

Cultures and Organizations

SOFTWARE OF THE MIND

**Intercultural Cooperation
and Its Importance
for Survival**

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PART

**THE CONCEPT
OF CULTURE**

I

The Rules of the Social Game

11th juror: *(rising)* "I beg pardon, in discussing . . ."

10th juror: *(interrupting and mimicking)* "I beg pardon. What are you so goddam polite about?"

11th juror: *(looking straight at the 10th juror)* "For the same reason you're not. It's the way I was brought up."

—Reginald Rose, *Twelve Angry Men*

T*welve Angry Men* is an American theater piece that became a famous motion picture, starring Henry Fonda. The play was published in 1955. The scene consists of the jury room of a New York court of law. Twelve jury members who never met before have to decide unanimously on the guilt or innocence of a boy from a slum area, accused of murder. The quote cited is from the second and final act when emotions have reached the boiling point. It is a confrontation between the tenth juror, a garage owner, and the eleventh juror, a European-born,

probably Austrian, watchmaker. The tenth juror is irritated by what he sees as the excessively polite manners of the other man. But the watchmaker cannot behave otherwise. Even after many years in his new home country, he still behaves the way he was raised. He carries within himself an indelible pattern of behavior.

Different Minds but Common Problems

The world is full of confrontations between people, groups, and nations who think, feel, and act differently. At the same time these people, groups, and nations, just as with our twelve angry men, are exposed to common problems that demand cooperation for their solution. Ecological, economical, political, military, hygienic, and meteorological developments do not stop at national or regional borders. Coping with the threats of nuclear warfare, global warming, organized crime, poverty, terrorism, ocean pollution, extinction of animals, AIDS, or a worldwide recession demands cooperation of opinion leaders from many countries. They in their turn need the support of broad groups of followers in order to implement the decisions taken.

Understanding the differences in the ways these leaders and their followers think, feel, and act is a condition for bringing about worldwide solutions that work. Questions of economic, technological, medical, or biological cooperation have too often been considered as merely technical. One of the reasons why so many solutions do not work or cannot be implemented is that differences in thinking among the partners have been ignored.

The objective of this book is to help in dealing with the differences in thinking, feeling, and acting of people around the globe. It will show that although the variety in people's minds is enormous, there is a structure in this variety that can serve as a basis for mutual understanding.

Culture as Mental Programming

Every person carries within him- or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting that were learned throughout the person's lifetime. Much of it was acquired in early childhood, because at that time a person is most susceptible to learning and assimilating. As soon as certain patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting have established themselves within a person's mind, he or she must unlearn these patterns before being able to

learn something different, and unlearning is more difficult than learning for the first time.

Using the analogy of the way computers are programmed, this book will call such patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting *mental programs*, or, as per the book's subtitle, *software of the mind*. This does not mean, of course, that people are programmed the way computers are. A person's behavior is only partially predetermined by his or her mental programs: he or she has a basic ability to deviate from them and to react in ways that are new, creative, destructive, or unexpected. The software of the mind that this book is about only indicates what reactions are likely and understandable, given one's past.

The sources of one's mental programs lie within the social environments in which one grew up and collected one's life experiences. The programming starts within the family; it continues within the neighborhood, at school, in youth groups, at the workplace, and in the living community. The European watchmaker from the quote at the beginning of this chapter came from a country and a social class in which polite behavior is still at a premium today. Most people in that environment would have reacted as he did. The American garage owner, who worked himself up from the slums, acquired quite different mental programs. Mental programs vary as much as the social environments in which they were acquired.

A customary term for such mental software is *culture*. This word has several meanings, all derived from its Latin source, which refers to the tilling of the soil. In most Western languages *culture* commonly means "civilization" or "refinement of the mind" and in particular the results of such refinement, such as education, art, and literature. This is culture in the narrow sense. Culture as mental software, however, corresponds to a much broader use of the word that is common among sociologists and, especially, anthropologists:¹ this is the meaning that will be used throughout this book.

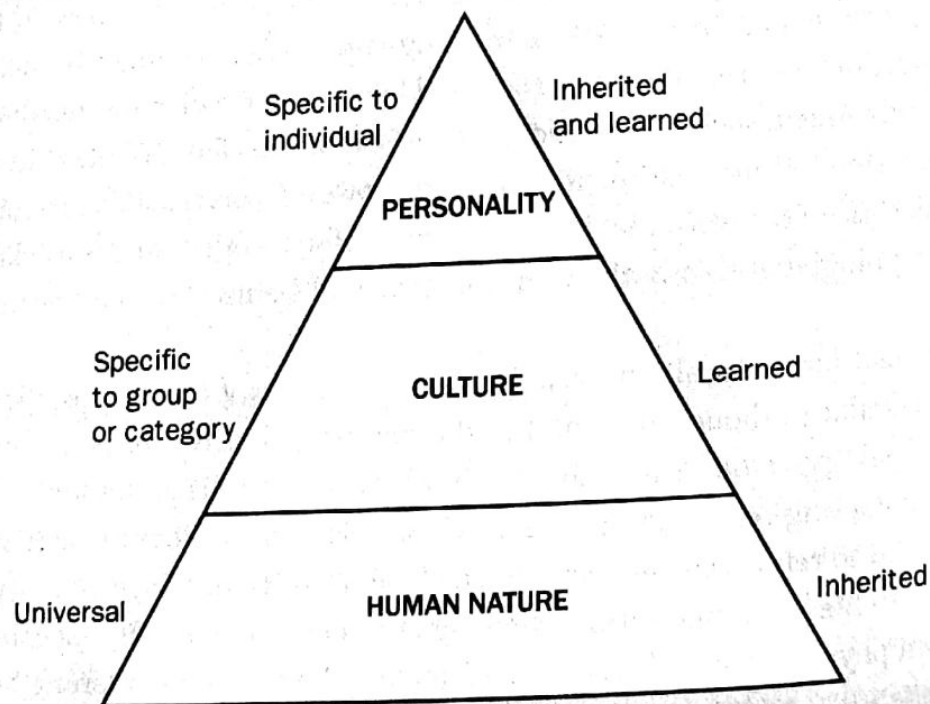
Social (or cultural) anthropology is the science of human societies—in particular (although not only) traditional or "primitive" ones. In social anthropology, *culture* is a catchword for all those patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting referred to in the previous paragraphs. Not only activities supposed to refine the mind are included, but also the ordinary and menial things in life: greeting, eating, showing or not showing feelings, keeping a certain physical distance from others, making love, and maintaining body hygiene.

Culture is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. It is *the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.*²

Culture is learned, not innate. It derives from one's social environment rather than from one's genes.³ Culture should be distinguished from human nature on one side and from an individual's personality on the other (see Figure 1.1), although exactly where the borders lie between nature and culture, and between culture and personality, is a matter of discussion among social scientists.⁴

Human nature is what all human beings, from the Russian professor to the Australian aborigine, have in common: it represents the universal level in one's mental software. It is inherited within our genes; within the computer analogy it is the "operating system" that determines our physical and basic psychological functioning. The human ability to feel fear, anger, love, joy, sadness, and shame; the need to associate with others and to play and exercise oneself; and the facility to observe the environment and to talk about it with other humans all belong to this level of mental program-

FIGURE 1.1 Three Levels of Uniqueness in Mental Programming



ming. However, what one does with these feelings, how one expresses fear, joy, observations, and so on, is modified by culture.

The *personality* of an individual, on the other hand, is his or her unique personal set of mental programs that needn't be shared with any other human being. It is based on traits that are partly inherited within the individual's unique set of genes and partly learned. *Learned* means modified by the influence of collective programming (culture) *as well as* by unique personal experiences.

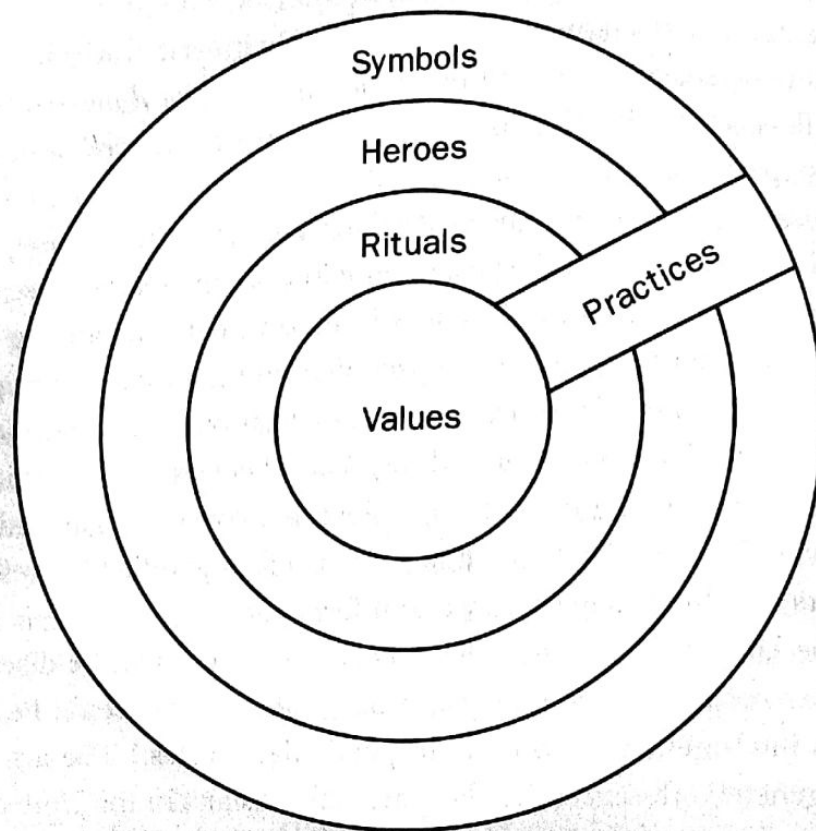
Cultural traits have often been attributed to heredity, because philosophers and other scholars in the past did not know how to otherwise explain the remarkable stability of differences in culture patterns among human groups. They underestimated the impact of learning from previous generations and of teaching to a future generation what one has learned oneself. The role of heredity is exaggerated in pseudotheories of *race*, which have been responsible, among other things, for the holocaust organized by the Nazis during World War II. Ethnic strife is often justified by unfounded arguments of cultural superiority and inferiority.

In the United States there have been periodic scientific discussions on whether certain ethnic groups, in particular blacks, could be genetically less intelligent than others, in particular whites.⁵ The arguments used for genetic differences, by the way, make Asians in the United States on average *more* intelligent than whites. However, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find tests of intelligence that are culture free. Such tests should reflect only innate abilities and be insensitive to differences in the social environment. In the United States a larger share of blacks than of whites has grown up in socially disadvantaged circumstances, which is a cultural influence no test known to us can circumvent. The same logic applies to differences in intelligence between ethnic groups in other countries.

Symbols, Heroes, Rituals, and Values

Cultural differences manifest themselves in several ways. From the many terms used to describe manifestations of culture, the following four together cover the total concept rather neatly: symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. In Figure 1.2 these have been pictured as the skins of an onion, indicating that symbols represent the most superficial and values the deepest manifestations of culture, with heroes and rituals in between.

FIGURE 1.2 The "Onion": Manifestations of Culture at Different Levels of Depth



Symbols are words, gestures, pictures, or objects that carry a particular meaning that is recognized as such only by those who share the culture. The words in a language or jargon belong to this category, as do dress, hairstyles, flags, and status symbols. New symbols are easily developed and old ones disappear; symbols from one cultural group are regularly copied by others. This is why symbols have been put into the outer, most superficial layer of Figure 1.2.

Heroes are persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess characteristics that are highly prized in a culture and thus serve as models for behavior. Even Barbie, Batman, or, as a contrast, Snoopy in the United States, Asterix in France, or Ollie B. Bommel (Mr. Bumble) in the Netherlands have served as cultural heroes. In this age of television, outward appearances have become more important in the choice of heroes than they were before.

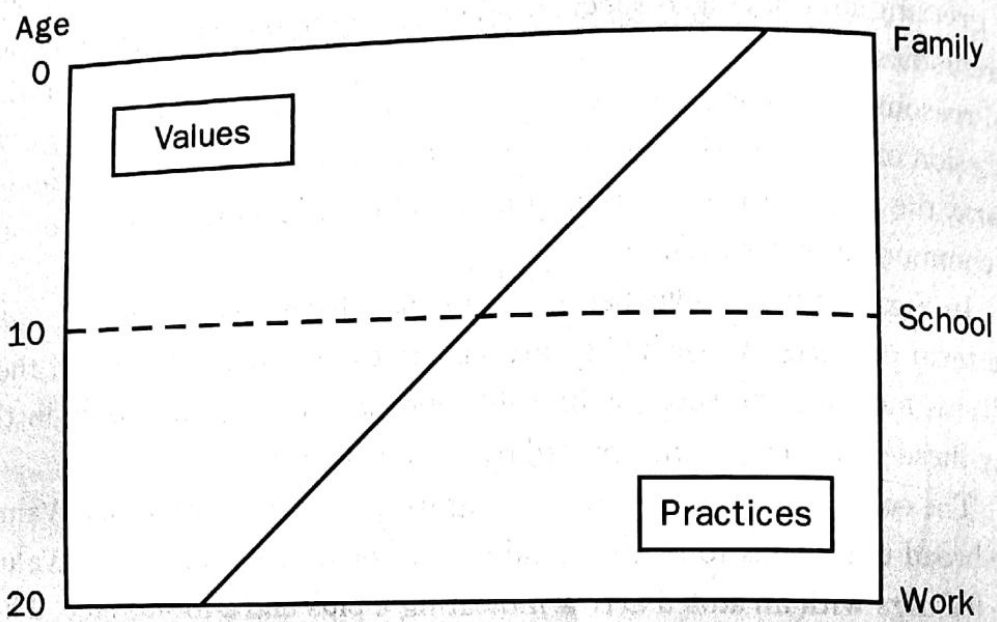
Rituals are collective activities that are technically superfluous to reach desired ends but that, within a culture, are considered socially essential. They are therefore carried out for their own sake. Examples include ways of greeting and paying respect to others, as well as social and religious ceremonies. Business and political meetings organized for seemingly rational reasons often serve mainly ritual purposes, such as reinforcing group cohesion or allowing the leaders to assert themselves. Rituals include *discourse*, the way language is used in text and talk, in daily interaction, and in communicating beliefs.⁶

In Figure 1.2 symbols, heroes, and rituals have been subsumed under the term *practices*. As such they are visible to an outside observer; their cultural meaning, however, is invisible and lies precisely and only in the way these practices are interpreted by the insiders.

The core of culture according to Figure 1.2 is formed by *values*. Values are broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others. Values are feelings with an added arrow indicating a plus and a minus side. They deal with pairings such as the following:

- Evil versus good
- Dirty versus clean
- Dangerous versus safe
- Forbidden versus permitted
- Decent versus indecent
- Moral versus immoral
- Ugly versus beautiful
- Unnatural versus natural
- Abnormal versus normal
- Paradoxical versus logical
- Irrational versus rational

Figure 1.3 pictures when and where we acquire our values and practices. Our values are acquired early in our lives. Compared with most other creatures, humans at birth are very incompletely equipped for survival. Fortunately, our human physiology provides us with a receptive period of some ten to twelve years, a span in which we can quickly and largely unconsciously absorb necessary information from our environment. This includes symbols (such as language), heroes (such as our parents), and rituals (such as toilet training), and, most important, it includes our basic

FIGURE 1.3 The Learning of Values and Practices

values. At the end of this period, we gradually switch to a different, conscious way of learning, focusing primarily on new practices.

Culture Reproduces Itself

Remember being a small child? How did you acquire your values? The first years are likely gone from your memory, but they are influential. Did you move about on your mother's hip or on her back all day? Did you sleep with her, or with your siblings, or were you kept in your own cot or pram? Did both your parents handle you, or only your mother, or other persons? Was there noise or silence around you? Did you see tacit people, laughing ones, playing ones, working ones, tender or violent ones? What happened when you cried?

Then, memories begin. Who were your models, and what was your aim in life? Quite probably, your parents or elder siblings were your heroes, and you tried to imitate them. You learned which things were dirty and bad and how to be clean and good. For instance, you learned rules about what is clean and dirty in regard to bodily functions such as spitting, eating with your left hand, blowing your nose, defecating, or belching in public, along with gestures such as touching various parts of your body or exposing them while sitting or standing. You learned how bad it was to break rules.

You learned how much initiative you were supposed to take and how close you were supposed to be to people, and you learned whether you were a boy or a girl, who else was also a boy or a girl, and what that implied.

Then when you were a child of perhaps six to twelve, schoolteachers and classmates, sports and TV idols, and national or religious heroes entered your world as new models. You imitated now one, then another. Parents, teachers, and others rewarded or punished you for your behavior. You learned whether it was good or bad to ask questions, to speak up, to fight, to cry, to work hard, to lie, to be impolite. You learned when to be proud and when to be ashamed. You also exercised politics, especially with your age-mates: How does one make friends? Is it possible to rise in the hierarchy? How? Who owes what to whom?

In your teenage years, your attention shifted to others your age. You were intensely concerned with your gender identity and with forming relationships with peers. Depending on the society in which you lived, you spent your time mainly with your own sex or with mixed sexes. You may have intensely admired some of your peers.

Later you may have chosen a partner, probably using criteria similar to that of other young people in your country. You may have had children—and then the cycle starts again.

There is a powerful stabilizing force in this cycle that biologists call *homeostasis*. Parents tend to reproduce the education that they received, whether they want to or not. And there is only a modest role for technology. The most salient learning in your tender years is all about the body and about relationships with people. Not coincidentally, these are also sources of intense taboos.

Because they were acquired so early in our lives, many values remain unconscious to those who hold them. Therefore, they cannot be discussed, nor can they be directly observed by outsiders. They can only be inferred from the way people act under various circumstances. If one asks people why they act as they do, they may say they just “know” or “feel” how to do the right thing. Their heart or their conscience tells them.

No Group Can Escape Culture

There normally is continuity in culture. But if you were caught in a gale at sea and found yourself stranded on an uninhabited island with twenty-nine unknown others, what would you do?⁷ If you and your fellow passengers were from different parts of the world, you would lack a common lan-

guage and shared habits. Your first task would be to develop an embryonic common language and some shared rules for behavior, cooperation, and leadership. Role divisions would emerge between young and old, men and women. Conflicts would arise and somehow be handled. Whose responsibility would it be whether two people mate? Who would take care of the sick, the dead, and the children born on the island?

The point of this example is to show that no group can escape culture. Creating shared rules, even if they are never written down, is a precondition for group survival. This pioneer group of thirty people united at random will have to create a new culture. The particulars of that culture will largely depend on chance, inheriting from existing values, particularly those of the most prominent group members. However, once the culture is set, and supposing children are born into the group, that culture will reproduce itself.

Values and the Moral Circle

From 1940 to 1945, during World War II, Germany occupied the Netherlands. In April 1945, German troops withdrew in disorder, confiscating many bicycles from the Dutch population. In April 2009, the Parish Council of the Saint-Catharina church in the Dutch town of Nijkerk received a letter from a former German soldier who, on his flight to Germany from the advancing Canadians, had taken a bike that was parked in front of the church. The letter's author wished to make amends and asked the Parish Council to trace the owner or his heirs, in order to refund the injured party for the damage.⁸

It is perplexing that human beings possess magnificent skills of reflection, empathy, and communication but are nonetheless capable of waging intergroup conflicts on massive scales over just about anything. Why is intergroup conflict still with us if it is so obviously destructive? Apparently, we do not use the same moral rules for members of our group as we do for others. But who is "our group"? This turns out to be a key question for any group, and from childhood on we learn who are members of our group and who are not, as well as what that means. People draw a mental line around those whom they consider to be their group. Only members of the *moral circle* thus delineated have full rights and full obligations.⁹

The German soldier in our story has probably spent long years revisiting his war experiences. In his old age he has redefined himself as belonging to the same moral circle as the churchgoer whose bicycle he took

sixty-four years before, and he has come to see his confiscation of the bike as a theft for which he wants to make amends.

Our mental programs are adapted to life in a moral circle. We take pride in the achievements of our children; we are happy when our favorite sports team wins; many of us sing patriotic or religious songs with feeling and pledge allegiance to our national flag. We are ashamed of the failures of members of our group, and we feel guilty about our crimes. There are differences among groups in the fine-tuning of these emotions: in some societies a woman can get killed by male family members based on rumors that she slept with the wrong man, and in others a man can be punished by law for having paid sex. Nevertheless, moral, group-related emotions are universal. We have these emotions even about frivolous things such as sports, song festivals, and TV quiz shows. The moral circle affects not only our symbols, heroes, and rituals but also our values.

There may be dissent in societies regarding who within the group is good and who is bad. Politics serves to sort out the difference. In societies that are politically pluralistic, right-wing parties typically protect the strong members, left-wing parties protect the weak members, green parties protect the environment, and populist parties brand parts of the population as bad guys. Leaders such as former U.S. president George W. Bush try to promote internal group cohesion by creating enemies: they make the moral circle smaller, in the same way that populists and dictators often do. The perception of a threat makes people close ranks behind their current leader. Leaders such as U.S. president Barack Obama strive to enlarge the moral circle by creating friends, in the same way that diplomats and negotiators do. In doing so, however, they risk achieving fission in their own moral circle. President Anwar el-Sadat, of Egypt (1918–81), and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, of Israel (1922–95), were both assassinated by one of their own people after reconciling with the traditional enemy.

The moral circle, in many guises and on scales from a single marriage to humanity as a whole, is the key determinant of our social lives, and it both creates and carries our culture.

Boundaries of the Moral Circle: Religion and Philosophy

Philosophy, spirituality, and religion are ways of sorting out the difference between good and bad. For 2,500 years, philosophers in the East and West have taught the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would wish them to do

to you”—which reads like an affirmation of the moral circle.¹⁰ Religious prescriptions such as “Love thy neighbor as thyself” serve the same purpose. Religious sects tend to draw their moral circle around members of their own community. Moral rights and duties, as well as rewards in the afterlife, are granted only to members of the faith. Religion, in essence and whatever the specific beliefs of a particular one, plays an important role in creating and delineating moral circles.

Nations and religions can come into competition if they both attempt to delineate a society-level moral circle in the same country. This has frequently happened during our history, and it is still happening today. The violence of these conflicts testifies to the importance of belonging to a moral circle. It also shows how great a prerogative it is to be the one who defines its boundaries. Through visits and speeches, new leaders typically take action to redefine the boundaries of the moral circle that they lead.

Some societies and religions have a tendency to expand the moral circle and to consider all humans as belonging to a single moral community. Hence the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,¹¹ and hence calls for development aid. Indeed, animals can be drawn into the moral circle: people form associations or even political parties to protect animal rights, and pet animals are solemnly buried. However, in such a vast moral circle, rights and duties are necessarily diluted. Historically, religions that were tolerant of religious diversity have lost out against those that were more closed on themselves. Most empires have disintegrated from the inside.

Rules for dealing with bad people and with would-be newcomers also differ across societies, of which we shall see examples in subsequent chapters. We humans are continually negotiating the boundaries of our moral circles, and we do it in ways that differ across cultures. Culture is about how to be a good member of the moral circle, depending on one’s personal or ascribed properties, about what to do if people are bad, and about whom to consider for admission.

Beyond Race and Family

Gert Jan once took a night train from Vienna to Amsterdam. An elderly Austrian lady shared his compartment and offered him some delicious homegrown apricots. Then a good-looking young black man entered. The lady seemed terrified to find herself within touching distance of a black man, and Gert Jan set to work trying to reestablish a pleasant atmosphere. The young man turned out to be a classical ballet dancer from the Dutch

National Ballet, with Surinamese origins, who had performed in Vienna. But the lady continued to be out of her wits with fear—xenophobia, in a literal sense. She could not get beyond the idea that when the dancer and Gert Jan talked music, they must mean African tam-tam. Luckily, the dancer was well traveled and did not take offense. The three arrived in Amsterdam safely after some polite chitchatting in English.

Humans whose ancestors came from different parts of the world look different. Some of our genetic differences are visible from the outside, even though our genetic variation as a species is small—smaller, for instance, than that of chimpanzees. Biologists call the human genome well mixed. We certainly are one single species, and it is becoming morally preferable to say that we are one human race.¹² Still, biologically speaking, there are races in our species that can be identified through visual and genetic means. However, genetic differences are not the main basis for group boundaries. There is continuity in our genomes, but there is discontinuity in our group affiliations. Millions of migrants live in other continents than their ancestors. It takes an expert observer to guess both ethnic origin and adoptive nationality just by looking at somebody. And yet recognizing group identity matters a lot. Religion, language, and other symbolic group boundaries are important to humans, and we spend much of our time establishing, negotiating, and changing them. People can unite or fight over just about any symbolic matter, from good-old family feuds to territorial fights, defense of honor in response to an insult, or the meaning of a book.

The historical expansion of human societies to millions of individuals has changed the nature of relatedness. Today, many people feel related to people with whom they share a symbolic group membership, not necessarily a genetic one. We fight and die for our country, sometimes even for our soccer team. We form ecstatic crowds of millions that feel united in admiration of a pop star, a gripping politician, or a charismatic preacher. We are active on computer-mediated social networks with people all across the world, and these relationships can be meaningful even with people whom we have never met face-to-face. We have laws that allocate rights and duties to people regardless of family ties, except in special cases such as birth and inheritance. Family loyalty is still important and will no doubt continue to be so, but it is part of a larger societal framework. We live in societies that are so large that blood ties cannot be the only, or even the most important, way to determine moral rights and duties. That said, there is no doubt that blood is still thicker than water, and this is more so in some societies than in others, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

We and They

Social scientists use the terms *in-group* and *out-group*. In-group refers to what we intuitively feel to be "we," while out-group refers to "they." Humans really function in this simple way: we have a persistent need to classify others in either group. The definition of in-group is quite variable in some societies, but it is always noticeable. We use it for family versus in-laws ("the cold side of the family"), for our team versus the opponents, for people looking like us versus another race. In one experiment, U.S. researchers tested affective reactions of African-American and European-American participants to pictures of members of their own and of the opposite ethnic group.¹³ Both African-American and European-American participants showed more emotional and physiological reactions when viewing pictures of people of their own race than when viewing people of the other race. They were more emotionally involved with in-group members. While the experiment supported in-group empathy, it did not find a general out-group antipathy.

Gender also plays a role in we-they dynamics, as we might expect in a species in which gender roles have historically been very different regarding crossing group boundaries. Women have usually come into other groups as young adults, to live as loyal members of the new group. Men have frequently come to new groups to dominate or to fight them. Both males and females can easily learn to overcome fear of an unfamiliar-looking female, but they tend to remain scared of faces of out-group males.¹⁴ Of course, this depends on which faces are thought of as out-group, and that in turn depends on exposure in infancy.

In we-versus-they experiments, physiological measurements can be used alongside questionnaires to measure fear. People's bodies can tell stories that their minds feel as taboo. These results confirm that family in a very wide sense is linked to human social biology and that ethnic characteristics are important as a quick aid in determining who belongs. People are we-versus-they creatures. In infancy they can learn to consider anyone, or any kind of face, as "we," but after a few months their recognition is fixed. Later in life it becomes hard for people to change intuitive we-they responses to racial characteristics. Physiological reactions to a we-they situation can be based on any distinction among groups—even that among students from different university departments.¹⁵

Ideologies as Group Markers

If you could make three statements about yourself, what would you say? Would you mention individual characteristics such as the color of your eyes, your favorite sports or food, or the like? More likely, you would mention group membership attributes such as gender, profession, nationality, religion, which sports team you favor, and which role you fulfill in society. Even if you mention only personal attributes, they are probably attributes that are esteemed among people who matter to you. Much of people's social activity is spent explicitly maintaining symbolic group ties. Most people most of the time are busy being good members of the groups to which they belong. They show it in their clothes, their movements, their way of speaking, their possessions, and their jobs. They spend time with these groups in rituals that strengthen them: talking, laughing, playing, touching, singing, fighting playfully, eating, drinking, and so forth. These activities all aim at reinforcing the moral circle. On a conscious level, however, few would look at their daily lives that way. Instead, people describe what they do in terms of its ritual justification. They go to work, they make strategic plans, they do team building, they attend church services, they serve their country, they celebrate a special occasion.

So, most people see differences where an anthropologist or a biologist sees similarities. These differences are important because we are continually defining and redefining who belongs to what group and in what role. Creating groups and changing membership is one of people's core activities in life. Every society has different rules about how bad it is to leave one group and to join another. It is not surprising that many groups have strong prohibitions against leaving, sometimes backed up by severe penalties. It is never easy to be of a minority religion, for instance, whatever the country one lives in. The degree to which groups penalize deviant symbolic identities and behaviors differs enormously across societies, as shall be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Layers of Culture

In the course of our lives, each of us has to find his or her place in many moral circles. Every group or category of people carries a set of common mental programs that constitutes its culture. As almost everyone

belongs to a number of different groups and categories at the same time, we unavoidably carry several layers of mental programming within ourselves, corresponding to different levels of culture. In particular:

- A national level according to one's country (or countries, for people who migrated during their lifetimes)
- A regional and/or ethnic and/or religious and/or linguistic affiliation level
- A gender level, according to whether one was born as a girl or as a boy
- A generation level, separating grandparents from parents from children
- A social class level, associated with educational opportunities and with a person's occupation or profession
- For those who are employed, organizational, departmental, and/or corporate levels according to the way employees have been socialized by their work organization

The mental programs from these various levels are not necessarily in harmony. In modern society they are often partly conflicting: for example, religious values may conflict with generation values; gender values may conflict with organizational practices. Conflicting mental programs within people make it difficult to anticipate their behavior in a new situation.

Culture Change: Changing Practices, Stable Values

If you could step into a time machine and travel back sixty years to the time of your parents or grandparents, you would find the world much changed. There would be no computers, and television sets would rarely be seen. The cities would appear small and provincial, with only the occasional car and no big retail chain outlets. Travel back another sixty years and cars would disappear from the streets as well, as would telephones, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners from our houses and airplanes from the air.

Our world is changing. Technology invented by people surrounds us. The World Wide Web has made our world appear smaller, so that the notion of a "global village" seems appropriate. Business companies operate worldwide. They innovate rapidly; many do not know today what products they will manufacture and sell next year or what new job types they will

need in five years. Mergers and stock market fluctuations shake the business landscape.

So, on the surface, change is all-powerful. But how deep are these changes? Can human societies be likened to ships that are rocked about aimlessly on turbulent seas of change? Or to shores, covered and then bared again by new waves washing in, altered ever so slowly with each successive tide?

A book by a Frenchman about his visit to the United States contains the following text:

The American ministers of the Gospel do not attempt to draw or to fix all the thoughts of man upon the life to come; they are willing to surrender a portion of his heart to the cares of the present. . . . If they take no part themselves in productive labor, they are at least interested in its progress, and they applaud its results.

The author, we might think, refers to U.S. TV evangelists. In fact, he was a French visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, and his book appeared in 1835.¹⁶

Recorded comments by visitors from one country to another are a rich source of information on how national culture differences were perceived in the past, and they often look strikingly modern, even if they date from centuries ago.

There are many things in societies that technology and its products do not change. If young Turks drink Coca-Cola, this does not necessarily affect their attitudes toward authority. In some respects, young Turks differ from old Turks, just as young Americans differ from old Americans. In the "onion" model of Figure 1.2, such differences mostly involve the relatively superficial spheres of symbols and heroes, of fashion and consumption. In the sphere of values—that is, fundamental feelings about life and about other people—young Turks differ from young Americans just as much as old Turks differ from old Americans. There is no evidence that the values of present-day generations from different countries are converging.

Culture change can be fast for the outer layers of the onion diagram, labeled *practices*. Practices are the visible part of cultures. New practices can be learned throughout one's lifetime; people older than seventy happily learn to surf the Web on their first personal computer, acquiring new symbols, meeting new heroes, and communicating through new rituals. Culture change is slow for the onion's core, labeled *values*. As already argued,

these were learned when we were children, from parents who acquired them when *they* were children. This makes for considerable stability in the basic values of a society, in spite of sweeping changes in practices.

These basic values affect primarily the gender, the national, and maybe the regional layer of culture. Never believe politicians, religious leaders, or business chiefs who claim they will reform national values. National value systems should be considered given facts, as hard as a country's geographical position or its weather. Layers of culture acquired later in life tend to be more changeable. This is the case, in particular, for organizational cultures, which the organization's members joined as adults. It doesn't mean that changing organizational cultures is easy—as will be shown in Chapter 10—but at least it is feasible.

There is no doubt that dazzling technological changes are taking place that affect all but the poorest or remotest of people, but people put these new technologies to familiar uses. Many of them are used to do much the same things as our grandparents did: to make money, to impress other people, to make life easier, to coerce others, or to seduce potential partners. All these activities are part of the social game. We are attentive to how other people use technology, what clothes they wear, what jokes they make, what food they eat, and how they spend their vacations. And we have a fine antenna that tells us what choices to make ourselves if we wish to belong to a particular social circle.

The social game itself is not deeply changed by the changes in today's society. The unwritten rules for success, failure, belonging, and other key attributes of our lives remain similar. We need to fit in, to behave in ways that are acceptable to the groups to which we belong. Most changes concern the toys we use in playing the game.

More about cultural change, including its origins and dynamics, will be found in Chapter 12.

National Culture Differences

The invention of *nations*, political units into which the entire world is divided and to one of which every human being is supposed to belong—as manifested by his or her passport—is a recent phenomenon in human history. Earlier, there were states, but not everybody belonged to one of these or identified with one. The nation system was introduced worldwide only in the mid-twentieth century. It followed the colonial system

that had developed during the preceding three centuries. In this colonial period the technologically advanced countries of Western Europe divided among themselves virtually all territories of the globe that were not held by another strong political power. The borders between the former colonial nations still reflect the colonial legacy. In Africa in particular, most national borders correspond to the logic of the colonial powers rather than to the cultural dividing lines of the local populations.

Nations, therefore, should not be equated to *societies*. Societies are historically, organically developed forms of social organization. Strictly speaking, the concept of a common culture applies to societies, not to nations. Nevertheless, many nations do form historically developed wholes even if they consist of clearly different groups and even if they contain less integrated minorities.

Within nations that have existed for some time there are strong forces toward further integration: (usually) one dominant national language, common mass media, a national education system, a national army, a national political system, national representation in sports events with a strong symbolic and emotional appeal, a national market for certain skills, products, and services. Today's nations do not attain the degree of internal homogeneity of the isolated, usually nonliterate societies studied by field anthropologists, but they are the source of a considerable amount of common mental programming of their citizens.¹⁷

On the other hand, there remains a tendency for ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups to fight for recognition of their own identity, if not for national independence; this tendency has been increasing rather than decreasing since the 1960s. Examples are the Ulster Roman Catholics; the Belgian Flemish; the Basques in Spain and France; the Kurds in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey; the ethnic groups of former Yugoslavia; the Hutu and Tutsi tribes in Rwanda; and the Chechens in Russia.

In research on cultural differences, nationality—the passport one holds—should therefore be used with care. Yet it is often the only feasible criterion for classification. Rightly or wrongly, collective properties are ascribed to the citizens of certain countries: people refer to “typically American,” “typically German,” and “typically Japanese” behavior. Using nationality as a criterion is a matter of expediency, because it is immensely easier to obtain data for nations than for organic homogeneous societies. Nations as political bodies supply all kinds of statistics about their populations. Survey data (that is, the answers people give on paper-and-pencil

questionnaires related to their culture) are also mostly collected through national networks. Where it *is* possible to separate results by regional, ethnic, or linguistic group, this is useful.

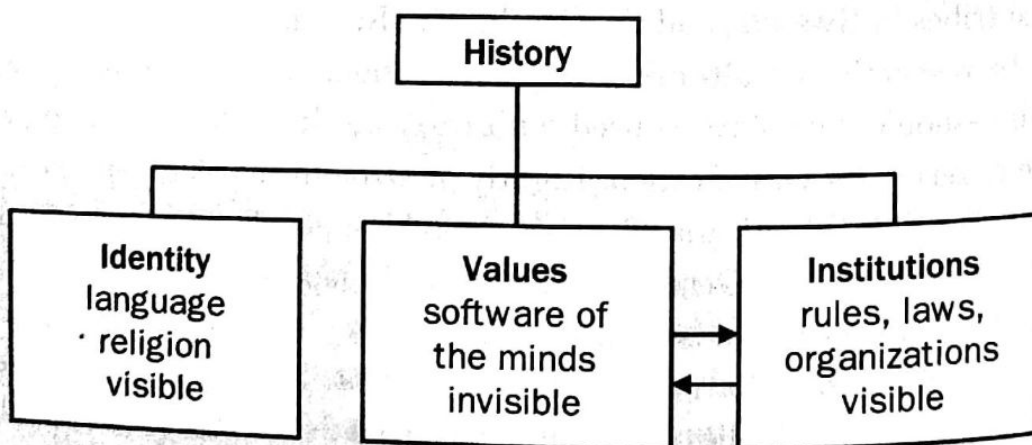
A strong reason for collecting data at the level of nations is that one of the purposes of cross-cultural research is to promote cooperation among nations. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, the (more than two hundred) nations that exist today populate one single world, and we either survive or perish together. So, it makes practical sense to focus on cultural factors separating or uniting nations.

National Identities, Values, and Institutions

Countries and regions differ in more than their cultures. Figure 1.4 distinguishes three kinds of differences between countries: identity, values, and institutions, all three rooted in history. Identity answers the question "To which group do I belong?" It is often rooted in language and/or religious affiliation, and it is visible and felt both by the holders of the identity and by the environment that does not share it. Identity, however, is not a core part of national cultures; in the terminology of Figure 1.2, identity differences are rooted in practices (shared symbols, heroes, and rituals), not necessarily in values.

Identities can shift over a person's lifetime, as happens among many successful migrants. A common experience for second-generation immigrants is to identify with their country of origin while they live in the

FIGURE 1.4 Sources of Differences Between Countries and Groups



adoptive country of their parents but, in contrast, to feel that they belong to their new country when they visit their parents' country of origin. This is because they are likely to live by a mix of cultural (hidden) rules from both societies while emotionally needing a primary group with which to identify. To no surprise, they often seek comfort with one another.

Identity is explicit: it can be expressed in words, such as "a woman," "a bicultural individual," "an American citizen." In fact, the same person could report being any of these three things, depending on the setting in which you asked. The degree to which identities can be multiple depends on culture. It relates to the individualism-collectivism distinction, which we will meet in Chapter 4. Individualistic environments such as modern cities, academia, and modern business allow people to have several identities and to easily change their identity portfolios. In collectivistic societies, in which most of the world's population still lives, one conceives as oneself much more as belonging to a community, whether this be ethnic, regional, or national, and one's sense of identity derives mainly from that group affiliation.

Values are implicit: they belong to the invisible software of our minds. Talking about our own values is difficult, because it implies questioning our motives, emotions, and taboos. Our own culture is to us like the air we breathe, while another culture is like water—and it takes special skills to be able to survive in both elements. Intercultural encounters are about that, and Chapter 11 will be devoted to them.

In popular parlance and in the press, identity and culture are often confused. Some sources refer to *cultural identity* to describe what we would call group identity. Groups within or across countries that fight each other on the basis of their different identities may very well share basic cultural values; this was or is the case in many parts of the Balkans, for the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and for the Flemish and French speakers in Belgium. On the other hand, persons with different cultural backgrounds may form a single group with a single identity, as in intercultural teams—in business, in academia, or in professional soccer.

Countries also obviously differ in their historically grown institutions, which comprise the rules, laws, and organizations dealing with family life, schools, health care, business, government, sports, media, art, and sciences. Some people, including quite a few sociologists and economists, believe these are the true reasons for differences in thinking, feeling, and acting among countries. If we can explain such differences by institutions that are

clearly visible, do we really need to speculate about cultures as invisible mental programs?

The answer to this question was given more than two centuries ago by a French nobleman, Charles-Louis de Montesquieu (1689–1755), in *De l'esprit des lois* (*The Spirit of the Laws*).

Montesquieu argued that there is such a thing as “the general spirit of a nation” (what we now would call its culture), and that “the legislator should follow the spirit of the nation . . . for we do nothing better than what we do freely and by following our natural genius.”¹⁸ Thus, institutions follow mental programs, and in the way they function they adapt to local culture. Similar laws work out differently in different countries, as the European Union has experienced on many occasions. In their turn, institutions that have grown within a culture perpetuate the mental programming on which they were founded. Institutions cannot be understood without considering culture, and understanding culture presumes insight into institutions. Reducing explanations to either one or the other is sterile.

A country's values are strongly related to the structure and functioning of its institutions and much less to differences in identity; therefore, in Figure 1.4 the horizontal arrows appear only between the “values” and the “institutions” blocks.

An important consequence of this fact is that we cannot change the way people in a country think, feel, and act by simply importing foreign institutions. After the demise of communism in the former Soviet Union and other parts of Eastern Europe, some economists thought that all that the former communist countries needed was capitalist institutions, U.S. style, in order to find the road to wealth. Things did not work out that way. Each country has to struggle through its own type of reforms, adapted to the software of its people's minds. Globalization by multinational corporations and supranational institutions such as the World Bank meets fierce local resistance because economic systems are not culture free.

What About National Management Cultures?

The business and business school literature often refers to national “management” or “leadership” cultures. Management and leadership, however, cannot be isolated from other parts of society. U.S. anthropologist Marvin Harris has warned that “one point anthropologists have always made is

that aspects of social life which do not seem to be related to one another, actually are related."¹⁹

Managers and leaders, as well as the people they work with, are part of national societies. If we want to understand their behavior, we have to understand their societies. For example, we need to know what types of personalities are common in their country; how families function and what this means for the way children are brought up; how the school system works, and who goes to what type of school; how the government and the political system affect the lives of the citizens; and what historical events their generation has experienced. We may also need to know something about their behavior as consumers and their beliefs about health and sickness, crime and punishment, and religious matters. We may learn a lot from their countries' literature, arts, and sciences. The following chapters will at times pay attention to all of these fields, and most of them will prove relevant for understanding a country's management as well. In culture there is no shortcut to the business world.

Cultural Relativism

In daily conversations, in political discourse, and in the media that feed them, alien cultures are often pictured in moral terms, as better or worse. Yet there are no scientific standards for considering the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting of one group as intrinsically superior or inferior to those of another.

Studying differences in culture among groups and societies presupposes a neutral vantage point, a position of cultural relativism. A great French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), has expressed it as follows:

Cultural relativism affirms that one culture has no absolute criteria for judging the activities of another culture as "low" or "noble." However, every culture can and should apply such judgment to its own activities, because its members are actors as well as observers.²⁰

Cultural relativism does not imply a lack of norms for oneself, nor for one's society. It does call for suspending judgment when dealing with groups or societies different from one's own. One should think twice before

applying the norms of one person, group, or society to another. Information about the nature of the cultural differences between societies, their roots, and their consequences should precede judgment and action.

Even after having been informed, the foreign observer is still likely to deplore certain ways of the other society. If professionally involved in the other society, for example as an expatriate manager or development cooperation expert, he or she may very well want to induce changes. In colonial days foreigners often wielded absolute power in other societies, and they could impose their rules on it. In these postcolonial days, in contrast, foreigners who want to change something in another society will have to negotiate their interventions. Negotiation again is more likely to succeed when the parties concerned understand the reasons for the differences in viewpoints.

Culture as a Phoenix

During a person's life, new body cells continually replace old ones. The twenty-year-old does not retain a single cell of the newborn. In a restricted physical sense, therefore, one could say we exist only as a sequence of cell assemblies. Yet we exist as ourselves. This is because all these cells share the same genes.

At the level of societies, an analogous phenomenon occurs. Our societies have a remarkable capacity for conserving their distinctive culture through generations of successive members and despite varied and numerous forces of change. While change sweeps the surface, the deeper layers remain stable, and the culture rises from its ashes like a phoenix.

But what do these deeper layers consist of? Although our genes give us the capacity to create and maintain culture, the evidence that is available so far suggests that culture is influenced far more by our experiences than by our genes. Culture is the unwritten book with rules of the social game that is passed on to newcomers by its members, nesting itself in their minds. In the following chapters we will describe the main themes that these unwritten rules cover. They deal with the basic issues of human social life.