

What is German culture?

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To narrow down what we understand when we use the term (German) culture, let's look at an example: You step out of your plane in Frankfurt, step onto one of the rapid transit trains (the <u>S-Bahn</u>) and apart from the language, Germany, at first sight, seems to look more or less like everyplace else!



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People talking on their cell phones, listening to their iPod and wearing more or less the same style of clothing you find all over the western world. You will see advertisements for similar movies, television shows, music and so on. Of course you will also encounter things that are uniquely German...



such as Frankfurt's distinct architecture or some of the local foods.

As you are exploring the city with the help of Frankfurt's many modes of public transport, you happen to sit down next to a German fellow traveler and as you do so, you utter – as you would in the US – in your very best German a polite...

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...However, instead of replying, "Good, how are you?", the other person will either stare at you blankly or proceed to tell very earnestly how s/he is doing (which might take until you have reached your final destination)!

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You have just come across one of many subtle and outwardly invisible attributes that are constitutive of what we understand as German culture. (Or you – having been a perceptive student of German culture – won't even attempt such a greeting but merely nod or smile at the person next to you as it is more common in Germany. But let's assume for the sake of the argument that you are not ...)



Apparently your first attempt at communication was misunderstood and you learned your first lesson in German customs for interacting with strangers: Generally, Germans do not start a conversation with strangers by asking them how they are, even if they happen to sit next to them in the subway. Our little fictional scene provides us with a first working definition of culture.

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Culture is the repertoire of shared patterns of social and cognitive constructs which are acquired through socialization and which regulate the interactions of the members within a group or society.

Culture defined this broadly does not just refer to the artistic production of a society but refers to a set of rules (explicit or not, such as laws, customs, traditions, general knowledge, religious beliefs, myths and so on) that guide human interaction in a particular society or group.

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It necessarily follows that culture is **multi-layered**: Just as there are a number of groups and groups in groups in any given society there are a number of cultures and cultures inside these cultures that may or may not intersect. For example, the ability to communicate via a language in which the construction of sentences is based on grammatical rules (verbal or sign language) is a trait of a universal human culture.



A particular language such as German might be one of the defining criteria of German culture. Certain German slang words that recently have entered the language system might be a defining criteria of German youth culture and so on. Thus, German culture should not simply be taken as a synonym of German national culture. Inside every national culture we will find a subset of different patterns of behavior which will reflect a subset of different cultures within a culture (e.g. youth cultures, cultures of migrants, regional cultures, business culture, soccer culture, alternative culture etc.)

German culture, for the purposes of this class, refers to this multi-layered understanding of culture.

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Before proceeding, please try to think of examples, possibly from your own experience, reflecting the multi-layered structure of culture or of a culture within a culture.



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Click the light bulb to share your ideas on Wallwisher, the online bulletin board for this course. You can even remain anonymous!

What went wrong?

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Let's now recall your encounter with a fellow German traveler on the tram in Frankfurt. Assuming you have learned the basics of the German language, you are familiar with German geography and history and the most important German laws and customs, why did your first attempt at a casual everyday interaction still end somewhat uncomfortably? What went wrong when you all you tried was to utter a polite greeting? What we called in our first definition of culture a repertoire of shared patterns of social and cognitive constructs does not just refer to the language, laws and customs of a specific culture but more importantly how these are interpreted.



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It is their interpretation of the symbols, laws and customs that distinguish cultures from each other. **!!**

Generally speaking members of the same culture will interpret cultural symbols and artifacts in a more or less similar way. Our three words "How are you?" can either signify a noncommittal greeting (as in US culture) or a genuine request for information (as in Germany).





As an aside note, the American term Subway has recently entered Germany, but not in reference to a mode of transportation. In 2007, the restaurant franchise had opened many stores in Germany. Click the play button below to watch the first German Subway commercial!



Now imagine our initial example of possible miscommunication in the subway a little differently: In recent decades, starting after WWII, German culture especially German youth culture has been influenced by US-American culture. Today as a result of global movie, music, and fashion industries aided by the advances of communication technologies, more and more elements of German popular culture have become almost indistinguishable from US pop culture.

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Chances are that if you meet a German your own age you will have seen some of the same movies. listened to some of the same music, follow similar blogs and tweets and you might even have mutual Facebook friends. If the person you chose to sit next to on the Frankfurt subway happens to be your roughly own age, chances are that s/he and you will share a fair number of cultural experiences and their interpretations and - after having seen hundreds of American produced TV shows and movies - s/he will recognize your attempt at a friendly greeting (and possibly your American accent) and reciprocate.

What has changed in our second scenario? The interpretation of the greeting has changed. The definition of culture as (sometimes changing) interpretation enables us to describe another important attribute of culture: the continuous flux, development and mixing of cultures.

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Culture is not a status quo but a process; it is flexible and thus able to continuously evolve into something else.

Members of a group are not only shaped by their culture but culture is simultaneously transformed by its members. Culture is nothing that simply is but it is perpetually created and recreated. In our little scenario with its two possible outcomes you have just witnessed the blending of two cultures, the transformation of culture at work. With the heightened interest in US pop culture, younger Germans have become acquainted with American greeting customs and have incorporated some of them into their own cultural repertoire. One scenario, two completely different outcomes based solely on the changing interpretation of three words as simple as "How are you?"



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Please try to think of other examples how the interpretation of historical, political or cultural events can change and possibly create a new cultural reality. Go back to the week 1 folder of Blackboard and post your response in your blog.

Thus far we were able to define cultures as multi-layered sets of shared cognitive constructs. People who belong to the same culture will generally interpret their cultural reality in more or less the same way. The more or less is crucial here. We have just described a scenario where a customary greeting of one culture has been assimilated by another. A possible interpretation of the phrase "How are you?" has become now that of a greeting. What makes this transformation of culture possible, what makes culture flexible depends again on its interpretation: the very idea of interpretation implies ambiguity, misunderstandings. Interpretation per definition leaves room for differing outcomes.



As a result, cultural patterns of interpretation are often ambiguous or even contradictory to the extent that they may become contentious. Members of a culture will more or less interpret their reality in the same way. We see these ambiguities at work every day, not just in politics but virtually where and whenever people communicate. Yet, far from being destructive these ambiguities and contradictions are exactly what make cultures work: They enable the communication between different culture and the very transformations which keeps those cultures alive.

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For communication between cultures cultural transformations gone wrong, please click the play button to watch a short clip of the British Comedian Harry Enfield as Jürgen the German:



As you watch, think about what stereotypes about Germans are addressed. How does the communication between cultures go wrong?