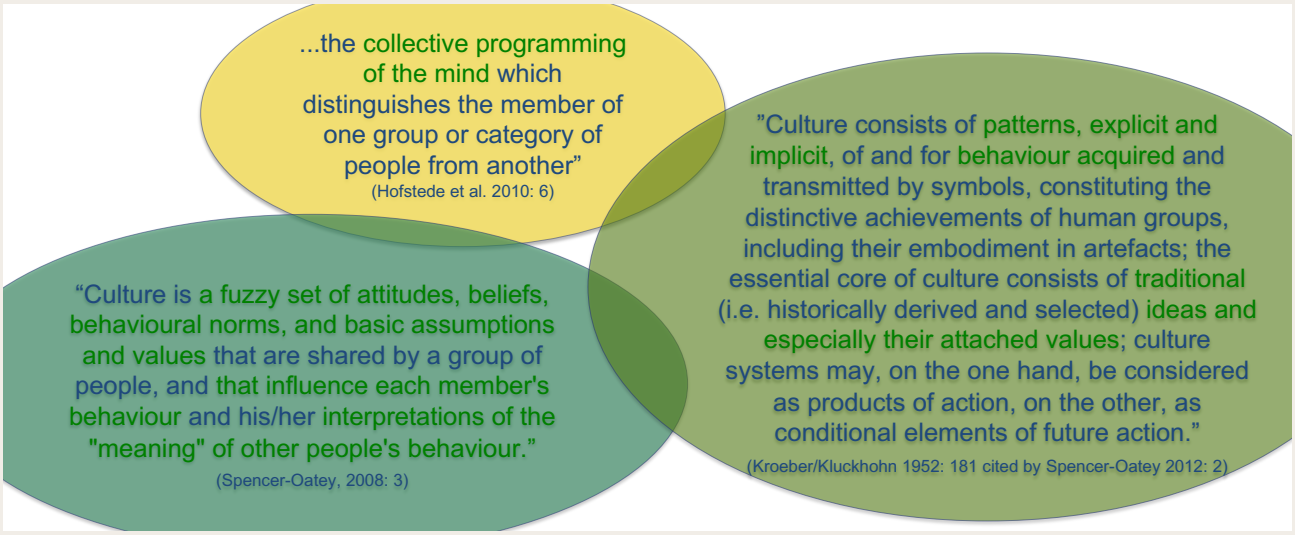

Fig. 1: Some central quotes on „culture“ from authors working in the field of intercultural communication.

The constructed nature of culture

In intercultural and transcultural communication research, particular caution must be exercised when dealing with the concept of culture.

Cultures are constructed in human minds; they do not exist as objective realities. The human mind works through mapping and categorizing to make reality more tangible (Bellmund et al., 2018). Cultural attributions are attempts to categorize groups and their characteristics in order to make reality more comprehensible. Thus, sorting people into different boxes (=cultures) and labeling them with different attributes makes reality more easily accessible. However, the constructed stereotypical uniformity of our mental categories does not exist in diverse and dynamic reality. Consider what you might spontaneously think about stereotypes of specific groups – and then reflect on whether all members of this group truly conform to these stereotypes. Probably not. We should be aware of these mechanisms and thus treat cultural concepts accordingly. Culture should be understood as a working term (Moosmüller, 2000; Sökefeld, 2001). As Hall (1983: 230) aptly states: "Culture has always dictated where to draw the line separating one thing from another. These lines are arbitrary, but once learned and internalized they are treated as real." This observation points to the potentially problematic nature of cultural concepts. If we take cultural concepts too seriously and place too much emphasis on their separating potential, they can indeed harm social relationships.

2. Some cultural models

As a next step, we should at least briefly examine theoretical frameworks on culture to investigate its fundamental nature. Through this examination, both the dynamic character of the concept and its evolution become apparent.

Fig. 2: To which cultural theories do these images refer?

From the Sphere Model to the Network Model: Johann Gottfried Herder's notion of culture long shaped the understanding of culture as homogeneous, stable, and closed systems – the so-called sphere model. This model assumes social homogenization, ethnic consolidation, and intercultural delimitation (Welsch, 1999). Although this concept never corresponded to reality, it proved to be a useful ideology for the formation of nation-states and corresponding origin myths – and it still influences the notion of culture in many people´s minds. The more realistic and contemporary network model (Thomas, 1991), on the other hand, understands cultures as orientation systems that are unstable and dynamic, heterogeneous, diverse, and pluralistic. This perspective corresponds far better to lived reality than the outdated sphere model.

The Iceberg Model of Culture: A helpful model for understanding cultural phenomena is the iceberg model (Hall, 1976). Similar to an iceberg, only about 10% of culture is directly visible and conscious – for example, language, clothing, or food. The much larger 90% lies below the surface and includes unconscious aspects such as values, beliefs, perception patterns, and fundamental assumptions about the world.

Cultural Glasses: Every person views the world through their own "cultural glasses" (Boas, 1904). These glasses are colored by individual experiences. People typically only notice their own cultural lens when they come into contact with the unknown – with different patterns of feeling, thinking, and acting. This awareness is a crucial step for intercultural competence.

Transculturality: The concept of transculturality (Welsch, 1999) goes beyond traditional understandings of culture. The prefix "trans" means "over, through" (in contrast to "inter": between). Transculturality emphasizes that cultures are always networked, intertwined, and interpenetrating. Transitions are fluid, and there are no clear boundaries. This approach opposes rigid categorizations, as these can promote exclusion and discrimination. However, there is also the danger of trivializing differences.

3. Cultural Identities

Socialization and Enculturation

As humans, we are deficient beings (Gehlen, 1940). Compared to other species, humans are physiologically and morphologically inferior, not perfectly adapted to any specific natural niche. For example, lacking the warming fur of many animals, we require warm clothing or fire to maintain body temperature in colder regions. Thus, through the evolutionary process, culture itself became the human survival strategy – a "second nature" that we transmit across generations. Additionally, we depend on each other for survival. Humans are "ultra-social animals" (Tomasello, 2014), spending their lives in social environments in which socialization processes take place. At birth, our brains are like blank slates – slowly filled with all the knowledge necessary for survival, predominantly social knowledge required to function in the social groups within which we spend our lives (Pagel, 2012). Thus, humans are highly receptive to socialization and enculturation processes. Socialization refers to the lifelong social learning process, while enculturation denotes learning within specific groups. According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), people learn how things work, how things are done, and all social rules from one another. At the societal level, through creating and transferring these social rules, people collectively construct social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). During this process, so-called "cultural standards" emerge. They designate all ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting that are considered "normal" and binding by the majority within specific groups. Behavior is assessed and regulated on the basis of these cultural standards (Thomas, 1991).

Fig. 3: Cultural participation and cultural identity ia always multi-layerd.

We Are All Cultural Hybrids

A central concept of transculturality is the recognition that all people are cultural hybrids. We participate in certain degrees in different social groups and environments. Cultural identity is multilayered, fluid, processual, and dynamic. The concept of multicollectivity states that every person participates in different cultures. An example illustrates this: A person named Sara from Israel, living in Berlin, studying history, living in a shared apartment, working in a restaurant, part of a FLINTA bike group, belonging to the punk scene, practicing yoga, surfing, and enjoying backpacking, participates in many different cultural contexts. Each of these contexts shapes her cultural identity. This perspective shows that cultural identity is not static or one-dimensional, but is composed of various affiliations and experiences that change and develop throughout life.

Consider your own cultural identity

- How would you describe your cultural backgrounds and participations?
- Which groups are you part of at the moment?
- Which groups were you part of in your past?
- How did these groups shape your identity?
- Reflect on these groups and their construced nature by considering the diversity of the groups beside their connecting elemets

4. Cultural Dimension Theories Related to Leadership

Cultural dimension theories explain the tendencies of social groups regarding values and norms. They function as continua with two poles, each symbolizing the extremes of value expression, on which specific positions can be made, mostly nationalities or geographical areas. The idea itself is very interesting, but these models should be treated with caution and care. Cultural dimension theories have been subject to considerable criticism. Most notably, by positioning individual cultures on these continua, Herder's notion of culture is inadvertently reinforced: cultures as stable, homogeneous constructs. As we know, this concept of culture does not represent reality. Additionally, cultures in the original models (e.g. Hall, 1959; Kluckhohn, 1961) are predominantly conceptualized as national cultures or even broader geographical areas, thereby supporting the one-dimensional equation of culture with nationality, which is itself highly reductive. This approach furthermore reduces people's identities to the national level, leading to the danger of stereotyping individuals labeled with these categories. Moreover, cultural dimension theories reduce and overgeneralize reality in another crucial aspect: we behave differently across various social fields; for example, the rules we apply in our private lives differ from those in our professional lives. Finally, the research design underlying these models is economically and Western-oriented, as they emerged primarily to facilitate business navigation from a Western research perspective.

Their advantages lie in their ability to reveal societal trends. Additionally, they can be used to explain differences in human behavior on a value-free level, not only at cultural levels, but also in personal relationships. Culturally dimensional models show us how variable human behavior can be – and that there is simply no such thing as “normal.” They also show us the power of socialization: We often perceive as “normal” what is common in our environments and judge ourselves and others according to these standards. Knowledge about the flexibility of values gives us the freedom to recognize the relativity of our own value system, to take a step back, and not to judge ourselves or others prematurely. Culturally dimensional models thus support our cultural self-awareness. They give us criteria that help us examine how we ourselves, the people around us, and the cultural environments in which we move, operate. By demonstrating the relativity of values and norms, culturally dimensional models protect us from misinterpretations or the danger of using ourselves as the benchmark for evaluating the behavior of others. In the following, we will consider some theories related to leadership behaviour.

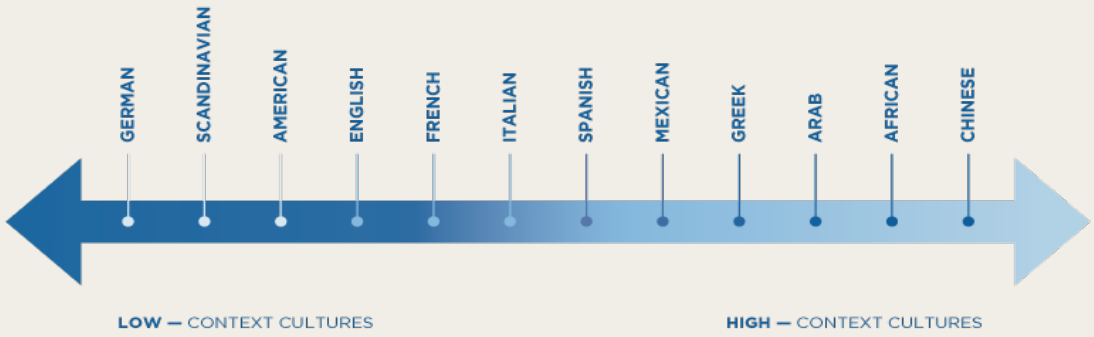

Fig. 4: High context versus low context (https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/should-we-move-beyond-high-low-context-cultural-tanya-finnie/)

High context versus low context (Hall, 1959)

A fundamental cultural dimension concerns communication style. In "low context" cultures, communication is very direct. The so-called "German directness" applies even to sensitive topics, and criticism is understood as a learning opportunity. There is a need to discuss, and yes and no are meant literally. People in these cultures try not to take things personally. In "high context" cultures, on the other hand, communication is more indirect. Messages are more hidden in body language, voice, and symbolic level – out of politeness and to protect feelings, especially regarding sensitive topics and criticism. People are very sensitive to verbal criticism. There is the "modesty no" and the "relationship yes". Things are taken personally more quickly.

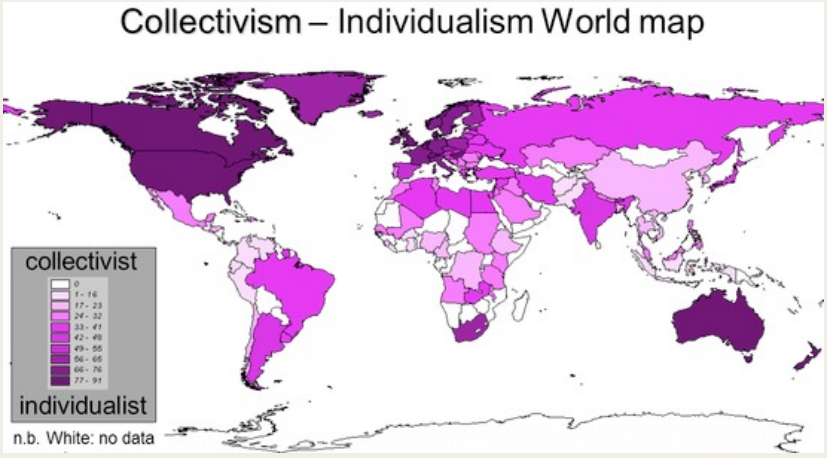

Fig. 5: Collectivism – Individualism world map (https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/)

Individualism versus Collectivism (Hofstede, 1983)

This dimension describes the relationship between the individual and the group. In individualistic cultures, the self is at the center. One's own well-being promotes the well-being of the group. Core values are self-care, independence, and self-reliance. Networks are fluid and flexible. In collectivistic cultures, the individual understands themselves as part of groups (family, team). The well-being of the group is more important than one's own well-being. Core values are caring for the group, harmony, and interrelationship. Networks are lifelong. This dimension has considerable implications for leadership behavior and expectations. While in individualistic cultures personal achievement and autonomy are emphasized, in collectivistic cultures group harmony and loyalty are paramount.

Monochronic People	Polychronic People
Do one thing at a time	Do many things at once
Concentrate on the job	Are highly distractible and subject to interruptions
Take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously	Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, if possible
Are low-context and need information	Are high-context and already have information
Are committed to the job	Are committed to people and human relationships
Adhere religiously to plans	Change plans often and easily
Are concerned about not disturbing others; follow rules of privacy and consideration	Are more concerned with those who are closely related (family, friends, close business associates) than with privacy
Show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend	Borrow and lend things often and easily
Emphasize promptness	Base promptness on the relationship
Are accustomed to short-term relationships	Have strong tendency to build lifetime relationships

Fig. 6: Monochronic and polychronic time perceptionin daily life (https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/everything-time-monochronism-polychronism-orientation-6902)

Time as a Cultural Phenomenon (Hall, 1959; Hall, 1984)

Time perception varies considerably between cultures. In monochronic cultures, "time is money". Schedules are sacred, deadlines are binding, disruptions are uncomfortable, and being late is impolite. In polychronic cultures, people are never too busy for each other, plans can be easily altered, flexibility is crucial, disruptions are normal, and being late is normal or acceptable – also raising the question: What does "late" actually mean?

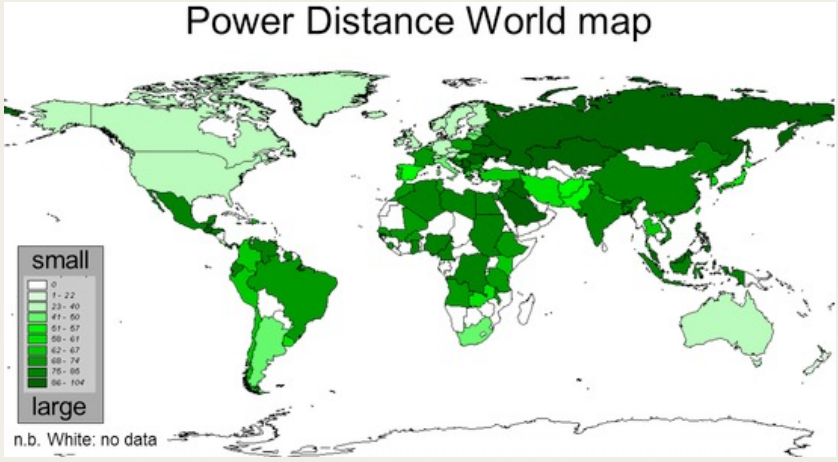

Fig. 7: Collectivism – Individualism world map (https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/)

Power Distance (Hofstede, 1983)

The dimension of power distance describes how societies deal with inequality and hierarchical relationships. In cultures with low power distance, hierarchies are generally undesirable and must be justified and legitimized. Communication takes place at eye level, and authorities can be questioned. In cultures with high power distance, hierarchies are much more normal. The social order is more clearly structured, and there are clear rules of conduct. Leaders have greater authority, influence, and respect.

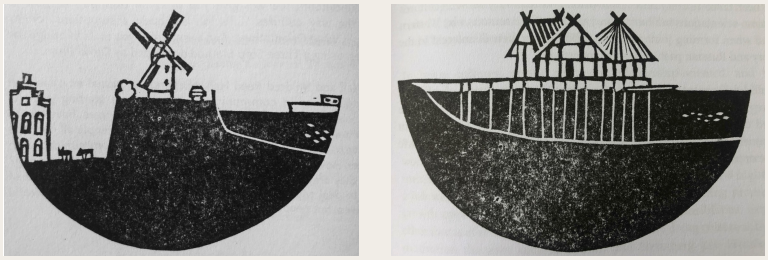

Fig. 8: Dominating relationship to nature versus in harmony (Nunez et al., 2017: 62f)

Relationship to Nature (Kluckhohn, 1961)
Cultures differ in their fundamental relationship to nature. Cultures with a dominating relationship to nature survive by adapting the environment to their needs. People try to optimize external factors, and problems are solved systematically. Cultures that live in harmony with nature survive without drastically changing the environment. People accept situations more readily. Some problems are changed and solved – others not. Adaptation strategies are developed.

Universalism versus Particularism (Trompenaars, 1994; 2018)
This dimension is illustrated by an ethical dilemma: You are riding in a car driven by a close friend. He hits a pedestrian, who is slightly injured. You know your friend was going at least 35 miles per hour in an area of the city where the maximum allowed speed is 20 miles per hour. There are no witnesses. Your friend's lawyer says that if you testify under oath that your friend was driving only 20 miles per hour, it may save him from serious consequences.
In universalistic cultures, people would regard helping the friend as corrupt and unethical. People place high importance on laws, rules, values, and obligations. They try to deal fairly with people based on these guidelines, but rules come before relationships. In particularistic cultures, people are more likely to support their friend: "My friend needs my help more than ever now that he is in serious trouble with the law." Circumstances and relationships dictate the rules. The response to a situation may change, based on what's happening in the moment and who's involved.

Neutral versus Emotional (Trompenaars, 1994)
This dimension describes how people express emotions. In neutral cultures, people make great efforts to control their emotions. Reason influences their actions far more than their feelings. They don't reveal what they're thinking or how they're feeling. In emotional cultures, people find ways to express their emotions, even spontaneously, at work. In these cultures, it is welcome and accepted to show emotion.

Fig. 9: Emotional expression in conflict situation (https://pixabay.com/de/photos)

Be aware of your own bias!

The Anti-Bias approach refers to the active recognition, confrontation, and mitigation of one's own unconscious biases, particularly those based on race, gender, culture, and other social categorizations (Derman-Sparks, 2011; Freire 2018). Rooted in social psychology, the concept draws from decades of research on implicit bias, which suggests that individuals' judgments and decisions are influenced by subconscious stereotypes, often without their awareness (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Understanding and addressing these biases is critical in transcultural leadership, as it promotes more equitable and inclusive decision-making processes. Leaders who cultivate anti-bias awareness are better equipped to manage cultural diversity in global teams, reducing the impact of biases that could otherwise hinder collaboration and trust. The relevance of anti-bias awareness ties closely to cultural dimensions theories, which identifies how cultural values influence behavior and perceptions. By acknowledging and confronting biases, leaders can create an environment where diverse perspectives are valued, fostering an organizational culture that is more adaptable and resilient in a globalized world.

5. Why Culture Matters in Leadership

Culture is of crucial importance in leadership because leadership is so much about good social relationships between people. This requires cultural self-awareness, cultural awareness for others, and awareness for cultural frames (Sackmann, 2006). Cultures influence both the behavior of individual persons and human cooperations in multiple ways. At the individual level, cultural impacts influences how people think, feel, and act, how they perceive and interpret reality, how they communicate, and much more. At the level of human cooperation, cultures influence social rules and norms, our expectations of each other, social roles and systems.
As leaders, we must be aware of our own cultural identities, cultural imprints, and related biases. We must be sensitive to the cultural identities of our interaction partners and their expectations. Leaders have the obligation to see every person on their team. Furthermore, we must be sensitive to cultural specifics of context, for example the preferences of target groups (Sackmann, 2006). Transcultural leadership does not mean negating or trivializing cultural differences, but rather acknowledging, valuing, and productively utilizing them. It is about creating a leadership culture that understands diversity as a strength and in which people with different cultural backgrounds feel equally seen, heard, and valued.

Conclusion
Transcultural leadership in our globalized world is not an option but a necessity. Understanding culture as a dynamic, multilayered, and fluid construct – in the sense of transculturality – forms the foundation for effective leadership in diverse contexts. Engaging with cultural dimensions such as communication styles, individualism-collectivism, time perception, power distance, and others enables leaders to understand cultural differences not as obstacles but as enrichment. Cultural self-reflection and the development of cultural sensitivity are continuous processes that require openness, willingness to learn, and the readiness to recognize and, if necessary, adjust one's own "cultural glasses". Only in this way can leaders create environments in which transcultural collaboration succeeds and the potentials of all participants can unfold.

References

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs.

Bellmund, J. L. S., Gärdenfors, P., Moser, E. I., & Doeller, C. F. (2018). Navigating cognition: Spatial codes for human thinking. Science, 362(6415), eaat6766. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aat6766

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. Anchor books.

Boas, F. (1904). The history of anthropology. *Science*, 20(512), 513–524.

Derman-Sparks, L. (2011). Anti-bias education: Reflections. Exchange, 33(4), 55–58.

Freire, P. (2018). Education as a Practice of Freedom. Duke University Press.

Gehlen, A. (1940). *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*. Junker und Dünnhaupt.

Greenwald, A. G., & Banaji, M. R. (1995). Implicit social cognition: Attitudes, self-esteem, and stereotypes. Psychological review, 102(1), 4.

Hall, E. T. (1959). *The silent language*. Doubleday.

Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Books.

Hall, E. T. (1984). *The dance of life: The other dimension of time*. Anchor.

Hall, S. (2015). Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory* (S. 392–403). Routledge.

Hofstede, G. (1983). National cultures in four dimensions: A research-based theory of cultural differences among nations. *International Studies of Management & Organization*, 13(1–2), 46–74.

Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context. *Online readings in psychology and culture*, 2(1), 3–26.

Kluckhohn, F. R., & Strodtbeck, F. L. (1961). *Variations in value orientations*. Row, Peterson.

Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1952). *Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

Liu, Y. (2016). *East meets West*. TASCHEN Verlag.

Moosmüller, A. (2000). Die Schwierigkeit mit dem Kulturbegriff in der interkulturellen Kommunikation. In R. Alsheimer, A. Moosmüller, & K. Roth (Hrsg.), *Lokale Kulturen in einer globalisierenden Welt. Perspektiven auf interkulturelle Spannungsfelder* (Bd. 9, S. 15–31). Waxmann Verlag Münster, Germany.

Nunez, C., Mahdi, R. N., & Popma, L. (2007). *Intercultural sensitivity: From denial to intercultural competence*. Van Gorcum.

Pagel, M. (2012). *Wired for Culture: Origins of the Human Social Mind*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Sackmann, S. A. (2006). Leading responsibly across cultures. In T. Maak & N. Pless (Hrsg.), *Responsible leadership* (S. 122–137). Routledge.

Sökefeld, M. (2001). Der Kulturbegriff in der Ethnologie und im öffentlichen Diskurs—Eine paradoxe Entwicklung? In H. Stöber (Hrsg.), *„Fremde Kulturen" im Geographieunterricht. Analysen—Konzeptionen—Erfahrungen. Studien zur internationalen Schulbuchforschung* (Bd. 106, S. 119–137). Hahn.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2008). *Culturally speaking culture, communication and politeness theory* (2. ed.). Continuum.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2012). *What is culture? A compilation of quotations*. GlobalPAD Core Concepts. http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/interculturalskills/

Thomas, A. (1991). *Kulturstandards in der internationalen Begegnung*. Saarbrücken/Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik.

Tomasello, M. (2014). The ultra-social animal. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 44(3), 187–194. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2015

Trompenaars, F. (1994). *Riding the waves of culture understanding cultural diversity in business* (Repr. with corrections). Brealey.

Trompenaars, F. (2018). Did The Pedestrian Die? Ethics Across Cultures. *Journal of Intercultural Management and Ethics*, 1, 5–10. https://doi.org/10.35478/jime.2018.1.02

Welsch, W. (1999). Transculturality: The puzzling form of cultures today. In *Spaces of culture: City, nation, world* (S. 195–213). Sage Publications Ltd.