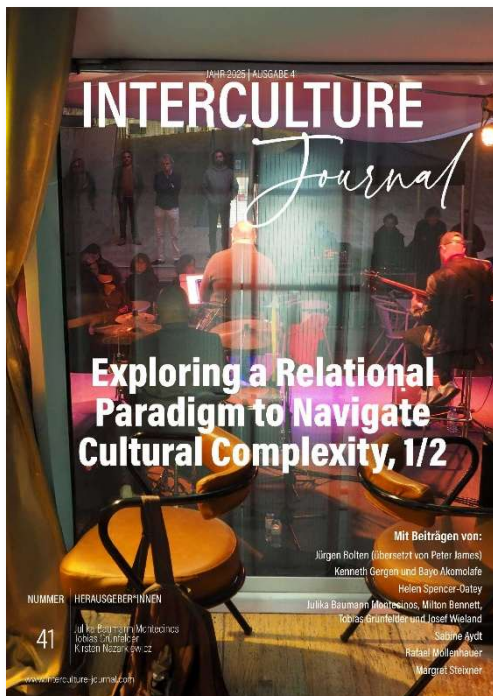


# Culture is notoriously difficult to define.



However, in line with Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021, 45), I maintain that it...

- is associated with social groups;
- is reflected in fuzzy behavioural patterns and networks of beliefs and values;
- influences people's expectations of behaviour and frames their interpretations/evaluations of behaviour.

This interpretation of culture raises two important points. Firstly, what social groups are included? Traditionally the focus has been on national groups and (to a lesser extent) organizational groups (e.g., Molinsky 2013; Meyer 2014; House et al. 2004).

However, there are some fundamental problems and limitations to this perspective. On the one hand, we are all members of multiple social groups, resulting in a complex picture of cultural influences on our identities, which Chao and Moon (2005) refer to as resulting in a cultural mosaic. On the other, the notion of social groups operates at multiple levels, not only the broad socio-cultural context, but also at the micro level and other intermediate levels (e.g., Ting-Toomey and Oetzel 2013, Sackmann 2023). This complexity of culture and social groups [...] needs to be taken into account.

Secondly, I note the words “influence” and “framing”. This draws attention to the importance of individual agency – that people are not robots who automatically follow their own cultural norms and expectations, but rather are also influenced by their personal goals and preferences and by other contextual factors. This inevitably makes analysis more complex, especially when an interpretive approach (Geertz 1973) is taken (Grosskopf and Barmeyer 2021).

Helen Spencer-Oatey (2025). INTERCULTURE Journal • 24/41 (September 2025)

