# **2.** Culture and interculturality, a plea for an open and dynamic approach

#### Topics

2.1 Prelude 2

2.2 Introduction 2

Task: Culture and virtual teams 2

2.3 A narrow and an expanded concept of culture 3

2.4 An open versus closed concept of culture 3

Task: Switzerland from a closed culture perspective 4

Task: Find your own example 7

Task: 'Zooming' – a new perspective on culture 10

2.5 Interculturality 11

2.6 Common cultural misconceptions and the potential of zooming for developing   
a collaborative team culture 13

Task: Cultural misconceptions and zooming in intercultural communication 13

2.7 Summary 14

2.8 Learning review 15

Task: Working in an intercultural team – some practical questions 15

2.9 Sources, further reading and web links 17

#### Learning outcome

Applying a dynamic understanding of culture and interculturality, you will recognise cultural features of virtual teams and realise the key aspects of interculturality and its influence on effective teamwork.

\* The text of this session was written by Peter Witchalls and is based on texts by Jürgen Bolten, University of Jena (Germany)

## 2.1 Prelude

In the previous session we outlined the complexities of virtual teams as well as some of the main competencies needed when working in virtual environments. When working in virtual team settings it is highly likely that participants will come from diverse backgrounds and cultures. For this reason, in this unit we will explore culture and subsequently the concept of interculturality. With this in mind, we will introduce intercultural competence as a form of general ‘action competence’ and conclude by discussing the importance of recognizing culture and interculturality in virtual teams.

#### Download: Learning journal for session 2

[Learning journal (.docx)](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/documents/Learning-Journal-VIT-02.docx) [Learning journal (.odt)](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/documents/Learning-Journal-VIT-02.odt) [Learning journal (.rtf)](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/documents/Learning-Journal-VIT-02.rtf)

## 2.2 Introduction

Culture is a notoriously difficult term to define and explain. In fact, it has become common to use the term as an explanation for many different phenomena. With regard to culture, it is important to stress that when we speak of cultural affiliation, we take it to mean not only nation states but our membership of a whole range of collectives such as age, gender, role, profession, region, education etc. Everyone is a member of many different cultures, some of which influence us greatly and some to a lesser extent. Each of us is therefore a ‘part’ member of many cultures. These cultures and thus collectives are not only numerous and lack sharp boundaries, but are also dynamic, and shaped by the constantly changing relationships and interactions between people.

If this is so, then how can we capture culture and interculturality? And what does this mean in the context of virtual teams? These are the questions we will explore in this session. Let us start by examining the concept of culture itself.

### Task: Culture and virtual teams

Look at the word cloud below, which depicts associations connected with culture. Pick some expressions from here, and consider them in relation to culture's influence in the context of virtual teams. Note down your findings in your learning journal.



Image developed by Holger Finke for this course

###### Sample answer

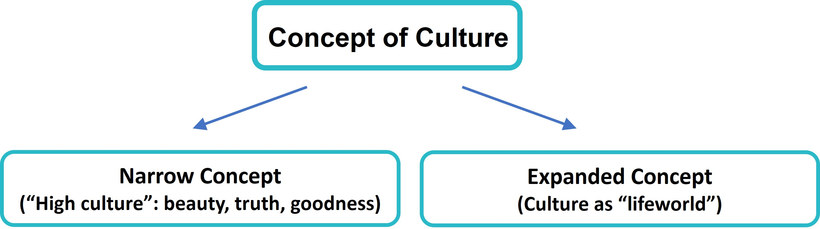
This is what one person noted down:

The word cloud highlights the notions of diversity, collaboration and community. It also points to challenges and possibilities. Linking this to virtual teams, it could mean that a team will need to build a kind of community in order to better collaborate. Doing this on a virtual level could be challenging, but at the same time new possibilities and opportunities could be opened up.

## 2.3 A narrow and an expanded concept of culture

Working in virtual teams commonly involves performing tasks with people who were socialised in different cultures and contexts, or what sociologists might call lifeworlds (Husserl, 1936). In this sense we refer to culture to mean the all-pervasive social environment that influences what we value, how we think and how we behave in everyday situations. This is known as the expanded concept of culture as opposed to the narrow concept. A narrow concept or ‘high culture’ distinguishes between culture and civilization and refers to the classics, art, architecture and literature, or ‘the beautiful, the true and the good’. Such a narrow concept of culture was advocated by Immanuel Kant and later by Oswald Spengler and was popular until the middle of the twentieth century.

The figure below illustrates these two conceptual views of culture.



Source: Bolten, Jürgen (2015, p. 46), adapted and translated

## 2.4 An open versus closed concept of culture

Considering cultures as living environments or lifeworlds means that culture is part of the individual's reality and their environment. Here the lifeworld is seen as the result of the actions of the human beings. Culture as a lifeworld has developed two different variants: the closed conception of culture and the open conception of culture. The closed view of culture embodies the idea that one group of people all possess the same or very similar characteristics and therefore can be clearly defined with sharp boundaries. In contrast, the open view of culture represents a movement away from conceiving cultures as stable and homogenous containers.

However, conceiving of cultures as closed or as containers means leads to considerable contradictions. This can be seen where an attempt is made to clearly define what belongs to a culture and what does not, in the sense of bivalent logic (e.g. 'right/wrong'; 'either/or'). A very typical example of such a thinking would be for example talking about Germans as coffee drinkers and the British as having their tea at five o’clock.

Nevertheless, from a pragmatic point of view, a concept of culture that is closed in this sense may have some advantages since it reduces complexity and, with its typifying simplifications, it enables us to gain an initial orientation with regard to cultural living environments of all kinds. Demarcations, however, are problematic due to migration movements and communication processes that have lasted for thousands of years, and “no living environment is conceivable as a homogeneous culture unaffected by external influences” (Said, 1996).

### Task: Switzerland from a closed culture perspective

Switzerland, a comparatively small landlocked country in Europe, is commonly viewed as a country where people speak Swiss German. However, it is bordered by five countries, including Italy to the south and France to the west, with four recognised national languages: German, French, Italian, and Romansh. Furthermore, a distinction can be made between people who speak Swiss German and standard German. Almost two thirds of the population speak more than one language regularly. ("Switzerland", 2021)

If you were only to consider the basic information given here, where might you find indications that a closed concept of culture often does not help us to get to know the people of Switzerland? Note down your answers in your learning journal.

###### Sample answer

Nations were created through historical processes, such as wars or treaties, and because of this at times people within national boundaries not only share a common government but also a history, a language, common experiences as well as values and norms. Japan is traditionally seen as an example of a nation state displaying a homogenous population group in that sense. However, in many cases, people living within national borders are heterogeneous and in the case of Switzerland, for examples, this relates to languages as well. The fact that so many different languages are spoken in Switzerland suggests that the people may also be diverse on other levels, making it difficult to apply a closed concept of culture to its inhabitants. This should alert us to the importance of being open to cultural differences and avoid making generalisations and assumptions about people. For example, in the case presented, thinking that learning Swiss German will be sufficient to communicate well with the Swiss may actually be a fallacy.

Increasingly, since the mid-1990s or even earlier, an increasing number of arguments have been proposed that reject container thinking. The predominant focus of the criticism has been the idea that culture is synonymous with the nation-state, a type of thinking which is still dominant among the closed variants of the expanded concept of culture. Against the backdrop of globalization processes, however, notions of homogeneity, i.e. that a group of people basically share the same characteristics, are proving to be increasingly untenable since nation-state cultural constructions tempt us into making unrealistic generalizations that encourage stereotypes, as the following example from an intern’s report suggests:

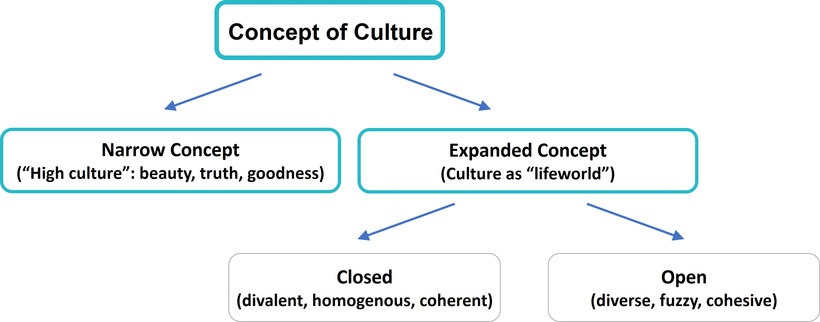
*At the office, I asked my supervisor a question, offering two possible solutions (‘Do you think…or should we rather…?’). I wanted to find out which of the two options she preferred. Sadly, she started to reply after the first part of my inquiry and then became furious because I had not waited for her to finish her answer before asking the next question. She argued that it must be because I come from South America that I am not able to wait before immediately asking the next question, thereby confusing the speaker. It may have slipped her mind that I did not grow up in South America.*

In the open perspective´s conception of culture, the *lifeworld* is seen as an open system. It is much more process and knowledge oriented, based on the understanding that culture is dynamic. It is a set of (constantly changing) practices through which social reality is created. Such a process view of culture is linked to an understanding of culture as knowledge. Through learning, individuals acquire knowledge about the way things are done and thereby gradually gain a sense of familiarity. This process leads to cultural *cohesion*, which means that culture is the glue that connects people. The basis of this is common knowledge and shared meaning.

This understanding of culture has the advantage that it captures the changes within cultures and their dynamics. Thus, culture is diverse, *fuzzy*, *heterogeneous* and *cohesive*. Bolten (2015) describes this perspective as an *either/or* AND *both/and* perspective. From this viewpoint, the construction of something that is *our own* and something that is *foreign* is no longer tenable. Since the *lifeworld* is our familiar world, it provides sense and meaningfulness for everyday actions. For the individual, something is meaningful if it is characterized by *relevance*, *plausibility*, *normality*, thus enabling routines (Schütz & Luckmann, 1979, p. 30).

The *open* view of culture represents a *multi-relational* type of thinking. According to this, not only national cultures are relevant, but also a range of other cultures, such as profession, age, gender, social or educational status, club affiliation and family among others (Hansen, 2009), all of which influence our values (what is seen as good, bad, to be strived for, to be avoided), behaviour and patterns of thinking. This new open conceptualisation of culture allows for the fact that each person possesses not only multiple affiliations with many different cultures, but also that they might identify with these cultures to a greater or lesser extent. The boundaries from one culture to another are therefore not sharply definable and could be said to be *fuzzy* (Bolten, 2015). Viewed in this way, the influence of culture on a person’s *lifeworld* is therefore the ever-changing influence of an intricate and unique mix of the cultures to which they have been exposed or decide to belong.

The following graphic illustrates the *narrow* and the *expanded concept* of culture as well as the *closed* and the *open* view of culture:



Source: Bolten, Jürgen (2015, p. 46), adapted and translated

#### Case "Beibei from East Frisia"

Beibei is a freshman at the university and joins an online get-together with lectures and fellow students. She introduces herself to one of the lecturers who comments: ‘Nice to meet you, where do you come from?’ Beibei answers: ‘From Leer’ which is a city in the far north of Germany and which prompts the lecturer to ask: ‘But where do you really come from?’. ‘From East Frisia’ is her reply indicating the region in the north of Germany. And in fact, this is the region where Beibei was born.

Use the *closed* and *open* concept of culture to explain the confusion and misunderstanding above. In doing so consider: What are the indications that suggest the lecturer based his question on a closed 'container' type thinking and conception of culture? Please note down your answers in your learning journal.

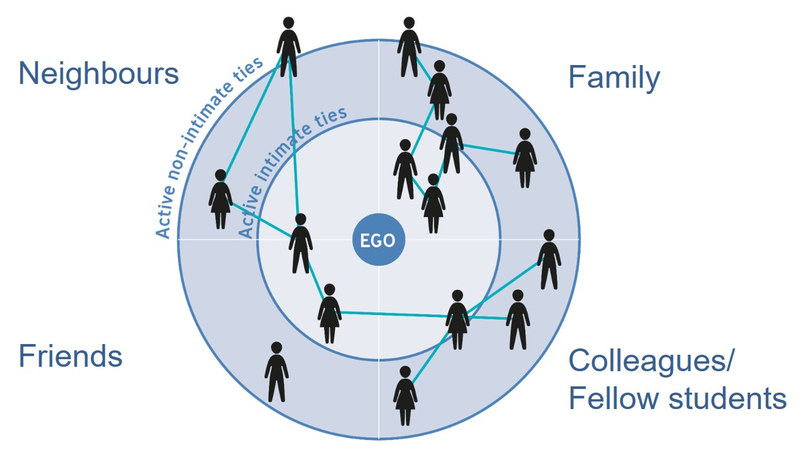
###### Sample answer

The reaction of the lecturer leads us to believe that he had a closed concept of culture in mind when posing the question "Where do you really come from?". When Beibei replied that she was from Leer, it is likely that Beibei's name and appearance did not fit his perception of "people from East Frisia", or any other region within Germany. Thus, he probably looked for an alternative explanation that would fit Beibei into a category such as China, for example. By asking Beibei where "she really came from" he indicated that he expected Beibei to feel another affiliation to a region that would fit her appearance and name, at least from the closed culture perspective of the lecturer. Beibei, however, may or may not feel affiliated to a country or region other than East Frisia or Germany.

The fact that there are quite different answers to the question of a person's origin, depending on their point of view, or that someone might have very different roles, makes it difficult to classify them definitively. A non-sharp definition of cultural affiliations therefore corresponds far better to reality: One might have a certain profession but at the same time be involved in numerous other roles and collectives, either within the family or through friendships, leisure or virtual relationships. This type of understanding of multi-collectivity was described by Hansen (2009) and is analogue to Bolten’s notion of multi-relational networks focusing on the relationships between actors (Bolten, 2011).

Along with the individual, this multi-relational concept of culture also affects groups, organizations, and societies in a much more pronounced form, regardless of which cultural actors are involved. Cultures are therefore not conceivable as sharply delimited fields of actors, but should rather be conceived of in terms of their links with other cultures and collectives. As mentioned above, the boundaries are blurred or fuzzy (Bolten, 2015) and should rather be considered as a network.

The following figure shows the networks EGO is a member of by considering four collectives. It shows the linkages and ties between EGO and the people in his/her network but also the relationships between the members. For example, some of the people in the network may be friends as well as fellow students. It also differentiates EGO’s relationships as actively intimate and non-intimate at the time when the image was drawn, showing that not only connections are important, but also the quality of those connections, and that these relationships change over time. For example, through working closely together in a team, a colleague who used to be an acquaintance, may become more of a friend.



Source: Based on Chua, Vincent, Julia Madej & Barry Wellman (2011, p. 102). Personal communities: the world according to me. In: John Scott and Peter J. Carrington (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Social Network Analysis*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 101-115.

Figure by Julia Flitta ([www.julia-flitta.com](http://www.julia-flitta.com/))

If we view culture in the context of today’s globalization processes, then we can clearly observe that economic, technological and political as well as professional and personal networks have established themselves across national borders. This emphasises the understanding of cultures as open systems and open networks of cohesively connected collectives (Bolten, 2014; Hansen, 2009; Rathje, 2009), rather than coherent constructions of homogeneity.

### Task: Find your own example

Understanding culture from an ‘either/or’ AND ‘both/and’ perspective, as the open concept suggests, allows us to consider Beibei’s sense of belonging from a multi-collective and multi-relational perspective. She identifies Leer as her home town and feels attached to it. Her name suggests that she or her family also feels attached to other collectives, which may or may not be China. If this is the case, the answer to the question ‘Where do you come from?’ could be ‘either/or’ AND both/and’, depending on self-ascription. In our case she obviously considered her answer to be the most relevant in the specific context.

Think about an example where an 'either/or' AND 'both/and' perspective could have supported a more differentiated view and note this down in your learning journal.

###### Sample answer

*As an example, take this dialogue between Ian and Gavin from the UK. They chat while waiting for a meeting to start.*

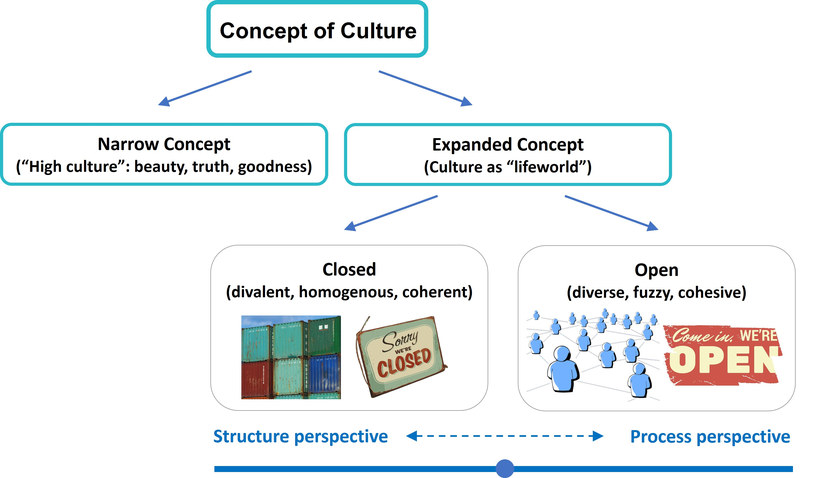
*Ian:*

*I am working with this colleague from Bangladesh, Kashif. It’s interesting, but sometimes challenging. It looks like they have a very different understanding of deadlines! It can be frustrating to constantly remind him of the deadlines we agreed on. I know that India and Bangladesh are two different countries, but I visited an intercultural training seminar some time ago, where they explained to us that the attitude towards deadlines is just more relaxed than it is here. That helps me a bit to see that he doesn’t mean it personally at least.*

*Gavin:*

*Well, you are right, it is possible that what you observe with Kashif can be explained that way. Have you considered though, that not only is India different from Bangladesh, but that there might also be a big difference between people within these countries? I remember you told me Kashif is new to our company. This might also be influencing his behaviour. We also do not know if he is from the countryside or the city, what his age is, or his general personality. It is even possible that his parents are from the UK, and he himself feels very British. So honestly, I would be a little sceptical with absolute statements from these intercultural workshops, especially when they claim that people from a certain national background necessarily share particular traits. If I were you, I would just take some time to talk to Kashif on an informal level, and see if you can get to know him better, to see what makes him "tick" as a person.*

In summary, we view culture as an open, ever-changing system, emphasising its knowledge-based and processual nature. This process aspect of culture leads to cultural cohesion, and thus culture can be seen as the glue that connects people, the basis of which is common knowledge and shared meaning. This understanding of culture is depicted below, and includes the structural as well as the process perspective.



Source: Bolten, Jürgen (2015, p. 46), adapted and translated.

Images by Pixabay. Accessed 15 May 2021. [Pixabay License](https://pixabay.com/service/license/)

Using an expanded and open definition of culture requires us to look closer at individuals and their membership of different groups or collectives, thus taking a micro-perspective. If we want to establish a trusting relationship with virtual team members, such a micro-perspective is important in order to gain the necessary in-depth knowledge of the people in our new collective, or team. An in-depth view based on an open definition of culture allows us to take on the aforementioned either/or AND both/and perspective, which enables us to see commonalities as well as differences. With such a perspective, our construction of what belongs to us (‘our own’) and what does not (the ‘foreign’) is no longer tenable and the transition from the ‘unfamiliar other’ to the ‘familiar other’ is gradual and contextual. It helps with the understanding that ‘they are us’. An expanded and open understanding of culture therefore enables opportunities for inclusion and an open, network perspective as the illustration below indicates.

An open concept of culture lays the groundwork for inclusion in the sense that it supports the process of all involved parties becoming part of the collective. In the context of virtual teams this would encourage an awareness of how important it is to establish a collective in such a way that every member feels part of it. The open network perspective takes this a step further by indicating that team members are also members of other collectives. Through these multiple team member affiliations the team can access information that would otherwise have been obscured to them and thus team performance can be considerably enhanced.

We have now seen that cultures are dynamic, ever-changing networks without sharply definable borders. We have also observed that each individual has multiple memberships of a range of cultures. These influences are either consciously or subconsciously combined in order to make up a person’s individual lifeworld.

If this is so, then the question logically arises: ‘If cultural memberships are multiple and the borders between cultures are fuzzy, then how can we make sense of cultures or even describe them at all?’ In order to answer this question, we will take a short digression into the world of “Zooming”!

When we view cultures, we are always taking on a particular degree of abstraction. The process of zooming helps to illustrate this. The closer we zoom in to the actor contexts and focus on the details of the micro-perspective, the more questionable initial macro-perspective constructions of homogeneity appear. This means that zooming helps us to see both structure and process. This also means that rather than seeing zooming-in and zooming-out as two viewpoints and therefore as an ‘either-or’ binary choice, it is more helpful to view them as being located on a gradual continuum stretching from “structure” at one end to “process” at the other. Viewed in this way we have a realistic way of conceiving of culture, and can accept that all points along the continuum might be relevant in particular circumstances and with particular objectives in mind. Culture is therefore both structure and process (this is the “both/and” approach).



Photograph by Adelheid Iken

As we see in the photographs, the image will change depending on how far we ‘zoom out’ and how far we ‘zoom in’. This inevitably creates a paradox, since hardly anyone will deny that despite the obvious heterogeneity of individual actors, there are certain situations in which it can be legitimate and meaningful to talk about ‘German’ or ‘Chinese’ ways of thinking and acting. In other words, what turns out to be heterogeneous from a microcosmic point of view, may well seem homogeneous from a macrocosmic (or 'outside') perspective.

To put it another way: Culture is both heterogeneous and non-heterogeneous (Hansen, 2009, p. 121; Moosmüller, 2009, p. 56). In this case, the idea would be: Both the either-or type of thinking that embraces cultural homogeneity as well as the both/and thinking that embodies a fuzzy understanding of culture are simultaneously equally valid. Accordingly, fuzzy not only relates to the concept of culture itself as a network of relationships, but also to the nature of the perspective that is used when viewing culture: This degree of ‘fuzziness’ determines how homogeneous/ heterogeneous we understand a culture to be (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31). In other words, both binary and fuzzy views are justified under particular conditions and in specific contexts.

In sum, when we view culture holistically and on a structure-process continuum, zooming is a tool we can use in order to change perspective, depending on the context and objective that is relevant at any given time.

### Task: 'Zooming' – a new perspective on culture

Watch the YouTube video on 'Zooming – A new perspective on culture' and carry out the following tasks.

1. What is zooming?
2. What is meant by *zooming out* as much as necessary and *zooming in* as much as possible?
3. How might *zooming in* on a virtual team support or hinder the development of a productive team culture?
4. Why is zooming an important concept in order to get to know virtual team members? How can zooming help to consider different perspectives?

###### Sample answer

**1. What is zooming?**

The concept of *zooming in* *and* *out* of cultural collectives is the technique of looking at something either very closely or from a distance. The technique thus involves looking at something from different angles.

**2. What is meant by zooming out as much as necessary and zooming in as much as possible?**

*Zooming in* as much as possible refers to the understanding that we need to capture as many details as possible in a particular context. *Zooming out* as much as necessary means that we should be cautious not to generalize too much, but can gain some insights from a wider view of the collectives involved.

**3. How might zooming in on a virtual team support or hinder the development of a productive team culture?**

When we *zoom in* too much, the diversity of behaviour, goals and values within the team can be overwhelming, making it challenging to achieve consensus. However, when we zoom out too much, we might perceive common ground which in reality does not take into account the real interests and needs of the people we work with. It is therefore important to achieve a balance of focus in order to do justice to both, team members' individual characteristics and needs as well as considering the cultures and collectives involved.

**4. Why is zooming an important concept in order to get to know virtual team members? How can zooming help to consider different perspectives?**

*Zooming out* enables us to initially put the team into rough categories. This step allows us to grasp the general level of diversity in the team, which can help us to be more aware of the team members' different perspectives. However, in order to really get to know your team, it is important to also question these categories, and make an effort to see the individual traits of team members by *zooming in*.

## 2.5 Interculturality

The video 'Zooming' indicates the importance of the concept when encountering others and working in virtual teams. A key message from the video is that the characteristics and perceived homogeneity of, for example a group of people, change when the viewpoint changes. This should encourage us to question our homogeneity assumptions when meeting new team members. With this in mind, and considering the open concept of culture, the next step is to explore interculturality.

As we saw in the previous section, concepts of culture have moved from the idea of cultures as static, homogenous, nation-bound units or containers (e.g. studies from E.T.Hall 'Beyond Culture' and Geert Hofstede "Culture's Consequences') to conceptions that embrace a more fluid, dynamic and multi-relational notion of culture.

From a practical point of view this means that we understand team members to have relationships with a range of people and to be members of a range of different collectives. Additionally, the figure below indicates that some of the collectives with which a team member feels associated have a stronger influence on him/her than others. For example the turquoise area may show an affiliation to their profession, which is considered to be highly relevant in the context of an upcoming team project.

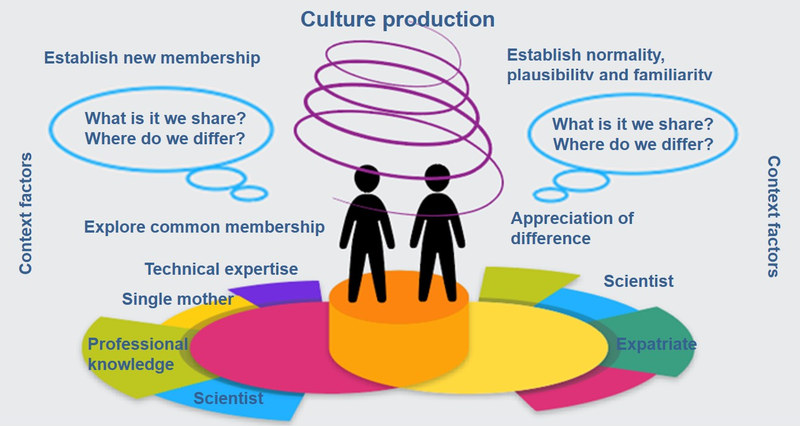


Source: Based on Rathje, Stefanie (2015). Multicollectivity – It changes everything. Key Note Speech at the SIETAR Europe Congress ([SIETAR\_slides\_Rathje.pptx (stefanie-rathje.de)](http://stefanie-rathje.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/SIETAR_slides_Rathje.pdf)). Accessed 24 May 2021.

Figure by Julia Flitta ([www.julia-flitta.com](http://www.julia-flitta.com/))

Imagine that a team member shares membership of a professional collective with another team member. In this case their relationship is characterised by culturality. At the same time they may diverge in their membership of other collectives, which nonetheless play an important role in their interactions. In this case their relationship can be characterised by interculturality. Thus the relationship between two and more actors can be characterized by both interculturality and culturality (Auernheimer, 2010, p. 60).

The figure below illustrates this with the example of two protagonists A and B: They are predominantly socialized in different contexts and thus diverge in their membership of a number of collectives, while sharing some others. This is the basis for them to explore differences and commonalities. They share membership of the gender collective and thus they are likely to find topics to discuss and observe here. However, because person A spent many years working abroad and person B did not, they are less likely to find common ground with many of the issues that stem from international experience. This will be an area of interculturality.



Source: Based on Rathje, Stefanie (2015). Multicollectivity – It changes everything. Key Note Speech at the SIETAR Europe Congress ([SIETAR\_slides\_Rathje.pptx (stefanie-rathje.de)](http://stefanie-rathje.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/SIETAR_slides_Rathje.pdf)). Accessed 24 May 2021.

Figure by Julia Flitta ([www.julia-flitta.com](http://www.julia-flitta.com/))

Despite this, the figure also shows that through mutual learning and an exchange of experiences during their teamwork they can develop their team culture and thus common conventions, *plausibility* and rules of *normality* in a common (e.g. professional) context of action. This means that the interculturality of this cooperation has already gone beyond the fluidity of interculturality and entered into a common *culturality*. In this context they will now no longer feel culturally different.

However, if B is a committed member of a religious community to which A has had no previous contact, and B invites person A to a celebration within this religious community after work, then suddenly the intercultural perspective in their relationship can dominate once more. Since both spheres of activity, i.e. professional and non-professional, are interlinked by the reciprocal relationship between the two actors, the way in which A and B interact *interculturally* in the external context described will influence their already *culturalised* reciprocal relationship (and vice versa).

However, interculturality is not only *multivalent* and relational, but also relative: The same (common) action context may be perceived by A to be intercultural due to his/ her inability to feel plausibility, familiarity and relevance in the situation, while B may not even notice this due to his perception of *culturality* and therefore perceived *normality*.

This is an example.

Starting in December 2019, a global pandemic changed the way people behaved on a global scale. For example, different regions in the world had different ways of greeting. Whereas some people would bow or shake hands, others might fold their hands or give a peck on the cheeks when greeting their co-workers or business partners. After the pandemic began, it became increasingly common to only meet virtually, rendering these forms of greetings obsolete. Colleagues from very different regions of the world thus started meeting in a ‘blank space’, and needed to create a new cultural norm when meeting online. Different forms popped up, from a simple ‘hello’ from everyone to a ‘check-in’, in order to share what is on their mind before the meeting starts, and many other forms in between. As the pandemic has created a new reality for many of us, a new consensus on the way we communicate had to be designed, or *culturalised*.

Against this background, *structure* and *process* approaches can contribute to the realization of intercultural action as a goal-oriented and *negotiation-based* collaborative activity, which can help to create a new normality in a team, even when the team was previously perceived to be heterogeneous.

## 2.6 Common cultural misconceptions and the potential of zooming for developing a collaborative team culture

An interview with Prof. Jürgen Bolten, Jena

URL: <https://www.podcampus.de/nodes/pWOkq/>

### Task: Cultural misconceptions and zooming in intercultural communication

Listen to the interview with Prof. Jürgen Bolten and carry out the following tasks:

1. Identify the main misconceptions regarding intercultural communication people have and note them down in your learning journal.
2. Do you agree with Prof. Bolten’s statements?

Support your answer with well-founded arguments.

1. How can zooming in and zooming out help to develop a collaborative team culture?

###### Sample answer

**During the interview the following main misconceptions regarding intercultural communication were identified:**

* one communication partner may link something different to what his/her partner mentioned due to the differences in the expression of ideas;
* generalized ideas of one or another national representative are errorsome, because cultures and nations are not homogeneous;
* misunderstanding may arise because people expect them to arise due to different ethical backgrounds or diverse appearances.

**Do you agree with Prof. Bolten’s statements?**

I totally agree with all of the statements and arguments given by Professor Bolten. He clearly put it forward that people share misconceptions because we tend to confuse our perception of a culture as something uniform and homogeneous influencing all its representatives to the same extent. Though we should never forget that cultures are realms which shape their representatives individually and cultures are not only those ones that correspond to our mother tongues and ethnic communities we were born in. Cultures come from schools, work, neighbourhoods. Additionally, we are prone to relate to other people following stereotypes based on strictly visible conceptions, this means that our attitudes are to some extent self-made and culture-unrelated.

**How can zooming in and zooming out help to develop a collaborative team culture?**

When we are working in a team, we may refer to the approaches of zooming in and zooming out. The better we zoom in on the field of actors, the better we understand how they interact and structures become dynamic. Change from zooming in to zooming out gives an opportunity to advance from structure-specific and culture-related perspective to process-specific and interculturally-related perspective.

To work in a team, we have to do both things. We should play the game of zooming in and zooming out. When we are interested in structures and aspire to have some certainty, we zoom out. If we are interested more in different things relating to processes, we zoom in. These techniques provide us with a perfect assistance which is about switching attention under control in the context of our personal needs.

## 2.7 Summary

Virtual teams are likely to be intercultural teams. For this reason we have dedicated this unit to examining culture and interculturality. In fact, with our definition of culture, which includes the idea of a multitude of cultural affiliations, we could even say that all teams are intercultural to a certain extent. We have attempted to capture the fluid nature of culture and the growing interconnectedness we face every day, which exposes us to a wide range of differing *lifeworlds*. This *expanded concept* of culture formed the basis of our understanding in this unit.

Taking the expanded concept of culture a step further, a distinction can be made between a *structural* and a *processual* perspective, also referred to as a *closed* and an *open* concept. While the closed perspective only considers the binary choice of *either/or*, the open perspective allows for both/and thinking. Through our ‘zooming’ tool we can move between these perspectives. This can be important in order to understand our team members and in this way we will find it easier to develop a working environment characterized by *normality*, *plausibility* and routinised actions.

The basis for an open perspective of culture is the understanding that we are all members of a multitude of collectives and therefore have relationships with a wide range of people. This can be visualized as a network. Considering the fact that people are members of various collectives enables us to explore commonalities as well as differences among team members, which we might not have realized from a structural ‘zoomed-out’ perspective. Dealing with intercultural situations in this way gives us the best chance of developing a team culture characterized by familiar and routinized actions as well as a feeling of togetherness and belonging.

Even after a tentative working ‘team culture’ has been created, it is quite possible that the initial feelings of unfamiliarity can surface once more. This happens when memberships of collectives are activated, thus exposing team members to unfamiliar behavioral patterns. This requires team members to explore the new behavior with transparency but without judgment, understand and readjust. This is possible because, as we have seen, cultures are dynamic and boundaries are fluid.

Understanding culture from a structural and processual perspective and the many ‘in-betweens’ along this continuum is a good basis for developing a working culture based on familiarity and routinized action that is embraced by all team members. Being aware of this constant fluctuation between *interculturality* and *culturalisation* helps to ensure that the team culture created is one that enables all team members to flourish.

## 2.8 Learning review

### Task: Working in an intercultural team – some practical questions

Imagine that next month you start working for an international company and you know that your team consists of:

* a woman who was born in Ghana
* a woman who was born in Russia, immigrated to the UK as a little girl and graduated in the USA, and
* a young intern you don’t know anything about.

Reflect on the following questions and note down your answers in your learning journal.

How can you apply what you have learned about the open and closed concept of culture to your team, considering the little information you have about your team members?

###### Sample answer

We have learned that the closed concept of culture can cause us to make assumptions about people that can be misleading. When we learn that one of our colleagues has lived in several countries before joining our team, and another one was born in Ghana, there are still few assumptions we can safely make. The woman in Ghana might be more defined by her gender, age, religion or profession than her birthplace. And even if we have a colleague who spent many years in different countries, we do not know whether she still feels 'Russian', and what she might understand by that. We should keep an open mind with these colleagues and also with the intern about whom we have no information. The initial information we have can, however, serve as a first idea from which to find out more about 'what makes your colleagues tick'.

What are some of the advantages and some of the disadvantages of a closed approach to culture based on national belonging?

###### Sample answer

One advantage of a closed approach to culture is that it takes away some complexity when dealing with a diverse team. It can also give us a certain sense of security when dealing with people of other nationalities. Another advantage is when we encounter behaviour that we do not like in a colleague, we could take a closed cultural concept to explain this behaviour, rather than take it personally ('he is not late out of disrespect towards me, but because of his cultural background'). One of the biggest shortcomings of a closed culture approach is the generalization of individuals. People generally do not appreciate their individuality being explained away through an external notion of cultural belonging. This is the feeling of estrangement we notice when reading cultural guides on the so-called typical behaviour in our own nation.

In addition, the closed notion of culture is more likely to lead us to 'judge'. We need to be especially aware here of judgments that are absolute and not simply expressing a preference. We might even judge people because they do not correspond to our stereotypical view of a certain nation ('she comes from a culture where people are punctual- but she is not. So, she must be unreliable or disrespectful').

Think about 4-5 work related values or behaviours people from abroad would associate with the country or region you are from. They can be positive, negative or neutral. Note that these attributes come from a closed culture point of view. Please write them down in your learning journal.

###### Sample answer

Here is an example of an answer from a German person:

* structured
* too honest and direct
* unemotional
* reliable

Now assume that during your first online meeting, your boss introduces you to the team as “This is your new colleague from…” mentioning your home country. Imagine that your colleagues associate you with the behaviour or values you just wrote down. Which expectations would you want to fulfil and which not? How would you feel about this situation, in which you are perceived from a closed-culture point of view? Note down the answers in your learning journal.

###### Sample answer

The German person cited above noted the following:

While I could relate to some of the traits, I did not feel like I shared some others at all. For example, I see myself as honest and direct, but also I often show up late, and actually feel that I am a very emotional person. Even with the more “positive” stereotypes like punctuality, I felt like I might disappoint my team when I show up late. Realising that my new colleagues might see me as the 'German' puts me in a rather defensive position.

Give examples of situations in which your 'automatic' assumptions and behaviour have been thrown into question by your diverse environment.

###### Sample answer

Participant 1:

I remember when I returned to the Sudan with a friend and we walked through the streets of Khartoum. It was already getting dark and we had just arrived, having not yet recovered from jet-lag, and feeling a bit insecure when someone called us using the term 'Asma' meaning 'listen to me'. Our initial assumption was that the person wanted to beg and ask for money because we were 'rich foreigners' and so we were tempted to walk faster. When we finally stopped, it turned out that it was someone I knew and simply wanted to greet and talk to us.

Participant 2:

When I was traveling in the Philippines I decided to take a long walk in the country side as I wanted to get away from the tourist centres and explore the area. When I passed people working on the field they waved at me pointing in the direction of the beach. They obviously assumed that I had got lost and that foreigners are only interested in the beach. Because I did not speak their language, there was no way to tell them otherwise.

Participant 3:

Last term I was in a team with a student from Mexico whose English was not very fluent and I was very sceptical as to the contribution he could possibly make towards the term paper we were expected to write together. Actually thinking back, my assumption were threefold. Being Mexican I assumed that he may not know what our standards for writing an academic term paper are. Because of the trouble we had communicating well in English as a foreign language and understanding each other, I also assumed that his contributions may be rather poor and I think I also assumed a more 'mañana' thinking he was from Mexico. And actually I must admit that I was proved wrong. He had less experience than me speaking English, but he had a lot of experience in academic writing and looking back, I am glad that I questioned my assumptions about the 'students from Mexico'.

During these two sessions, we have already encountered a series of situations where 'automatic' assumptions were questioned afterwards. We can take for example the first case from lesson one, where we had a team working exclusively from Brazil, but then saw that even in a situation like this, a high level of diversity was possible. Or take the case with Beibei, who has a Chinese name and possibly also appearance, but might identify much more with her Northern German birthplace. In the ‘zoom’ video we saw that the book the expat consulted before going abroad was written from a closed culture perspective, and led him to wrongly believe that everyone here would behave in a certain way. Automatic assumptions and behaviour make many things easier for us, and it is very challenging to live without them. However, it is still desirable to question them frequently, in order to appreciate the high level of diversity around us, negotiate openly, without prejudice, a new way of working that all parties can embrace, and allow the process to enrich us.

## 2.9 Sources, further reading and web links

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