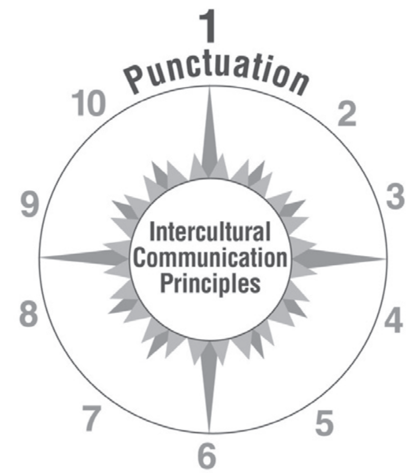
1 Punctuation Principle

‘What’s in a Line?’



Key Theme: Boundaries
Problem Question: What is the process of cultural identification?
Objective: To help you understand how and why cultural identities are formed

Key Concepts: *Barbaroi*, border, boundary, boundary crossing, boundary fit, colonization, communication, cultural appropriation, culture, cultural erasure, ethnic identity, group, hard boundaries, *Homo Faber*, identity, identity confirmation, identity disconfirmation, in-group, intercultural communication, ‘looking-glass self,’ national identity, out-group, punctuation, racial identity, resource, role-taking, salience, soft boundaries, symbolic.

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1 Introducing the Problem Question

Leonard Pitts Jr., a well-known U.S. journalist, writes in his article entitled 'Alas, what to call non-Caucasians?':

> In a saner world, when somebody asked a non-Hispanic, black Native American Indian, what he preferred to be called, he wouldn't have to give the currently acceptable term for his genus, his group or his type. He'd only have to give one thing. His name.
>
> (Pitts, 2003)

Yes, everyone thinks of oneself as a unique individual and would prefer to live in the world where, as in the famous Boston bar in *Cheers*, the iconic U.S. sitcom of the 1980s, 'everybody knows your name.' However, that is not realistic as it would require for every person to get to know everyone else in the entire world in every interaction. In many situations, though, one is called by such names as "an American, a Buddhist, a Democrat, a Dane, a woman" (Adler, 2002). The list can be continued to include 'a coach,' 'a doctor,' 'a pastor,' 'a teenager,' 'a student,' etc. While a unique person, everyone is in some respects just like other people with whom we all share some characteristics because communication not only "separates, sets apart, 'particularizes' its members" but also "unites them and makes alike inside its own boundaries" (Bauman, 1993, p. 40).

In this chapter, thus, we take up the following Problem Question: 'What is the process of cultural identification?'

2 Defining Basic Terms

The subject of this book is intercultural communication so let's begin by defining its two basic terms—culture and communication.

2.1 Culture

Culture is sometimes conceptualized as a 'deposit,' a 'repository' (Cress, 2012) or "a set of shared meanings, symbols, and norms" (Croucher et al., 2015, p. 73). This may create an impression of culture as a mechanical collection of things of the same kind arranged in a certain order that can be stored in some place and used when needed. We should remember, however, that the word 'culture' goes back to the Latin 'cultura' derived from 'cultus' and meaning 'cultivation' or 'tillage' (Morris, 1982, p. 321). Just as a crop is produced and cultivated by Nature, **a group** of people can produce and cultivate their own 'crop'—a system of symbolic resources. So, it is more accurate to think of culture as a cultivated system of symbolic resources shared by a group of people.

Let's address briefly each main component of this definition.

Culture is a cultivated system of ***symbolic*** resources shared by a group of people. Since a symbol is anything that represents meaning, "virtually anything shared (or assumed to be shared) among members of a historically recognizable group can rightfully be called culture" (Hall, 2014, p. 60). For example, for many Western companies, a field with oil may mean the potential to create a lot of consumer goods and services. Or, in some Asian cultures, making sounds while eating (slurping) has the meaning of appreciation of the food and tribute to the chef. These meanings might seem natural to those who share them, and yet meanings are symbolic creations, produced and reproduced by people themselves, not by Nature. A field with oil does not always mean consumer goods and services; for the U'wa Indians, oil is sacred as the blood of mother Earth and cannot be drilled. And in most Western cultures, slurping sounds have the meaning of lack of respect and bad manners.

Culture is a cultivated system of symbolic *resources* shared by a group of people. **A resource** is anything that makes it possible for people to accomplish a task. Symbolic resources can be seen as the *source* to which people *re*sort whenever needed; hence, 're-source.' Just like a natural crop, symbolic resources allow us to accomplish various tasks. For example, people use oil when they need to produce gas for our vehicles or when they need to connect to mother Earth. People resort to slurping when they want to show appreciation of the food or display lack of respect.

Culture is a cultivated system of symbolic resources *shared* by a group of people. Symbolic resources "are shared with others and constructed jointly through interaction" (Littlejohn, 2002, p. 165). Symbolic resources are meaningful insofar as people from a certain group agree on what something means. For example, people from a certain culture may agree that slurping represents lack of respect and bad manners; if one does not share this meaning, one comes across as disrespectful or rude when making slurping sounds during a meal.

Culture is a cultivated *system* of symbolic resources shared by a group of people. A system is an organized whole in which all parts are interrelated: "culture here is a system of concepts, structures, and relations that groups of people use to organize and interpret their experienced worlds" (Kronenfeld, 2018, p. 6). For example, culture is characterized by interactions between two or more individuals, and the outcome of each interaction is determined by their interactions and cannot be attributed to a single individual; also, a change in their interactional dynamics affects the entire system (cf. Kim, 1992). By the same token, cultural behaviors and practices are organized into a system, e.g., we understand the meaning of a handshake only insofar as it relates to other forms of greeting, such as a hug or a kiss, and as greetings relate to other forms of behavior, such as farewells.

Finally, culture is a *cultivated* system of symbolic resources shared by a group of people. Culture is not simply a 'deposit,' a 'repository,' or a set of shared meanings, symbols, and norms; rather, "culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their action" (Geertz, 1973, p. 144). 'Fabric' is not limited to cloth produced by weaving or knitting

textile fibers: culture is anything created by ***Homo Faber***—'Human the Maker'—that is symbolically joined together into some tangible texture regardless of material—from a poem to a painting to a city. Culture is the living fabric of meaning, which is created, recreated, and can be changed. Sometimes, culture can even be erased. **Cultural erasure** is a practice in which a dominant culture suppresses and removes the fabric of a subordinate culture. Such practices can take various forms, which are often part of **colonization**, i.e., establishing control over the indigenous people of an area (Figure 1.1).

Culture can be erased through such radical acts as book burning (Williams, 2017) or other practices such as renaming places in Hawaii during its colonization using English or Anglicized words. Also, settlers targeted the everyday lives and artistic practices of Native Hawaiians by 'emptying' the visual spaces of Native peoples and filling them with their own visions of the American Dream (Kosasa, 2008; Tamaira, 2017). Another example in the U.S. cultural history is the 'indigenous erasure' by settlers of American Indian peoples and their culture; one practice of such erasure was to narrowly define who might be an American Indian (Orr et al., 2018).

Figure 1.1 Spanish colonization of Mexico *Source: Library of Congress*

Preserving culture, therefore, calls for constant care on the part of a group's members to keep its fabric alive, as well as resistance to cultural domination, which will be discussed later in the text.

2.2 Communication

Cultural meanings and behaviors are constantly (re)created through **communication**. The word 'communication' goes back to the Latin 'communicare' derived from 'communis' and meaning 'to make common' (Morris, 1982, p. 269). The idea of making something common implies mixing or sharing something. In the process of communication, cultural meanings as symbolic resources are created and shared. Communication can be conceptualized as the practice of creating and sharing meanings or symbolic resources.

Culture and communication are interconnected: "culture and communication are not separate entities or areas. Each is produced through a dynamic relationship with the other" (Shirato & Yell, 2000, p. 2). Communication practices make it possible for cultural meanings to be created and shared, while culture as a system of symbolic resources makes it possible for communication practices to continue. For instance, through the process of communication, people in many Asian cultures created the meaning of slurping during a meal as appreciation of the food. This cultural meaning, in its turn, makes it possible for people in those cultures to communicate with one another (resort to this practice again when needed) and also share this meaning (as a symbolic resource) with people from other cultures.

Culture and communication as "resources and practices are tightly connected and cannot really be separated. Resources are constructed in practice, and practices are shaped by resources. This is the recursive loop of resources and practices" (Littlejohn, 2002, p. 165). Culture and communication, therefore, form a dynamic relationship.

Based on this understanding of culture and communication, we can define **intercultural communication** as a process of interaction between people who share different systems of symbolic resources. As you can see, in intercultural communication we deal with "the identification of communications of a shared system of symbolic verbal and nonverbal behavior that are meaningful to group members" (Fong, 2004a, p. 6). Let's take a closer at the process of cultural identification—how and why people identify with one another and form cultures.

3 Identity as Group Membership

We form groups with other people "satisfying our need for membership affiliation and belonging" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 13). Our in-group belongingness is crucial because "it satisfies a primary emotional need for security and predictability" (Bonn, 2015). Simply put, people have a much

better chance of survival in groups by sharing their experiences. In this sense, to quote John Dewey, a famous American philosopher and educator, "shared experience is the greatest of human good" (Dewey, 1994, p. 167).

All people can be categorized "as members of our cultures or not members of our cultures" (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, p. 189)—**in-group** and **out-group**, respectively (Tajfel, 1981). In technical terms,

> in-group refers to group members who identify and associate with each other. Members of the group see themselves and other members as part of their "in-group" . . . People who are kept at a physical and emotional distance are considered the *out-group* from the view of in-group members . . . For example, athletes and cheerleaders may consider themselves as the in-group at their school and see the student government leaders as the out-group.
>
> (Fong, 2004a, p. 8; original emphasis)

The world appears natural and innately true when viewed inside an in-group; when we engage in interactions with other groups, though, we find out that the same things can be represented differently and have different meanings. For example, in parts of Tanzania and Uganda it is a form of courtesy to give a visitor roast coffee beans for chewing (Gamser et al., 1990) or as a symbol of acceptance into the community (Chinchen, 2000). Jan Blommaert, a Dutch researcher of languages and cultures, recalls a misunderstanding between himself and a Tanzanian colleague over a simple suggestion 'to have a coffee': for him, that meant drinking a cup of coffee, whereas for his colleague it meant chewing coffee beans (1991, p. 24). Often, such misunderstandings and distorted perceptions of out-groups lead to stereotyping and prejudice; we will discuss these barriers to successful intercultural communication in Chapter 9.

Now, take a sheet of paper and divide it in two parts with a line in the middle. On the left, put any group of people sharing a system of meanings. You can list any groups of which you personally are a member. You can use words, e.g., 'Spanish,' 'a marathon runner,' 'a student,' or you can get more creative and use pictures that you think represent different groups, e.g., different religious symbols or symbols for different political groups. Next, put groups different from yours on the right side of the sheet of the paper. As an example, see Figure 1.2.

As you can see, the process of cultural identification begins by drawing boundaries between an-group and an out-group. So, the key to answering our Problem Question is found on the sheet of paper in front of you: the process of cultural identification is based on boundaries drawn between different groups of people. **Boundary lines** play a crucial role in the process of construction of cultures. As a member of an in-group, one shares certain meanings or symbolic resources with other members. For example, a Muslim shares with other Muslims certain ideas about what it means to be a Muslim. In other words,

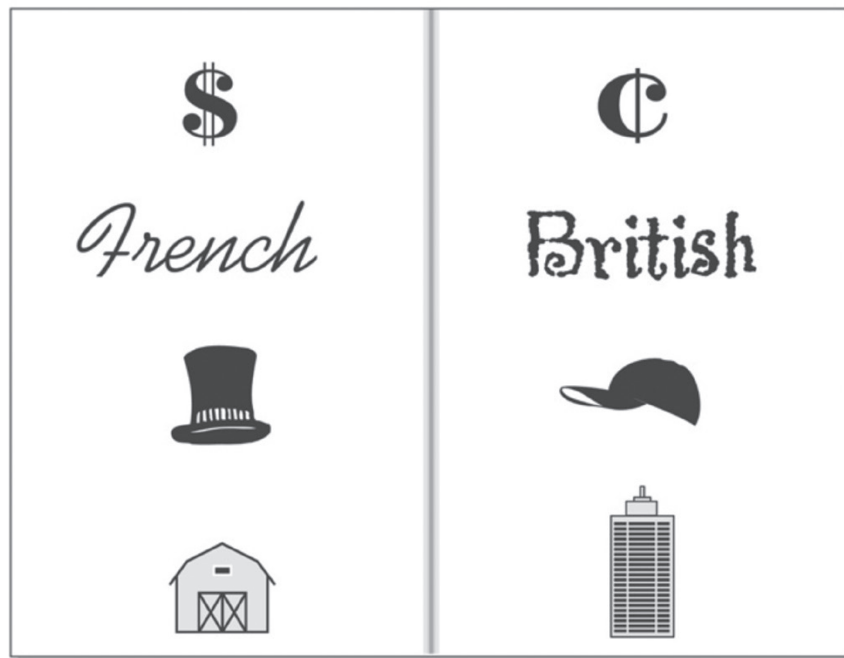

Figure 1.2 Boundary line between cultural groups *Source: Author*

one identifies with certain meanings, such as serving Allah. When we draw a boundary line between ourselves and others, we identify with those similar to us and create our cultural **identity**. All people who identify with the same meanings or symbolic resources have a collective cultural identity. It's important to note that 'cultural identity,' "as a maintenance of an inner solidarity with a group's ideals," is always "a *persistent* sharing of some kind of essential character with others" (Erikson, 1968, p. 109; emphasis added).

The word 'identity' is derived from Latin 'idem,' meaning 'the same (as above),' from 'id'—'it, that one.' You may have come across the word 'idem,' commonly abbreviated as 'id' and used inside parentheses to denote the previously cited source, when reading scholarly books or articles. Here's one example from a book on intercultural communication: "leaders can help shift individual members to align more closely with collective identity (idem)" (Dascalu, 2014, p. 81). It is this meaning of 'sameness, state of being the same' that is found in the concept of identity.

Thus, cultural identity can be viewed as a group membership where all people share the same symbolic meanings. Cultural identities vary in terms of scope (the number of people who share an identity), **salience** (the importance of an identity), and intensity (the strength with which an identity is communicated to others) (Collier & Thomas, 1988). There are many "group identities such as nationality, race, ethnicity, age, sex and gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, regional identity, ethnolinguistic identity, political affiliation, and (dis)ability" (Chen & Lin, 2016). Let's look at some types of cultural identity—racial, national, and ethnic identities.

The concept of **racial identity** refers to a group membership based on alleged biological and physical characteristics. Nature pushes us, as it were, to form racial group membership more readily, based on different facial features, skin pigmentation, or hair texture. However, our thoughts affect the process of racial identity construction. For example, in the 2000 Census count in the United States, almost half of all Hispanic respondents refused to identify themselves by any of the five racial categories on the form: white, black, Asian, American Indian or Alaska native and a category that includes natives of Hawaii and the Pacific Islands. Forty-two percent of all Latino respondents marked the box 'some other race' and wrote in such identities as Mayan, Tejano, and mestizo (Navarro, 2003).

Recently, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey on race in the United States (Parker et al., 2015). According to the survey, America becomes more racially diverse; 60% of multiracial adults are proud of their mixed-race background (60%) and 59% feel their racial heritage has made them more open to other cultures. With the share of interracial marriages and multiracial babies on the rise, this growth is expected to continue: the Census Bureau projects that the multiracial population will triple by 2060. At the same time, shared multi-racial backgrounds do not necessarily translate into shared identity: only 34% of all multiracial Americans think they have a lot in common with other adults who are the same racial mix that they are. Also, according to the survey, 21% of mixed-race Americans say they have felt pressure from friends, family, or society in general to identify as a single race. One more key finding of the survey is that for multiracial adults, race is not the most important element of their personal identity: only 26% of multiracial adults say their racial background is 'essential' to their identity, compared to gender or religion (39%).

So, even the skin color is a moving target, and the American construct of race is making room for new groups of people. Race is controversial because it is difficult to establish a true identity based only on physical marks. For instance, attempts to determine identity through DNA testing are usually met with resistance. Racial identity, which is grounded in the natural lines of descent, is further constructed to reflect a hierarchy of symbolic meanings. Reliance on the body as the site of racial identity is inadequate because race is constructed through various communicative behaviors. For instance, the meaning of the 'white race' is enacted in a number of different verbal and nonverbal behaviors and cannot be identified only with the skin color (Warren, 2001). A recent example is that of Rachel Dolezal, a former NAACP leader from Spokane, WA, who is white but claimed to be black since she identified with that culture (Donezal, 2017; see also King, 2017).

Unlike Dolezal's controversial case, some behaviors can be qualified more clearly as an act of **cultural appropriation**, usually understood as the act of adopting elements from other cultures without truly understanding or respecting the original context (Figure 1.3).

Sometimes, attempts are made to appropriate an entire cultural identity. As elite colleges and universities in United States seek to be more diverse, the question of race becomes one of the most important and agonizing

Figure 1.3 Example of cultural appropriation *Source: highsnobiety.com*

questions on a college application; some students declare the racial identity they feel could give them a leg up. For instance, Ed Dugger, the director of college counseling at Friends Academy, a private Quaker school on Long Island, New York, tells a story of a student whose family was Jewish and came from Europe checking Latino on his application. When Mr. Dugger asked him why, the boy said his family had taken a DNA test showing that he was 2% Sephardic. When asked if he felt connected to the Latino community, the student changed his answer to 'white' (Belkin, 2019).

The concept of **national identity** refers to a group membership based on a historico-political formation with a specific space and an administrative apparatus, e.g., French national identity. Usually, national identity refers to "a person's legal status or citizenship in relation to a nation" (Fong, 2004b, p. 30); if one has dual citizenship, one has a dual national identity. National identities are usually marked by **borders**—on land, in the air, or in the water. National identities have an impact on how people from different cultures

interact. For instance, on May 31, 1995, six Thai fishing boats were set upon by Vietnamese coastal-patrol vessels in waters claimed by both Thailand and Vietnam, prompting the Thai navy to intervene. For Thailand, the incident was a reminder of how serious the competition for resources in those waters had become, whereas for Vietnam, it was a worrisome signal that Thailand was willing to use force to uphold its interests. The Thais said that the incident occurred 213 kilometers east of the coastal town of Songkhla, which would place the incident area within Thailand's exclusive economic zone. For their part, the Vietnamese said that the incident occurred within Vietnam's southwestern territorial waters. The timing of the skirmish was particularly awkward, occurring just days before bilateral talks in Ho Chi Minh City on the disputed border of Thai and Vietnamese waters. Needless to say, the incident had an impact on the Thai and Vietnamese perceptions of each other and on their future intercultural interactions (Vatikiotis & Schwartz, 1995).

The concept of **ethnic identity** refers to a group membership based more on common symbolic heritage—a sense of origin and history, marked by shared language, beliefs, and rituals; examples of ethnic groups include the Kurds in the Middle East or the Zulu in southern Africa. Ethnic identities are "sustained by shared objective characteristics (language, religion, etc.) or by more subjective contributions to the sense of 'groupness'" (Edward, 1979, p. 10). For instance, since those who identify themselves as 'Aboriginal' can range from dark-skinned to broad-nosed to blonde-haired to blue-eyed people, Aboriginal people define their identity not so much by skin color as by their relationships (Korff, 2019).

Over the years, scholars have paid more attention to the saliency of national, racial, and ethnic identities in intercultural communication studies (Chen & Lin, 2016). Even today, when it is noted that "intercultural communication studies need to address . . . less-studied cultures," calls are made for "studies done in the Middle Eastern, African, or Central Asian contexts" (Croucher et al., 2015, p. 80), i.e., those focusing on national, racial, and ethnic identities. It must be remembered, though, that intercultural communication involves interaction between people from any groups that use different systems of symbolic resources, including sports fans, neighborhood communities, gangs, sororities and fraternities, etc.

It must also be remembered that "identities are contingent and unstable cultural creations with which we identify. They are not universal or absolute existent 'things'" (Barker, 2000, p. 193). Cultural identities are dynamic because, as a result of the number of people who share an identity (and other factors), their salience constantly changes: some identities become more noticeable or important as they are more often enacted in various situations. As a result, cultural identities represent the dynamics of power structures. For instance, for a long time the salience of male gender identity was very high; until recently, the pronoun 'he' has been unmarked and used for both men and women. Today, as women's status and visibility have increased, the

salience of the female cultural identity is much higher, reflected in the use of 'he or she' or 'he/she.' In spite of calls made for "unlearning gender" (LeMaster & Johnson, 2018), in addition to the traditional male and female identities, we now witness a number of emergent cultural identities such as 'heteroflexible,' 'bigender,' 'non-binary,' 'asexual,' 'sapiosexual,' 'demisexual,' 'ciswoman,' and 'transcurious' (Cover, 2018; see also: Shi & Langman, 2012).

In short, identities are contingent and dynamic creations. With more advanced information technologies, "communication of cultural identities in media platforms opens up new areas for the study of cultural identities" (Chen & Lin, 2016; Langmia & Tyree, 2016). Moreover, today's advancements in technoculture and biotechnology call for "a rethinking of the integrities and identities of the human: not forgetting, either, those of its non-human others, many of them of humanity's own making and remaking—gods, monsters, animals, machines, systems" (Callus & Herbrechter, 2012, p. 241). While in the present book we discuss various cultural identities of the human, it should be kept in mind that the non-human identity is now receiving more and more scholarly attention (Harrison-Buck & Hendon, 2018).

3.1 Cultural Identity as Reflective Self-Image

As we saw earlier, cultural identity refers to our conceptualizations of Self that derive from memberships in groups. To put it simply, cultural identity is the way we see ourselves in group settings. For every culture, it can be said that "within our own cultural context, we have unconsciously built our 'self-image'" (Usunier, 1996, p. 386). For example, people from the United States may see themselves as hard-working, friendly, tolerant and freedom-loving (Stewart & Bennet, 2005).

Our identity as an image of ourselves formed through interaction with other people; this idea is elaborated in many developmental theories of social interaction, e.g., in the works of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky (see: Psaltis & Zapiti, 2014). Common to such theories is the premise that Self is but a reflection of Other, captured well by Karl Popper, a famous British philosopher:

> It seems to me of considerable importance that we are not born as selves, but that we have to learn that we are selves; in fact we have to learn to be selves . . . How do we obtain self-knowledge? Not by self-observation, I suggest, but by becoming selves, and by developing theories about ourselves. Long before we attain consciousness and knowledge of ourselves, we have, normally, become aware of other persons . . . I suggest that a consciousness of self begins to develop through the medium of other persons: just as we learn to see ourselves in a mirror, so the child becomes conscious of himself by sensing his reflection in the mirror of other people's consciousness of himself.
>
> (Popper & Eccles, 1977, pp. 109–110)

George Herbert Mead, a well-known American scholar who studied language and communication at the beginning of the last century, employed the term "**the looking-glass self**" (Mead, 1934) for this reflection of ourselves. That term had earlier been introduced by Charles Horton Cooley, an American sociologist, who used the image of a mirror to show how a person imagines what he or she looks like to others, incorporating what they imagine into their own self-concept. Based on that idea, Mead showed that the achievement of identity involves mirroring: the individual "becomes a self in so far as he can take the attitude of others and act toward himself as others act" (Mead, 1934, p. 171). This can be achieved only through **role-taking** or imaginatively putting oneself in the place of someone else and assessing one's own actions through the eyes of that person. It is an ongoing process that allows one to anticipate and adapt one's behaviors depending on the expectations of other people's reaction to them. Role-taking in itself is a reflexive process since one continuously puts oneself in other people's shoes and behaves accordingly. Oneself turns back upon oneself by reflecting on one's experiences; hence, self-reflexivity—having an ongoing conversation with your whole self about what you are experiencing as you are experiencing it—is a crucial human attribute, especially for intercultural adaptation.

In this light, our group identity is a result of interaction with other groups. It is important to note that an encounter of a cultural self and a cultural other occurs even when no explicit communication takes place. For instance, it is known that the Greek '**barbaroi**' meant 'all that are not Greek'; therefore, it was not worth engaging in communication with such groups (Boletsi, 2013). Since then, practically every group has assigned the status of 'barbarians' to groups that are different and whose language is foreign, strange and unintelligible (Figure 1.4). However, exclusionary naming and associated practices come to define the culture that chooses to communicate with 'barbarians' by not interacting with them.

Cultural identity, then, is not simply a group membership; it is an image of ourselves as a result of interaction with people from other groups, denoting "*the reflective self-image* or self-conception that we each derive from our cultural group membership" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 28; emphasis added). It is crucial to remember that every situation of "intercultural communication takes place in the confrontation of a *cultural* self and a *cultural* other" (Nöth, 2001, p. 240; emphasis added). As Mikhail Bakhtin, a famous Russian philosopher and literary critic, puts it, "it is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly . . . A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 7). As members of an in-group, we acquire our view of ourselves based on the view of us by people from other cultures. Americans may view themselves as hard-working, friendly, tolerant, and freedom-loving. However, there are often differences between this self-construal and the reflective self-image, i.e., how they may see themselves through the eyes of people from other cultures. For instance,

Figure 1.4 Barbarians vs Romans *Source: Plassenburg Zinnfiguren Museum*

the book *Learning to hate Americans* (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2003) presents the image teenagers around the world have of Americans. According to the surveys conducted in 12 countries, many people perceive Americans to be extremely violent and criminally inclined, and American women sexually immoral. The authors of the book note that they expected some difference in perceptions, but such image shocked them. Another book, recently published and raising the same questions, is entitled *Why do they hate us? Making peace with the Muslim world* (Slocum, 2019). Naturally, "conflict may arise when there are sharp differences between who we think we are and who others think we are" (Martin & Nakayama, 2000, p. 111). Intercultural communication, therefore, puts us in a hall of mirrors with multiple and ever-changing reflections. We may not always like this reflective self-image, but blaming the mirror is never helpful.

It must be clear by now that people's experiences of "interacting with a person from a different culture triggers an awareness of their own cultural identities" (Lustig & Koester, 2003, p. 145). In this respect, "culture provides the frame of reference to answer the most fundamental question of each being: Who am I?" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 12). Overall, it is only by going outside of one's own culture that one's identity can be revealed most fully and profoundly. It is not surprising, then, that self-reflexivity is considered a crucial skill because only by opening up towards difference can we become aware of who we truly are (Clark & Dervin, 2014). Edward T. Hall,

an American anthropologist and one of the founders of the field of intercultural communication, expressed this idea very well:

> If one is to prosper in this new world without being unexpectedly battered, one must *transcend one's own system*. To do so, two things must be known: first, that there is a system; and second, the nature of that system. What is more, *the only way to master either is to seek out systems that are different from one's own and, using oneself as a sensitive recording device, make note of every reaction or tendency to escalate*. Ask yourself questions that will help define the state you were in as well as the one you are escalating to. It is impossible to do this in the abstract, because there are too many possibilities; behavioral systems are too complex. *The rules governing behavior and structure of one's own cultural system can be discovered only in a specific context or real life situation*.
> (1976, p. 51; emphasis added)

As you can see, to understand one's own culture, one must go beyond it and remain consciously aware of one's reflection in the mirror of other people's consciousnesses. Only this way, in real-life situations of interactions, can one's own cultural identity be revealed and maintained.

Thus, "collective identity is produced by the social construction of boundaries. These boundaries . . . establish a demarcation between inside and outside, strangers and familiars" (Eisenstadt, 1998, p. 139). Every cultural identity can be viewed as a group membership and as a reflective self-image. We can define ourselves as cultural beings only in the process of interaction with people from other cultures. Without boundary lines, there would be no Others and without Others—no us.

4 Introducing the Punctuation Principle

Let's now formulate, based on the discussion above, the first principle of intercultural communication—the Punctuation Principle. We will isolate three parts that make up this principle. Each part deals with intercultural communication as a process of drawing boundary lines between groups of people. First, we will present boundary lines in intercultural communication as conceptualizations; next, we will look at constructive and destructive boundary lines; finally, we will discuss the goal of intercultural communication as looking for a boundary fit. We will discuss each part separately and then formulate the Punctuation Principle, as a whole.

4.1 Boundary Lines as Conceptualizations

The term '**punctuation**' goes back to Latin 'punctuare,' meaning 'to break, to mark with points or dots,' which in turn goes back to Latin 'pungere,' meaning 'to pierce.' This is exactly what traditional punctuation marks do—break the stream of writing by marking with points and dots its separate

elements. Punctuation marks help us to understand the correct meaning; as we all know, a simple comma, put in the wrong place, can change meaning dramatically. However, 'punctuation' is also used in a much broader sense; for instance, we read of "the punctuation of the city" (Lavrinec & Zaporozhets, 2009, p. 210), or even "punctuation of our lives" (Chambers, 1994, p. 24).

Applied to communication, 'punctuation' is usually understood as "a process of perception through which people organize their ongoing interactions into recognizable openings, closings, causes, and effects" (Anderson & Ross, 2002, p. 147). Based on this concept, a well-known axiom states that "the nature of a relationship is contingent upon the punctuation of the communicational sequences between the communicants" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 59). This axiom can be extended beyond interpersonal interactions to intercultural communication because they share the same premise, i.e., reality "is differently punctuated and categorized . . . by, or presented to the participants of different cultures" (Lee, 1950, p. 13). For instance, people may punctuate the differing triggering event that leads to intercultural conflict (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001), which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.

Punctuation plays a crucial role in the process of cultural identification and intercultural communication because "collective identity is produced by the social construction of boundaries. These boundaries . . . establish a demarcation between inside and outside, strangers and familiars" (Eisenstadt, 1998, p. 139). Since ancient times, people have been drawing boundary lines between themselves and other groups viewed as unfamiliar, strange, or barbaric. But what *is* a boundary line? At first glance, the question seems easy to answer: it is a visible mark such as a series of dots. If you were asked to give examples of boundary lines, you'd probably name land borders, sea lines, shared language, beliefs and values, etc. Notice, though: as we move from skin color to land borders to sea lines to shared beliefs and values, they become less and less tangible, and more and more difficult to detect. You can literally put your finger on a land borderline, but how can you grasp lines in the universe of beliefs and values? What about people who have the same skin color and, yet, do not communicate at all, or may even be ready to kill one another? Where does the boundary line between those people lie? What is a boundary line, first and foremost?

If we look more carefully at the definition of punctuation given earlier—'to mark with points or dots,' we notice that the emphasis needs to be placed on the action of 'marking' itself. In other words, it should be emphasized that "boundary is not an entity or a point, but *an event—a certain dynamic* that moves us from inside the system outside" (Neuman, 2003, p. 143; emphasis added). A **boundary**, therefore, is not so much an entity (an exterior region) as it is an action of marking a limit (in our case—of a cultural identity).

Let's remember that "what we *think* of as our identity is dependent on what we *think* we are *not*" (Barker, 2000, p. 195; emphasis added). The word 'think' is the key to the origin of boundary lines: they are, above all, our thoughts, our perceptions and expectations. Boundary lines are born in people's minds

and later turn into borders, walls, lines in the water, language barricades, etc. It is people who create boundary lines, for better or for worse. A boundary line, first and foremost, is an idea, a conceptualization. There is a wonderful short film called *Boundary Lines* directed and written by Philip Stapp in 1946. In this film, we see two friendly neighbors peacefully settling a dispute over a little fence. But we also see an arrow shot by a primordial hunter flying across time and turning into various types of weapons, eventually ending as an atomic bomb, ready to descend on a city. The film makes a powerful statement about the conceptual nature of boundary lines. It is best phrased at the beginning of the film: 'What is a line, anyway . . . Except what we make it?'

4.2 Constructive and Destructive Boundary Lines

When people hear the words 'boundary lines' or 'boundaries,' their first image is often that of separation and breakdown in communication. Unfortunately, this view is supported by numerous real-life examples. In fact, many intercultural encounters discussed in this book are examples of destructive boundary lines that lead to communication failures. Boundary lines are perceived as destructive if people use certain verbal and nonverbal behaviors that result in **identity disconfirmation**, i.e., people fail to define themselves by constructing their cultural identities. Identity disconfirming messages may include avoiding others, racist language, etc. For instance, people "can suffer real damage, real distortion" if people from another culture "mirror back to them a confining, or contemptible picture of themselves" (Taylor, 1992, p. 25).

Destructive boundary lines can take the physical form of a wall separating people, such as the Berlin Wall. People from different cultures can also be separated by language. For instance, in the Texas town of Amarillo, two women who were fluent in Spanish and English were fired from their jobs because they chatted in Spanish in their workplace. The owner of the company asked the women to speak only English while at work; the owner allegedly even demanded that they sign a pledge not to speak Spanish. Both women refused and lost their jobs (Verhovek, 1997). It is clear that this intercultural interaction the owner was perceived as overstepping his boundaries, while the two women were perceived as uncooperative and lacking flexibility.

Let's not forget, however, that without boundary lines there would be no cultures, so boundary lines cannot be all that bad! Besides, the Latin root of 'punctuation' refers simply to 'marking with points,' and the Latin root of 'boundary' refers to 'a field within limits.' Nowhere do we find any evaluation: the meanings of 'punctuation' and 'boundary' are neutral. Yes, boundary lines could be perceived as negative and destructive, but and they could (and should!) be perceived as positive and constructive. Boundary lines are constructive when they make it possible for people to construct their cultural identities, successfully regulating interaction with others. If people can freely take the line they want by using certain verbal

and nonverbal behaviors, their cultural identity is confirmed. In this case, boundary lines are perceived as constructive and positive because people achieve their goals. Positive response can be equated with '**identity confirmation**' as the "process through which individuals are recognized, acknowledged, and endorsed" (Laing, 1961, p. 83). Identity confirming messages may include showing empathy toward others, using supportive language, etc.

Take the example of St. Maarten, the smallest parcel of land in the world ruled by two sovereignties since the partition treaty was signed back in 1648 (see: Jermanok, 1999). Part French, part Dutch, the island even has two names—St. Martin and Sint Maarten. People from both cultures are said to have merged to create arguably the most cosmopolitan island in the Caribbean. The island's inhabitants are proud of their peaceful coexistence for over 350 years. A boundary line here takes the form of a border running from Cupecoy Bay in the west to Cortalita Beach in the east apportioned 21 square miles to the French and 16 square miles to the Dutch. Legend has it that the two soldiers, one Dutch, one French, were chosen to divide the island in half. They started back to back and began walking. However, the Dutch soldier stopped to have a drink while the French soldier remained sober and continued his duty; hence, the difference in size. (More likely, though, the French received 21 square miles because of their superior naval presence in the region when the treaty was signed.) Today, one is free to cross sides without a passport. The boundary line between Dutch St. Maarten and French St. Martin is open and free, considered among the most peaceful the world has ever known (Banks, 2016).

Therefore, the nature of boundary lines, as internalized conceptualizations, is two-fold. A boundary line can take the form of various barriers that cause disputes and even wars; it is then perceived as destructive and does not lead to successful intercultural interactions. A boundary line can also create peaceful borders; it is then perceived as constructive and leads to successful intercultural communication. Let's emphasize one more time that the origin of boundary lines is in people's minds, and it is people who make those boundary lines destructive (dysfunctional, negative) or constructive (functional, positive).

4.3 Boundary Fit in Intercultural Communication

Sometimes, people's attitude to boundary lines is so negative that we hear calls to get rid of all boundaries or at least avoid them. For instance, the film *Boundary Lines* is described as "a plea to eliminate the arbitrary boundary lines which divide people from each other as individuals and as nations: invisible boundary lines of color, origin, wealth, and religion" (International Film Foundation, 1951). Yet, as must be clear from our earlier discussion, boundary lines are crucial for the creation of cultural identity and for intercultural communication, overall.

It could be that those whose attitude is so negative think of walls rather than boundary lines; as Robert Frost writes in one of his poems, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That wants it down." Indeed, in such cases communication is often prevented or undercut; one hits a wall, so to speak, because,

> just as much as walls keep peoples out, walls also keep peoples in. In this way, just as much walls distort the view of those on the outside, walls distort the view of those on the inside. In other words, in distorting our view of each other, walls ultimately distort our view of ourselves.
>
> (Rodriguez, 2008)

We're much better off thinking of intercultural communication in terms of "human nature as having permeable boundaries" (Abrams et al., 2003, p. 217). It is crucial to understand that boundaries are made to be crossed. In other words, boundaries not only allow but also call for various crossings, and so an essential skill—especially in today's complex world—"is the ability to interact across cultural boundaries" (Tennekoon, 2015, p. 1). Every **boundary crossing** is an interactive, intersubjective experience. Only by crossing boundaries can new possibilities be created in intercultural communication and only at cultural intersections can new identities be forged (Chen & Lin, 2016; McConachy, 2018).

So, instead of calling for the elimination of all boundaries or avoiding them, we should be ready for—and welcome—boundary crossings. In the process of intercultural communication, we must make sure that boundary lines are respected and agreed upon, perceived as constructive by people from all interacting cultures. People must strive for a **boundary fit** as an agreement on the nature of a boundary line between them; such "boundary wisdom helps interactants challenge their own core cultural values at the same time when facing the challenge from their culturally different counterpart" (Chen, 2013, p. 1).

Boundary lines can be hard or soft, depending upon how difficult or easy it is for an out-group to communicate with an in-group. **Soft boundaries** are lines not as deeply engraved and easier to change and cross in the process of intercultural interactions. For instance, according to a recent article focused on the analysis of symbolic productions (Rigaud et al., 2018), there were complex interactions between Early Neolithic farming cultures in the western Mediterranean area. The circulation and exchange of pottery decorations and personal ornaments was made possible by flexible boundaries between these groups, reflecting the high level of their mobility and rapid expansion in the area.

A modern-day example is presented by Switzerland where peaceful stability is maintained as a result of well-defined boundaries between various cultural groups (Rutherford et al., 2014). Another example of a good boundary fit is interaction of the Amish people with the broader American

culture that constantly undergoes boundary crossings. For instance, while their commitment to staying off the electricity grid used to be a given, now some Amish small businesses find it impractical; also, more Amish are now beginning to use the Internet and social media (Stuhldreher, 2016). At the same time, the boundaries are being crossed more often from the side of the broader American culture, as people engage with the Amish in discussions about life after death or participate in Bible readings with Amish families (Park, 2018).

Hard boundaries are lines deeply engraved within a culture and more difficult to change and cross in the process of intercultural interaction. Sometimes, it seems that the boundary line is so negative and deeply engraved that it appears to be impermeable, with no boundary fit possible. However, boundary lines are, first and foremost, ideas that take many different forms and undergo changes, sometimes quick and dramatic ones: think of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Or, take the example of a dramatic change in the boundary lines in the former Yugoslavia where people from the same communities saw themselves, all of a sudden, as members of different ethnic groups. The aggressive behavior of former neighbors, friends, and even spouses, which the international community often found difficult to understand, was the consequence of a changed boundary fit (Petronio et al., 1998).

It is crucial to remember that even the hardest boundaries change because our conceptualizations change; it is said that nothing can stop an idea whose time has come. Boundary lines change because people can change their conceptualizations of themselves and others. In this respect, a boundary fit can be more or less successful ('fitting'), and reaching a boundary fit can be more or less difficult, depending on the degree of permeability of the boundaries. In all cases, a boundary fit is work in progress as it requires constant intercultural interactions.

Boundaries, therefore, are meant to be crossed. Boundary crossings form the essence of intercultural interactions even though they may not be easy because "boundaries abound. So do the ambiguities traversing them" (Connolly, 1995, p. 198). Cultural boundaries are not obstacles but permeable creations that allows us to understand and situate ourselves in relation to others. Intercultural interactions can be conceptualized by using the membrane metaphor as "spaces in which the other is close yet discrete, separated with permeable boundaries, like a membrane" (Martin, 2000, p. 86). This view captures the essence of intercultural interactions very well because "boundaries—like membranes—modify communication without shutting it down" (Cabranes-Grant, 2011). In this book, we'll discuss from various perspectives how intercultural communication can be modified yet continue.

5 The Punctuation Principle Defined

Let's give a concise formulation of the Punctuation Principle, based on the above discussion of its three parts.

First, intercultural communication can be seen in terms of boundary lines, which originate in people's minds marking distinctions between in-groups (Self) and out-groups (Other). Any boundary line is, fundamentally, an idea, a conceptualization.

Second, boundary lines can be perceived as destructive or constructive, resulting in less successful or more successful communication, respectively. If boundary lines prevent people from realizing their goals and defining themselves, they are considered destructive; if they allow people from different cultures to define themselves and realize their goals, they are considered constructive.

And, third, people from different cultures have certain boundary demands. Successful intercultural communication requires that people from different cultures agree on a boundary fit between them.

In a nutshell, the Punctuation Principle can be formulated as follows:

> *Intercultural communication is a process whereby people from different groups define their collective identities by drawing boundary lines between themselves, looking for a mutually acceptable boundary fit.*

6 Case Study: 'Peace Walls' in Northern Ireland

The case study is based on the following materials (Burdeau, 2019; Hawley, 2018; McGrade, 2017). It is recommended that you read them in their entirety; below, you find a summary of the articles.

Be ready to identify and then discuss the following topics:

1. The role played by the 'peace walls' in the process of cultural identification.
2. The 'peace walls' as conceptualizations.
3. Looking for a boundary fit.

Past. Since the early 20th century, tensions have existed in Northern Ireland between most Catholics who wanted complete independence from Britain and most Protestants who wanted to retain political and economic ties with Britain. Often, the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' are conflated with 'nationalist' and 'unionist,' and 'Irish' and 'British,' respectively. In the late 1960s, violent riots broke out between these two groups, and British troops were brought in to restore order. The violence was so bad that the residents built the so-called 'peace walls,' or 'peace lines,' and thousands of Northern Irish families relocated behind those areas deemed safe.

The 'peace walls' were established as a temporary measure to keep the two groups apart. 'The Troubles,' as several decades of violence came to be known, was brought to an official end in 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement which opened up the border between the territories. Gates, sometimes staffed by police and many closed at night, began to appear in the walls

allowing passage from one area to another. Since 1998, more than ten miles of walls have been added.

Present. Today, many tourists visiting Northern Ireland are shocked to find dozens of 'peace walls' there. One of the most notorious is the concrete wall running between the Falls Road and Shankill Road in west Belfast that became to be referred to as 'the Berlin Wall of west Belfast'. The walls are not limited to Belfast and stand across the country: if they were placed end-to-end, they would stretch to over 34 kilometers (21.1 miles). The 'peace walls' exist in the so-called 'interface areas'—those places where Catholics and Protestants live in close proximity. The walls are still up because they serve a purpose: many people feel they are needed to protect them from physical attack. Of course, as they function to protect people, the walls also have the effect of separating them.

Also, tourists visiting Northern Ireland today may discover that many local residents can identify a person's religion simply by his or her appearance. For instance, Chelsea Fuchs, an undergraduate in the Walsh School of Foreign Service, class of 2019, who spent several months in Belfast, reports interesting conversations with a Catholic boy and a Protestant boy. In the words of the Protestant boy,

> If he's wearing O'Neill's shorts, or a Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) shirt, he's definitely Catholic. Catholics are also the people who don't come out on the Twelfth of July [which celebrates the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James II]. But my dad swears he can tell a Catholic just by looking into his eyes.

In response, the Catholic boy asserted that "Prods usually have sallow skin and wear rugby stuff" claiming that it "takes years of experience" to note the difference.

Future. It remains to be seen whether Northern Ireland will remove the 'peace walls' by 2023, as promised by its government. There are a number of factors to be taken into consideration when speculating when, how, or if the walls will finally come down. First, whereas the destruction of the Berlin Wall was viewed as necessary for the purpose of reintegrating the city's population, Northern Ireland's population, for the most part, has managed to reintegrate even with the walls intact.

Second, it must be remembered that the 'peace walls' were built by the members of the local communities themselves, not imposed from outside; this makes it harder to bring them down.

Third, although commonly associated with the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, the 'peace walls' continue to exist as a result of the political identities (nationalist and unionist) that may become more salient than one's religious identity.

Fourth, the ‘peace walls’ have become part of the fabric of the so-called ‘Troubles tourism,’ providing employment to working-class communities and especially those living closest to the ‘interface areas.’

Slowly, people from the communities on both sides of the walls are being brought together. One cross-community effort aimed at taking down the ‘peace walls’ brings together about 200 Belfast children drawn from Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods divided by walls to play sports. Part of the PeacePlayers International project, it focuses on the common ground between different groups showing to young people what the future can be like. It is clear, though, that the process of dealing with the ‘peace walls’ will be gradual, and much work is yet to be done.

****

1. The role played by the ‘peace walls’ in the process of cultural identification.

   As discussed in the chapter, people can be categorized as members of our cultures (an in-group) or not members of our cultures (an out-group). Since collective identity is produced by the social construction of boundaries, the ‘peace walls’ (as a form of boundaries) make the distinction between an in-group and an out-group clear-cut: most Catholics who wanted complete independence from Britain self-identify as ‘nationalist’ whereas most ‘Protestant’ self-identify as ‘unionist.’ It is also clear that each group’s identity is a reflective self-image derived from interactions with the other group: people from each group can anticipate and adapt their behaviors depending on the way they expect people from the other group to react to them. This way, people from each group can reflect on their experiences and self-reflexively plan their actions.

2. The ‘peace walls’ as conceptualizations.

   Although tangible in form, the ‘peace walls’ have a symbolic component: they started as a conceptual distinction between the ideas of those who desired complete independence from Britain and didn’t want to share its ideology, and those who desired to retain ties with Britain and so share its ideology. Also, it is an example of how conceptualizations can turn destructive and form quasi-national borders in the form of hard boundaries such as walls.

   The ‘peace walls’ as conceptualizations persist not only in a tangible form but also in cultural memory and narrative; consider the example of someone who can tell a Catholic just by ‘looking into their eyes,’ which ‘takes years of experience.’ Also, while they were established as a temporary measure to keep the Catholics and Protestants apart, the ‘peace walls’ are now conceptualized somewhat differently since they’re now part of life in Northern Ireland.

3. Looking for a boundary fit.

   The 'peace walls' are clearly an example of hard boundaries; yet, as noted earlier, even the hardest boundaries can change once our ideas change. It is unlikely that the 'peace walls' will undergo a quick and dramatic change similar to the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, we can see how cultural efforts to soften the hard boundaries are at work even in this long-standing conflict of identities and loyalties: important cross-community efforts are being made by the people on both sides of the walls toward finding a mutually acceptable boundary fit.

   In spite of many challenges, it must be remembered that all boundaries are meant to be crossed and that every boundary crossing is an interactive experience. It remains to be seen what forms a boundary fit in this case will take on; it may be that the 'peace walls' will be physically preserved, with cultural intersections creating new opportunities and identities.

7 Side Trips

7.1 What Is a 'Person of Color'?

In his article, entitled '"People of color" came out of the blue,' Jonathan Kolatch (2019) poses the question: "What is a 'person of color'?" He says that to grade people by skin tone is silly, except to politicians, and that recurrent headlines in national newspapers, such as 'Five essay collections by women of color,' only perpetuate this distortion. He also argues that the expression 'people of color' is a purely American invention and must be stripped from the lexicon, or, at a minimum, needs better classification, suggesting such labels as 'colorless,' 'colored,' 'bicolored,' 'tricolored,' and 'multicolored.'

** Do you agree with Kotlach's opinion and suggestion?

7.2 Human Towers in Catalonia

Human-towers (*castells*) is a dramatic display of Catalonian culture: people literally stack themselves on top of one another by climbing up backs and shoulders. The cultural practice was first documented in 1801 and became a powerful metaphor for the Catalonian identity, symbolizing togetherness, the elimination of class differences, and Catalonia's welcoming atmosphere (Wolters, 2019).

** Can you think of other unusual forms of expression of cultural identity?

7.3 **Intangible Cultural Heritage** *List*

UNESCO established a list of *Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding*, focusing on people whose identities are endangered and at risk of fading away. *Intangible Cultural Heritage* includes practices, representations,

knowledge, and skills that define a group, particularly focusing on oral traditions and expressions, rituals and festive events, performing arts, traditional craftsmanship, etc. For instance, in 2018 Jamaica applied to add reggae to this list, which was honored. The updated forms are available to be completed by states when nominating living heritage elements to the Representative List and Urgent Safeguarding List for the 2021 cycle along with 38 files of elements considered as good examples by the Committee or the Evaluation Body (https://ich.unesco.org/).

** What would you propose to add to this list and why?

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