



## The Meaning of Culture

by Anna Katrina Davey

*What is culture? And how does it affect us?*

We encounter and make use of the word *culture* several times a day and in very different contexts. We attend *cultural programs*, discuss *cultural differences* as well as *agricultural practices*, read about the danger of *cults* and *cultivate good or bad habits*. Even when standing in the dairy section of the supermarket we are confronted with *live and active cultures* while searching for the right yoghurt to buy!

Reflecting its Latin origin in the word *cultus*, past participle of *colere* - meaning to inhabit, cultivate, foster, worship or take care of - the term *culture* holds numerous meanings throughout various disciplines such as sociology, cultural anthropology, biology and agriculture.

But for the purpose of *intercultural relations and research*, how do we define culture and how does it impact us?

Is it the way we dress? The way we eat or prepare food? The kind of cars we like to drive or other means of transportation we might prefer?

*Culture* is all these things and much more. In fact, most everything we do is influenced by culture: the way we give and receive information, use time and space, or view authority:

*Culture* is a framework of behavioral patterns, values, assumptions and experiences shared by a social group,

*Culture* is a mostly automatically or unconsciously applied orientation system of collective values, which makes its group members' behavior comprehensible and to a certain degree predictable for each other,

*Culture* is communication, it impacts how we send and interpret messages,

*Culture* shapes human conduct within a cultural group,

*Culture* is something we learn,

*Culture* is like *mental software* and has accordingly been defined as “*the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others*” (Geert Hofstede),

*Culture* acts as a *kind of filter or lens* through which we view others, affecting the way we see them and creating multiple perspectives,

*Culture* is often compared to *an iceberg*. Like the tip of an iceberg, visible aspects of culture such as behavior, eating habits, or clothing are easy to see. Under the surface, however, hides a huge and potentially fatal portion made up of beliefs, values, customs, experiences and assumptions. Knowledge of the deeper parts of the iceberg helps us understand the “*why*” behind the behavior. It enables us to make more informed evaluations of global counterparts and avoid misunderstandings that can waste time and damage relationships.

Awareness of our own cultural conditioning and knowledge about other cultural systems build the foundation of cross-cultural training while paving the path towards cross-cultural competence.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Italy, Anna Katrina has extensive international living and work experience on three continents, has traveled 40 countries, and is fluent in German, English, Italian and versed in Spanish as well as in Vietnamese. Anna Katrina earned a Master's degree in Geography, Ethnology and European Cultural Studies, from Albert-Ludwigs Universität in Freiburg, Germany. She received further professional training in Intercultural Communication from InWEnt, the German government's organization for human resources development, further training and dialogue.

