

# Chapter 2

## The “Culture” in Cultural Competence



Michael Davis

### Introduction

Cultural competence is a journey and a pathway towards becoming competent in working with, and between, diverse cultural situations and contexts. There is no single definition of cultural competence, since it is a continually evolving process, but there are some useful working definitions such as Cross et al. (1989). These authors use the term “culture” to denote “the integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group” (Cross et al., 1989, p. 3). But this is just one among a vast array of definitions in the long history of the concept of culture in the social sciences and humanities fields (see, e.g., Billington et al., 1991).

Like cultural competence, the term “culture” resists definition (White, 1959). It is, as one sociologist suggests, “a slippery, even a chaotic” concept (Smith, 2000, p. 4). Despite this resistance to definition, there has been, in recent decades, a “cultural turn” which has seen a resurgence of the idea of culture across several disciplines and subdisciplines in the humanities and social sciences area. This return of the idea of culture has also been instrumental in the fashioning of the discipline of “cultural studies” (see Hegeman, 2012).

The aim of this chapter is not to present a comprehensive discussion and analysis of the culture concept. Rather, the aim is quite specific: to explore the idea of “culture” as a dynamic, creative and transformative concept, and of how this view of the concept of culture can provide the basis for considering the way it is used in cultural competence.

---

M. Davis (✉)

National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia  
e-mail: [m.davis@anu.edu.au](mailto:m.davis@anu.edu.au)

© The Author(s) 2020

J. Frawley et al. (eds.), *Cultural Competence and the Higher Education Sector*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5362-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5362-2_2)

15

## What is Culture? From Essentialism to Dynamism and Process

In early formulations, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the culture concept was closely associated with and employed in, the classification and formation of hierarchies, of peoples in a matrix of colonialist/ethnological discourses. In this historical sense, the notion of culture had racialised connotations and was employed as a marker to establish or reaffirm superiority or dominance of one culture over another, based on presumed racial or biological characteristics (Billington et al., 1991, pp. 82–84). It is in this context that the culture concept has been one of the cogs in the machinery of oppressive colonial regimes. In recent decades, however, and with the “cultural turn,” there have been transformations in the use of the culture concept, as it is harnessed by groups and peoples to establish, reaffirm and celebrate their cultural identity and difference. This aspect as it relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is discussed below.

Despite a turn towards more pluralised usages, there has persisted an essentialised discourse on culture that reifies a people as having a fixed “culture”. These essentialist discourses often find expression in references to a group of people, a nation or an ethnic or language group in formulations such as “*The Nuer*,” “*The Inuit*” or “*The Aborigines*,” implying that those peoples are a homogeneous entity, and obscuring, or denying, diversity within a cultural group. These also appear occasionally, in Australian public discourses, use of the possessive noun in paternalistic ways, in phrases such as “*Our Aborigines*,” “*Our Indigenous Australians*,” and the like. However, despite the persistence of these essentialising tropes, the historical trajectory of the concept of culture has seen major shifts from evolutionary, classificatory, hierarchical and totalising views, to views that allow for difference and diversity. As McGrane remarks, “our contemporary experience of ‘culture’ as the universal ground and horizon of difference marks a rupture with the nineteenth-century concept of culture” (McGrane, 1989, p. 113). He explains that “the emergence of the concept of ‘culture’ has made possible the democratization of difference (perhaps, in one sense, ‘culture’ *is* the radical democratization of difference)” (McGrane, 1989, p. 114). In his reference here to the nineteenth-century concept of culture, McGrane is pointing particularly to the work of E. B. Tylor, considered one of anthropology’s founding “fathers”. Tylor conceived of culture in his 1871 work *Primitive Culture* as a “complex whole” that includes “knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 34, citing Tylor, 1871). Tylor’s now outmoded concept of culture has been the subject of extensive debate and discussion for a long time. One critique by Stocking draws attention to the flaws in Tylor’s notion of culture in the context of present-day usages:

Tylor’s actual usage of the term “culture” lacked a number of the features commonly associated with the modern anthropological concept: historicity, integration, behavioural determinism, relativity, and—most symptomatically—plurality. (Stocking, 1987, pp. 302–303)

The transformations in the idea of culture, from the totalising Tylolean formulations to the more dynamic and open-ended ones, are not without their tensions. A shift towards a more fluid and processual notion of culture has rattled age-old canons of thought that are founded on certainty, homogeneity and fixity. This is sometimes observed in current contexts of destabilising discourses on contested issues—such as identity, difference, migration, nationhood and citizenship—where culture has assumed a greater focus for anxiety (Grillo, 2003; Stolcke, 1995). In these scenarios, culture has become, or perhaps has re-emerged, as a fulcrum for often tense and sometimes divisive public debates and discussions around such notions as “multiculturalism”, “ethnicity” and “belonging”.

But this is not new; humans have always invoked the idea of culture, whether it is to assert national sentiments, proclaim and strengthen ethnic and Indigenous identities, appeal to ancient and enduring traditions, or establish markers of status or difference. Culture has continually been invented, reinvented, created or refashioned, in countercurrent to its persistence as a reified or essentialised entity. A question now is the idea of culture as “a system of belief grounded in a conception of human beings as *cultural* (and under certain conditions territorial and national) subjects, i.e. bearers of a culture, located within a boundaried world, which defines and differentiates them from others” (Grillo, 2003, p. 158, original emphasis). In today’s increasingly fluid and mobile world, these fixities are becoming less relevant or appropriate. In this regard, Grillo identifies a problem with the notion that “a specific culture *defines a people*” (2003, p. 159, original emphasis). Against this essentialist view, he suggests, is one that sees “cultures and communities” as “constructed, dialectically from above and below, and in constant flux” (Grillo, 2003, p. 160). In a growing multicultural world, Grillo asserts, “the emphasis is on multiple identities or identifications whose form and content are continuously being negotiated” (2003, p. 160).

Another aspect of the changing discourses on the culture concept is related to the way it is constructed in historical, particularistic and situational settings. One writer cautions against what he refers to as a “culturalist” approach, a “reduction of social and historical questions to abstract questions of culture.” As “culture” in this view becomes devoid of all historical and situational contexts, it can contribute to “legitimizing hegemonic relations of exploitation and oppression within societies” (Dirlik, 1987, p. 17). This notion of the role of the culture concept in oppressive colonial regimes is supported by looking to some of the word’s etymological roots, which point to its associations with colonialism. As Eagleton points out, “its meaning as *inhabit* has evolved from the Latin *colonus* to the contemporary *colonialism*” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 2). Yet, again showing the slipperiness of the term, “culture” is also derived from Latin words associated with the idea of “cultivation”, “caring”, and “tending to”—notions that are more relevant to the kinds of “cultures of care” that are one of the central planks of cultural competence. In these latter contexts, in its more positive and benign usages, rather than culture being “used to justify Western hegemony over the non-West”, if, in Dirlik’s argument, culture is regarded as a “way of seeing”, and as a “way of making the world”, then this “offers the possibility of a truly liberating practice” (Dirlik, 1987, p. 49). The potential for

culture as a transformative, “liberating practice” is a critical element for the path to cultural competence, in working cross-culturally with Indigenous peoples.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote that culture:

denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [*sic*] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (1973, p. 89)

Geertz argues that if “man is an animal suspended in webs of meaning he himself has spun,” then “I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). In this framework, to understand culture requires examining behaviour; as Geertz states, “behaviour must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behaviour—or, more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation” (1973, p. 17). In this view, then, culture is expressive and can be understood by looking at these expressions as they are played out in contexts of human interaction. This expressive quality of culture also suggests movement and flow; qualities that indicate that, as Denning asserts, “the essence of culture is process.” As a process, culture is also, in this sense, a creative force, and “one moment is no more hybrid than the last, one response no less creative than that which was made before” (Denning, 1980, p. 39).

These processual and creative aspects of culture can be illustrated by considering, for example, the ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have, over hundreds of thousands of years, drawn on the creative and innovative qualities of their cultures to adapt to vast climatic and environmental changes, and to establish and maintain successful livelihoods in very diverse environments (see Cane, 2013). Culture, in this dynamic, creative sense is, as various writers see it, a system of signs and symbols: a “signifying system” (Geertz, 1973; Jones, 2004, p. 130; Mitchell, 1995, p. 102; Williams, 1981). As one writer puts it, “culture is socially constructed, actively maintained by social actors and supple in its engagement with other ‘spheres’ of human activity” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 102). As a dynamic entity, culture is “symbolic, active, constantly subject to change and riven through with relations of power” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 103). These features of culture allow it to be constructed as a creative concept, which is particularly apt for Indigenous people.

## Culture and Indigenous People

Since white settlement, Australia’s Indigenous people have suffered discriminatory and harmful policies and laws that sought to assimilate them into the dominant European culture. They were denied the right to their own distinct cultures, traditions, languages and heritage. The denial of the essential characteristics that defined them as a distinct people has left its legacy of trauma and lack of wellbeing. The recognition

of Indigenous people both as distinct, and as a diversity of cultures, is at the heart of their identity and survival.

A creative, innovative sense of the idea of culture is central to Indigenous peoples. Ideas of difference and plurality in defining culture are important in seeking to better understand and respect the cultures of Indigenous peoples by the wider community. However, recognition and respect for difference and diversity, both within and between cultures, needs to be balanced by an appreciation of the universal characteristics of all Indigenous cultures. But in searching for a vocabulary to describe and define these universal Indigenous cultural characteristics, there is also a risk of totalising Indigenous cultures, of reducing them to a homogeneous entity. These kinds of tensions can be illustrated by considering what are often thought to be some key aspects of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and worldviews that are markers of their distinct status as First Peoples. These include the Dreaming, that is often used to denote their unique cosmological system; their distinct and deep relationships with their lands, often understood as “Country” or “caring for Country” (e.g. Rose, 2004); their complex social and political systems, often characterised as being based predominantly on various collective forms of group organisation; and their unique capacity for sustainable and innovative ecological practices that have enabled them to nurture and manage diverse landforms and ecosystems over many generations (e.g. Gammage, 2011; Pascoe, 2014). These are often ascribed as comprising elements common to all Australian Indigenous people and are crucial to understanding their worldviews. Yet at the same time, as well as recognising and respecting the things that define all Indigenous peoples as distinct, it is also essential to recognise the great diversity in the ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people express their cultures and live their societies. In thinking about shared cultural aspects of Indigenous peoples, we might also consider what they share in terms of political aspects. In this regard, shared histories of colonialism and dispossession often serve to create a sense of political unity among Indigenous peoples.

Culture is closely related to worldviews, as Ranzjin et al. (2009) explain that “like worldviews, culture is not just a mental representation. Cultural values, beliefs and norms are commonly expressed as outward behaviours of both the individuals belonging to the group as a whole” (Ranzjin et al., 2009, p. 20). There is also a close association between culture and knowledge in Indigenous worldviews, and it is important to acknowledge and understand the complex relationships between these. Such is the closeness between these—culture and knowledge—that one Indigenous academic uses the term knowledge to denote culture, because, as she explains, culture is “increasingly seen as an anthropological construct” (Müller, 2014, p. 14). But this narrative can change, as this chapter seeks to argue, if the concept of culture is deployed to denote the capacity for creativity, for innovation, and for cross-cultural sharing and communication. Culture, in this sense, is not only an abstract or an analytical construct, but a living force, as implied by Eagleton:

Culture is not only what we live by. It is also, in great measure, what we live for. Affection, relationship, memory, kinship, place, community, emotional fulfilment, intellectual enjoyment, a sense of ultimate meanings: these are closer to us than charters of human rights or trade treaties. (Eagleton, 2000, p. 131)

While this action-based and interactive use of the culture concept is critical in cultural competence, there is also much utility in harnessing a different kind of usage of the concept. Although it can be subject to criticisms of essentialism, the idea of peoples “having,” or being defined as “a culture” can have important symbolic and political power. An example is in the notion of Australian Aboriginal people as having, or being, “the oldest living continuous culture,” which is one of a number of formulations that have an important role in their identity formation. It is also a critical element in a transformative paradigm that can facilitate shifting from a deficit discourse—that is, a discourse that perpetuates negative imagery of Indigenous people—to a positive and affirmative narrative. This kind of shift calls for a nuanced and respectful view of Indigenous people that also appreciates the great diversity of their cultures and societies.

To appreciate what it is that makes Indigenous cultures unique necessitates an appreciation of their distinct cosmologies, worldviews and philosophies (see, e.g., Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Nakata, 2007; Sherwood, 2010). But in this context, it is also important to avoid using top-down, imposed Eurocentric concepts to delineate Indigenous cultures and worldviews. Muecke (2004) draws attention to this potential problem, cautioning that “cosmology” is a non-Aboriginal term that “encapsulates a European enlightenment thrust to systematically explain cultures as totalities from a reflective distance, positioning the speaker as outside of, and thus able to see the (conceptual) whole” (Muecke, 2004, pp. 17–18). He argues that “cultures are not totalities; they are better perceived as partially acquired skills and attributes” (Muecke, 2004, p. 18). If, in this formulation, culture is something that develops through life in an accumulative way, then this is consistent with the view of culture as *process*, and as dynamic and creative, as articulated by Geertz (1973) and Denning (2004), among others.

## Rights to Culture

Claiming a distinct identity, a cultural identity, to Indigenous peoples, is also seen as a right. As one writer puts it, “culture is not only important for wellbeing, it is the very essence of a person’s being, permeating every aspect of their existence” (Ranzjin et al., 2009, p. 26). Indigenous people have struggled over a long time to have their rights to culture and cultural identity recognised internationally, and these are now enshrined by the United Nations (UN) in both universal and Indigenous-specific standards. Certainly, these conventions stand as significant achievements in global standards and present landmark references for thinking about culture. They are not without their deficiencies, however, and there is scope for more nuanced

thinking and action, in both international and domestic law, to address gaps in how the conventions address race and culture in specific frames and contexts.

The United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1966, and entered into force on 3 January 1976. This forms one of the planks of the international bill of rights and enshrines the rights to culture into international law, for all nations and peoples. Another crucial instrument is the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 1965). This was adopted on 21 December 1965, and entered into force on 4 January 1969. This latter instrument is also of crucial importance in the constellation of rights and protections, and the issue of culture, relevant to cultural competence.

An international instrument that provides specifically for the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 13 September 2007. Key provisions in the UNDRIP are Articles 11.1 and 31.1. Article 11–1 provides the right for Indigenous people:

to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.

Article 31–1 provides Indigenous people with the right:

to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts.

The wording of these provisions in the UNDRIP shows that Indigenous cultures, in all the variety of their manifestations and expressions, are many and diverse. The text also highlights the intricate relationships between all the various elements of their cultures. Diversity of ways of life is an important aspect of Indigenous peoples’ cultures and is especially important in the light of tendencies for dominant discourses to homogenise and essentialise these, thus denying the plurality of voices and viewpoints of Indigenous peoples. Article 15 of the UNDRIP recognises this plurality by stating that “Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information” (UNDRIP, Art 15). These protections in international standards are crucial in informing the journey to cultural competence.

## Culture in Cultural Competence

What does the “cultural” mean, in cultural competence? If we examine the relationship between “cultural” and “competence” it becomes evident that the concept

of culture here must be understood as dynamic and expressive: as *process*. The dictionary defines “competent” as: “adequately qualified (*to do, for a task*); legally qualified; effective, adequate; (of action, etc.) appropriate, legitimate” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1976, p. 206, italics in original). Therefore, taking the entire formulation of “cultural competence,” we might define it as *being qualified for the task of culture*, as in having effective, appropriate and legitimate skills, experience, abilities and, perhaps, qualities in the matter of culture. Extending this further, we might infer that to be culturally competent means that one has legitimacy in doing, being in, expressing, understanding and/or interpreting culture—both one’s own culture and that of others. This idea of “having competence” or “being competent” in one’s own culture and different cultures also requires a view of culture as adaptive, creative, performative and expressive, as the above has shown. These qualities of culture are implied in the approach by Cross et al. (1989) in their model for a cultural competence of care, which emphasises “the cultural strengths inherent in all cultures and examines how the system of care can more effectively deal with cultural differences and related treatment issues” (Cross et al., 1989, p. iii). In this context, culture cannot be viewed as being frozen and fixed in time and place, but as dynamic, evolving and subject to continual transformation and innovation.

The idea of innovation in the concept of culture, and its symbolic and ideational dimensions, need to be balanced by attending to other material aspects, such as livelihoods and the nature of human beings. Critic Terry Eagleton takes up these points within a Marxian frame of interpretation. He states that “culture in the artistic and intellectual sense of the word may well involve innovation, whereas culture as a way of life is generally a question of habit” (Eagleton, 2018, p. 2). He points to the material conditions of our humanity which, in Eagleton’s view, are critical for our understanding of culture. He explains that there is “something deeper seated than culture, namely the material conditions which make it both possible and necessary.” Expanding on this, he claims that “it is because human beings are material animals of a peculiar kind that they give birth to cultures in the first place” (Eagleton, 2018, pp. 42–43).

The concept of culture in cultural competence is perhaps best understood by an appreciation of it as a balance between its materiality; that is, its basis in everyday living and being, and its ideational aspects.

A perspective on culture as process-oriented also forms an important basis for its use in cultural competence, both in discussions and reflections on the subject, and in its applications as a methodology and practice. It is applicable not only to individuals and groups but also to organisations and institutions, which can be said to have a particular “culture”. One of the critical challenges for achieving cultural competence is to effect changes in organisational and institutional cultures and to bring about a shift away from entrenched racialised behaviours, attitudes and values based on preconceived prejudices or discriminatory ideas. This requires being attentive to the particularities of language, discourse, and technical lexicon in every academic discipline, and also to the structural aspects of organisations and institutions. To bring about transformative changes in negative, discriminatory and derogative behaviours



and attitudes in institutional, structural and discursive settings necessitates mobilising a creative and dynamic sense of the culture concept.

Engaging with the idea of culture as dynamic, creative and innovative, and in terms of the ways in which it is expressed in contexts and situations of human interaction, provides a focus for exploring its roles in cultural competence. Understanding this idea of culture in cultural competence might be facilitated by considering what anthropologist Michael Carrithers has termed a “mutualist” view (Carrithers, 1992, p. 11). In a mutualism framework, the starting premise is that humans are social beings. As Carrithers puts it, “learning, living together, and changing the social world are done between people,” and therefore “to understand how we do any one of these things opens an understanding of the others” (Carrithers, 1992, pp. 10–11). This “mutualist” view, Carrithers argues, considers people as “inextricably involved with each other in face-to-face relationships,” and in this way, “the works of humans” are “always achieved jointly” (1992, p. 11). This proposes an alternative to the notion, sometimes argued from within the discipline of psychology, that humans are essentially individual, asocial beings; and instead advances a thesis of human sociality and interactivity as the driving forces for behaviour and society (Fiske, 1992; Carrithers, 1992). This idea of sociality, in turn, allows more potential for considering culture as a space for creative and innovative forms of intercultural engagement—aspects that, as pointed to earlier, are crucial in the journey to cultural competence. That is, cultural competence requires consideration of *relationships* between self and others; between one’s own culture and the diversity of cultures of, and between, others. Viewing culture in this way, in terms of dynamic and innovative processes of interaction between and among people, can also facilitate the development of cultural competence as a transformative paradigm. By inculcating culturally competent values and philosophies through interpersonal relations, this paradigm can have the capacity to effect changes to unequal power relations founded upon racialised, unjust, prejudicial attitudes and behaviours, to bring about social, cultural and political changes at individual, societal and organisational/institutional levels.

In Cross et al.’s (1989) schema for cultural competence, which is one among many useful working models, a processual approach is proposed, which comprises several elements, one of which is to develop an awareness and understanding of, and work with, the “dynamics of cultural interaction.” They propose as one of the guiding principles for cultural competence that “inherent in cross-cultural interactions are dynamics that must be acknowledged, adjusted to, and accepted” (Cross et al., 1989, p. 52). Here the expression “cross-cultural” implies interactivity and sociality, and the aim is to ensure that people, institutions and agencies work effectively in cross-cultural situations. It is about conversation and negotiation, as implied in Eagleton’s comment that “on another view, culture is the implicit knowledge of the world by which people negotiate appropriate ways of acting in specific contexts” (Eagleton, 2000, pp. 34–35). In this sense, the setting in which effective cultural competency is to be developed is the space in which there is an engagement or dialogue between cultures.

Engaging with the idea of culture in its creative and dynamic, processual dimensions wrenches the concept from its roots in totalising and essentialising discourses.

By thus liberating the idea of culture as a fixed, immutable concept, it becomes amenable to articulation as a creative, malleable entity, and as a space for dialogue. This idea of movement in the concept of culture finds support in the work of Bhabha (1996), who examines culture in terms of ruptures, dislocations and movements. He argues that “critical practices that sought to detotalise social reality by demonstrating the micrologies of power, the diverse enunciative sites of discourse, the slippage and sliding of signifiers, are suddenly disarmed” (Bhabha, 1996, p. 53). It is in this sense, Bhabha suggests, that an understanding of “culture-as-difference” will enable us to grasp the articulation of culture’s “borderline, unhomely space and time” (Bhabha, 1996, p. 55); allowing, in this way, for culture to become not a fixed entity with unfortunate historical associations with racialised hierarchies and classifications, but instead, a concept that is malleable and flexible, as readily applicable to the margins, borders and displacements of human activity as it is to more stable formations.

## Cultural Diversity and Cultural Competence

Central to achieving cultural competence is recognition and respect for cultural diversity. While this is generally accepted as the norm, in one different interpretation, cultural diversity is considered as a challenge to cultural competence. This interpretation, which is based on a study of mental health systems, examines ways in which cultural competence can be employed “to address the challenge of cultural diversity in mental health services” (Kirmayer, 2012, p. 149). Here, cultural diversity, rather than being seen as *enriching* the mental health sector, is the challenge that cultural competence seeks to address, as Kirmayer explains:

Cultural diversity poses challenges to mental health services for many reasons. Culture influences the experience, expression, course and outcome of mental health problems, help-seeking and the response to health promotion, prevention or treatment interventions. The clinical encounter is shaped by differences between patient and clinician in social position and power, which are associated with differences in cultural knowledge and identity, language, religion and other aspects of cultural identity. Specific ethnocultural or racialized groups may suffer health disparities and social disadvantage as a result of the meanings and material consequences of their socially constructed identities. In some instances, cultural processes may create or constitute unique social and psychological problems or predicaments that deserve clinical attention. In culturally diverse societies, the dominant culture, which is expressed through social institutions, including the health care system, regulates what sorts of problems are recognized and what kinds of social or cultural differences are viewed as worthy of attention. (Kirmayer, 2012, p. 149)

Culture, in this view, is manifested in terms of difference, or cultural difference, and poses challenges to disciplines, professions, practices, institutions and organisations. Cultural difference here, in culturally diverse societies, is thought to create unequal power relations, wherein the dominant culture regulates and determines the issues and problems to be solved, and this results in disparities in access to services and care (Kirmayer, 2012).

In an alternative perspective, cultural diversity is the expression of adaptation and creativity in culture—and it is this diversity that enables societies, or peoples, to adapt, innovate, and to survive major, often catastrophic, events and processes. Recognition and respect by others of cultural difference and diversity are key aspects of a peoples’ collective identity, and it is also important in relating positively to other cultural groups. This ability to relate to ones’ own, and to others’ cultures is vital for well-being, as observed by Ranzjin et al. (2009), who write that “increasingly, it is becoming recognised that the best outcomes, in both a psychological and behavioural sense, are the result of having fully developed identities relating to *both* cultures” (Ranzjin et al., 2009, p. 26, italics in original).

## Culture and Communication

As well as recognising cultural diversity, another essential component in the path to cultural competence is effective transcultural communication. The specific ways in which individuals communicate with each other are determined by a complex combination of cultural, social, politico-economic, behavioural and psychological factors. They can be determined by socio-economic class, geographical location, peer group influence, or family upbringing, as much as by the individual’s language and culture, among many factors. Communicative behaviour is also determined by the particularities of situation and context; an individual who is voluble and highly articulate in the family home or among friends in her or his own country, might be reserved, restrained, formal and introverted when in foreign places or in job interviews, for example. In this sense, differences in communication styles and strategies are likely as much within a particular culture, as between different cultures. Notwithstanding this complexity and diversity of communication behaviours, some researchers argue that there can be discerned some general relationships between a specific culture and particular communication style. Ranzjin et al. claim, for example, that cultural groups such as Indigenous people, who are what these authors describe as “collectivist” cultures, have a different way of communicating to people in western cultures. They state, “behavioural differences between individualism and collectivism are associated with important differences in communication styles.” Elaborating on this, they claim:

Western people tend to be very direct in their communication style, getting straight to the point and expressing the main thing on their mind. In contrast, many people from collectivist cultures, such as Indigenous Australians, tend to get to the topic indirectly, preferring to establish a relationship with the other person before discussing the topic that the Western person regards as the main point of the conversation. .... For Indigenous people, trust needs to be established in the relationship first. (Ranzjin et al., 2009, p. 24)

I would argue that this binary classification of cultures as “collectivist”/Indigenous or “individualist”/western, and the positing of a linear relationship between cultural type and communicative behaviour, is overdetermined and obscures the expressive,

processual and creative dimensions of culture. That is, thinking about culture necessitates a nuanced approach, and it is useful to consider the idea of “complicating” it. Rather than presenting an understanding of culture in terms of its relationships to behavioural types, it is more productive to think of it as multidimensional: as something akin to “constellations of practices” (see, e.g., Adamson & Davis, 2017).

Nonetheless, in the view of some writers (Ranzjin et al., 2009), Indigenous people are considered as being generally “collectivist in their orientation, especially in the area of kin relationships and in the social roles and responsibilities that follow from those relationships” (Ranzjin et al., 2009, p. 22). Ranzjin et al. suggest that “understanding the collectivist aspects of Indigenous cultures is crucial for effective transcultural interaction” (Ranzjin et al., 2009, p. 22). Whether collectivist or individualist in orientation, communicative transactions between and among different cultures can be enriched by the formation of a safe and positive space in which there can be exchange, reciprocity and mutual respect.

## **Cross-Cultural Engagement in a Shared “Third Space”**

The co-creation of culture and knowledge is part of the journey to cultural competence, with people working effectively across and between cultures. This co-creation of culture and knowledge can only occur by forming a safe space in which the different cultures and knowledge can be shared, and co-developed. This is facilitated by considering cultures as process, rather than as “end-states”, as Casrnir (1999, p. 91) explains:

The consideration of cultures as end states, rather than dynamic, changing, developing processes (even while admitting that change is possible), has in the past frequently led to both theoretical and research models, which are not adequate to the task of dealing with human interactions as process.

There are many ways in which to theorise a safe, mutually beneficial space for the co-creation of cultures and knowledge. One writer proposes the notion of a “third-culture,” described as “the construction of a mutually beneficial interactive environment in which individuals from two different cultures can function in a way beneficial to all involved, represents my attempt to evolve a communication-centered paradigm” (Casrnir, 1999, p. 92). Here, communication is “that which happens, symbolically, between human beings as they do things together—in concert if you will” (Casrnir, 1999, p. 94). An engaged, interactive communication process, in which humans “build identities, societies, cultures or institutions for their continued existence and growth in a common socio/cultural environment” is that which helps fashion the process that Casrnir refers to as “third-culture building,” which is a “concerted process between human beings with different backgrounds, experiences and interpretative or value systems” (Casrnir, 1999, p. 94). This idea is also consistent with the “mutualism” of Carrithers and others, and with a Geertzian view of culture

as a symbol, and meaning-making, which allows for a focus on an event, interaction, and behaviours-in-context, in understanding intercultural and transcultural communication.

It is in these interactive, culture-in-context dimensions of culture that the concept finds most usefulness in cultural competence. The performativity of culture is critical here, as highlighted by education theorist Cary (2004), for example, who writes that she was “drawn into issues of cultural performance within and against hegemonic structures” (Cary, 2004, p. 75). She engages with a number of theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Pratt (1992) to consider “the socially interactive performative nature of culture as a place from which to disrupt the colonising mentality of Western knowledge” (Cary, 2004, p. 76). As Cary (2004, p. 75) states:

A number of theorists have discussed the ways in which culture is socio-historically constructed and performed through social interactions often involving experiences of domination and subordination within the enlightenment project of colonization and imperialist territorialisation.

Cary (2004) also usefully refers to the notion of “contact zones” as formulated in Mary Louise Pratt’s discussion on the interactivity of culture. In her work on colonial engagement, Pratt employs “contact zone” to “invoke the spatial and historical co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect” (Pratt, 1992, p. 7). She uses “contact” in a dynamic sense, to “foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination” (Pratt, 1992, p. 7). Pratt’s model of colonial encounter between coloniser and colonised seeks to emphasise “co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1992, p. 7). These interactive, creative and mutually engaged forms of engagement may be crucial in achieving cultural competence. Pratt’s model of inter-cultural meeting points as ‘contact zones’ certainly has some useful analytical resonance in discussions around cultural competence, and for blurring coloniser/colonised dualisms. But it cannot entirely serve as a theoretical basis for further developing my argument about the processual view of culture, without considering, for example, the important role of ethics in shared spaces.

## Conclusion

Re-theorising the notion of culture as dynamic and creative is essential for considering its role in cultural competence. In the journey to cultural competence, meetings, encounters and interactions between and among peoples and cultures from different backgrounds, ethnicities and cultures are seen as akin to conversations, in which there is a constant shifting and fluidity, creating a space for new knowledge and culture formations built around trust, reciprocity, recognition and respect.

## References

- Adamson, J., & Davis, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Humanities for the Environment: Integrating Knowledge, Forging New Constellations of Practice*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Battiste, M., & Henderson, Y. J. (2000). *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge*. British Columbia: UBC Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1996). Cultures in-between. In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (pp. 53–60). London: SAGE.
- Billington, R., Strawbridge, S., Greensides, L., & Fitzsimmons, A. (1991). *Culture and Society: A Sociology of Culture*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: MacMillan.
- Cane, S. (2013). *First Footprints: The Epic Story of the First Australians*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Carrithers, M. (1992). *Why Humans have Cultures: Explaining Anthropology and Social Diversity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cary, L. J. (2004). Always already colonizer/colonized: White Australian wanderings. In K. Mutua & B. Swadener (Eds.), *Decolonizing Research in Cross-Cultural Contexts: Critical Personal Narratives* (pp. 69–83). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Casimir, F. L. (1999). Foundations for the study of intercultural communication based on a third-culture building model. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 23(1), 91–116.
- Cross, T. L., Bazron, B. J., Dennis, K. W. & Isaacs, M. R. (1989). *Towards a culturally competent system of care: A monograph on effective services for minority children who are severely emotionally disturbed*. Washington, DC: Child and Adolescent Service System Program Technical Assistance Center, Georgetown University Child Development Center.
- Dening, G. (1980). *Islands and Beaches, Discourse on a Silent Land: Marquesas 1774–1880*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Dening, G. (2004). *Beach Crossings: Voyaging Across Times, Cultures and Self*. Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press.
- Dirlik, A. (1987). Culturalism as hegemonic ideology and liberating practice. *Cultural Critique*, 6, 13–50.
- Eagleton, T. (2018). *Culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Eagleton, T. (2000). *The Idea of Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Fiske, A. P. (1992). The four elementary forms of sociality: framework for a unified theory of social relations. *Psychological Review*, 99(4), 689–723.
- Gammage, B. (2011). *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Grillo, R. D. (2003). Cultural essentialism and cultural anxiety. *Anthropological Theory*, 3(2), 157–173.
- Hegeman, S. (2012). *The Cultural Return*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jones, P. (2004). *Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kirmayer, L. (2012). Rethinking cultural competence. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 49(2), 149–164.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- McGrane, B. (1989). *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mitchell, D. (1995). There's no such thing as culture: Towards a reconceptualization of the idea of culture in geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 20(1), 102–116.
- Muecke, S. (2004). *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Müller, L. (2014). *A Theory for Indigenous Australian Health: Connecting Indigenous Knowledge and Practice*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

- Nakata, M. (2007). The cultural interface. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36(Supplement), 7–14.
- Pascoe, B. (2014). *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident*. Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books.
- Pratt, M. L. (1992). *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge.
- Ranzjin, R., McConnochie, K., & Nolan, W. (2009). *Psychology and Indigenous Australians: Foundations of Cultural Competence*. South Yarra, Victoria: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rose, D. B. (2004). *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Smith, M. J. (2000). *Culture: Reinventing the Social Sciences*. Buckingham, U.K: Open University Press.
- Sherwood, J. (2010). *Do no harm: Decolonising Aboriginal health research*. (Unpublished doctoral thesis), University of NSW (UNSW), Sydney.
- Stocking, G. (1987). *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press.
- Stolcke, V. (1995). Talking culture: New boundaries, new rhetorics of exclusion in Europe. *Current Anthropology* 36(1). Special Issue: Ethnographic Authority and Cultural.
- The Concise Oxford Dictionary. (1976). Oxford: The University Press.
- Tyler, E. B. (1871). *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. London: J. Murray.
- UN General Assembly. UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted 13 September 2007. A/RES/61/295.
- UN General Assembly. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), adopted 21 December 1965.
- UN General Assembly. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted on 16 December 1966.
- White, L. A. (1959). The concept of culture. *American anthropologist*, 61(2), 227–251.
- Williams, R. (1981). *The Sociology of Culture*. London: Fontana.

**Michael Davis** is an independent scholar, historian, and policy specialist with extensive experience in writing and publishing in Indigenous history, Indigenous Knowledges, and related topics. He has published widely; his most recent book, co-edited with Joni Adamson, is *Humanities for the Environment: Integrating Knowledge, Forging New Constellations of Practice* (Routledge, 2017).

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

