**What exactly is culture?**

**Introduction**

No matter whether during a semester abroad, at work or in digital spaces - we live in a globalized world and are constantly dealing with people with a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. We always notice that what connects people is much more important than our differences, but our differences do matter. Since we humans are socialized differently and have had different experiences, we also think, feel and act differently. If we are not aware of this, it can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. In order to prevent this, it is important to know a lot about our – often unconscious – cultural influences. However, this requires that we first have a basic understanding of what we are talking about here and what culture actually is.

**Definitions & challenges of the concept of culture**

“Culture” is a word that is used very frequently – usually without a more concrete awareness of the actual meaning of the term. If you ask people what culture is, terms like nationality, migration or migrant background usually come up. In addition, topics such as traditions, habits, values ​​and norms, food, music, clothing, etc. are often mentioned. But the term culture is actually much bigger. It comes from the Latin cultura, which goes back to the word colere, which in turn means to cherish, care for, preserve or protect (Fuchs 2012: 2). In a very general definition, culture includes everything that people creatively generate. This includes material, normative and symbolic culture as well as all technologies. Material culture includes all objects that people make or modify. Normative culture is the values, norms and social rules that we have in our heads. Since these are not visible, they are often very difficult to access for other people. Symbolic aspects of culture are symbols or signs that point to something else about themselves. This can be, for example, our language and characters or signs such as the heart as a symbol of love or the white dove for peace. Art also has a highly symbolic character. Culture also includes all the technologies that people use in everyday life. These include, for example, different types of food preparation, clothing manufacturing techniques or architecture.

There are many different definitions of culture in the academic world (e.g. Kroeber 1952). Different disciplines place different focuses depending on the question and the sources. Archaeologists, for example, examine human remains and draw conclusions about past living environments. For them, material culture plays a key role. Sociologists, on the other hand, deal with the cultural aspects of human interaction, which puts our social behavior at the center. In the area of ​​inter- and transcultural communication it is primarily about “...the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the member of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede et al. 2010: 6). Spencer-Oatey defines culture as a “fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioral norms, and basic assumptions and values ​​that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behavior and his/her interpretations of the "meaning" of other people's behavior” (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 4). Another classic definition comes from Kroeber/Kluckhohn: “Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior 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; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action” (Kroeber/Kluckhohn 1952: 181, quoted in Spencer-Oatey 2012:2).

At this point it is absolutely necessary to also address the challenges of the concept of culture (Moosmüller 2000; Sökefeld 2001). In principle, the term culture is just a working or auxiliary term, because cultural descriptions and attributions are always just constructs. They are attempts to categorize people and summarize groups and their characteristics in order to make reality more tangible. This creates “thinking boxes” (e.g. national stereotypes) into which we sort people, e.g. Germans are so-and-so, footballers are so-and-so, ... . Cultural attributions can cause great damage if handled without reflection, because not all Germans are the same, just as not all footballers are the same. The constructed stereotypical equality does not exist in our diverse and dynamic reality. Instead, people are cultural hybrids (transculturality) and cultures are also dynamic and constantly changing. Therefore, the concept of culture is seen as quite controversial in some academic disciplines and especially in cultural studies itself (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1991).

## Cultural theories

Some cultural theories are described below that help us to better understand the concept of culture. Early approaches represented cultures as closed, stable and homogeneous systems (spherical models). They go back to Herder’s ideas, who thus laid the “foundation stone for the theoretical conceptualization of national culture” (Frank 2015). In this way of thinking, for example, there was a uniform and stable German or French culture. This usually meant German or French “high culture”, i.e. art, literature or music. These spherical models are now outdated because they do not correspond to reality. We now know that cultures are much more complex and that such perspectives also lead to stereotypical views of people. Unfortunately, such ideas are still quite effective in people's minds.

We now see cultures more as network models. This idea goes back to Cliford Geertz's idea of ​​culture as a “web of meanings” (Geertz 1987). Cultures are viewed here as permeable, multi-layered, heterogeneous, diverse, pluralistic and dynamic. They surround us like networks, giving us social support and orientation. They are interwoven networks of various individual actors, institutions, norms, practices, artifacts, etc. that are in continuous interaction and exchange.

One of the best-known cultural models is Edward T. Hall's iceberg model (1976). The majority of an iceberg lies beneath the surface of the water; only around 10% can be seen above the surface. The same is true with cultural groups. There is the easily accessible, visible part, and then there is the large invisible part, the “hidden dimensions”. For example, if we go on vacation to a part of the world we don't know for two weeks, then in this short time we only get to know the tip of the iceberg, i.e. the easily accessible, visible cultural expressions such as architecture, food, clothing or music. However, in order to get to know the bottom 90%, we have to stay there longer and, above all, spend a lot of time with the people. Then we get to know, for example, the language and methods of communication, the local understanding of relationships and social roles, deep-seated beliefs and value systems, social behavior and norms.

The analogy of cultural glasses goes back to Franz Boas (1907) and describes the theory that every person can only perceive the world through their own, culturally colored glasses. The color of the lenses depends on your own experiences and your own socialization, your own cultural participation. An objective perception of reality is simply not possible. We usually only become aware of this subjectivity through encounters with other people and unfamiliar patterns of thinking, feeling and acting.

The concept of transculturality (Welsch 2010) can best be described in comparison with the concept of interculturality. Inter means between, intercultural means intercultural. Here, cultural images similar to the ball model quickly emerge, i.e. of cultures as static, stable and homogeneous systems between which something takes place. Such a view can quickly lead to demarcation, highlighting difference and even isolation. Trans, on the other hand, means over or through. It is emphasized here that cultures are hybrid and flexible systems without clear boundaries, which interpenetrate one another and have merged with one another in their processual diversity. Such a concept of culture offers significantly more protection against exclusion, discrimination, ethnocentrism or othering. However, this view is criticized for trivializing important, everyday-relevant differences, for promoting a tendency towards uniformity (e.g. in the form of “Western” consumer goods, uniform information or a “world culture”) and for the fact that economic-political power processes are driving forces of transculturalization (Graef-Calliess 2018; Welsch 2010).

**Cultural diversity**

In order to properly understand the concept of culture, we have to take a look at the cultural diversity of our living environments. Cultural diversity describes the coexistence of different cultural expressions within a society or global context. It includes differences in language, religion, ethnicity, traditions, world views, etc. . It is a central feature of globalization and modern societies, which are characterized by migration, international communication and the increasing interconnection of markets (Apppadurai 1996).

Our current living environment is shaped by a multitude of cultures. In addition to the often associated national or ethnic cultures, there are many important, everyday-relevant categories of culture such as gender cultures, age cultures, generational cultures, religious or regional cultures, family cultures, (university) school cultures, corporate cultures, professional cultures, club cultures, music cultures, etc. . These are just a few examples; this list could be expanded to include a few more categories. In principle, within all human groups that exist over a longer period of time, cultural similarities and corresponding differences from other groups arise.

**Culture and identity**

Identity is neither innate nor stable. In his identity theory, Stuart Hall emphasizes that identity is socially and culturally constructed and, like the world around us, is in a constant process of transformation (Hall 2015). Socialization is at the same time enculturation. Each of us grows up in culturally hybrid social environments and internalizes a wide variety of culture-specific patterns of thinking, feeling and behavior in our social interaction, e.g. values ​​and norms, explicit and implicit social rules, language or non-verbal communication.

Through the resulting agreements, people collectively construct their social reality (Berger/Luckmann 1967). A good example of the construction of a social reality is money. If we came from another planet we wouldn't know what these little metal coins and pieces of paper actually are. They can only be effective if all people believe in their value (Harari 2014: 157ff). This is just a small and, above all, globally effective example of a jointly constructed reality, but if we take a closer look, our entire everyday life is full of small, jointly constructed realities. Just think of different languages ​​and the meaning concepts of words (e.g. ideas like “siesta”, “zeitgeist” or family), different understandings of social roles (e.g. the understanding of the father’s role is not the same everywhere) or institutions and their functions.

On the individual level, we are all part of different cultural groups, so we belong to different cultures and are culturally hybrid dynamic creatures. The term multicollectivity describes that “the multiple and diverse affiliations of the individual form a constitutive element of human existence” (Rathje 2014: 42). As an example we can tell about Shanti. She was born in Israel, has lived in Berlin for many years and studies history there. She lives in a shared apartment and works in an Italian restaurant. Shanti is bisexual and enjoys going to punk concerts in her free time. If time and budget allow, she travels as a backpacker during the semester break. Shanti's cultural participation does not remain the same throughout life, but is always dynamic and flexible. For example, if we meet her five years later, she has settled into a relationship and become a mother, lives with her small family in an apartment in Tübigen, Swabia, is a mother part-time and works in a history archive the other half of the day. In her free time she travels with her child, dog and friends and regularly attends yoga classes.

Every culture we participate in shapes us. This led to various phenomena: On the one hand, we are all cultural chameleons: we are able to constantly adapt to different cultural contexts. We have complex adaptation mechanisms (Northoff 2009). For example, we adapt our clothes to different situations, the topics we talk about, our body language, etc... In addition, through participation in different cultures, hybridization occurs at the individual level: in various aspects of life we ​​combine the various cultural influences, e.g. we adopt words from other languages, have the favorite curry from our last trip to Thailand alongside the Spanish paella seasoning and the herbs of Provence in our spice box and also a mix of styles from our different eras of life in the wardrobe. In addition, people can form transcultures, for example when a family migrates from one country to another and within these families both national cultures are mixed, for example both languages ​​or culinary aspects are mixed.

**Conclusions**

This article has shown that “cultures” are constructs that people use to make different groups and their characteristics tangible. In addition, culture is much more than just the everyday association with nationality or ethnicity. Our living environment consists of a multitude of cultural participations (multicollectivity), e.g. family culture, religious culture, language cultures, ... . So we are all cultural hybrids. Our cultural participation is not static, but dynamic throughout our lives. Every cultural participation shapes us and leaves its mark on our thoughts, feelings and actions.

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