

2.1

The culture onion

Aims

- To focus on the range of cultures which can influence an individual's behaviour.

Procedure

- 1 Ask students which cultures they feel they are influenced by: how their ideas and their behaviour are moulded to some extent by the people and events around them. Include large groups such as nationality, and also smaller ones such as clubs or teams.
- 2 Look at the culture onion and ask if other layers could be added in addition to those already discussed. Possibilities include geographical regions within a country, social class, departments within a company and work teams.
- 3 Form groups to discuss task 2. Ask each group to rank the relative importance of the different cultures mentioned so far, in shaping people's ideas and behaviour. At this stage they should be thinking in general terms, although of course every person is a unique product of different influences, including individually inherited characteristics. Thinking generally should help recognise and avoid the danger of stereotyping. Compare results through a spokesperson from each group, and encourage discussion.
- 4 Introduce task 3. Ask the groups to choose a person whom they can briefly analyse in terms of how representative they are of the cultural groups they belong to. Ask a spokesperson to report back from each group, and encourage discussion.

- a part of a country:
California, Siberia, western Norway, Yorkshire
- a company:
IBM, Ericsson, Nissan, Alcatel
- a team:
China Sea project team, new software implementation project
- a function:
mechanical engineers, financial controllers
- a professional association:
the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, the British Medical Association.

At the centre of all these groups is the individual, whose combination of inherited genes and specific environmental influences have made him or her a unique person.

This individual will be a member of many different cultures.

At the same time as sharing some of the characteristics of each of these groups, he or she as an individual will have much in common with people outside the same groups.

Categories will inevitably overlap: a Colombian employee of Ericsson may derive certain cultural characteristics from his or her country and others from the company. The former could make him or her different from an Ericsson employee in Britain; the latter could make him or her different from a Colombian working for Siemens.

Outcomes

This activity should encourage students to consider how far we are a product of our different cultures, and how far we are unique individuals. It should also allow them to reflect on the complex cultural situations in which we all live and work.

Development

Culture is normally associated with the place where you were born or have spent most of your life, usually a country. This is because countries often share vital characteristics such as history, climate, laws, art or geography. But there are other groups which have their own distinctive cultures, for example:

- a larger geographical area:
south-east Asia, North America,
southern Europe

Linked activities

2.5, 2.7, 2.8, 3.1, 6.4

Further reading

The many influences that colour our acts of communication are thoroughly analysed in *Communicating with Strangers* (4th Edition), by William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim, 2002, New York: McGraw-Hill.

For valuable insights into the dimensions of national culture and how these affect societies, institutions and the workplace, see

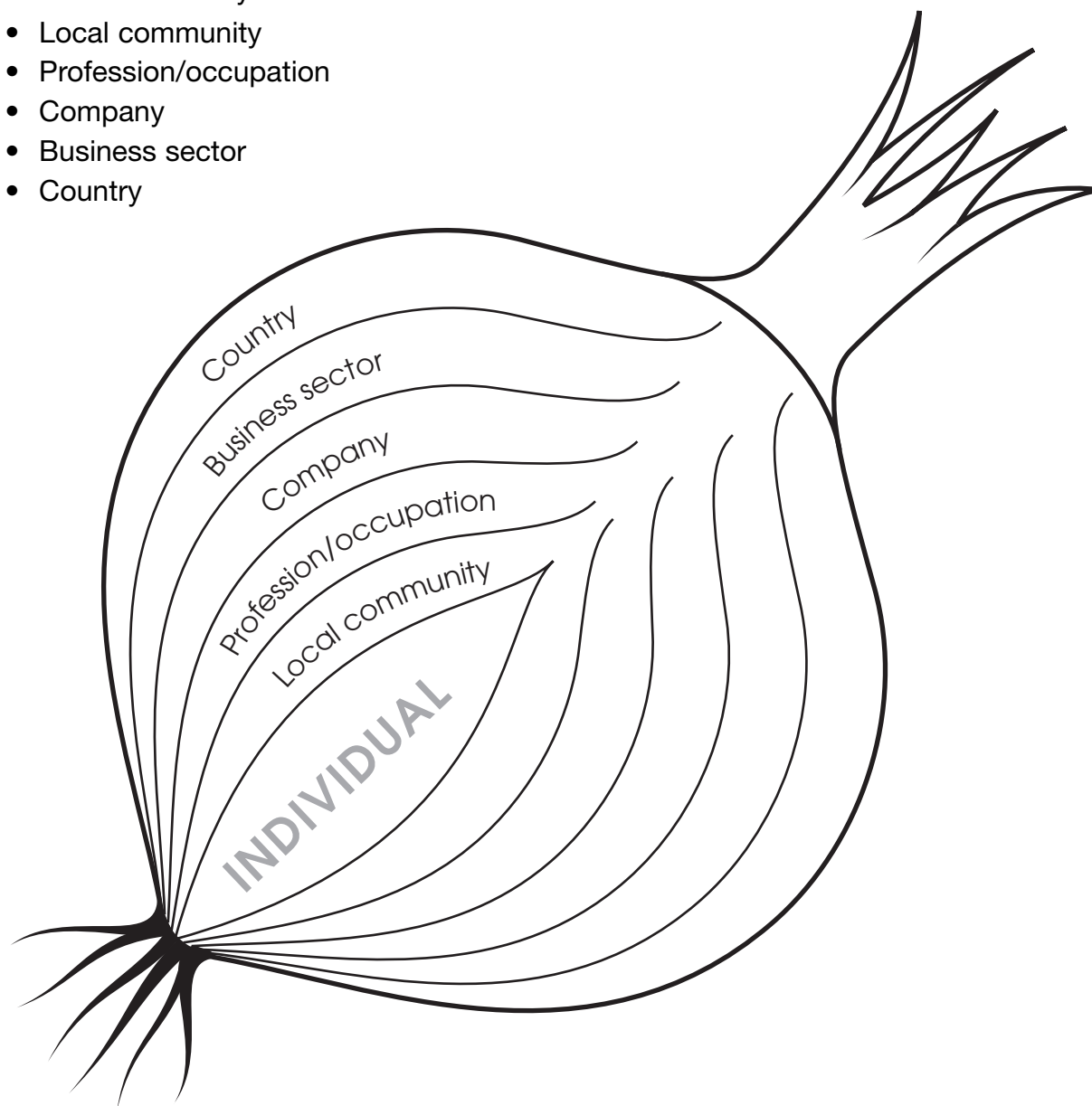
Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind, by Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, 2004 Third Millennium Edition, New York: McGraw-Hill.

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The onion shows five different layers of culture which might affect an individual's identity:

- Local community
- Profession/occupation
- Company
- Business sector
- Country



- 1 Can you add other layers to the onion?
- 2 Which layers of culture do you think are the most influential on a person's behaviour?
- 3 Choose a person you know quite well and explain how he or she has been influenced by the different cultures he or she belongs to.