

## **Chapter 1 – Characterising culture**

### **Introduction**

**Culture** is something we all feel we know something about, especially as most of us will claim membership of at least one culture, whether it be a national, regional, ethnic, or any of the myriad of possible cultural groupings. Culture is something that we see and hear all around us in our everyday lives. It is debated in the media and politics, it is something we study at school, we often discuss it with family and friends and we might even be asked to ‘explain’ it by visiting friends or colleagues from ‘other’ cultures. Yet at the same time, culture is extremely difficult to define. As Raymond Williams has famously written “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (2015: 86). When asked to define a particular culture, for example ‘Chinese culture’ or ‘Western Culture’, it is unlikely that any two people will agree exactly on what it is. We are, therefore, put in a dilemma when discussing culture, summed up neatly by the linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs: “while culture is considered important to fathom, it is obscure and difficult to analyse. You can’t see it; you can’t count it in any obvious way” (2002: 115).

While we cannot offer a single definition of culture, since the range of uses the idea is put to make this an impossible task, this chapter provides an introduction to the concept of culture and how it has been defined at different periods of time and in different disciplines. Given the aims of this book we place focus on linguistic approaches to culture and five different characterisations of culture are outlined. These are the traditional product approach, an interpretive **semiotic** approach, a **discourse** approach, a practice approach, and a critical ideological approach to culture. Two powerful **ideologies** that underlie current thinking about culture, nations and **globalisation**, are considered. We introduce the notion of **essentialism**, especially as related to product approaches to culture, and emphasise that this book follows a mixture of discourse, practice, and critical approaches to culture. We present three questions, drawn from Scollon and Scollon (2001), which underpin our perspective on culture in this text book: “who has introduced culture as a relevant concept in interaction, with what purposes, and with what consequences?” Throughout the chapter you will be asked to reflect on your own understandings and experiences of different cultures.

### Activity 1.1: Characterising culture 1

Brainstorm your ideas about what culture is. Add your ideas to the culture diagram below. A few examples have already been given. If you can, compare your answers to other people's.

Festivals

Ideas of right and wrong



Food

Family structures

Based on what you wrote above try to write a definition of culture here.

**Feedback:** *There are no right or wrong answers to these activities and there are many different things you may have chosen to include as part of culture. A few of the many things you might have chosen are language, clothes, food and drink, greetings, politeness, literature, education, religion, TV programmes, music, personal space, and gestures. This list could go on for pages and we still would not be finished. This illustrates the complexity and depth of culture which we explore further in this chapter.*

### 1.1 Developing ideas of culture

The origins of the word culture come from the Latin word *cultura*, meaning what is cultivated or grown in contrast to *nascere*, referring to what is born. In other words, culture is something which is learned and developed, not something you are born with. This idea of cultivation resulted in traditional perspectives on culture that associated it with civilisation. Thus, 'civilised' societies were seen as distinct from and superior to more 'primitive' or basic societies. Culture and civilisation were something to aim for and develop as societies moved forward. This understanding of culture was especially associated in the English speaking world with the writer Matthew Arnold who argued in 'Culture and Anarchy' that cultural development would result in "an atmosphere of sweetness and light" (1869, cited in Bauman, 2011: 7) for all. Associated with civilisation and cultural development was the distinction between 'high' and 'low' cultures in which certain arts forms, for example opera or literary fiction, and particular works of arts, for instance a particular painting or poem, were viewed as superior and more 'cultured' than others. This was also extended to societies and cultures with some societies viewed as more 'civilised', cultured, and superior to other 'primitive', less cultured ones. One of the most insidious results of such

an essentialist, ethnocentric, and racist understanding of culture was the supposed justification it provided for the invasion and enslavement of people from 'lower' cultures under colonialism.

An alternative perspective on culture that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century from a more anthropological perspective was the idea of culture as a way of life of a group of people. A well-known example of this being Edward Tylor's definition of culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1871: 1). While early anthropological approaches to culture, such as Tylor, believed it was possible, and desirable, to continue to distinguish between 'high' and 'low' cultures based on their way of life, this changed in the twentieth century to less hierarchical perspectives. For instance, the United States (US) anthropologist Franz Boas (1986) in his study of indigenous American cultures, rejected the ethnocentric hierarchical approach and instead adopted a cultural relativist position, exploring cultures in their own terms with no association of superiority or inferiority between different cultures. The notion of culture as a way of life of a group of people and a cultural relativist position are two features that continue in many characterisations of culture today.

## 1.2 Five perspectives on culture

In this section we will consider five current perspectives on culture: a product approach to culture (e.g. Hall, 1959; Hofstede et al., 2010); an interpretive semiotic approach to culture (e.g. Geertz, 1973/2000); a discourse approach to culture (e.g. Kramsch, 1998a); a practice approach to culture (e.g. Street, 1993); and a critical, ideological approach to culture (e.g. Holliday, 2011; Piller, 2017).

### *The product approach to culture*

The product approach to culture sees culture as a *thing* which can be described and delineated. This is probably the most common understanding of culture outside of research and academia and is exemplified in the type of definition seen in dictionaries. For example, the Oxford Advanced American Dictionary defines culture as "the customs and beliefs, art, way of life, and social organization of a particular country or group".<sup>1</sup> A product approach is also frequently used in traditional **intercultural communication** research. For instance, Edward T. Hall, considered to be the 'father' of intercultural communication research, used the metaphor of an iceberg to describe culture. For Hall (1966) there are visible aspects of culture which can be clearly observed such as festivals, costumes, and food but, like an iceberg, most of culture is below the surface, such as beliefs, values, and thought patterns, and cannot be directly observed. Thus, for Hall, most of what we describe as culture is internalised in the mind and outside of our consciousness. Similarly, the cross-cultural psychologist Geert Hofstede (1991) uses the metaphor of the onion to describe the different layers of culture. Like Hall, Hofstede views culture as predominantly in the mind and characterises it as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another" (2001: 9). A product perspective to culture is also very common in English language teaching. For example, Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) distinguish between 'Big C' culture: history, geography, institutions, literature, art, music, and the way of life, and 'Little c' culture: culturally influenced behaviour, beliefs, and perceptions expressed mainly through language, but also including unconscious beliefs, values, customs, and habits. Such a perspective is still prevalent today with a popular text book on intercultural communication defining

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/culture\\_1](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/culture_1) (accessed 30 September 2020).

culture as “[t]he totality of that group’s thought, experiences, and patterns of behavior and its concepts, values, and assumptions about life that guide behavior and how those evolve with contact with other cultures” (Jandt, 2021: 11).

An underlying theme running throughout these accounts of culture is the idea of culture as a thing or container into which the way of life of a particular group of people can be placed, both externally through observable products and behaviours, and internally through beliefs, values, and thought patterns in the mind. By approaching culture in this way it is possible to delineate and contain it and therefore distinguish between different cultures. In other words, groups of people can be differentiated from each other based on whether they fit into one cultural container or another. Within product orientated approaches this is frequently done at the level of national cultures (e.g. Hofstede, 1991). So for instance, statements about cultures often follow the pattern of, people in culture X behave in this way and believe this which is different from people in culture Y, who behave in this way and believe this. Examples include Hall’s notion (1966) of polychronic cultures (e.g. claims that in Mexico people have a more cyclical, fluid concept of time and are more likely to multitask and take time to interact with others rather than keep to a time schedule) vs. monochronic cultures (e.g. claims that in Germany time is viewed in a linear manner and as a valuable resources that should not be wasted, and people are more likely to keep to time schedules and disapprove of lateness). Similarly Hofstede’s (1991) conception of individualist cultures (e.g. US culture in which the individual is more important than the group) vs. collectivist cultures (e.g. Japan where the group is more important than the individual). However, as will be discussed throughout the rest of this chapter, product approaches have been criticised for a number of reasons. These include claims that they take an overly simplistic view of culture that assumes individuals are synonymous with group characteristics. This can promote overgeneralisations about culturally based behaviour and hence lead to unhelpful **stereotypes** about people, when in reality groups of people, and individuals within those groups, are much more variable in their beliefs and behaviour than any cultural generalisations would suggest. Another criticism is that product perspectives on culture misrepresent culture as a static system whereas it is actually a dynamic and constantly changing process, not a thing at all.

#### *The interpretive semiotic approach to culture*

An alternative approach to understanding culture is a semiotic, or symbolic, approach. The applied linguist Zhu Hua (2014: 192) describes this as an ‘interpretative approach’ since, unlike the product approach, it does not attempt to provide an account of all the rules of a culture as part of a unified system, but instead interprets the meaning of individual events in their cultural context. As the ethnographer Clifford Geertz, the most well-known proponent of this approach, writes:

man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning (1973/2000: 5).

A key part of Geertz’s (1973/2000) approach to interpreting culture is to provide a ‘thick description’ of the particularity of individual events and then linking them to the multiple layers of culture which give it meaning through ethnographic study (where the researcher becomes a part of the cultural group they study). This again contrasts with the ‘thin descriptions’ provided by the large scale generalisations of product approaches such as Hofstede (1991). Another important distinction between product and

interpretative approaches is that culture is seen as created externally in interaction not internally in the mind: “human thought is basically both social and public – that its natural habitat is the house yard, the market place, and the town square” (Geertz, 1973/2000: 45). Lastly, under the semiotic approach culture is conceived as primarily made up of learned patterns of meaning expressed symbolically: culture “denotes an 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 toward life” (Geertz, 1973/2000: 89).

This semiotic and interpretative approach to culture has been very influential within linguistics since language is typically seen as the prime semiotic system. As the linguist Michael Halliday argues, language is a semiotic system that expresses the culture that we live in. The relationship between language, culture, and society is interrelated; language influences culture and culture influences language. Language as a social semiotic means “interpreting language within a sociocultural context, in which culture itself is interpreted in semiotic terms” (Halliday, 1978). In other words, there is a cyclical relationship between language and culture in which languages is seen as the main way of constructing and representing culture, while at the same time language takes the forms that it does because of culture. This approach to culture has influenced many of the subsequent accounts of culture that will be presented later in this chapter, as well as thinking on the relationship between language and culture. However, while semiotic accounts are more interactive and dynamic in their characterisation of culture than product approaches, there is still concern about how they can account for the multiple meanings associated with symbolic systems in the highly diverse **multilingual** and **multicultural** environments we often find ourselves in currently (e.g. Pennycook, 2007; Blommaert, 2010) and this is particularly the case in relation to global uses of English (Baker, 2015).

### *The discourse approach to culture*

The notion of culture as constructed in and through discourse has been influential in **applied linguistics** studies. Here discourse is viewed from the perspective of Discourse with a capital ‘D’ (Gee, 2015) in which discourse is understood as ways of thinking, talking, and writing about particular aspects of the world. For instance, we can discuss the discourse of ‘gender’ or ‘education’ or ‘globalisation’. While discourse and language are closely linked, it is important to stress that they are not the same. So the same discourse can be expressed in many different languages, for example, globally relevant topics such as climate change and environmentalism. Influential scholars of a discourse approach to culture are Clare Kramsch and Ron and Suzie Wong Scollon. Kramsch defines culture as “1 Membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting. 2 The discourse community itself. 3 The system of standards itself” (Kramsch, 1998a: 127). Furthermore, Kramsch sees cultural discourse communities as having three dimensions; firstly, the social dimension in which the members of the community interact with each other; secondly, the historical dimension in which the members draw on shared history and traditions; thirdly, common imaginings in which the members share imaginations of what their community and culture is, including the previous two dimensions. Importantly, Kramsch also introduces a critical dimension to culture emphasising that what is viewed as shared standards, values, histories, traditions, and imaginings is a site of struggle and conflict. Thus, “culture, as a process that both includes and excludes, always entails the exercise of power and control” (Kramsch, 1998a: 8). The constant struggle to describe, or ‘imagine’, culture also means that culture is viewed as always heterogeneous and changing.

Scollon et al. argue that “culture is mostly too large a concept” (2012: 10) to be useful to researchers given the multiple interpretations of its meaning, as well as the dangers of stereotyping when discussing particular cultures. Instead, they propose the term discourse system which is defined as:

a ‘cultural toolkit’ consisting of four main kinds of things: ideas and beliefs about the world, conventional ways of treating other people, ways of communicating using various kinds of texts, media, and ‘languages’, and methods of learning how to use these other tools (2012: 8).

Examples of discourse systems include nation, gender, generation, and profession, as well as more ideological systems such as Confucian and Utilitarian discourse systems. While Scollon et al.’s explanation of these discourse systems is complex, Utilitarian discourse roughly equates to a ‘global capitalist’ perspective (2012: 114) and has its roots in utilitarian philosophy in Europe. Key features are individualism and egalitarianism and in communication this translates to direct talk and the promotion of close, equal relations (Scollon et al., 2012: 121). In contrast, the Confucian discourse system has its origins in China and East Asia. Important aspects of this system are relationships between people, nature, and social harmony (Scollon et al., 2012: 124) which manifests itself in communication via respect for authority and maintaining hierarchical systems. However, Scollon et al. (2012) underscore that these two discourse systems should not be seen from an essentialist East/West divide. Confucian and Utilitarian discourse systems exist side-by-side in most modern East Asian societies and the European thinkers who proposed utilitarian philosophies were heavily influenced by Confucian and East Asian scholarship (Scollon et al., 2012). Thus, by adopting this discourse system approach people are not reduced to one particular system, such as nationality or ethnicity, but are seen as simultaneously participating in multiple discourse systems. While it is debatable whether the term ‘discourse’ is any less broad or easy to interpret than ‘culture’, viewing people as participating in many different discourse systems and communities is very useful in capturing the complexity and diversity of people’s identifications, cultural or otherwise, and helps to avoid the reification of stereotyped views of culture that reduce individuals to one dimension.

#### *The practice approach to culture*

Practice approaches view culture as something we ‘do’ rather than as something we ‘have’. One of the most well-known formulations of this is the education and literary scholar Brian Street’s (1993) notion of ‘culture as a verb’. In other words, culture is not the static ‘thing’ that a noun suggests but rather a process as associated with verbs. Culture is here viewed as subjective and constructed in interactions between individuals. Under this perspective culture is inherently intersubjective since it can only be constructed through and in interaction. Due to the situated nature of culture, this means that any characterisation of culture will always be temporary and partial. Culture is a constantly changing, dynamic and fluid practice which can be viewed from multiple perspectives and levels, or scales, such as global, national, regional, work, and family cultures. For the applied linguist Adrian Holliday, culture is seen as constructed social practices, “as ways of doing something which relate to particular cultural environments” (2013: 6). The most important cultural environments are what Holliday refers to as **small cultures**, defined as:

cultural environments which are located in proximity to the people concerned. There are thus small social groupings or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour, such as families,

leisure and work groups, where people form rules for how to behave which will bind them together (2013: 3).

Holliday believes that it is from these small cultures that all other cultural groups, such as national cultures, develop.

Another important dimension of practice approaches to cultures, highlighted by Holliday and others, is the historic dimension. The practices that form cultures are typically established through routines of behaviour which become social norms through repetition, often to the extent that they go unnoticed by the members of a culture. However, as culture is created intersubjectively in interaction there is always a degree of negotiation in the meaning of cultural practices between individuals. This results in a tension between the amount of freedom individuals have in negotiating and constructing social practices and the restrictions imposed by existing social norms or practices. Thus, for practice approaches to culture, as with discourse approaches, culture can be a site of conflict and power struggles between dominant and alternative practices.

#### *The critical ideological approach to culture*

A theme running through both the discourse and practice approaches to culture has been a critical perspective to culture in which the contested nature and power relationships in culture are recognised. This theme is explicitly dealt with in critical ideological approaches to culture. As the philosopher Madan Sarup writes, "Culture is not something fixed and frozen as the traditionalists would have us believe, but a process of constant struggle as cultures interact with each other and are affected by economic, political and social factors" (1996: 140). Thus, ideological accounts of culture focus on critically exploring how social structures are created in cultures, the factors affecting this, such as economics and politics, and the power relationships that emerge. The applied linguist Ingrid Piller sums up this position in the following way:

Culture is an ideological construct called into play by social actors to produce and reproduce social categories and boundaries, and it must be the central research aim of a critical approach to intercultural communication to understand the reasons, forms and consequences of calling cultural difference into play (2011: 16).

In other words, as researchers of intercultural communication we should not take culture for granted, but rather investigate how it is constructed and used in communication.

Here ideology is understood as sets or systems of beliefs and ideas constructed by members of a community to make sense of the variability they encounter, often with a moral/political dimension (i.e. what is viewed as 'right', 'wrong', 'proper', 'standard'). All groups have their own ideologies and hence there is no neutral view; however, the ideologies of powerful groups are typically most prominent and influential (see for example Milroy & Milroy, 2012). In terms of culture and ideology the discourse analyst James Paul Gee explains it as:

Cultural models are not all wrong or all right. In fact, like all models, they are simplifications of reality. They are the ideology through which we all see our worlds. In that sense, we are all both "beneficiaries" and "victims" of ideology, thanks to the fact that we speak a language and live in culture. But we can – or at times are morally obligated to – interrogate our cultural models and

replace them with others, sometimes even with explicit and well developed theories. Ultimately, these new theories are models too, but, we hope, better ones. (2008: 29)

Both Gee and Piller emphasise that it is the role of researchers to critically explore conceptions of culture and not take them for granted. However, it is also important to recognise that all perspectives on culture are ideologically informed whether they be product, semiotic, discourse, or critical. It is the job of the researcher to recognise and be explicit about the ideology informing their perspective on culture. This approach to understanding culture is perhaps best captured in the well-known quotation from the Scollons:

set aside any a priori notions of group membership and identity and ... ask instead how and under what circumstances concepts such as culture are produced by participants as relevant categories ... [w]ho has introduced culture as a relevant category, for what purposes, and with what consequences? (Scollon & Scollon, 2001: 544-545).

These are questions that will underpin the approach to culture and intercultural/**transcultural communication** throughout this book.

### *Summary*

As you will have noticed from this discussion, culture is difficult to define. So, as the sociolinguist and cultural studies researcher Karen Risager explains, “there has been more or less a consensus that it is not possible to lay down an ‘authorised’ definition of culture” (2006: 42). We have, therefore, not attempted to provide a single definition but rather presented five different perspectives on culture, all of which contain aspects that we think are useful in understanding culture. The five perspectives can be summarised in the table below.

**Table 1.1 Five perspectives on culture**

Perspectives on culture	Main features	Examples
Product	Culture is a thing (festivals, food, folklore) possessed by groups of people typically at the national level	Hall (1959); Hofstede et al. (2010)
Interpretive semiotic	Culture is a symbolic (semiotic) system for meaning making and interpretation; language is the prime semiotic system in culture	Geertz (1973/2000); Halliday (1978)
Discourse	Culture is a shared discourse system among groups of people	Kramsch (1998a); Scollon et al. (2012)
Practice	Culture is something we do (not something we have); culture is a process	Street (1993); Pennycook (2007)
Critical, ideological	Culture is a shared ideology; power imbalances between	Holliday (2011); Piller (2017)



	different ideologies mean that cultural characterisations are contestable	
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From these five approaches to culture a number of important themes emerge:

- Firstly, culture can be seen as a system of shared products, symbols, discourses, practices, and ideologies among groups of people.
- Secondly, these shared products, symbols, discourses, practices, and ideologies and the groupings of people themselves that make up culture are contestable and sites of struggle.
- Thirdly, the people and shared products, symbols, discourses, practices, and ideologies that make up cultures are constantly in process and changing and hence cannot be fixed and have no clear boundaries.

Thus, culture is complex and cannot be reduced to simple explanations. Indeed we find the metaphors of **complexity theory** particularly helpful in understanding culture as a shared system but a constantly changing system that is always in flux with no final end point. As one of the authors of this book has previously written:

following a complexity perspective, cultural systems emerge from the interactions of groups of individuals but are not reducible to those individuals. Therefore, in contrast to simplistic, essentialist understandings of culture, individuals are not synonymous with the cultural systems or groups which they may identify or be identified with (Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019: 2).

We will explore the idea of culture and language as complex emergent systems in more detail later in this book.

### **Activity 1.2: Characterising culture 2**

Compare your earlier definition of culture with those below taken from the approaches presented here. What elements are the same or different? Which characterisations do you find most convincing? Would you like to change anything in your definition of culture after reading these?

#### **Culture as product**

“the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (Hofstede, 2001: 9)

“The totality of that group’s thought, experiences, and patterns of behavior and its concepts, values, and assumptions about life that guide behavior and how those evolve with contact with other cultures” (Jandt, 2021: 11)

#### **Culture as symbolic interpretation**

“it [culture] denotes an 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 toward life” (Geertz, 1973/2000: 89).

#### **Culture as discourse**

“1 Membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting. 2 The discourse community itself. 3 The system of standards itself” (Kramsch, 1998a: 127).

#### **Culture as practice**

Culture is not something static as suggested by its classification and use as a noun, but rather dynamic, “Culture is a verb” (Street, 1993); it is something we ‘do’, not something we ‘have’.

#### **Culture as ideology**

“Culture is an ideological construct called into play by social actors to produce and reproduce social categories and boundaries, and it must be the central research aim of a critical approach to intercultural communication to understand the reasons, forms and consequences of calling cultural difference into play” (Piller, 2011: 16).

#### **Critical approaches to culture**

“set aside any a priori notions of group membership and identity and ... ask instead how and under what circumstances concepts such as culture are produced by participants as relevant categories ... [w]ho has introduced culture as a relevant category, for what purposes, and with what consequences?”. (Scollon & Scollon, 2001: 544-545)

#### **Culture as complex emergent systems**

Cultures are shared systems of products, symbols, discourses, practices, and ideologies among groups of people. However, these systems are constantly changing and in flux with no fixed end point.

Furthermore, cultural systems emerge from the interactions of groups of individuals but are not reducible to those individuals. (Baker, 2015)

**Feedback:** *There are obviously no right or wrong answers to this activity. However, we would guess based on previous teaching experiences that many of your definitions were closer to the ‘culture as product’ and symbolic interpretations. Hopefully, you have now added some other dimensions to your definitions.*

### 1.3 Culture, nation, and globalisation

As we have seen culture can be viewed at many different levels and in many different ways. Nonetheless, the influence of national conceptions of culture and the link to nation states remains very powerful and is frequently made use of in popular accounts of culture and in research participants' descriptions of culture. As Holliday explains, "it is a fact that people everywhere really do use, talk about, explain things in terms of, and present themselves with national cultural profiles, despite their lack of scientific basis" (2013: 164). Two influential understandings of the processes by which ideologies of national cultures maintain their prominence are 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2006/2016) and 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995). The political scientist Benedict Anderson explains imagined communities in relation to the nation state in the following way, "It is imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (2006/2016: 6). From this perspective, nations and national cultures are always socially constructed rather than the 'natural' entities that they are sometimes portrayed as. However, this does not diminish the power of nations, rather it emphasises the ideological nature of their construction. For Anderson a key part of the construction of nation is its association with a shared national language. We can see the influence of this notion of imagined communities in Kramsch's (1998a) characterisation of culture as an imagined discourse community.

Connected to imagined communities the sociologist Michael Billig introduced the concept of banal nationalism which explores "the ideological means by which nation-states are reproduced" (1995: 6). Billig highlights the manner in which maintenance of nationalism and the nation is an everyday, but unnoticed (banal), part of our lives. Examples of reinforcement of the nation include maps that depict the nation and its borders, national flags, national images on coins and bank notes, and weather forecasts that are restricted to the national borders, as well as the idea of a national language. Through this constant reminder of nationalism the constructed nature of nation 'disappears' into the background of our lives and becomes normal and apparently natural. Piller (2011) highlights how uncritical approaches to culture and intercultural communication also reinforce this banal nationalism through reproducing the ideology of the nation and national cultures in describing the processes of the intercultural communication.

Alongside nation another powerful influence on culture in recent times has been globalisation. While globalisation has often been seen as undermining the role of nations in cultural ideologies, in practice the two frequently exist in parallel. Globalisation has been defined in many different ways but here we will use the well-cited definition from the sociologist Jan Aart Scholte as:

the spread of transplanetary ... connections between people. From this perspective, globalisation involves reductions in barriers to transworld social contacts. People become more able – physically, legally, linguistically, culturally and psychologically – to engage with each other wherever on earth they might be. (2008: 1478).

Under this concept globalisation is not in itself anything, but rather it is an umbrella term that covers a number of process as outlined in Scholte's definition. We will return to the concept of globalisation again in our discussion of global languages. The increased connections and engagement between people

and communities at a global scale have had significant implications on how cultures are constructed and understood. The notions of **transnational** or **transcultural flows**, from sociology and anthropology (Appadurai, 1996; Hannez, 1996), have been proposed as a way to understand the relationships between globalisation and culture. These approaches emphasise the increasing scale and complexity of social networks and the flows of cultural practices and ideologies through these networks which result in an increased diversity of cultural practices and identifications. However, this global scale to culture is not viewed as a replacement to nation. Instead the global scale is seen as existing alongside the national scale and many other in a multitude of cultural scales, identifications, and practices which are part of contemporary globalised societies. This transnational and transcultural perspective also rejects the idea that globalisation results in the homogenisation of cultures in which we become part of a unified 'global culture'. Instead, cultures are viewed as ever more diversified, with multiple layers from the local, to the national and the global, interacting in dynamic and fluid ways.

In applied linguistics the notions of global flows of cultures and languages have been made use of extensively by Risager (2006; 2007) in her transnational paradigm and Alasdair Pennycook (2007) through transcultural flows. At the global scale Risager (2006) envisages languages and cultures spreading across each other in networks of **linguistic and cultural flows**. Similarly, Pennycook employs the metaphor of flow to describe how:

Transcultural flows therefore refer not merely to the spread of particular forms of culture across boundaries, or the existence of supercultural commonalities (cultural forms that transcend locality), but rather to the processes of borrowing, blending, remaking and returning, to processes of alternative cultural production. (2007: 6).

For Pennycook, globalisation opens up new spaces for cultural creation and identification. However, again, he emphasises that the global dimension does not replace the local or the national scale. Instead globalisation results in new ways in which local settings are connected in multiple ways, and the global flow and adaptation of cultural forms and practices across and through these interconnected localities. The idea of transcultural flows will be returned to throughout this book in relation to both language and culture and the notion of transcultural communication.

#### **1.4 Cultural stereotypes, generalisations, and essentialism**

The many different perspectives and layers of culture that we have presented so far illustrate that culture is complex and cannot be reduced to a single explanation. It is therefore important that we avoid overly simplistic accounts of culture if we want to have a better understanding of the diversity of our own cultural groupings and others. In intercultural communication literature these simplistic accounts of culture are typically referred to through terms such as stereotypes, essentialism, and **othering**. A stereotype is a belief about a group of people that is often not based on any personal experience or an over-generalisation based on a small amount of knowledge or experience. Stereotypes tend to be self-perpetuating in that people look for information that confirms their stereotype and ignore information that does not fit their stereotype. **Cultural stereotypes** typically link cultures and nations together, which as we have already seen is just one level of culture, and thus ignore the many other different scales of culture. We are all probably very familiar with national cultural stereotypes from the media and advertising such as polite British people and shy Japanese people. Of course there may be polite Brits or

shy Japanese but this does not mean that *all* British and Japanese behave this way, or even that those that do behave this way do so *all the time*. It is especially problematic to assume that these behaviours or values are unique to a particular nation or even linked to the nation state at all. Other stereotypes may be even more detached from the everyday experiences of people in a particular culture. The first author of this book remembers being very shocked and surprised by an advert in Bangkok for a UK based international chain of English language schools that featured a picture of a man dressed in a pin striped suit wearing a bowler hat. In his experience he had never seen an English teacher, or anyone else he knew in the UK, dressed in this way.

Closely linked to the notion of stereotypes is that of generalisations. Like stereotypes, generalisations may be based on a limited amount of knowledge or experience and are extended to a wider group of people. However, unlike stereotypes, generalisations are adaptable and change. When interacting with people in unfamiliar situations we need to begin somewhere and typically make use of our existing knowledge and experiences, what are often termed schemas (or schemata). Schemas are mental structures or patterns for interpreting the world and deciding how to behave (Holland & Quinn, 1987). Schemata shared by groups of people are referred to as 'cultural schemata' and it is these which enable people to behave in broadly similar ways and come to similar understandings of interactions. So, for example, we may have a schema for greeting work colleagues in the morning or for accepting a compliment from a friend. It is crucial though that when we use these schemata to make generalisations, they are adaptable and can change if our knowledge and experiences show them to be inadequate or mismatched (Sharifian, 2011; Baker, 2015). This is particularly important in unfamiliar interactions, such as intercultural communication, where our existing schema may not be relevant or appropriate. If we are not able to adapt and change our schemata when generalising, they can become stereotypes and hinder rather than help communication.

Understandings of cultures which are stereotyped and simplistic are often referred to as essentialist perspectives on culture. Holliday et al. define essentialism as "presuming that there is a universal essence, homogeneity and unity in a particular culture" (2017: 1). Essentialist perspectives on culture view it as a physical entity or thing, associate it with a particular place, typically a nation, see the world as divided into different and exclusive cultures with people belonging to only one culture, and believe that culture is the cause and explanation for people's behaviour (Holliday et al., 2017: 3-4). As with stereotypes, essentialist perspectives on culture are very common and are often found in advice on how to communicate or do business with people from particular cultures, as well as in many language learning materials which present stereotyped images of 'other' cultures (Gray, 2010). A more sophisticated approach to culture, but still problematic, is what Holliday (2013) terms the neo-essentialist perspective. Neo-essentialism recognises the diversity of cultures and heterogeneity *within* cultures but still views the nation as the default culture that contains other aspects of culture. A distinction is still maintained between different national cultures, and deviations from 'national norms' are viewed as exceptions and sub-cultures. Again this neo-essentialist perspective is frequently part of language learning materials and approaches (Baker, 2015). Linked to essentialism is the notion of othering in which people from cultures which are perceived as distinct from ours are viewed as always different and hence a cultural 'other' (Holliday, 2011). Othering will be discussed in more detail in relation to issues of **identity** later in this book. In contrast to essentialist views on culture is a non-essentialist approach in which any statements about culture are tentative and temporary (Holliday et al., 2017). As with the more critical approaches to culture outlined previously, cultures from a non-essentialist perspective are seen as complex, fluid, and multiple with no clear boundaries. We will return

to these themes of essentialism and othering, and how we might avoid the problems associated with them, in multilingual, intercultural, and transcultural communication throughout this book.

### **Activity 1.3: Cultural stereotypes**

- List the stereotypes of your own culture and another culture you are familiar with. How many of these stereotypes do you think are true (if any)? How many of these stereotypes have you experienced personally?
- Has someone ever tried to explain your behaviour based on a cultural stereotype? How did it make you feel? Have you ever explained your own behaviour based on cultural stereotypes?

***Feedback:** Your answers here will, of course, depend on your own experiences. You should have found that some of your stereotypes may be based on limited experiences and others perhaps on nothing but media images and things other people have told you. We all make use of stereotypes and generalisations (the term we prefer to use) to help us make sense of the world and things that are new to us. However, it is important that these generalisations do not become fixed and applied to all people. If they are too static or we are not prepared to change our generalisation based on individual experiences they quickly become unhelpful oversimplifications and stereotypes. These hinder rather than help intercultural communication.*

### **Chapter summary**

In this chapter we considered a range of approaches to understanding culture. You should now be familiar with:

- a product approach to culture
- an interpretive semiotic approach to culture
- a discourse approach to culture
- a practice approach to culture, and
- a critical, ideological approach to culture.

While we suggested that it is not possible to offer a single definition of culture that would be relevant in all settings and for all purposes, we identified a number of core themes in understanding culture. These were that, firstly, culture can be seen as a system of shared products, symbols, discourses, practices, and ideologies among groups of people. Secondly, these shared products, symbols, discourses, practices, and ideologies and the groupings of people themselves that make up culture are contestable and sites of struggle. Thirdly, the people and shared products, symbols, discourses, practices, and ideologies that make up cultures are constantly in process and changing and hence cannot be fixed and have no clear boundaries. In sum, culture is complex, multiple, fluid, and always in a process of change. However, we also saw that national conceptions of culture still form a powerful ideology in many people's understanding of culture. We examined the influence of globalisation on cultural practices and groupings and in particular focused on the notion of transcultural global flows of cultural practices and ideologies. Lastly, we considered the problems associated with simplistic, stereotyped views of culture,

what is often termed essentialism, and contrasted this with more complex, non-essentialist perspectives on culture. The idea of transcultural flows and non-essentialist critical, complex perspectives on cultures will be themes returned to throughout this book.

### **Further reading**

Baker, W. (2015). *Culture and identity through English as a lingua franca: Rethinking concepts and goals in intercultural communication*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. – Chapter three contains a detailed discussion of many of the theories of culture presented here, as well as an exploration of culture and complexity theory.

Geertz, C. (1973/2000). *The Interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books. – A key text in understanding culture from a semiotic and ethnographic perspective. Written in a style accessible to a general audience.

Holliday, A. (2019). *Understanding intercultural communication: Negotiating a grammar of culture* (2nd ed.). Abingdon: Routledge. – A detailed discussion of critical perspectives on understanding culture including Holliday's own 'grammar of culture' model.