

Enquiry: Culture and Representation

How is culture defined in each of the perspectives below? What assumptions inform these perspectives? What are the educational implications of holding these assumptions?

Culture is the set of traditions (like food, dances and music), ways of thinking and behaviours of specific people that live in a specific place. It needs to be respected and preserved.

Ethnic cultures have interesting and exotic dances, drumming and cookery, but, at the end of the day, they need to learn from us about how to catch up with modernity and civilization - otherwise we will always need to give them aid and support.

What people see as real and ideal for their lives varies with their age, class, gender, religion, the culture of the region they live in, their family background, political orientation, upbringing, etc... The only person I can represent is myself.

When people ask me to speak as a Latin American or a Brazilian, I feel very uncomfortable. They must think we all think the same way. What would they say if I asked them to give me 'the' British perspective?

Culture is universal and timeless. If someone is cultured, he or she can understand the highest expressions of art and music in human history.

Culture is the way groups of people interpret the world. It is dynamic – it changes with time and history.

I feel I can represent my people. I can certainly say what the majority of people in my country would say about a specific issue.

A stereotype is a misinformed and fixed idea about characteristics of cultures. Negative stereotypes reinforce racism. They should be challenged and changed for a positive image of the target culture. We should only promote the good side of cultures.

A stereotype is not only a false image about the other – it is a false idea about the self, as we define our own identities in relation to other people/cultures/groups. Racism is the belief in our own cultural superiority – and this is what needs to be challenged.

Informed Thinking

What informed your current perspective on this topic? What shapes the dominant understanding of culture? Where can you hear about different perspectives? How do you make your decisions about what you think about it?

Reflective Questions

Take three minutes in silence to reflect about the following:

1. What do you identify as 'your culture'? What are the characteristics of your culture? Would everyone from your culture recognize the same characteristics? How is your culture perceived by other people? What are the factors that shape your culture - who constructs it?
2. What characteristics do you share with the people of your family? Of your school/college/university/church/work? Of your city or region? Of the same religion? Of the same gender? Of the same social/economic group? Of the same country? Of the same continent? Of the planet? How different and how similar are these groups?
3. Does your national or regional culture have a hierarchy of inferior/superior cultures? How do you define yourself in relation to other people?
4. What (positive and negative) stereotypes do you have about other cultures? Do you think they say something about your own identity?
5. Have you ever been in a position where you were in the minority? (that is in the minority in any given situation) How did it feel and why do you think you felt that way?

Group Dialogue Questions

Read through the list of questions below. Are there any other burning questions you would like to add to this list? Select two 'priority' questions for discussion in your group.

1. How do you define culture? How are cultures defined?
2. Do cultures change over time? If so, what/who provokes this change? Are cultures fundamentally good? Should cultures be 'preserved'? Should people try to challenge and change them?
3. To what extent differences represent barriers for mutual understanding? To what extent do they represent opportunities for learning?
4. What happens when groups or individuals decide to define themselves or their cultures as superior, or better than the others?

5. How is power distributed amongst different 'cultures'? How is this distribution connected to processes of colonisation and oppression? How have we come to think about cultures and ethnicities in terms of categories of contrast like civilised/uncivilised, developed/underdeveloped, modern/backward, lazy/hard-working, intellectual/physical, winner/loser? Who has defined these categories, in whose name and for whose benefit?
6. Should children of different cultures attend separate schools in a multi-cultural society? What are the implications if children are kept separate from one another? Should children from minority ethnic communities be forced to adhere to the common dress and behaviour of the dominant majority in a school setting? Or should they (and their parents and communities) have the freedom to vary according to their particular traditions? What are the implications of adherence, and of complete freedom?
7. Should differences be respected? If so, how and at what levels? For example, should we respect the difference of groups with common traditions or of individuals? Should we avoid engaging critically with somebody in order to respect her or his culture? How do you define 'respect for difference'?
8. Can any culture be traced back to a 'pure' or 'authentic' origin? Why would some people find such an undertaking important or desirable? What's at stake in wanting to establish the purity or authenticity of cultural/ethnic origins?

Responsible Choices

How does this topic relate to your context of work? To what extent does asking these questions affect your decisions?

A school is promoting an 'ethnic' evening where some groups of minority cultures are going to present dances and cookery. You have been asked to prepare a workshop for the teachers about how to engage (critically) with this topic in the classroom (before or after the event).

Debriefing

Think about your learning process today. What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others? What have you learned about knowledge and about learning? What could be done to improve the learning process of the group and the relationships within the space?