

# Culture

The notion of conceptualizing culture is a daunting prospect as it is considered such an all embracing idea that encompasses a near infinite range of subject matters. Nevertheless, many scholars have attempted to define or indeed calculate how many definitions may be formulated for an everyday understanding of the word. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1953) suggest 162 ways to define it. Furthermore, it has been called one of two or three of the most complicated words in the English language. (Williams, 1976) If there are so many ways in which the word is employed and as many different contexts in which it is called upon is it a futile exercise to endeavour to do so and what is the purpose in it anyway? One widely accepted understanding of the concept of culture within social anthropology academia is offered by the sociologist Geertz (1973, 89) who defines culture as:

*A historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.*

Culture is passed on from generation to generation through a peoples' literature, language, storytelling etc. Within a name many meanings may reside. In some cultures, a name giving ceremony takes place upon the birth of a child. In fact the context of the birth can dictate the name child will be called. Perhaps the influence is the time of year that is special in their calendar, or the name of a heroic character from folklore, or they bear a resemblance to their grandfather so become their namesake. The significant aspect is that the chosen name is easily recognisable and shared within a group's culture. In Ireland we have Gaelic names that when we travel abroad or meet people from other cultures here, others initially may find them difficult to pronounce. It is also unlikely they will know the meaning of the name and indeed less likely still that they will be familiar with the story which lives within the name. For instance, the name Deirdre which appears in an old Irish legend called Deirdre of the Sorrows. She is renowned as the foremost tragic heroine in Irish mythology. It is fair to say that some parts of our culture may not get *transmitted* or passed to the next generation and many Irish people may not know or remember some or their own folklore.

As culture is often a difficult concept to grasp many scholars use metaphors to describe its meaning. One of the most accessible is the metaphor of the iceberg. The one tenth of the iceberg which is visible represents the most opaque aspects of our cultural identity; this would include our language, perhaps our affiliation to a particular sports team or social club and how we choose to dress. These could be considered the aspects of our identity that are most easily detectable in an initial encounter. While the nine tenths beneath the surface represent an individual's beliefs, traditions, customs and value systems. These represent the cultural traits of the individual and inherently present much more of a compelling challenge to

discover and attempt to understand. This is a core challenge within our increasingly multicultural societies in Europe. How can we begin to understand each others' differences? The crucial starting point is just that, that we begin with an understanding that we may not share the same cultural traits simply because we did not all have them same cultural upbringing. Within the European context however, there are certain overlapping cultural traditions for instance how Roman Catholic ceremonies are practiced.

People may have positive, negative, neutral, or ambivalent feelings about components of their own cultural identity. Heightened positive feelings toward one's own cultural identity, may manifest as ethnocentrism, and negative feelings toward others' cultural identity, manifest as prejudice. In fact, people may also have conscious or subconscious negative feelings about components of their own cultural identity. The potential to culturally stereotype groups of people is emphasized within a society that has been unfamiliar with diversity.

Studies of ethnicity have most explicitly addressed this issue. In constructing a model of ethnic identity, for instance, Sellers et al. (1998, 26) included a dimension they called regard, referring to *a person's affective and evaluative judgment of her or his race in terms of positive-negative valence*. In her identity validation model, Ting-Toomey (1986, 120) theorized that people develop positive or negative attitudes toward characteristics of their own cultural identity based on their perceptions of the extent to which others support that identity. So by affirming another person's cultural identity, one *provides the underlying motivational force in which intergroup-interpersonal ties can be developed and blossom*.

Whereas, in the case of an individual who forms a negative attitude towards a part of his or her cultural identity, there are several possible responses. To maintain self-esteem, a person may focus on a different identity component, change the basis for comparison, devalue that component, or, if possible, leave the group connected to that component (Sussman, 2000; Tajfel, 1978).

Cultural, political, social and religious beliefs, practices and values are thorny and sensitive subject matters when in the face of divergent views. Theories of universalism or the argument in favour of cultural relativism may be evoked. Rather than making swift judgements based on the visible components of an individual or group, it is through investing time, energy and financial support into fostering a real engagement with people from different cultural backgrounds that we have the opportunity to enlighten and educate one another and ultimately to develop new intercultural components to our ever evolving human identities.