




**Interpreting Culture**  
Improving Cross-Cultural  
Communication

Jamie Spurway

*"Culture is the sum total of the way of  
life of a people"* Edward T Hall


A photograph of an iceberg floating in the ocean. The top part of the iceberg is visible above the water, while a much larger, jagged portion is submerged below the surface, illustrating the concept of hidden culture.

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**Aims**

- ✓ What culture is, where it comes from & how it influences us
- ✓ What makes working across cultures sometimes challenging – and how to make it easier

A decorative blue wave graphic at the bottom of the slide.


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What is,  
becomes  
what ought

David Hume

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- What do you think of when you hear 'culture'? What elements does the term include? (eg Food)
- What are some specific differences between cultures? (eg Haggis)

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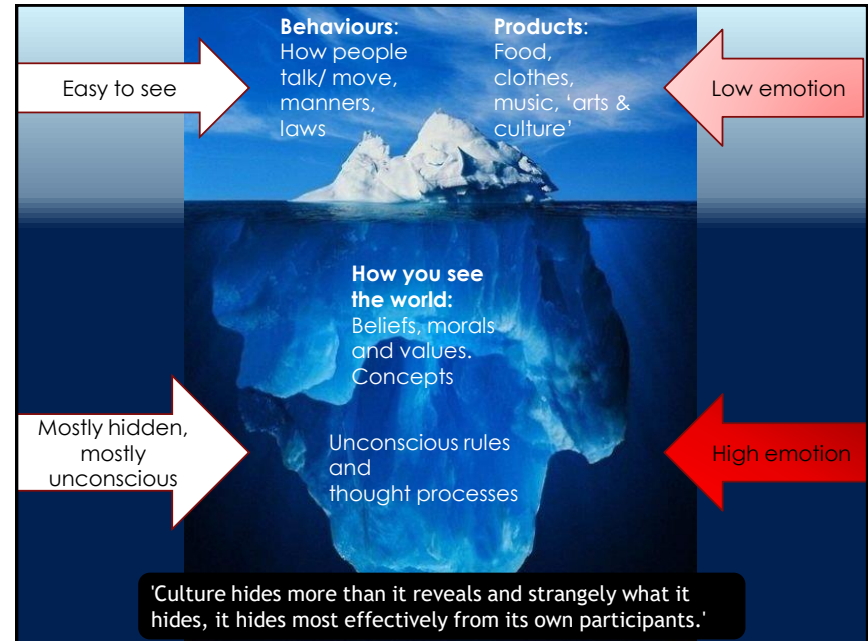
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## Some definitions

1. "Culture is the collective programming of the human mind"  
- Geert Hofstede
2. "Culture is the sum total of ways of living of a people"  
- Edward T Hall
3. "Culture is social glue."
4. "Culture is to a community what memory is to a person"
5. "Culture is the dialogue between a person and the world around them"

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### Some ways that cultures vary (If people invented it, it will be different somewhere)

- Language
- Religion
- Individualist v collectivist
- Values
- Morality
- Politeness and rudeness
- Personal space
- Touching: handshakes, hugging, kissing
- Clothing and modesty
- Ideas around love, marriage, sex
- How you should treat children or elders
- Class and social roles
- Food and hospitality
- Gender norms
- Humour
- Time and punctuality
- Superstition

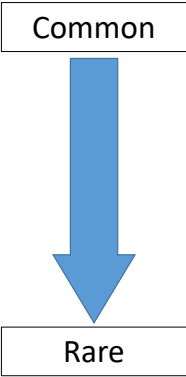
But remember any one 'culture' will have huge variety



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### What problems can cultural difference create?

- Difficulty connecting
- Confusion and misunderstanding
- Embarrassment
- Irritation, offence and anger
- Violence



Problems almost always stem from interpretation



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What happens when two British people  
accidentally bump into each other?

In an environment  
like this, people  
don't expect  
apologies!



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What does an empty plate  
mean?



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## What does it mean when someone avoids eye contact?


- ▶ Shyness
- ▶ Shame
- ▶ Lying
- ▶ Autism
- ▶ Respect
- ▶ Disrespect
- ▶ Deference
- ▶ Dislike
- ▶ Embarrassment
- ▶ Distraction
- ▶ Fear
- ▶ Modesty
- ▶ Flirtation
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Disgust
- ▶ Trauma
- ▶ Dissociation
- ▶ Eye problem

One behaviour -  
lots of  
interpretations!

What tends to  
happen once we  
have made our  
interpretation?

Do we check we  
are correct?

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## Self-fulfilling interpretations

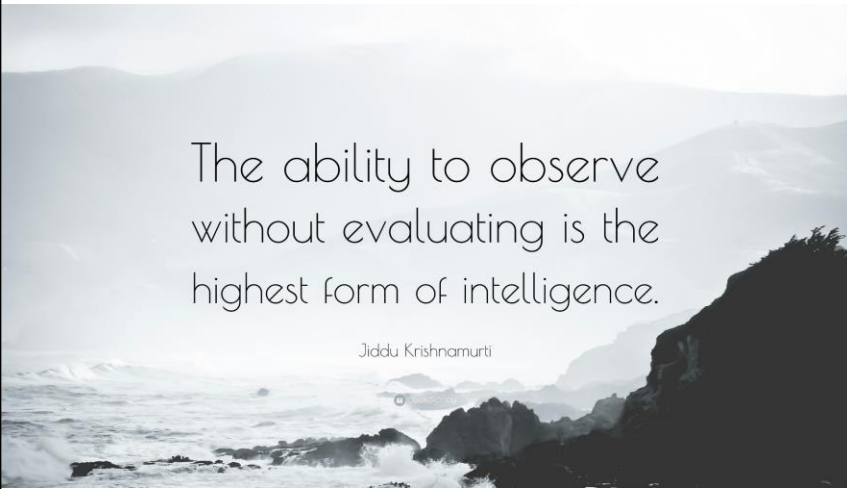
- Jack & David meet for the first time
- Culturally, David does not behave as Jack expects
- Jack thinks David was rude
- So, Jack is cold and abrupt to David
- David senses this and decides Jack is rude
- So David becomes cold and abrupt to Jack
- This confirms Jack's first impression that David is rude
- So Jack feels justified in being hostile to David.....

- Both feel equally justified in thinking the worst of the other and being increasingly hostile
- All caused by Jack's first (mis)interpretation of David

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graph LR
    A[Observation] --> B[Story/ interpretation]
    B --> C[Emotion & action]
  
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The ability to observe  
without evaluating is the  
highest form of intelligence.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

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What challenges have you faced  
in relation to cultural difference?

- Have you felt something that a person from another culture did was rude? Or embarrassing or confusing.
- Have you done something that had a surprising emotional effect on a person from another culture?
- Could there be a different way of interpreting what happened?
- Could there be other factors that influenced what happened?



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If you made a cultural 'mistake'  
how would you want to be told?

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## Responding

'Mostly, perceived rudeness is unintentional and unknown

- ▶ A tut or glare is v unhelpful!
- ▶ Consider – what else could be happening here?  
Is there another way of seeing this?
- ▶ A possible structure for responding:



- ▶ When you are late for our meetings
- ▶ It means I cannot help other people. Or  
It makes me feel that you don't value my support.
- ▶ So please try to arrive on time. Or  
What would help you arrive on time?

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## Silent students

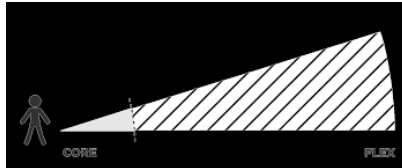
- From outset, describe interpretation & importance of participation in UK culture (academic & employment)
  - Provide examples of welcome participation & encouragement for those who do
  - If some unparticipative - Name the observation & explore possible cultural difference.
  - Open a discussion about students' experiences & perceptions of participation. Perhaps even within a perceived cultural group.
  - Emphasise that questioning a lecturer is not deemed disrespectful – perhaps even that silence can be viewed this way?
  - All to recognise that shifting cultural habit/ norm is difficult – sense of vulnerability
- Tools to help people participate:
- Small groups invited to form questions to ask.
  - Peer feedback. Online forums. Questions via eg slido. 'Think, write, share'.

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## Core and flex



Flex: the things about yourself (beliefs, values, habits, behaviours etc) that you are willing to change

Core: those that you are unwilling to change

Generally we find it much easier to change our behaviours than our beliefs and values.

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## Four stages of cultural awareness

1. **Parochial stage** - My way is the only way
2. **Ethnocentric stage** - I know their way, but my way is better
3. **Synergistic stage** - My way and their way
4. **Participatory third culture stage** - Our way

What stage best describes your context?

What could support progressing to another?

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## Communication tips

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- Patience makes it faster – anxiety/ embarrassment is the biggest barrier
- Calm and friendly in face and tone
- Speak slowly but naturally. Short, simple sentences
- Repeat then rephrase
- Emphasise the keyword
- Avoid abbreviations – can't or cannae
- Chunk information then pause
- Avoid Scottish words or phrases – they are learning one English, most of us speak another
- 'Do you want me to repeat that?' – not 'do you understand?'
- Phone interpreters, Google translate app, online translation tools, writing/ typing things down

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## Body language

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- ❖ Symbolic gestures vary in meaning
  - thumbs up – very common in UK, very rude in Middle East, N Africa, S America
  - 'ok' sign, nodding/ shaking head
  - Often cause misunderstanding, sometimes offence
- ❖ Emotional expression –
  - Smiling, frowning etc
  - Very common across cultures
  - Very low risk of confusion or offence
- ❖ Personal Space
  - What is acceptable varies greatly

- Horn of the devil (West)
- Dispel evil (Buddhist/ Hindu)
- A curse (parts of Africa)
- Your wife is cheating on you (Med & S America)



UK & USA = O.K.      JAPAN = MONEY

RUSSIA = ZERO      BRAZIL = INSULT

1000ventures.com

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## Key recommendations

- Respectful curiosity – acknowledge and ask.
- Remember everyone thinks their culture is normal.
- Speaking of culture is always a huge generalisation. *'That's because they believe...'* Be wary of even positive stereotyping.
- Observation > Interpretation > Emotion and  
Observation > Impact > Request
- We tend to view those of our culture as individuals, those of other cultures as members of that culture.
- Ask yourself - are there deep-iceberg elements (assumed values/ morals/ concepts) to this tension/ argument?

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## Contacts and Links

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