



Intercultural Preparation Module: Online Branch

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Authors: Ghent University

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome!

Soon you will be embarking on an exchange as part of your study programme. Exciting!

You might already be busy with practical preparations and managing your nerves, but a solid intercultural preparation is just as crucial to the success of your exchange! **Intercultural learning** plays a critical role in successfully navigating and integrating into a new, often unfamiliar, cultural environment. It allows you to grow not just academically but also personally and socially, making your experience as an exchange student not only enriching but also far more meaningful.

1. Intercultural learning

Intercultural learning goes beyond understanding cultural customs and traditions.

It's as much about **learning about yourself** as it is about learning about others. You'll need to think about yourself, the culture you belong to, and how your values and norms shape your worldview. This critical self-reflection and awareness of your own cultural context and positioning is essential for interacting openly and constructively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Our own culture often forms such a natural frame of reference that it's hard to imagine that others do, see, and experience things differently. Only when you consciously reflect on what is typical of your culture, and compare this with other cultures, can you share your experiences, learn from others, and better understand them.

Beyond critical self-reflection, intercultural learning also involves empathy and understanding other cultures. As Hofstede (2002) puts it: **"The intellectual challenge is understanding the essence of national culture: the rules of the social game that differ across borders. The emotional challenge is being able to put yourself in the place of somebody from a 'strange country'"** - somebody with possibly a different positionality, no doubt complex intersectional vulnerabilities, different socio-economic status, varying cultural practices, and divergent expectations (adapted by Van Hoeck, 2024).

2. Module content

What this module covers - and what it doesn't.

This Intercultural Preparation won't cover practical exchange details like visa, travel medicine, accommodation, or transportation, nor will it provide specific information about your host country's culture. While learning about your host culture is essential, this module focuses on broader, **culture-general** topics and issues, providing knowledge and skills that can be applied to any destination.

This module will not make you an expert in intercultural learning, but it does provide tools and foundational principles. Depending on your education, background, and previous intercultural experiences, this module may offer new insights or serve as a refresher. Developing intercultural competencies is a **lifelong process**, and this training is just the starting point. The real learning will happen through your interactions with people.

Important disclaimer on eurocentrism: In our intercultural preparation, we often refer to **Eurocentric** concepts, ideas, or ways of thinking that have historically been considered universal. It is essential that in a training on intercultural learning, we critically examine these Eurocentric ideas that are often placed at the center, and we strive to integrate non-Eurocentric perspectives as well. It is important to be aware of the critiques and inaccuracies related to West vs. East and **Global North vs. Global South**. We acknowledge that these terms reinforce inequalities between certain 'groups' and take little account of the diversity and power imbalances within these groups. Finding and consistently using a suitable alternative is not easy. Additionally, seemingly neutral terms often conceal certain inequalities and privileges. Therefore, these terms will sometimes still be used in the module, with full recognition of the limitations of these concepts.

Key term: North/South

The classic economic definition of the Global South usually goes as follows: Global South countries are those located near the equator and characterized by high levels of extreme poverty and significant income inequality.

However, this definition tends to group a vast diversity of countries across different continents and generalizes, potentially leading to stereotypes.

A better definition to use is:

Global South countries are those with a shared history of oppression, extractivism, violence, colonization, and that continue to suffer from these in political, economic, social, and environmental terms today. This perspective, which explicitly considers power and oppression, allows for the inclusion of a broader range of countries.

Global North countries are states and regions that have historically and structurally benefited from colonialism, extractivism, and the exploitation of

labor and natural resources from the Global South. As a result, they have established a dominant position in political, economic, social, and environmental power dynamics, which continue to shape global structures and institutions today.

3. User instructions

How does this work?

This **1-hour** online module is a **mandatory** part of the Intercultural Preparation that you will soon attend live.

Take your time to go through it carefully, and feel free to explore additional resources provided, such as videos, books, and websites. Your **progress is saved** automatically, so you can return to the module at any time.

The module is invites open-minded reflection on your own perspectives.

Answer the questions thoughtfully and honestly. Responses are **anonymous**, but general insights may be shared during the live session.

In that session, you'll explore these topics more deeply, gain further insights, and have the opportunity to discuss and reflect on questions raised here.

Throughout the module, you will encounter various icons inviting you to think, explore, or take action. Click on each icon to reveal a detailed explanation.

Reflection questions	Prompts to help you think critically about the content and apply it to your own experience or knowledge.
Key term	Important concept or definition that enhances your understanding of the topic.
Watch video	Visual content to deepen your understanding through lectures, demonstrations, or real-world examples.
Further reading	Suggested resources for deeper exploration of the topic.
Task	Practical activity to apply your learning in a hands-on way.
Case study	Real-world example to illustrate the application of concepts in study abroad settings.

4. Feelings about your exchange

Task for students

Introduction | Feelings about your exchange

◀ ▶

Select the word(s) that best describe(s) your feelings before your exchange.

You can select more than one answer

Curious	Overwhelmed	Motivated
Excited	Mixed	Uncertain
Confident	Sad	Nervous

5. *Expectations for international experience*

Have you critically reflected on your motivations and expectations?

Research and experience show that not all students look back on their exchange period with entirely positive feelings. Students often attribute this to local customs, the population, the internship site, or the host university. However, they *may* start with unrealistic expectations or, at the very least, expectations that do not fully account for the local complexities.

Have you taken the time to reflect critically on your motivations and expectations? This is a crucial step! Disappointment usually stems from a gap between expectations and reality—especially when those expectations are overly optimistic, romanticized, or superficial.

The good news? You can prepare for this. Clarify your expectations and take time to read up on the country you'll be visiting. It can make a world of difference!

Taking the time to reflect will make it easier to connect with and enjoy your new environment. Use the weeks before departure to consider these questions thoughtfully!

We often focus too much on the internship or studies as the sole measure of success, which can lead to disappointment if things don't go as planned. However, **success in this experience includes your learning curve, independence, cultural encounters, new friendships, flexibility, self-awareness, resilience, and intercultural communication.**

Task: Write a letter to your future self

Write a letter to your future self reflecting on what you hope to see, do, and experience during your time abroad. Consider your goals and what you hope to achieve personally, academically, or professionally.

While drafting your letter, you may find it helpful to draw on insights from this Intercultural Preparation.

Use the website <https://www.futureme.org/> to send your letter. After writing it, click on “Send to the Future” — your letter will be delivered to your email address on a date you choose, for example around the time you return.

The following questions can be helpful:

- What do I expect from my studies/internship or host institution? And what do I expect from myself.
- What challenging situations do I anticipate encountering during my stay?
- What images do I associate with my host country, its people, and their way of life?
- How do I think people will behave, and what do I expect to see most?
- Why did I choose this specific country?
- What do I expect from my fellow students who are traveling with me? What do I expect from my peers at my host institution?
- When would I consider my exchange a success?

6. Chapter overview

This module consists of five chapters:

1. Culture and Identity
2. Intercultural Challenges
3. Stereotypes, Prejudices and Discrimination
4. Inequality and Poverty
5. Intercultural Competence

Each chapter has a learning goal:

1. Understanding what culture is, recognizing its complexity, dynamism, and multi-dimensionality.
2. Gaining insight into (academic) culture shock and adaptation. Examining intercultural communication and ethnocentrism.
3. Fostering a critical understanding of how discrimination, privilege, stereotypes, and prejudices shape life experiences and influence your ability to connect with others, through the visible and often invisible walls of class, race, gender, etc.

4. Developing a nuanced understanding of poverty and (income) inequality, and its complex dimensions and severe consequences.
5. Providing theoretical insights and practical strategies for enhancing intercultural competence and facilitating navigation in diverse cultural settings.

I. CULTURE and IDENTITY

Learning Goal: This chapter explores the concept of culture. Culture is complex, dynamic, and multi-dimensional. We aim to foster an understanding and critical awareness of what we mean when we talk about culture.

1. Warm-up

- What comes to your mind when you hear the word 'culture'? Write your answer here.
- What do you consider to be part of your cultural 'baggage', 'heritage' or values? Write your answer here.

2. Understanding culture

Culture, what's in a name?

Traditionally, culture is often associated with **visible** elements such as nationality, language, clothing, art, and food. However, culture runs much deeper than these surface characteristics and is difficult to define precisely. There is **no universally accepted definition** because culture holds different meanings for different people and in different contexts.

Culture is **complex** and encompasses many dynamics within a society. Many of these aspects are **less visible**, such as values, norms, worldviews, emotional expression, gender roles, forms of discrimination, privileges. These underlying elements are often difficult to recognize, especially for people outside the culture in question.

Key term: Culture

There are many ways to define **culture**. It's important not to fall into a narrow or overly simplistic understanding of what the term means. Below are a few well-known definitions of culture:

"The collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the member of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede 1994: 5)

"Culture, in its broadest sense, can be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society or social group. It encompasses not only art and literature but also lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs."

(UNESCO, Mondiacult Conference, 1982)

"Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural norms, and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that

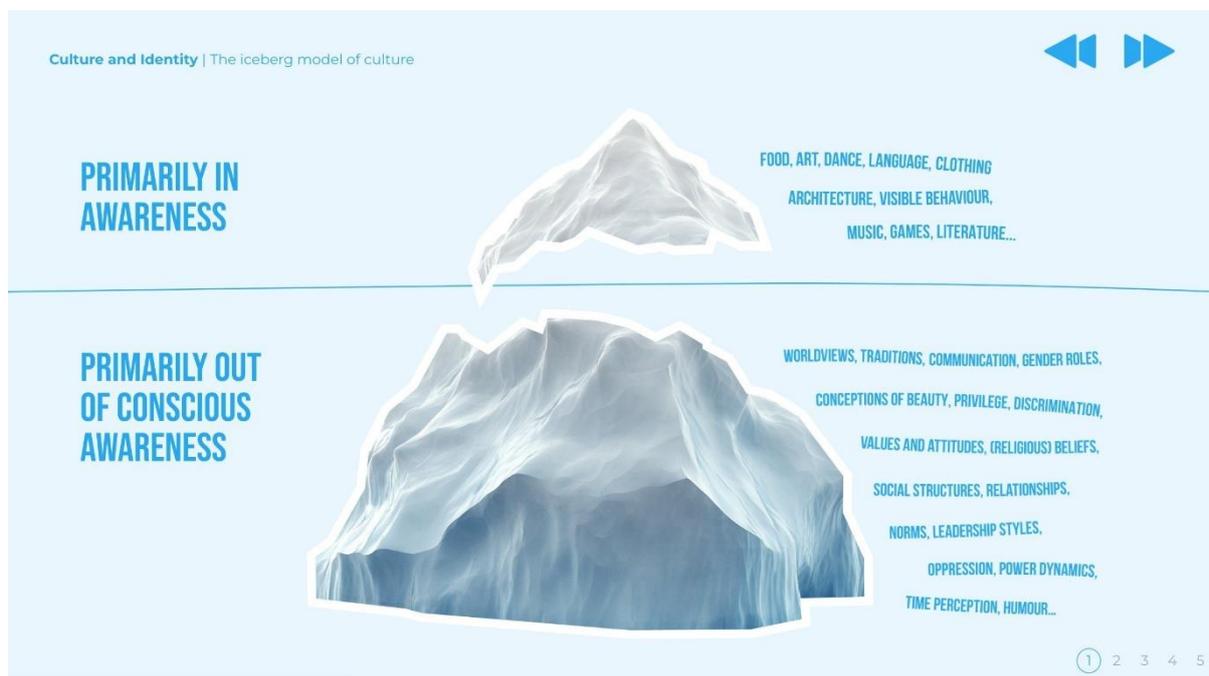
influence each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour." (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 4)

The **iceberg metaphor** illustrates this well: the visible part of culture is only a small fragment of the whole.

Beneath the surface lie deeper, less visible aspects that require time, observation, and critical thinking to fully understand.

3. The iceberg model of culture

- **Primarily in awareness** (above the surface): food, art, dance, language, clothing, architecture, visible behavior, music, games, literature...
- **Primarily out of conscious awareness** (below the surface): worldviews, traditions, communication, gender roles, concepts of beauty, privilege, discrimination, values and attitudes, (religious) beliefs, social structures, relationships, norms, leadership styles, oppression, power dynamics, time perception, humour, ...



4. Cultural identity

In everyday life, we often move effortlessly through our environment because, from a young age, we have learned how to interact with others and function within our world. During this learning process, we have adopted a wide range of behaviors, skills, beliefs, rituals, and language. This has made us "members" of a

community in which we typically feel at home, as if we were fish swimming in water.

Our culture is like the water we swim in: we don't often question the composition of the water or how we move within it. We are unaware of the elements that make up this "water." But as soon as we move to a different culture, we suddenly notice that the water around us has changed, and swimming becomes more difficult. That's when we start asking questions about the composition of that water, the elements in it, and how we should navigate through it.

We have thus developed or adopted an identity, often referred to as "**cultural identity**" that is an important **frame of reference** for us. This identity is shaped through interaction with meaningful members of our community or culture, with whom we share an environment.

Our cultural identity and background are therefore **complex, context-dependent, and constantly evolving**. It's important to realize that this also applies to individuals from other countries, and that beneath their visible, surface-level cultural behaviors, there is often a rich and deeper layer.

Key term: Frame of reference

If culture is what we learn in groups about what is right, good or beautiful and what is unfair, ugly or taboo, and if the groups shift and multiply as we move in the social space, it is to be expected that our own personal culture is also plural. Our socialization depends on the groups we identify with, on significant others whom we meet and on our availability to certain influences in certain times. Out of these influences we develop a singular way of seeing the world, which is just ours, still we owe each part of it to others. It functions as a lens, a looking glass, or a frame through which the things we see take on their proper meaning. It is our singular and still cultural **frame of reference**.

Task: Can you identify how your values have been shaped by institutions like your family, religion, school, and friends? Write your answer here.

II. INTERCULTURAL CHALLENGES

Learning Goal: This chapter focuses on developing a better understanding of (academic) culture shock and adaptation. It also explores intercultural communication and the concept of ethnocentrism.

1. Culture Shock

Culture shock refers to the stress and disorientation you experience when entering a new culture. When your familiar environment and comfort zone disappear, it can be difficult to form connections that provide the same sense of safety and familiarity as in your own country. The development of culture shock typically occurs in the following phases:

1. **Honeymoon Phase:** Everything feels new and exciting. You're curious, enthusiastic, and fascinated by the new culture.
2. **Crisis or Frustration Phase:** Differences start to feel overwhelming. Miscommunications, confusions, homesickness and frustration may arise.
3. **Recovery Phase:** You begin to understand the culture better. There is acceptance and flexibility. You develop routines and feel more comfortable navigating daily life.
4. **Adjustment Phase or Integration:** You feel more at home. You're able to function effectively in the new culture, even appreciating its complexities. This phase doesn't imply full acceptance or agreement with all local cultural practices. Rather, it reflects your ability to engage with the culture critically—understanding it in relation to your own background and recognizing how it works within its specific context.

Watch [video](#) on culture shock.

2. Reverse culture shock

When you return to your home culture, you may experience a new form of culture shock because you have been changed by the experiences you had in the other culture. This **reverse culture shock** often comes unexpectedly and is therefore harder to process.

Its development is similar to the culture shock you experienced in your host country. You might once again feel misunderstood. The familiar may now feel unfamiliar, and values or routines at home can feel strange or frustrating. **When you realize that it's not your environment that has changed, but you, does your adjustment process begin.**

Some people integrate aspects of the culture they lived in abroad into their identity permanently. This can be a meaningful way to move beyond reverse culture shock and create a more intercultural sense of self.

3. *Academic culture and its challenges*

We are often aware that we are entering a different culture or that we will have to collaborate and study with people from various cultural backgrounds. However, what we often overlook is that we will also find ourselves in a **different academic context**. Academic cultures can differ significantly between countries due to variations in educational systems, societal values, and historical contexts. These differences manifest in teaching methods, student-professor relationships, research expectations, and approaches to assessment.

All these changes in your academic context can also lead to a form of culture shock.

This particular challenge is often underestimated, despite the fact that it requires significant adjustments and changes.

At your host institution:

- What level of independence is expected in managing coursework?
- How are the student-professor relationships and feedback methods?
- What are the expectations for group work and leadership roles?
- How are deadlines viewed?
- How formal is interaction with university staff?
- What's the balance between exams and continuous assessments in grading?
- Are there specific norms for classroom behaviour, such as participation or questioning?

4. *Intercultural relations*

Intercultural relations refer to the dynamics of interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, where processes such as communication and adaptation play a central role.

A key concept within this domain is **ethnocentrism**, which refers to the tendency to use one's own culture as a standard or central point of reference when evaluating other cultures. In this case, the individual's own cultural system is seen as the norm, while other cultures are judged against it. Cultures that resemble one's own are viewed more favorably, while those that differ significantly are seen as inferior. In short, the idea is that our culture is superior, and other cultures should adapt to our norms and values.

The consequence of this cultural lens leads to **discrimination** and **limits dialogue** by treating your culture as the standard while viewing others as inferior. It assumes that some values, customs and practices are above others.

Key term: Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to the tendency of individuals to perceive and evaluate other cultures using the norms and values of their own culture as a benchmark. This perspective often leads to the assumption that one's own culture is superior, more rational, or more "normal" than others, which can obstruct genuine intercultural dialogue and reinforce systems of inequality.

In the context of intercultural competence, recognizing and addressing ethnocentrism is essential for developing empathy, openness, and respect in cross-cultural interactions.

(Bennett, 2013)

5. *Intercultural communication*

- Is body language and non-verbal communication universal? What do you think? Write your answer here.
- Are you planning to learn the language of your host country? Why or why not? Write your answer here.

Cross-cultural communication is the exchange of information between different cultures, where both verbal communication styles and non-verbal communication play a crucial role.

A key concept within this domain is the distinction between **high-context** and **low-context** cultures. In high-context cultures, such as Japan and the Arab world, much of the information is conveyed implicitly, with non-verbal cues and the context of the message being essential to its meaning. In contrast, low-context cultures, such as the Netherlands and the United States, emphasize explicit and direct communication, where the words themselves carry the primary meaning.

Understanding these variations in communication styles and the role of non-verbal elements is fundamental to successful intercultural interactions and avoiding misunderstandings.

This model has certain limitations, as it tends to generalize too broadly, but it can serve as a useful starting point for understanding your future host country. Please note that, on an individual basis, people from your host country can differ greatly from these cultural models.

Watch [video](#) on cross-cultural communication.

Further reading on cross-cultural communication.

- **Book:** *The Culture Map* by Erin Meyer
- **Podcast:** [Decoding cross-cultural communication with Erin Meyer](#) by ReThinking with Adam Grant (February 25, 2025)

III. STEREOTYPES, PREJUDICES and DISCRIMINATION

Learning Goal: This chapter encourages a critical understanding of the different ways in which discrimination, privilege, stereotypes, and prejudices impact individuals' life experiences and influence your ability to connect with others through the visible and often invisible walls of class, race, gender, etc.

1. Stereotypes

“The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Watch video: [‘The danger of a single story’](#).

As we saw in the first chapter, people rarely approach each other without bias. **Everyone has stereotypical ideas.** This is a normal cognitive process because our brain needs to make quick decisions. We do this by categorizing others based on characteristics such as gender, origin, skin color, age, sexuality, language, etc. We form an image of the other person based on past experiences or the most dominant discourse or prevailing idea. As a result, we often develop an incomplete, unnuanced, or discriminatory view of others, overlooking each person’s unique identity. Or, as Chimamanda puts it: “They make one story become the only story.”

2. Prejudices

Have you ever caught yourself being prejudiced?

Stereotypes become problematic when we attach a value judgment to that image and dismiss or undervalue certain individuals based on that stereotype. This leads to **prejudice**.

We tend to have more prejudice toward people who are different from us or who don’t belong to our so-called "in-group" because we often consider our own frame of reference as the norm.

We often view and judge the world from ourselves as the center, but that so-called center is heavily influenced by our upbringing, our cultural baggage, our values, prejudices, and privileges. Understanding our own frame of reference is one of the most valuable intercultural skills.

Prejudices also shape our **worldview**. Everyone grows up in a world full of stereotypes and often unconsciously absorbs them. Especially when it comes to prejudices against ‘minorities’ (e.g., women, non-white people), these are often more deeply ingrained than we care to admit.

White people have grown up with a deeply internalized sense of superiority, of which they are often unaware or unwilling to acknowledge. We humans have a stubborn tendency to focus on information that confirms our pre-existing beliefs. Acknowledging this can be confronting. We like to believe that we are above these prejudices and act as rational thinkers, but our brain constantly carries out all kinds of categorization and assessment processes without us being aware of them.

Key term: Stereotypes and prejudices

Stereotypes are beliefs and opinions about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of various groups (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). They simplify our understanding of others by categorizing individuals based on their group identity, often leading to generalized assumptions.

Prejudice is an attitude or emotional response directed toward an entire social group or the individuals within that group (Brewer & Brown, 1998). It often encompasses both negative evaluations and feelings that can influence how we perceive and interact with others.

- Have you ever caught yourself being prejudiced? Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you felt others had a stereotypical view of you? Write your answer here.
- We acknowledge the complexity within our own group, but we are less aware that other groups are also complex and not uniform. We tend to generalize and stereotype other groups more easily. How would you describe “your nationality” to your host country? Write your answer here.

3. Discrimination

When we internalize prejudices, we (unconsciously) start to base our actions and judgments on them. This can lead to various forms of **discrimination**.

We are most familiar with the conscious and direct forms of discrimination, such as overt racism, sexism, and homophobia. These are illegal in many countries and are punishable by law.

For example, a bus driver refusing to let a woman wearing a headscarf, a bouncer who won't allow people into a club because of their ethnicity, or a school that deliberately avoids hiring teachers from the LGBTQIA+ community.

Key term: Discrimination

Discrimination refers to treating people differently from others based primarily on membership in a social group (Sue, 2003). This can manifest in various ways, such as unfair treatment in employment, education, or social situations.

However, much discrimination is subtler and manifests itself in indirect ways.

This includes **institutional** and **structural** forms of **discrimination**, where messages of superiority and inferiority are often conveyed unconsciously. Structural racism is intertwined with power relations and oppression, is often collective, unconscious, and primarily invisible, with deep historical roots.

Examples of structural discrimination:

- **Language:** In academia, English dominates as the primary publication language, putting non-native English-speaking researchers at a disadvantage. Even with strong content, language barriers can lead to lower evaluations by journals and reviewers who may unconsciously favor 'native' English. This "native speaker bias" often values style and grammar over substance, causing important insights from non-English-speaking countries to be underrepresented and sometimes unfairly judged as "lower quality." This reinforces the perception that only perfect English is valid, perpetuating inequality in academic opportunities.
- **Housing:** In some regions, certain ethnic groups, people with a migration background, or individuals with lower incomes face difficulties finding housing due to landlords' unconscious or conscious biases. These landlords may systematically reject certain groups of prospective tenants based on name, origin, skin color, or socioeconomic background during the screening process. Some landlords and agents discriminate against potential tenants from the very first interaction. This can range from subtle discouragement to actively withholding available properties from people with a specific background. As a result, these groups have fewer options and are restricted in their ability to live in neighborhoods of their choice.

Reflection questions:

- *Can you give an example of structural racism in healthcare, research, education, or the workplace?*

- *What do you think of the statement: "I don't see color, I treat everyone equally"?*
- *Have you ever heard of "white fragility"? If so, what feelings does it evoke in you?*

4. Privilege

"If you don't have to think about it, it's a privilege."

"Privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it's not a problem to you personally."

Discrimination and privilege are inseparably connected; they are two sides of the same coin. In situations where one person is discriminated against, another person is often privileged.

Privileges or advantages are often invisible to those who possess them, as they are seen as self-evident or normative, and sometimes even as universal. As a result, privileges are frequently unacknowledged, yet they play a crucial role in maintaining **inequality**.

Peggy McIntosh wrote an essay, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1989), in which she explained the concept of **white privilege** using the metaphor of an "invisible knapsack" of advantages that white people carry with them in society, often without realizing it.

Watch [video](#) on privilege.

Task: How privileged are you? Complete the privilege list. The more you can answer 'yes', the more privileged you are.

- One or both of your parents graduated from university or university of applied sciences.
- You haven't been mistreated or served less fairly in a place of business because of your race or ethnicity.
- You studied the history and culture of your ethnic ancestors in elementary and secondary school.
- You never have to worry about crime, drugs, rape, or any other violence threats in your neighborhood.
- You or your family never had to move due to financial inabilities.
- You almost always see members of your race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and class widely represented on television, in the newspaper, and the media in a POSITIVE manner.
- You didn't grow up in a single-parent home.
- You can have a relationship with the person you prefer, and you almost always feel comfortable with people knowing your sexual.

- You feel that people do not interpret your personal opinions as a representation of your entire race/ ethnicity.
- You feel certain that you will not be followed, harassed, or watched under close surveillance while shopping.
- If walking alone at night, most of the time you never have to worry about anyone feeling threatened because of your presence.
- You started school speaking the official language of the country and not another language.
- You were never the only person of your race/ethnicity in a classroom or place of work.
- You can easily get visas for almost every country in the world.
- You have no visible or invisible limitations.
- You know where and who to turn to when you need advice or help.
- Nobody of your immediate family has ever been addicted to drugs or alcohol.
- You haven't ever skipped a meal or went away from a meal hungry because there was not enough money to buy food.
- Nobody in your immediate family has ever served time in a state or federal penitentiary.
- You can afford to go on vacation at least once a year.

5. Gender

Gender inequality remains an important topic of discussion, despite the progress made over the past decades. The rise of conservative counter-movements and/or political parties, as well as misogynistic influencers, shows that the fight for gender equality is far from over. Men and women are still not treated equally, and people who exist outside the binary gender framework experience even more inequality.

It is important to actively contribute to the discussion on sexism and gender inequality and reflect on the role you can play in this fight.

Non-binary people and those undergoing gender transition are often not taken seriously, which leads to misunderstanding and exclusion. It is essential to treat everyone with respect, including recognizing gender identities. Dialogues on these topics promote inclusivity and mutual understanding.

[Click to reveal some statistics on gender inequality.](#)

IV. INEQUALITY and POVERTY

Learning Goal: This chapter aims to develop a nuanced understanding of poverty and (income) inequality, and its complex dimensions and severe consequences.

1. *Misconceptions about poverty*

There are many misconceptions about the causes and impact of poverty.

It's crucial, therefore, to gain insight into the complexity of poverty and its effects on people's daily lives. For those going on an exchange to a country where (extreme) poverty is more prevalent, **understanding poverty within the proper context is essential.** Without this understanding, stereotypes about the causes of poverty can increase, misunderstandings about individuals' work ethic may worsen, and further oppression and division between social classes can result.

Poverty must always be viewed within a broader context. It is often the result of historical and economic factors such as colonialism, globalization, unequal trade relations, and debt burdens. Political instability and prolonged conflicts can also lead to high levels of poverty. This is known as **poverty at the macro level**, as it refers to the structural and systemic causes that manifest on a national or global scale. Poverty is therefore rarely the result of fate or individual laziness. **Rather, poverty is the outcome of complex economic, social, political, and historical processes that privilege some while marginalizing others, making it generally not an individual responsibility.**

2. *The massive scale of poverty*

Click to reveal some numbers about global poverty and poverty lines.

Understanding the scale and magnitude of global poverty

Some numbers on poverty from the world bank (15 October 2024)

- **8.5%** of the global population – almost 700 million people – live today on less than **\$2.15** per day, the extreme poverty line relevant for **low-income countries**. Three-quarters of all people in extreme poverty live in Sub-Saharan Africa or in fragile and conflict-affected countries.
- **44%** of the global population – around 3.5 billion people – live today on less than **\$6.85** per day, the **poverty line** relevant for **upper-middle-income countries**. The total number of people living under this poverty line has barely changed since 1990 due to population growth.
- Progress on shared prosperity has stalled since the pandemic, due to slow economic growth and a divergence in mean incomes. **Today, incomes around the world, on average, would have to increase five-**

fold to reach the level of **\$25** per person per day, the **minimum prosperity standard** for **high-income countries**.

- Around **20%** of the world's population lives in economies with **high inequality**, concentrated mostly in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. Only **7%** of the global population lives in countries with low inequality.
- **Climate change** poses a fundamental risk to poverty and inequality reduction. Nearly **1 in 5** people globally are likely to experience a severe weather shock in their lifetime from which they will struggle to recover.
- Climate change also threatens to **increase global inequality**, as poorer countries and people are likely to suffer more from the negative consequences.

Further reading on the website: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty>

Understanding the massive scale of global poverty is a first step toward recognizing the constraints individuals face in escaping such conditions. Two often-cited, if somewhat superficial, sayings attempt to address this issue: **“If hard work were the key to success, then every African woman would be a millionaire”** and **“Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day; teach him to fish, and he'll be fed for a lifetime.”** A more relevant version might be: **“Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day; but return his land, resources, social services, and eliminate colonial oppression, extractivism, and corruption, and he will thrive for a lifetime.” (Van Hoeck, 2024)**

Considering poverty's complex historical and systemic roots fosters a more compassionate view of individuals and the communities we may encounter.

3. *Exclusion and inequality*

Poverty encompasses much more than just financial limitations.

Poverty extends beyond financial limitations, encompassing **exclusion** and **inequality** that restrict access to education, healthcare and other essential services. It impacts mental health, cognitive functions, and social connections, often eroding dignity and self-respect for individuals and society alike. True understanding of poverty requires viewing it as exclusion and lack of belonging, not merely a lack of resources. Economist Adam Smith observed that freedom from poverty includes the ability to "walk in public without shame," highlighting the connection between poverty and **dignity**. Those affected by poverty seek a dignified life, so treating people in poverty with the dignity they deserve is essential.

If poverty is about exclusion and lack of belonging, one could argue that **social inequality** is a greater issue than poverty itself. Many countries considered poor by the Global North also suffer from high levels of **income inequality**, which is crucial to consider when addressing poverty.

Recognizing your **own privileges** is a crucial step, as these can influence your perception of poverty and, at times, unintentionally reinforce biases. By becoming aware of this, we can approach poverty with greater empathy and less prejudice, enabling us to build more meaningful connections with the people we encounter.

Reflection questions:

- *How do I view the gap between rich and poor in my host country? Have I considered this before going on exchange?*
- *How has the history of my host country contributed to current inequalities?*
- *How does my own experience of poverty or wealth compare to that of people in my host country?*

4. Poverty and social status

Poverty and social status: an example

Poverty and social status are deeply interconnected. While poverty refers to a lack of financial resources and access to basic needs, **social status** reflects how individuals are perceived and valued within a society. Living in poverty often affects more than just material well-being—it can limit opportunities, reduce visibility, and lead to exclusion or stigmatization.

Understanding this relationship helps us see poverty not just as an economic issue, but also as a social one, shaped by inequality and power dynamics.

In Guatemala, celebrating the **15 años** (15th birthday) is one of the most important events in a girl's life. This celebration is not only a personal milestone but also a social event that influences how the family is perceived within the community. Many families, regardless of their financial situation, feel the pressure to organize an impressive celebration to maintain social status and respect.

Case study: Ana comes from a family in Guatemala that lives below the poverty line. Her parents work hard in coffee farming, but their income is unstable and insufficient to meet basic needs such as food, education, and healthcare.

Despite their financial situation, Ana's parents decide to go all out for their daughter's 15 años celebration. To fund the event, Ana's parents take a loan from a local lender with high interest. They spend all their savings and even

borrow from relatives. The celebration costs them far more than they can afford.

Now, Ana's parents are in debt they cannot immediately repay, and they struggle to finance their family's basic needs. They face difficult choices, such as paying rent or buying food.

Reflection questions:

Consider these questions as you reflect on Ana's family's situation and the social pressures they face:

- *What do you think of the decision to organize a large celebration, like a 15 años, despite the Guatemalan family's financial limitations?*
- *In light of Ana's situation, how would you handle the social pressure to host an impressive celebration, even if it comes at the expense of basic needs?*

5. Questions on poverty

Do you agree with the following statements about poverty?

- *People in the Global South are often poor, but happy. **Agree/Disagree***
- *Poverty is solely the result of individuals' personal shortcomings. **Agree/Disagree***
- *People in poverty sometimes waste money on unnecessary things and don't make responsible financial choices. **Agree/Disagree***

V. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Learning Goal: This chapter offers both theoretical insights and practical strategies to enhance your intercultural competence, helping you navigate and engage effectively in diverse cultural settings.

1. Theory

In theory...

So far, we have laid the foundation for **intercultural learning** by exploring key topics such as culture, poverty, racism, and privilege. We have also emphasized the importance of critically reflecting on one's own culture and background.

Developing **intercultural competencies**—based on knowledge (understanding privileges, knowing the history and social systems of a culture), skills (communication abilities, coping with differences and difficulties), and attitudes (respect, empathy)—is, as mentioned, complex and a lifelong learning process.

Milton Bennett's **Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)** describes six stages that people go through in developing intercultural sensitivity and competence. The model explains a progression from ethnocentric (focused on one's own culture) to ethnorelative (appreciation of other cultures) worldviews. It offers a useful framework to reflect on your own position and identify opportunities for growth in intercultural learning.

Ethnocentric stages

1. **Denial:** In this stage, people barely acknowledge the existence of cultural differences. They live in a monocultural world with little interaction with people from other cultures, often viewing "the other" as less important.
2. **Defense:** People in this stage begin to notice cultural differences but view their own culture as superior. They perceive other cultures as a threat and often display hostility or negative stereotyping.
3. **Minimization:** While cultural differences are recognized, people in this stage believe that all people are essentially the same. They emphasize universal values and overlook deeper differences rooted in culture.

Ethnorelative stages

4. **Acceptance:** In this stage, people acknowledge cultural differences. They understand that cultures are fundamentally different but not better or worse. They start to contextualize various values and behaviors.

5. **Adaptation:** People in this stage develop the ability to adjust their behavior and communicate effectively in intercultural situations. They can empathize with other cultures and develop cultural empathy.
6. **Integration:** In this final stage, individuals can move fluidly between different cultural contexts. They have a multicultural perspective and no longer fully identify with one culture, feeling at home within multiple cultural frameworks.

2. Practice

... and in practice

Now that you've explored the DMIS model and how people move from ethnocentric to more ethnorelative ways of experiencing cultural difference, it's time to bring those insights into practice.

Intercultural competence isn't just about knowing cultural differences—it's about mindset, awareness, and behaviour. How do you respond when something feels unexpected or confusing? How do you adapt without losing yourself? How do you show respect and empathy, even when you disagree or don't fully understand?

By reflecting on your own experiences and preparing for future intercultural encounters, you start developing a more thoughtful, flexible, and respectful approach to diversity.

Case study: Amira, a Belgian student in an international master's programme, is assigned to a group project with Jia from China, Siphon from South Africa, and Lukas from Germany.

Eager to work efficiently, Amira proposes a clear structure, assigns tasks, and sets weekly deadlines—expecting this approach to suit everyone.

But after two meetings, she notices Jia is quiet and hesitant to share opinions. Siphon often arrives late and prefers to begin with casual conversation, which frustrates her. Lukas becomes impatient and openly criticizes the lack of progress.

Amira starts feeling stressed and overwhelmed, as if she's the only one taking responsibility. She begins to wonder if cultural differences are affecting the group dynamics—and whether her own expectations might also be part of the issue.

Reflection questions:

- *According to the DMIS model, which stage would you place Amira in at the beginning of this project? Do you think she is moving toward another stage?*
- *How do cultural values such as hierarchy, communication styles, and perceptions of time affect the group dynamics in this case?*
- *How do cultural values such as hierarchy, communication styles, and perceptions of time affect the group dynamics in this case?*

In summary

- Empathy, self-reflection, and respect are key to understanding and connecting with others across cultures.
- Stay open to yourself and others by embracing new perspectives and learning from each experience.
- Cultures are complex and unique—avoid oversimplification, and appreciate the depth of each cultural context.
- Move beyond ethnocentrism by recognizing that your cultural viewpoint is not the only valid one, and seek to understand others without judgment.
- Some values are universal, but respect for diversity means recognizing that not all experiences or practices will align with your own.

3. Outro

Congratulations!

You have successfully completed the online portion of the **Intercultural Preparation!** This is just the beginning—during the **in-person session**, we'll dive deeper into the topics covered and continue building your intercultural toolkit.

In the meantime, feel free to explore additional materials or revisit any sections. Don't forget to write a letter to your future self!

Looking forward to seeing you soon!

ATTENTION! After you return home from your exchange, we strongly advise you to take part in the **Intercultural Debriefing**. It's an important opportunity to reflect on your experiences abroad and complete your intercultural learning.