



Concepts and Theories of Culture

...for AFS &
Friends

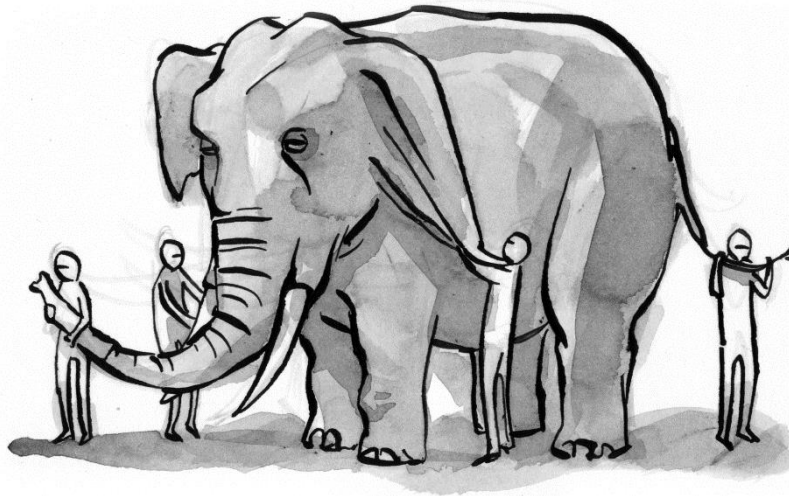


Illustration by Kevin Cornell

In the story called “The blind men and the elephant”, originally developed in south Asia, six blind men encounter an elephant for the first time. Each of them touches a different part of the animal and their variety of perspectives leads to different assumptions of what an elephant is. This story depicts how reality can be perceived in many different ways and that there has to be more than just one ultimate truth. Similar to this metaphor, culture is a concept which is not easy to define, since each person has his or her own view and presumptions on what culture is. A better understanding of culture’s complexity makes it easier to deal with and to appreciate the cultural variety that we experience. But what is culture exactly? How can we define such an abstract concept?

According to Milton Bennett, an intercultural communication researcher and AFS Educational Advisory Council member, culture can be defined as **shared characteristics (values, behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, etc.) and learned tendencies or patterns of a group that are transferred from one generation to the next and can adapt slowly over time**. Moreover, every individual has a cultural background that affects his or her way of thinking, behaving and feeling and it functions as a system of orientation. In short, culture influences our perception of the world and **one needs to be aware of one’s own system of orientation to figure out the best way to interact with foreign rules, structures and people from different cultures**.

The definition of culture includes a variety of different aspects and its complexities are difficult to grasp. A helpful way to make the concept of culture more tangible is through the use of models that help us visualize it.

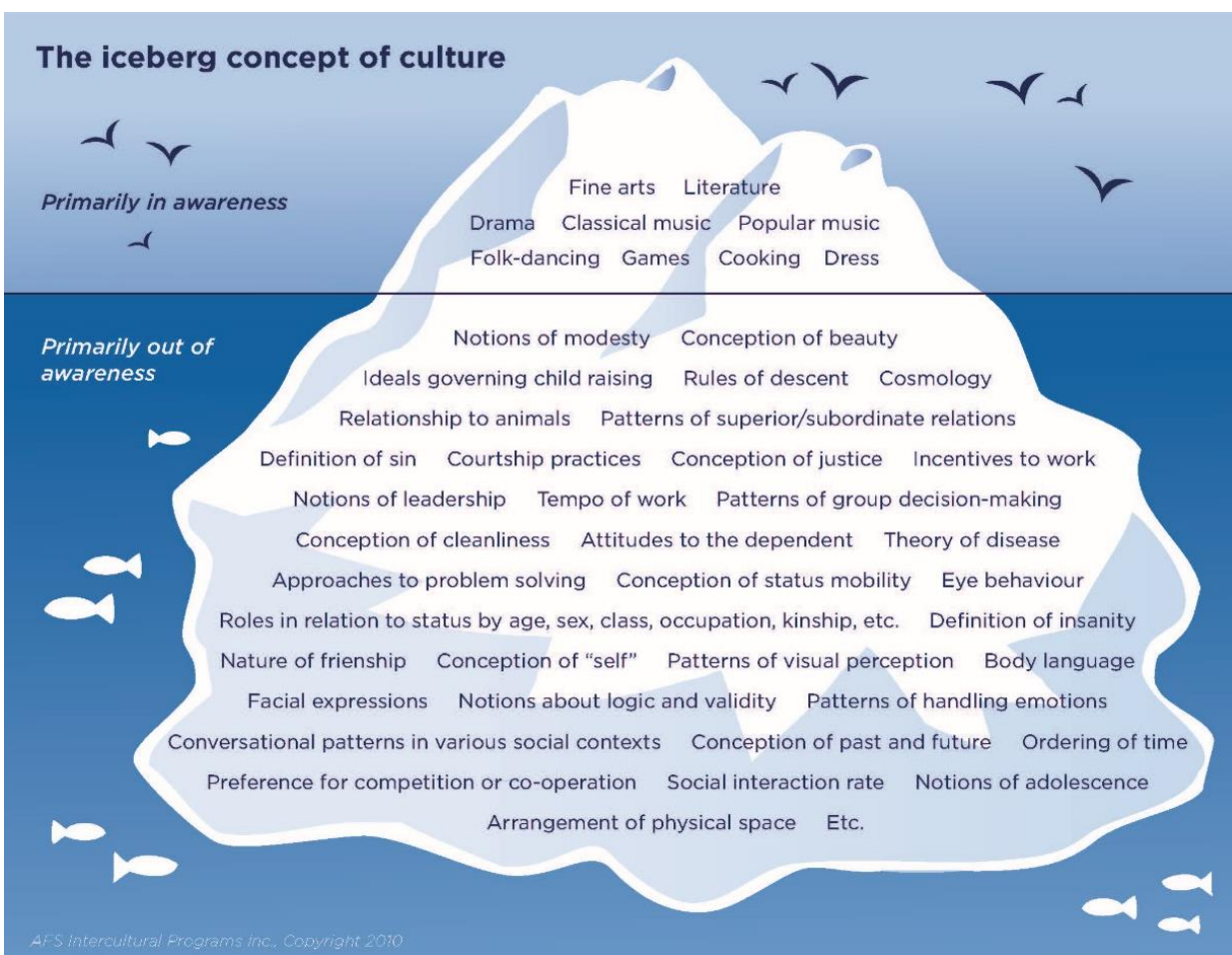
UNDERSTANDING MODELS OF CULTURE

AFS uses three main models that help us represent what culture is: the Iceberg, the Onion and the Tree. We do so bearing in mind each model facilitates greater understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon.

The Iceberg Model

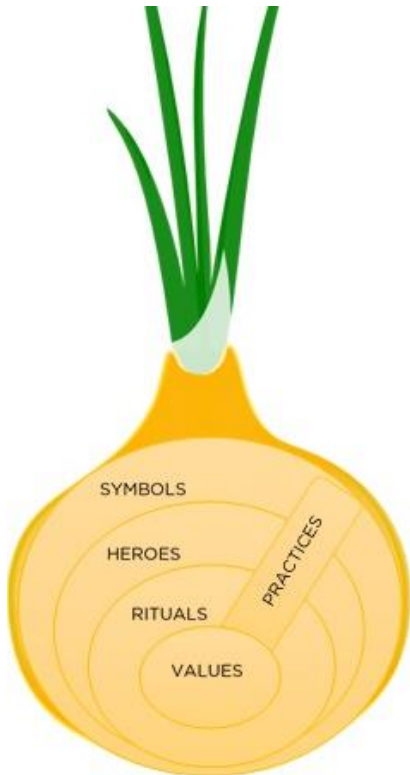
The image of an iceberg represents the relation between **observable words, actions and artifacts and the deeper, often hidden and subconscious associated values and beliefs**. When seen above the water, only approximately 10% of the iceberg is observable – most of it is hidden in the water. This reminds us that only a few cultural aspects are visible and “primarily in awareness” but the majority of it, which is “primarily out of awareness” and less tangible, is essential to understand a culture. In fact, the aspects underneath the surface of the water directly influence the ones on the “tip” of the iceberg and both parts exist in an interrelated dependency.

The visible aspects of the iceberg represent **artifacts and behaviors**, whereas the elements underneath the water correspond to **values and norms**. The image of an iceberg also emphasizes that if somebody is only aware of the 10% above the water, he or she is likely to crash and sink like the Titanic. Therefore, one should question and reflect upon first impressions and assumptions of other cultures and also try to explore the hidden parts.



The Onion Model

The onion model offers a means to visualize how differences in cultures may be arranged and it provides a comprehensive insight into the practicalities of culture. The deeper you get into the onion the less obvious and visible the features get for observers.



The outer shell of the onion corresponds to **symbols**, which are observable phenomena such as words, pictures, dress codes or flags, each with a specific meaning. These are visible to people who share that culture. Underneath that first layer lies the layer of heroes or figures that are admired and serve as good examples for behavior. Further into the layers of the onion are **rituals** or practices that a specific society condones as essential to taking an active part in its community. A wedding ceremony or a funeral are two examples of rituals that can occur in specific ways in particular national cultures. At the core of the onion, hidden by other layers, are **values**, which influence perceptions of what is good, beautiful and normal. Values are one of the first beliefs a child is implicitly brought up to learn, which makes them hard to change. As visualized by the onion metaphor, values are located at the very core and covered by other layers so that they can't be observed directly by onlookers.

As a result, rituals, heroes and symbols are components of **practices** that correspond to a specific set of values. These elements determine one's outlook on the world and how one arrives at a decision. Practices might be visible for outsiders, though their cultural meaning may only be interpreted by members of the culture.

The Tree Model

The tree model also points out visible and hidden parts of a culture. The leaves represent observable aspects of a culture, such as **rituals, legends, policies, language, control systems or symbols**. Like the iceberg model, the tree emphasizes **unwritten expectations, values and norms**, and these are symbolized as the tree's trunk. The roots of the tree are hidden underneath, and these symbolize the **core beliefs and assumptions** of a culture.

The tree needs all of its parts to work together in order to grow - especially the roots to ensure its sustainability. However, the hidden aspects of culture require time and effort to learn about and might not even be easily known by people within a



certain culture since they are deeply rooted and often subconsciously practiced. As Edward T. Hall, , an anthropologist and cultural researcher, once wrote, “Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants.”

These three models help us to discover the visible parts of culture, whether they are represented as a tip of an iceberg, outer layers of an onion or as leaves of a tree. We can find the less obvious and rather hidden aspects of culture represented in the iceberg underneath the water, in the inner layers of an onion or in the trunk or roots of a tree. All three of these models emphasize the importance of exploring the hidden aspects in order to better understand a particular culture.

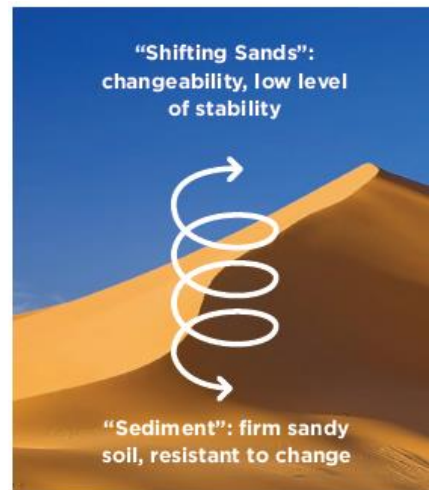
ADDITIONAL MODEL TO CONSIDER

Apart from the models presented, which have been used for some time by AFS to introduce the complexity of culture, there are many others that could be considered when looking at concepts and theories of culture. Here, we present one more that has been recently developed by Professor Jürgen Bolten, AFS Educational Advisory Council member.

The Dune Model of Culture

The dune model depicts culture as the different sand layers of a dune.

The “**Sediment**” or bottom level of the dune consists of firm sandy soil that is not likely to be changed over a long period of time. This is where we find norms, laws, prohibitions and other binding forces that are considered to be normal, non-negotiable and *have to* be followed in a culture. The next layer of sand, the **middle level**, includes the rules that *should* be followed. These are guidelines, rituals or “styles” that are more dynamic and generally less strict compared to the sediment level. At the top level of the sand dune we find the “**Shifting Sands**” which can easily be blown away and are regulated by context-specific, unwritten agreements or group rules (for example, the way in which people greet each other). This part of the sand dune is highly flexible, dynamic and most likely to appear and disappear regularly due to the lack of relevance or plausibility. This part might also carry different rules for subcultures or specific groups that are not binding for an entire society or group.



In order to describe a culture appropriately, Bolten recommends that we look at all structure-oriented parts (Sediment, middle level) and process-oriented parts (middle level, Shifting Sand) and try to find interrelations between the different layers and to uncover the intersections in between them. The Dune Model of Culture is unique in that it addresses the possibility of change of certain values and norms in a group.

CONCLUSION

Models enable us to think and talk about abstract phenomena like culture, but when working with models it is important to consider their limitations and not expect them to depict a perfect picture of reality. Certainly none of the models presented here can be considered as the ultimate way of representing what culture is. We must bear in mind that cultures are fluid and ongoing processes, not homogeneous or static as some models of culture might suggest. As professor Jürgen Bolten put it, “Cultures cannot be clearly bordered; their edges appear, rather, as a confluence of diverse transcultural networks. Cultures are inherently uneven or fuzzy.”

Nevertheless, the models presented here are a good starting point when it comes to understanding culture, especially for our work within AFS. They help us to visually understand the concept of culture and to explore its complexity through tangible images. They allow us to reflect upon invisible, more hidden aspects of behavior and the underlying values that behavior may represent. These models provide us with a starting point to talk about cultural differences. All in all, having a better understanding of the concept of culture enables us to develop cultural awareness and to support others in their intercultural learning experiences.

CONCEPTS & THEORIES OF CULTURE MAY...

- ✓ show the visible and the more hidden aspects of cultures
- ✓ help to understand the complexity of culture and enable us to tangibly talk about it
- ✓ serve as a good starting point to reflect upon your own culture and on cultural differences

FOR MORE INFORMATION...

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