These cultural values can range from high to low on five *dimensions of culture* that correspond to the five issues. Each dimension spans a continuum from one extreme position to the other regarding that particular social issue. The opposite poles of each dimension are named according to the terms introduced within each value above.

Value Dimensions

Dimension	One Extreme	Other Extreme
Identity	Collectivism	Individualism
Hierarchy	Large Power Distance	Small Power Distance
Gender	Femininity	Masculinity
Truth	Strong Uncertainty Avoidance	Weak Uncertainty Avoidance
Virtue	Long-Term Orientation	Short-Term Orientation

Major Aspects of Culture

Culture Is Problematic

We have now introduced you to a widely accepted definition of national culture and given you a template for studying the values of these cultures. There are, however, still numerous problematic aspects about culture.

- Culture is not a universally accepted notion, and there are a great many different ways to define it. However, all but the most exotic definitions include, as we do, the sense that culture pertains to the social world; it determines how groups of people structure their lives.
- Once you begin considering culture, there is the problem of knowing where to stop. Do you include all value-related sources such as demographics, status levels, affiliations, and identities, or do you limit yourself to one or two categories? In this book, empirical data on national cultures are a starting point. National cultures constitute the social fabric in which each individual has a place. Ethnic or regional subcultures can function in a way that is analogous to national culture, but they do not usually have school systems, legal systems, and other social institutions that nations employ to reinforce their dominant value systems. Professional, corporate, or age-related subcultures are usually no more than variations in the fabric of national culture. These subcultural groups can have their own heroes, symbols, and rituals, but they share the values of the national culture in which they operate.
- There is also the question of who decides what the rules are for any given culture and who is the legitimate interpreter of those rules. Of course, these rules are emergent in social interaction, they are forever reinventing and reinterpreting themselves, and the final word on them can never be said.
- Culture only manifests itself through social action that always takes place in a changing context. For instance, political events or technological advances can drastically change the context in which people live. A change in context does not, however, in itself constitute a change in culture, though it puts pressure on culture. The effects of culture and context are not easily separable. It is easy to misinterpret a context effect for a culture effect, or vice versa. One can see culture's consequences everywhere or nowhere.
- Because culture is so complex and dynamic, problems of reliability and validity make it very difficult to measure.
- Perhaps most profoundly, persons who are members of a culture may not be able to describe that culture accurately and articulately in a way that would be accepted by another person who is also a member of the same culture, or understood by a person who is not a member of that culture. Value systems are implicit, and values defy conscious reflection.

To sum up, the social nature of culture makes it a somewhat elusive phenomenon.

Culture only manifests itself through social action that always takes place in a changing context.

One can see culture's consequences everywhere or nowhere.

In any intercultural encounter, there is always a temptation to feel that the others have bad character or bad intentions, rather than to realize that they are acting according to different rules.

Culture Is Not Personality

It is not always easy to disentangle personal behavior from cultural characteristics. In any intercultural encounter, there is always a temptation to feel that the others have bad character or bad intentions, rather than to realize that they are acting according to different rules.

People from individualist cultures may attribute culture-based behavior to personal character even more readily, because they are less likely to perceive the invisible hand of the group. They do not like to be categorized in a group, as if they were not unique individuals. They have a hard time seeing that they are both unique individuals and share a common culture with their fellow countrymen and –women. People from collectivist cultures may make the opposite error: they attribute behavior of individuals to a group intention. We saw this happen in The Frankfurt Incident, where the collectivist North Koreans thought that the United States was behind the humiliating treatment inflicted on their delegation, not merely some security personnel from an airline company.

When people are interacting with each other across cultures, their cultural values could make them say or do things that are misperceived as intentional. Some stereotypic kinds of misattribution exist across cultures as a result of differences along the culture dimensions. Let us give a much simplified overview of some of these.

In an apparent analogy to the dimensions of culture, psychology also distinguishes five dimensions: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. This is not the place to discuss these "big five" personality dimensions, but only to caution the reader to be aware of the distinction. The five dimensions from psychology are entirely different concepts from the five dimensions of national culture.

When people are interacting with each other across cultures, their cultural values could make them say or do things that are misperceived as intentional.

Misattributions of Culture-Based Behaviors

Listener who is culturally more...	**...can misperceive culture-based behavior of foreigners as...**
Collectivist	insulting, stressed, heartless, rude
Individualist	dishonest, corrupt
Large Power Distance Oriented	disrespectful, improper, rude
Small Power Distance Oriented	bossy, rigid (of high-status persons); servile, cowardly (of low-status persons)
Feminine	aggressive, showing off (of men); playing "baby doll" (of women)
Masculine	weak (of men); unfeminine (of women)
Strong Uncertainty Avoiding	unprincipled, amoral
Weak Uncertainty Avoiding	rigid, paranoid
Long-term Oriented	irresponsible, throwing away money
Short-term Oriented	stingy, cold

Culture Differences and Language Differences

One could wonder whether differences in national culture have anything to do with language differences. We know that each language has its own vocabulary and style, and it is very hard to translate books without losing the finer nuances of meaning. This is understandable. Every language has evolved along with the society using it, so language differences between countries usually point to differences in culture. The reverse is not always true, however. It turns out that having the same language does not necessarily mean sharing the same culture. Two countries can differ greatly in culture even though their people speak the same language. Take, for example, the case of the Netherlands and Vlaanderen (Flanders), the neighboring northern part of Belgium. The two countries share a common, open border and a common language, though differing in dia-

Two countries can differ greatly in culture even though their people speak the same language.

lect; yet their national cultures are quite different and have been so for many centuries. The historical reason can be traced to the Roman Empire.

Although the dimensions of national culture are independent of one another, some of them occur together in clusters of countries. This is notably so in Europe, where the southern countries are characterized by larger power distance, higher masculinity, and stronger uncertainty avoidance than are the northern ones. The boundary between these groups of countries more or less follows the former delimitation of the Roman Empire. The contrast between Belgium and the Netherlands is a case in point, because Belgium has a Latin culture, influenced by the Roman Empire, whereas the Netherlands was hardly affected by the Romans at all. Here is an account by a Dutchman working in Belgium for a Dutch cleaning company.

Rules in the Cleaning Company

During my work as a regional management assistant at a firm providing cleaning services in Belgium, I came into contact with a lot of people. Because I had to make new cleaning schedules and cost calculations for new and old customers, I met all the employees, both at headquarters and the operating core working at different sites.

The first thing I noticed was the relationship between a superior and a subordinate. Orders from a superior were to be obeyed, not questioned. Informal relations between people from different positions in the hierarchy were minimal; for example, no secretary had lunch with her boss. Subordinates expected superiors to tell them what to do. When I talked to the people on the work floor, they always called me Mr. so-and-so, although I had told them my first name. They also expected me to tell them what to do, even if they had more experience in their areas than I did. This was difficult for me in the beginning. Sometimes people stared at me in surprise when I did something they did not expect, for example, when I helped carry some cleaning materials, which in their eyes was inappropriate. Some Belgians appreciated this no-nonsense style, but it also created some confusion.

The Belgians were used to following the rules, and when rules were absent, they wanted a direct and clear decision or order from their superior. The work schedules and job descriptions had to be very detailed. If something went wrong, the employees often referred to their job descriptions and their work schedules and said that according to these, they hadn't done anything wrong. Sorting through such tangles took a lot of my management time. Sometimes it was as if we talked a different language.

The kind of job one had was also very important. To the Belgians, a good job meant high esteem in society. Almost everyone was trying to improve his or her position or at least make it look more important. Also, money was very important. Not only did the money one earned tell something about the job one had, but this money also made it possible to buy a large and beautiful house and a big car.

Three dimensions of culture are involved in this story: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. First, differences in power distance are manifest in this young manager's account. Belgium has a larger power distance than the Netherlands does. Compared with the Dutch, the Belgians were used to a steep hierarchy and a stratified social life. Second, the two countries are wide apart on the scale of uncertainty avoidance. Belgium has a stronger uncertainty avoidance than the Netherlands. To the Dutchman, the Belgians appeared obsessed with detailed instructions. Finally, there is a considerable difference in masculinity between the Belgians and the Dutch. The Belgian culture is more masculine. The Dutchman perceived the Belgians as wanting to make themselves look better.

The seeming ease of contact that a common language provided hid a marked difference in organizational practices. The Dutchman's remark, "Sometimes it was as if we talked a different language," held some truth; the words may have meant the same in the two countries, but they did not come across in the same way, because the rules about who was supposed to talk to whom and about what were different.

Awareness of Culture Differences

We shall now revisit each of the five basic dimensions of culture through ten true stories. Although in real life culture never manifests itself as purely one-dimensional, each of the stories does highlight how one or more of the basic issues in particular can cause problems in intercultural encounters. Each of the stories in the following exercise appears in two versions: a "working" version and a "highlighted" version. The exercise tests your ability to recognize cultural differences as portrayed in the stories, based on what you have learned so far about the five dimensions of culture (see pages 35–39).

The Wedding Guest

An American was hired as an external consultant to assess the progress of a development project in Indonesia. The consultant already suspected from other sources that the project was in trouble due to mismanagement by the Northern European project leader. This opinion was confirmed to him by an Indonesian engineer, albeit in a reluctant manner. From the Indonesian's veiled account, the consultant deduced that the project leader was in fact an utter failure. The consultant then asked the Indonesian whether he had told the project leader that he was not doing well. "That is not so," said the Indonesian. "Why not?" asked the consultant. The Indonesian engineer replied, "He was a guest at my wedding."

See if you can determine which words and phrases indicate cultural differences between the American and the Indonesian. When you have done this, underline them. Then read on and find out which words and phrases we chose to highlight in the version below. A discussion of our interpretation follows, which identifies the concept(s), analyzes the situation, and provides the contextual meaning.

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Discussion: Identity

Spot the concept: In this account the differences between a collectivist "insider" and an individualist "outsider" perspective are clear and important.

Analysis: The company insiders held the collectivist value of protecting one another against threats from the outside. In a collectivistic value system, external auditing is not desirable. The external consultant became a threat to the local European manager, who had gained insider status as indicated by being invited to the wedding of the project leader. Although the local manager and the external consultant were both foreigners, they were evaluated differently; the local manager had been accepted as "belonging" and therefore required—and received—the protection of the others against any external threat. The difference along the individualism-collectivism continuum is also apparent in the direct questioning by the American, as opposed to the Indonesian's indirect style.

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Meaning: Rather than identify the problem as being mismanagement by one individual group member (the European manager), the task ahead is more one of restoring harmony within the collectivity of the local company. One solution would be to retrain the local European manager to do a better job, thereby preserving his role in the group. If the European manager is punished, then the entire collective group may perceive this as a punishment of itself as well and respond accordingly, whatever the intention of the external consultant. If, however, it becomes necessary to remove the local European manager, an outsider, such as the external consultant, would be the best choice for the unpleasant task. After all, he will probably never "be invited to the project manager's wedding," so to speak, and will never become an insider. It would be very difficult and perhaps impossible for the other insiders to exclude the local European manager, no matter how much of a failure he might be.

Rebecca Dooley, an American consultant, recounts an experience she had.

The Job Candidate

I was traveling from London to Amsterdam on a consultancy assignment for a U.S. high-tech company. Accompanying me was the head of HR for all European operations, who was Irish and who had been in his position for sixteen years. We got onto the subject of understanding and doing business with different cultures, when he suddenly leaned over and said earnestly in his Irish lilt, "Whatever you do, you don't want to be doing business with the Dutch!" I asked him why not, and he proceeded to explain.

"I very nearly hired a Dutch fellow to become a director of marketing. He had all the right skills, experience, and references and had impressed all the other directors of the region during our multiple-interview process. Just as we were in the final stages of hiring him, he asked if it would be possible to work forty-eight hours per week, within four days of the week. I was aghast and told him that this would be inconceivable. You can believe I quickly ended the hiring process then and there. I realized it would be impossible to get the kind of total commitment to the company from him we expected, with that kind of attitude. He was only thirty-three years old, for goodness sakes. What would such a young man do with three days off?! Not only that, but whenever I've negotiated an opportunity with a potential Dutch candidate, they always have to go home first and talk everything over with their wives and family before giving an answer. With me, I make the business decisions and inform my wife. She trusts my judgment to be in the best interest for all of us. Not in Holland! The wives have the power to veto any opportunity at any time. I tell you it's the women who wear the pants around there! The point is that with all this going on, you'll never get anything done if you work with the Dutch!"

As we were landing and admiring the ingenuity and organization of the tulip beds and greenhouses stretching for miles and miles below us, I commented that they certainly seemed to accomplish quite a lot anyway. Later, in the Amsterdam office, I observed that of the management population at that site, indeed only one was Dutch. Unfortunately, I was unable to meet him because he was on extended holiday.

Can you find the phrases and sentences that are culturally significant? Again, underline those phrases and then read our version with the significant text highlighted.

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As we were landing and admiring the ingenuity and organization of the tulip beds and greenhouses stretching for miles and miles below us, I commented that they certainly seemed to accomplish quite a lot anyway. Later, in the Amsterdam office, I observed that of the management population at that site, indeed only one was Dutch. Unfortunately, I was unable to meet him because he was on ***extended holiday****.*

Discussion: Gender

Spot the concept: Almost every sentence uttered by the Irish HR manager speaks of the typical kind of misunderstandings that occur between people from two countries that differ on the cultural dimension of masculinity; the Irish are masculine, whereas the Dutch are feminine.

Analysis: The Irishman did not interpret the Dutch applicant's request as culturally embedded. Instead he used his own frame of reference to interpret it and concluded that the candidate was not committed to the job. That led him to discard an excellent candidate.

Meaning: It is possible for two culturally different people to disagree about their behavior without either one being "wrong" as long as they can agree on the common-ground objectives or shared goals. When behaviors are interpreted outside their cultural context, those behaviors are usually inaccurately interpreted, resulting in misunderstanding and inappropriate intervention. The Dutch are very industrious while on the job but value their private time; the primary social distinction is home versus work, not men's world versus women's. Actually, four-day management jobs are not common in Holland, but they do occur, and the economy seems none the worse for it. As for this particular firm, with such a hiring policy in place for sixteen years, it is no wonder that there were hardly any Dutch managers to be found. This shows how the hiring process can make corporate culture follow national culture, even in multinational firms.

When behaviors are interpreted outside their cultural context, those behaviors are usually inaccurately interpreted, resulting in misunderstanding and inappropriate intervention.

Here is the story of a young Dutchman, five years after the event.

Extreme Hospitality

When I was fifteen years old, I played indoor soccer. I was a member of a very nice team; we were friends. Once we played Maluku, our biggest rival. Maluku is an association for people from the Maluku Islands in Indonesia, many of whom live in Holland. After the game, which we lost 5 to 1, we were invited to the canteen (bar) of the Maluku Club. Whole families were present there. They insisted we join in and eat and drink with them. I felt very uneasy. They were all relaxed and friendly and really pleased to be with us, but somehow I was very frightened by their extreme hospitality. After having been there for a short time, I stood up and went to the toilet, and I stayed there for half an hour. I was just washing my hands when the coach of the Maluku team came in. He asked me where I had been for so long, and I told him that I had been in the rest room because I had a terrible stomachache. When we reached the canteen again, there was a loud and happy party going on. Although I didn't want to hurt my hosts' feelings, I just couldn't go back in there. I told the coach of the Maluku team that I still felt bad and asked him to leave me alone for a minute. After the coach had joined the party again, I took my bag, ran out of the building, and went home.

The people of the Maluku Islands still think that I had a stomachache that night. If they knew I left because I felt frightened by their hospitality, I'm sure they would feel very sad about it. I'm almost sure they would think I did not like them, but I do. I have been in similar situations since then, and I have experienced the joy and warmth these people are able to share so easily. Back then, though, it was new and somehow unreal to me.

Please read the story again and underline the phrases that you think indicate culture differences. When you have done that, compare your version with our interpretation of significant phrases below.

*When I was fifteen years old, I played indoor soccer. I was a member of a very nice team; **we were friends**. Once we played Maluku, our biggest rival. Maluku is an association for people from the Maluku Islands in Indonesia, many of whom live in Holland. After the game, which we lost 5 to 1, **we were invited** to the canteen (bar) of the Maluku Club. **Whole families were present there. They insisted we join in** and eat and drink with them. **I felt very uneasy**. They were all relaxed and friendly and really pleased to be with us, but somehow **I was very frightened by their extreme hospitality**. After having been there for a short time, I stood up and went to the toilet, and I stayed there for half an hour. I was just washing my hands when the coach of the Maluku team came in. He asked me where I had been for so long, and I told him that I had been in the rest room because I had a **terrible stomachache**. When we reached the canteen again, there was a loud and **happy party** going on. Although I didn't want to hurt my hosts' feelings, I just **couldn't go back in there**. I told the coach of the Maluku team that I still felt bad and asked him **to leave me alone** for a minute. After the coach had joined the party, **I took my bag, ran out of the building**, and went home.*

*The people of the Maluku Islands still think that I had a stomachache that night. If they knew I left because I felt frightened by their hospitality, I'm sure they would feel very sad about it. I'm almost sure they would think I did not like them, but I do. I have been in similar situations since then, and I have experienced **the joy and warmth these people are able to share so easily**. Back then, though, it was new and **somehow unreal to me**.*

Discussion: Identity

Spot the concept: In this story, individual versus group identity is at stake, as shown by the boldface (highlighted) text.

Analysis: The Maluku team held collectivist values. In line with those values, they considered their rival team to be guests of honor and therefore "part of the family." The Dutch boys, on the other hand, were individualists, and they were not used to being so close and exuberant, not even with one another. Note that the boy makes no mention whatsoever of his team members in the later part of his account. He speaks of "I," not "we," and he wants to be left alone. Caught between his fear of joining the party and of offending his hosts, the boy pleaded physical illness. In most cultures this is an acceptable excuse for not following the local rules.

Meaning: It is significant that this event is still important to the Dutchman, even five years after it took place. An important clash of cultures occurred from which he is still learning five years later. He is now able to better understand the collectivist Maluku culture and is better able to adapt his social behavior to a similar cultural setting.

By the way, the importance of losing is interpreted differently by each culture. Had the boy been from a masculine culture, then his team might not have been keen to celebrate with their victors. But in a feminine culture such as the Dutch, losing is not a big deal, and it would not have made any difference to the story if the boy's team had won 5–1.

Half a Greek

A multinational company had manufacturing facilities in Greece. The U.S. headquarters appointed Nick Nikopoulos, born in the United States like his parents but with Greek ancestry, as a floor manager. His assignment was to improve efficiency without firing people. Nick was anxious to get ahead. He thought he would start by establishing a good working relationship with the existing workers. His first action was to call in his direct reports, the shift leaders, for a meeting. He told them in his broken Greek, "I want to launch an efficiency operation. Since you have worked here longer than I have, I would like to ask your opinion about the optimal duration of a number of tasks."

To his surprise and discomfort, the shift leaders stared at the floor mutely, until one of the older ones finally said, "Sir, you are the boss. Why don't you just tell us what to do?" Nick began to realize that he was not as Greek as he had thought he was back in the U.S.

Now reread the story and underline the phrases that point to culture differences. When you have done this, read on and find out how we have interpreted the incident.

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Discussion: Hierarchy

Spot the concept: The text in boldface type indicates that Nick comes from a culture low on power distance, whereas his shift leaders are used to large power distance.

Analysis: Calling in his inferiors or wanting to change things was not problematic. Misunderstandings arose when Nick asked his direct reports for their opinions. From their perspective this was a sign of weak leadership. But the same issue, large power distance, made them reluctant to say this to Nick's face. If Nick had first made a speech showing firmness and a sense of purpose, he might have asked his question afterward with more success.

Meaning: Nick took it for granted that he could apply his usual U.S. approach with his Greek shift leaders. He was of Greek ancestry, after all, and spoke the language. But he recognized a bit too late that this was not sufficient. With reflection and practice, he will acquire a bicultural identity, with the ability to move from the American to the Greek perspective and back again. This will enable him to increase efficiency while at the same time preserving the large power distance preferences of his staff.

George Bush in Japan

In 1991 the American president George Bush Sr. traveled to Japan for a trade mission. He was accompanied by several of the leading business tycoons from the United States. Their mission was to discuss trade regulations. What they really wanted was to curb Japanese competition. They complained that the Japanese were flooding the U.S. with products while keeping their own borders closed to American products, which was causing layoffs back home.

The Japanese were not impressed. They pointed to the fact that an American CEO earns about two million dollars per year, which is six times as much as a Japanese CEO makes, while the Japanese pay more taxes. This money should go into the business, they said. In Japan, they explained, when the business takes a downturn, the CEO cuts his own salary before laying anybody off. If these American CEOs cared more about the future of their companies and less about their own bank accounts, the Japanese said, their business problems would be solved. Obviously, the trade dispute was not settled. Incidentally, quite a few Americans openly agreed with the Japanese line of reasoning, among whom was Bill Clinton, the ambitious governor of Arkansas who wanted to run for president.

Read the story and underline significant words and phrases. Then read our version.

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Discussion: Virtue and Identity

Spot the concept: The response of the Japanese addressed both the short-term orientation and the individualism of the Americans, as indicated by the words and phrases in boldface.

Analysis: The "big picture" was more important to the Japanese businessmen than to the Americans. The Japanese emphasized the longer-term outcomes of the business and its collective welfare. The Americans were more focused on scoring a point by changing trade and tariff arrangements. They intended to impress the Japanese by bringing some of their most powerful, super-rich businessmen. In the United States, these tycoons are cultural heroes and command great respect. The Japanese struck back by attacking what they perceived to be unethical personal enrichment by the American CEOs. What began as a discussion of trade rules ended up with two very different social systems criticizing one another. Consequently, not only were the specific trading rules left in dispute but now the conflict had also escalated considerably, making future discussions even more difficult. Incidentally, because both the U.S. and Japan are masculine cultures, fighting in itself is seen as a proper way of dealing with disagreements by both parties and may even have contributed to mutual respect, if not to an agreement.

Meaning: There is a significant difference between individualist cultures that put emphasis on short-term context, such as Anglo cultures, and collectivist cultures that emphasize long-term context, such as the Japanese. In order to reach an agreement between these two positions, it is more fruitful for both sides to consider the long-term context in which decisions are made. It is not coincidence that Asians have sayings of the type, "If you keep an American waiting long enough, he'll sign anything." If they had put more emphasis on the long-term

There is a significant difference between individualist cultures that put emphasis on short-term context, such as Anglo cultures, and collectivist cultures that emphasize long-term context, such as the Japanese.

outcomes, the Americans would not have given up any bargaining power while the Japanese would have felt much better understood. The Japanese, on the other hand, would have had a very difficult time disregarding the long-term context and implications of their immediate decisions.

This is the story of Fernando, a young man from Spain.

Fernando and the Napkin

Two years ago I lived with an Irish family for fifteen days during the summer. The first day when I sat at the table to have lunch, I realized that there was no napkin beside my plate. I asked the Irish woman for one, and she reacted as if I had asked for the strangest thing in the world. I felt bad because I thought that they thought I was a dirty boy who needed a napkin to clean what I was going to soil. However, I was sure that my behavior was correct. Afterward, she took a napkin and gave it to me, and for the remaining days she did the same not only for me but also for the rest of the family.

Please underline the culturally significant words or phrases. Then compare your choices with our version.

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