

## Cultural Awareness



Today many people visit other countries e.g. on holidays and study tours or school excursions. Other people primarily encounter various cultures to do business, to work for international aid or humanitarian organisations or to study. Some people are in contact with foreigners through the Internet or learn about other cultures through TV and various social media. All these people probably and hopefully notice that there are minor or major differences or similarities between people from their own culture and the foreigners they are interacting with. They may also realize that knowing about the characteristics of other cultures help them interact successfully with foreigners.

Very often people have their own ideas of what culture is and they also think that they know other cultures well, either from the media or from short visits to popular holiday resorts. However, this knowledge is usually not sufficient to manage successfully or to be interculturally competent. Intercultural competence is "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett, J. M. 2008). In other words, people have to have intercultural knowledge and insight which can be acquired by means of knowledge of cultural theory and personal experience from stays abroad. They also have to have sufficient social and communicative skills in order to manage successfully among people with various cultural backgrounds.

When being in a foreign culture people also have to be aware of not offending the local people by e.g. violating their norms and values or behaving indecently. In some cultures it is e.g. not appropriate to show too much naked skin or to be too loud and uncontrolled e.g. after having consumed too much alcohol. Tourists therefore have to take that into account when being in public places. People also have to keep the saying "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" in mind in order to adapt to local norms, values, customs and traditions. If these elements are totally ignored, the experiences from time spent in a foreign culture may not be particularly positive and successful.

## The Culture Concept

Culture is often considered the core concept in intercultural encounters and has been defined in many ways by several theorists. A very simple definition of culture is to see culture as "Learned patterns of behavior and attitudes shared by a group of people". (Martin & Nakayama, 2007)

The main function of culture is to create shared meanings, collective worldviews and a group identity. Through these characteristics, cultures try to minimise uncertainty by socialising their members to behave in well-defined ways.

Within the anthropological field, culture is defined as "the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning".

### Activity 1.1

1. Discuss what you understand by the word "culture". Make a mindmap of issues related to the word "culture".
2. Mention as many cultures/subcultures as you can. Select some of the cultures/subcultures and work in groups to find differences and similarities of those you have selected.

Nature very often has a great impact on how cultures behave and live. Eskimos, for instance, have more than 40 words which all mean snow, and one African tribe has more than 30 words for the colour green. Both peoples have developed so many words for just one concept because in their natural environment they have had to distinguish between different types of snow and different shades of green because of their dependence on nature.

### Activity 1.2

1. Find examples of how nature has shaped cultures the way they are. You may include the following elements:
  - language
  - clothes
  - traditions
  - weapons
  - housing
  - transport
  - food



## Attitudes to Other Cultures

“ So let us not be blind to our differences, but let us direct our attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved.

*(John F. Kennedy)*

Generally speaking there are three attitudes to other cultures, namely a culture relativistic, an ethnocentric, and a parochial attitude.

**relativistic** to have an open-minded approach to another culture  
**ethnocentric** to regard one's own culture as superior to other cultures  
**parochial** to be narrow-minded and "culture-blind"

## Cultural relativism

Cultural relativism refers to an open-minded, emphatic and curious approach to other cultures where you are non-judgmental and are just observing the differences between the cultures at play. However, it is not possible to be totally neutral or objective in a cultural interaction since your culture is an ingrained part of you and consciously – and maybe also unconsciously – you tend to measure other cultures in terms of your own. To be totally culture relativistic is impossible because that would imply that you would accept all aspects of a culture even though they were morally and ethically wrong, e.g. female circumcision, child prostitution or sex trafficking of women.

## Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to the perception that your own culture is superior to all other cultures, and you tend to evaluate a foreigner's behavior by the standards of your own culture.

All cultures display a certain degree of ethnocentrism. The tendency to be ethnocentric is common to all cultures, and all members of a country with its own distinct culture tend to refer to themselves as "us" and everyone else as "them". Ethnocentrism might contribute to prejudice and intolerance towards foreigners and intergroup conflicts. When interacting with foreigners, businesspeople have to avoid comparing their way of life with that of their international business partners, and they have to minimize their level of ethnocentrism.

## Parochialism

Parochialism refers to the perception that you are quite narrow-minded and "culture blind" and therefore you do not observe that cultures are different. People who settle down in another culture with people of their own nationality and with traits of their own culture being predominant are not open to integrating or assimilating to another culture.

### Activity 1.3

1. Discuss whether you consider yourself ethnocentric or not. State your reasons.
2. Find examples of ethnocentrism in your everyday life either in your neighbourhood, at school, in your town, sports club, at your workplace, on TV or in newspapers.
3. Discuss your attitude to the concept of ethnocentrism.

## Stereotypes and Prejudices

A stereotype is usually described as a rigid and exaggerated image of another culture like e.g. "all French people are arrogant", "Germans eat sausages and drink beer" and "Finns carry knives". Stereotypes are not necessarily incorrect but they are oversimplified images of other cultures and consequently often problematic in as much as they often lead us to hasty conclusions about other cultures.

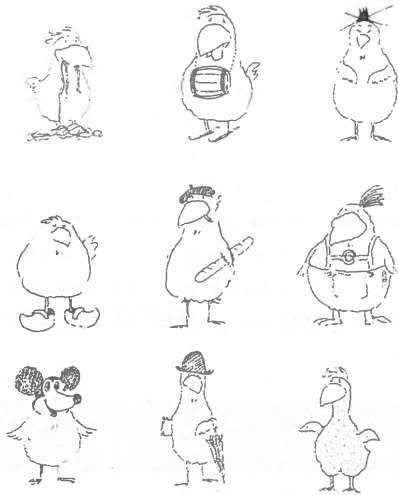
More problematic than stereotypes are prejudices which are antipathies or negative attitudes to a culture based on a wrong and rigid generalization. An example of a prejudice could be that some Danes have a negative attitude to a certain group of immigrants because some Danes e.g. are convinced that the immigrants are all gang members or that they practice polygamy and arranged marriages.

### Activity 1.4

1. Discuss whether stereotypes are true pictures of specific cultures.
2. Discuss whether stereotypes serve a special purpose or are just useless.



### Activity 1.5



1. What countries do the “birds” come from?
2. State the “things” that helped you identify the nationality of the “birds”.
3. What “things” would you have used to illustrate the nationality of the “birds”?

### Activity 1.6

1. Find as many examples of stereotypes as you can on [powerpoetry.org](http://powerpoetry.org).

### Activity 1.7

Watch a personal story on stereotyping called *The danger of a single story* on [Ted.com](http://Ted.com).

# Cultural Theory

This book gives an overview of some relevant cultural theories and cultural characteristics. The cultural theorists are Geert Hofstede, Edward T. Hall and Richard Gesteland. Knowledge of these theories and cultural characteristics is useful in the process of building up intercultural competence. Intercultural competence includes cognitive skills, communicative skills and affective skills.

## Geert Hofstede's Value Dimensions

On the basis of conducted interviews with IBM employees from more than 50 countries, Geert Hofstede, a Dutch professor, has carried out a research to identify national cultural differences and similarities. He has concluded that there are a lot of things that are common to people but also that there are a lot of differences among various nations in the world.

When Hofstede started his research, he wanted to focus on the collective programme, namely to identify similarities and differences among various countries. In his research of cultural characteristics Hofstede does not distinguish between culture and country although within a country there can be different cultures. Initially, he concluded that four dimensions can be used to characterize cultures or countries, and he called these dimensions **power distance**, **collectivism/individualism**, **uncertainty avoidance** and **femininity/masculinity**. He later added a fifth dimension called **long-term/short-term orientation** and a sixth-dimension called **indulgence versus restraint**. These two last dimensions will not be dealt with in detail in this book.

The characteristics of the first four dimensions are listed in tables which show the general norms or characteristics which apply to families, schools and at workplaces and those which apply to politics and ideas.

Furthermore, Hofstede has placed various countries in clusters and indexes to illustrate their individual positions. The indexes show for instance whether a country is a high or low power distance culture or whether it is a weak or strong uncertainty avoidance culture. These indexes make it possible to compare countries. For further information see [geert-hofstede.com](http://geert-hofstede.com) and Focus on Culture, Systime, 2015.

## Power Distance

This dimension is about to what extent members of a society accept that some people are more powerful than others, e.g. in schools, companies, families or society as such. People in countries with a high power distance accept a hierarchical society where everybody has his proper place. Companies in those countries often have centralized organizational structures with powerful leaders, and it is also typical in these countries that children are often very dependent on their parents and teachers.



Countries with a low power distance, however, try to minimise differences in power, and companies often have a flat organizational structure where leaders often seek their employees' advice. Parents and teachers in small power distance countries encourage children and students to be independent.

## Collectivism/Individualism

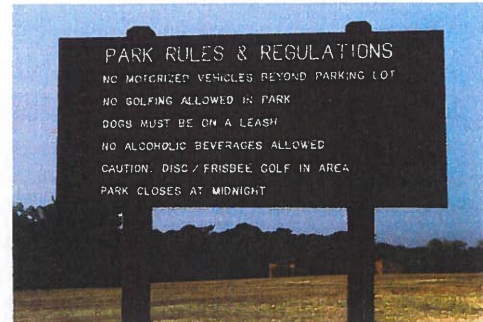
**In a collectivist country** the group is more important than the individual, and in collectivist countries people are expected to give up some of their independence and to be loyal to the group. The needs of the group are more important than individual needs. In return for his loyalty to the group the individual is protected and supported by the group.



**In individualist countries** the individual human being is more important than the group, and people in an individualist country think in terms of "I" whereas people in collectivist countries think in terms of "we".

## Uncertainty Avoidance

Many situations in life are difficult to deal with. Some countries say: "Let's solve problems when we face them". These countries, also called weak uncertainty avoidance countries, tend to adopt a relaxed attitude to the uncertainties of life, and they are willing to take risks. Other countries which are called strong uncertainty avoidance countries say: "Let's protect ourselves against the uncertainties of life by making many formal and informal rules". In these countries it is very important to observe the generally accepted rules of for instance how to dress, communicate, hold meetings, and write reports. Consequently, strong uncertainty avoidance countries have many rituals.



## Masculinity/Femininity

In some countries men are very self-assured, competitive, and dominant. Women are typically more caring, modest, and educative. These countries are typically dominated by male norms and values, and they are called **masculine countries**. In such countries individual human beings strive to achieve personal results, and they expect to be rewarded for them.



In other countries the difference between men and women is much smaller. In those countries men may be modest and caring as well, and they may attach more importance to personal relationships than to making a career. These countries are called **feminine countries**, and people in those countries focus more on the quality of life, and they have sympathy for the weak. In feminine countries solidarity is important, and the strong help the weak.

### Activity 2.1

1. Discuss the roles of women and men in feminine and masculine countries. How e.g. would different countries react to the issue of parental leave and childcare in general?

### Short-Term Versus Long-Term Orientation

In order to clarify the difference in thinking between the Asian and western world, Geert Hofstede added a fifth dimension to his research. According to this dimension, the tendency of a country to be more short-term or long-term oriented is based on Confucianism and the search for human truth.

**Short-term oriented countries** stress satisfying needs here-and-now and tend to pursue personal fulfillment and activities that enable creativity and self-actualisation.

**Long-term oriented countries** stress virtuous living through thrift, hard work and perseverance\* and tend to value the acquisition of skills and a good education. Many Asian cultures are long-term oriented.

### Indulgence versus Restraint

In 2010 Hofstede added a sixth dimension. This dimension focuses on happiness and the extent to which members of a society try to control their desires and impulses. This dimension is not covered by the other five dimensions.

**Indulgence:** Indulgent societies tend to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun.

**Restraint:** Restrained societies tend to suppress gratification of basic and natural human desires and to regulate it by means of strict social norms.

The fifth and sixth dimension will not be dealt with in detail but for more information see [geert-hofstede.com](http://geert-hofstede.com)

Although Hofstede's thorough research, made in the 1980s, gives a quite rigid and somehow "generalized" picture of national cultures, it is still today applicable as a useful cultural framework when comparing national cultures. The comprehensive research of more than 50 countries can be applied as a starting point for acquiring culture-specific knowledge of the cultures represented in his research. His research can also be used to

**perseverance** the effort required to do something and keep doing it till the end, even it is hard

compare the different countries and their rankings in his indexes of the four value dimensions.

Knowledge of the ranking of the various countries can also be useful in a business, marketing or negotiation context. E.g. if a country has a high power distance, it is important to take this knowledge into consideration by being prepared for a hierarchical structure and certain formalities. If a country is collectivistic, ads showing a successful individual being alone in a certain setting may not work among group-oriented cultures.

However, it has to be pointed out that culture is dynamic, and many things have changed in the world since Hofstede made his research in the 1980s. Therefore, some of the rankings of the 50 countries may today be taken with certain precautions.

## Index on Hofstede's Value Dimensions

The index below gives an overview of how selected countries are placed according to Geert Hofstede's four most well-known value dimensions. The upper third represents countries with a high degree of individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. In the bottom third countries with the lowest degree of individualism, power distance, and masculinity are represented.

Individualism	Power Distance	Uncertainty Avoidance	Masculinity/Feminity
<b>Upper third</b>			
USA	Arab world	Greece	Japan
Great Britain	China	Portugal	Italy
Netherlands	India	Belgium	Ireland
Italy	France	Japan	Great Britain
Belgium	Turkey	France	Germany
Denmark		Spain	China
Sweden		Turkey	USA
France			Greece
Ireland			
Norway			
Germany			

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<b>Middle third</b>			
Spain	Belgium	Italy	India
India	Portugal	Arab world	Belgium
Japan	Greece	Germany	Arab world
Arab world	Spain	Netherlands	Turkey
Turkey	Japan	Norway	
Greece	Italy		
Portugal			
<b>Bottom Third</b>			
China	USA	USA	France
	Netherlands	India	Spain
	Germany	Great Britain	Portugal
	Great Britain	Ireland	Denmark
	Norway	China	Netherlands
	Sweden	Sweden	Norway
	Ireland	Denmark	Sweden
	Denmark		

### Guess a Country

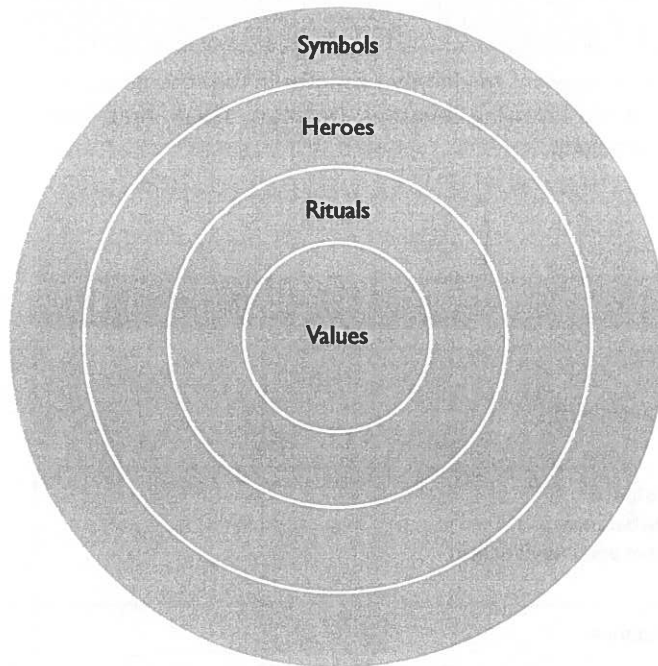
Use Geert Hofstede's value dimensions to identify a country. In the scheme you will find some characteristics of the following countries: Denmark, Japan, Arab countries, Spain, India and Great Britain.

Guess the six countries.

	Description	The country is
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low power distance</li> <li>• Individualistic</li> <li>• Small uncertainty avoidance</li> <li>• Feminine</li> </ul>	
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium power distance</li> <li>• High uncertainty avoidance</li> <li>• Medium collectivism and individualism</li> <li>• High masculinity</li> </ul>	
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium power distance</li> <li>• Individualistic</li> <li>• Strong uncertainty avoidance</li> <li>• Relatively feminine</li> </ul>	
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High power distance</li> <li>• Medium collectivism/individualism</li> <li>• Relatively weak uncertainty avoidance</li> <li>• Medium femininity/masculinity</li> </ul>	
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High power distance</li> <li>• Relatively collectivistic</li> <li>• Medium uncertainty avoidance</li> <li>• Medium masculinity/femininity</li> </ul>	
6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively low power distance</li> <li>• Individualistic</li> <li>• Relatively weak uncertainty avoidance</li> <li>• Masculine</li> </ul>	

### Geert Hofstede's Onion Diagram

Differences in cultures are manifested in various ways. Geert Hofstede has identified four manifestations of culture that can be used to describe and analyse any culture. He has created an onion diagram consisting of the four manifestations of culture, namely symbols, heroes, rituals and values.



*Geert Hofstede's Onion Diagram*

The diagram indicates that symbols represent what can easily be observed in a culture. Values represent what is invisible and fundamental in a culture, with heroes and rituals in between. By observing the symbols, heroes and rituals of a culture, the deepest manifestations and values of a culture which govern its people's behaviour and world views can be identified.

## **Symbols**

In broad terms, symbols are words, artefacts\* and nonverbal behaviour which are of great importance to people in a certain culture. Examples of symbols could be flags, songs, buildings, colours, music and proverbs.

## **Heroes**

According to Hofstede, heroes are persons alive or dead, real or fictional\* who have some abilities that are very much appreciated in a culture, and these heroes serve as role models to the members of the culture. Examples of heroes are e.g. athletes, statesmen, artists and cartoon figures.

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**artefacts** "things" related to a certain culture or time

## Rituals

Rituals are the collective activities within a culture that are socially essential to the members of the culture but rather superfluous in reaching specific goals. According to Hofstede, these rituals are carried out for their own sake, and as examples of these he mentions greeting rituals, eating rituals, religious rituals, meeting rituals and political rituals.

## Values

In Hofstede's opinion, the underlying values govern people's behaviour and actions, and he defines them as tendencies to prefer certain things to others. The values of a culture for instance deal with what is good or evil, abnormal or normal, unnatural or natural and ugly or beautiful.

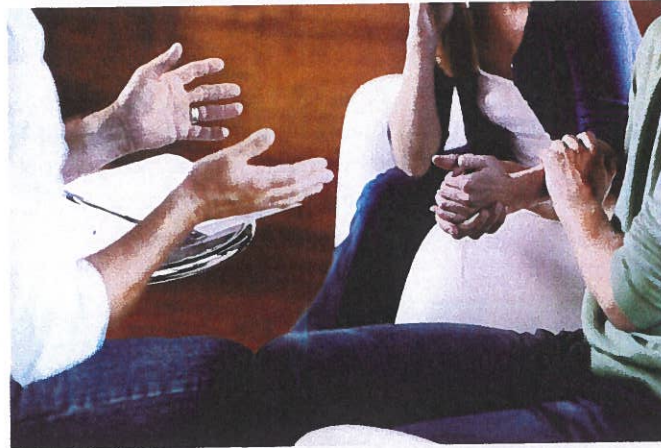
### Activity 2.2

1. Identify symbols, heroes, rituals and values in cultures of your own choice and discuss what your findings state about these cultures.
2. Apply the onion diagram on a corporate culture of your own choice. It could for instance be your workplace or school/institution.
3. Apply the onion diagram on a subculture of your own choice.

## Edward T. Hall's Theories on Culture

According to Edward T. Hall, an American anthropologist, individuals in different cultures communicate and behave in different ways. In some cultures words are very important as a means of communication whereas in other cultures nonverbal communication plays a more important part. When a person communicates nonverbally he or she uses various kinds of body language like e.g. hand and arm gestures (kinesics), distance to the people he communicates with (proxemics), and eye contact (oculesics). Also touch behaviour (haptics) and facial expressions vary from culture to culture as does paraverbal communication like voice volume, the use of silence, and conversational overlap.

**fictional** something invented or imagined



## Low- and High-Context Cultures

Hall divides cultures into two categories, namely low-context cultures and high-context cultures.

### Low-context cultures

Cultures in which words (spoken or written) and a direct way of communicating play an important part.

### High-context cultures

Cultures where people communicate much more by means of nonverbal communication.

To people from low-context cultures, representatives from high-context cultures may sometimes seem vague and hesitant since they do not give a direct response to a question. However, people from high-context cultures may see representatives from low-context cultures as impersonal and sometimes rude.

Hall also says that when people from high-context cultures meet people from low-context cultures, it can be difficult for them to fully understand each others' messages since they use different ways of communication. No cultures can be characterized as purely high-context or low-context, but when generalizing a little, different cultures can be placed on the scale below.

In the scale, the most high-context cultures are placed on top and the most low-context cultures at the bottom.

### **High-Context Cultures**

Japan  
Arab countries  
Greece  
Spain  
Italy  
England  
France  
North America  
Scandinavian countries  
German-speaking countries

### **Low-Context Cultures**

*Source: Hall, 1991*

## **Fast and Slow Messages**

In terms of communication and coding of messages within different cultures, Hall distinguishes between "fast and slow messages". He claims that everything in life – actions as well as people – can be categorized within this area.

### **Fast message cultures**

Cultures in which it is easy to make contacts which often tend to be rather superficial and not necessarily deep-rooted. Hall mentions America as an example of a fast message culture.

### **Slow message cultures**

Cultures in which it takes time to get to know a person well but this relationship is likely to be long-lasting and deep-rooted. As examples of such slow message cultures, Hall mentions European cultures, Japan and Arab countries.



Fast messages	Slow messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prose</li><li>• Headlines</li><li>• Propaganda</li><li>• Cartoons</li><li>• TV commercials</li><li>• Television</li><li>• Easy familiarity</li><li>• Manners</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Poetry</li><li>• Books</li><li>• Art</li><li>• Etchings</li><li>• TV documentary</li><li>• Print</li><li>• Deep-rooted relationships</li><li>• Culture</li></ul>

Source: Hall, 1991

## Monochronic and Polychronic Cultures

According to Hall, the concept of time is culture-specific, and he distinguishes between monochronic\* and polychronic\* time concepts or monochronic and polychronic cultures.

In monochronic cultures all human activities are divided into linear and scheduled activities which means that monochronic people concentrate on one thing at a time and

**monochronic** to work according to a certain schedule and to do one thing at a time  
**polychronic** more things take place at the same time without a systematic structure

do things in a very systematic way. The concept of time plays a more important part in monochronic than in polychronic cultures.

In polychronic cultures people tend to do many things at a time without any specific linear progression. In these cultures human relations are more important than time schedules.

Hall has made the below list that illustrates the characteristics of monochronic and polychronic people/cultures. According to Hall, monochronic cultures are often also low-context and polychronic cultures are often high-context. However, it is important to remember that no cultures are solely monochronic or polychronic. In all cultures you find both monochronic and polychronic people but you can say that generally some cultures are more polychronic or monochronic than others. E.g. people who know each other well tend to use more polychronic than monochronic communication styles.

Monochronic people	Polychronic people
Do one thing at a time concentrate on the job	Do many things at once are highly distractible and subject to interruptions
Take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously	Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, if possible
Are low-context and need information	Are high-context and already have information
Are committed to the job	Are committed to people and human relationships
Adhere religiously to plans	Change plans often and easily
Are concerned about not disturbing others; follow rules of privacy and consideration	Are more concerned with those who are closely related (family, friends, close business associates) than with privacy
Show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend	Borrow and lend things often and easily
Emphasize promptness	Base promptness on the relationship
Are accustomed to short-term relationships	Have a strong tendency to build lifetime relationships

Source: Hall, 1991

### Activity 2.3

A restaurant in Holland is owned by an Italian. One day a Swedish couple enters the restaurant to book a table. They get a table and while the Italian restaurant owner is serving the Swedish guests, some other guests enter the restaurant. These guests are the Italian owner's friends and right after they have entered the restaurant, he starts serving them while at the same time serving the Swedish guests. The Swedish guests get very angry and leave the restaurant.

1. Discuss how you think the Swedish and Italian guests react to the owner's way of serving them.
2. Discuss reasons why the owner behaves the way he does.

Use Hall's theory of monochronic and polychronic cultures.



### Personal Space

Hall also describes the "space concept" (distance to the person one communicates with) and sees this concept as very important in an intercultural encounter and as something culture-specific. According to Hall, all people have a bubble of space around them. This bubble of space expands and contracts dependent on e.g. the relationship between communicators, the person's emotional state and cultural background. In Scandinavian and German cultures, people's bubbles of space are rather big, and people keep a distance when they communicate, whereas e.g. French, Italian, and Arab people have rather small bubbles of space and stand closely together when communicating.