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Culturally influenced concepts of health and illness

Cultural conceptions of health and illness refer to how culture shapes the perception, definition and management of health and illness.

These conceptions influence which symptoms are considered significant, how they are explained (e.g. by causes such as diet, stress or moral failure) and which treatments are considered appropriate.

Ideas about health and illness, as well as expectations regarding treatment, vary greatly depending on cultural background, traditional values, personal experiences and social environments.

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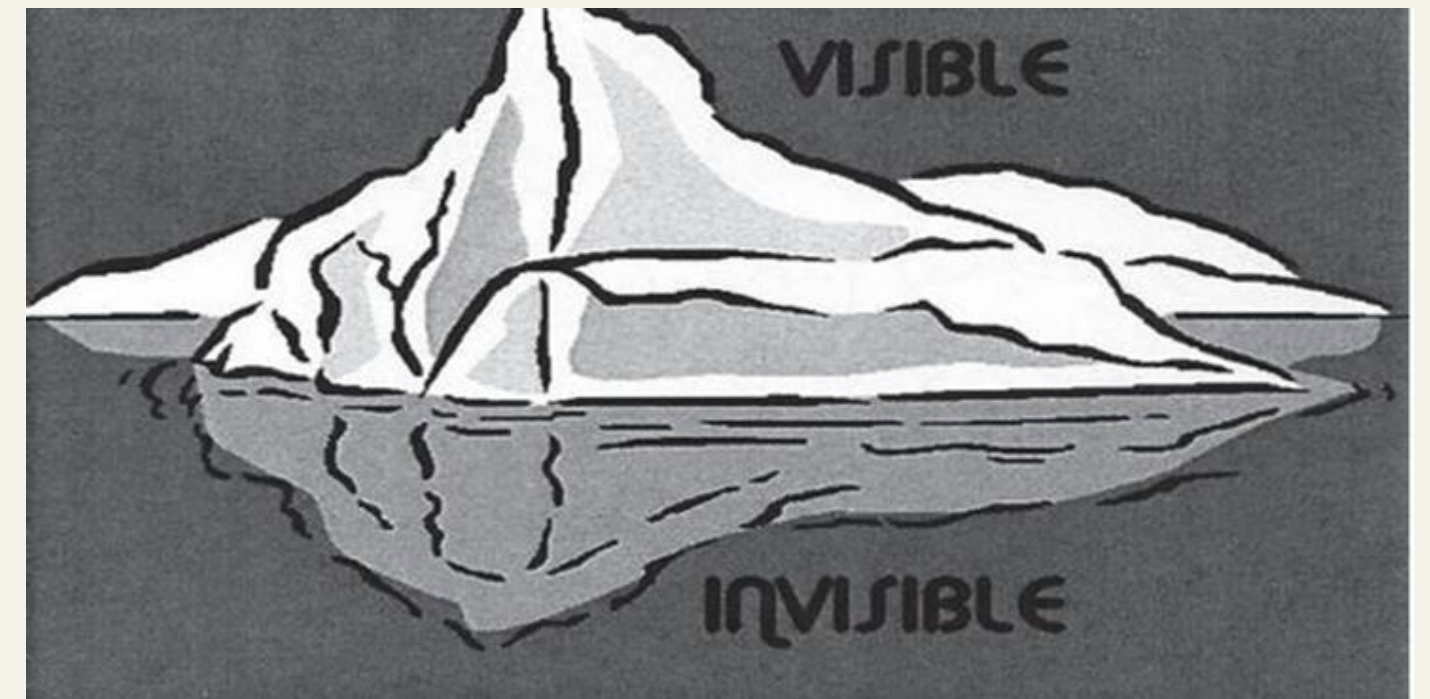
Culturally influenced concepts of health and illness

Explanation of the term 'culture' using the iceberg model

The iceberg has a visible tip. This is the part of the culture that we can see in a physical sense. Visible elements include things such as music, clothing, architecture, language, food, gestures, religious rituals, art, and much more.

The part of the iceberg that we cannot see – the largest part – encompasses areas such as values and norms, religious beliefs, rules for social relationships, attitudes towards rules and regulations, communication styles, gender differences, etc.

It is these invisible elements that underlie and shape the visible areas of culture. The meaning of these visible elements can only be grasped if one knows and understands the (hidden) mechanisms that underlie them.



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Culture:

- can explain the way people communicate their symptoms and which symptoms they report.
- has a strong influence on whether people seek help at all.
- influences what kind of help they seek.
- affects what coping strategies and social support services people use.
- determines how strongly mental illness is stigmatized.
- shapes the significance people attach to their illness.

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Important!



- Please note that **general statements about the cultural characteristics** of a particular group **can lead to stereotyping** of individuals based on their appearance or affiliation.
- Diversity within a population group is usually greater than between different population groups.

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Cultures also differ in the **importance** people attach to illness and in their interpretation of the subjective experience of illness and suffering (Kleinman, 1988).

The **meaning of an illness** refers to a culture's deeply rooted attitudes and beliefs about

- whether an illness is “real” or “imaginary”.
- whether it affects the body or the mind (or both).
- whether it deserves compassion.
- how stigmatized it is.
- what might cause it.
- what kind of person might succumb to it.

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How do cultural influences shape perceptions and attitudes towards health and illness?

- Perception of symptoms: Culture determines how people experience and interpret symptoms. For example, some cultures tend to perceive and express pain differently than others.
- Causes of illness: The causes of illness are attributed differently across cultures. These can range from purely biological explanations to explanations related to moral behaviour, spiritual influences or social inequalities.
- Behaviour in the event of illness: Cultural norms influence how people respond to illness, e.g. whether they seek medical help at an early stage or only when the condition is critical.

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How do cultural influences shape perceptions and attitudes towards health and illness?

- Treatment and healing: Cultural and religious beliefs can influence what treatment is considered acceptable. This includes ideas about nutrition (e.g. religious dietary laws), prayer times or gender-specific preferences during examinations.
- Social stigmatisation: Illness can be stigmatised in some cultures, which has a negative impact on patients and their treatment.
- Dealing with relatives: The role of family and community varies from culture to culture, which also affects how sick people are treated. In some cultures, strong family support is expected, while in others, individuals are more reliant on themselves.

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Cultural conceptions of illness have real consequences, they influence

- whether people are motivated to seek treatment,
- how they deal with their symptoms
- how supportive their families and communities are
- where they seek help (psychiatrist, family doctor, clergy, and/or traditional healers),
- what paths they take to receive services
- how successful treatment is.

The consequences can be severe when people with serious mental illness do not receive appropriate treatment. They can include including extreme suffering, disability, and possibly suicide.

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- Knowledge of cultural dimensions can reveal the areas and dimensions in which our behaviour is culturally influenced.
- An important prerequisite for successful intercultural communication is understanding behaviour patterns.

Geert Hofstede developed his model of six cultural dimensions for this purpose.

- This concept is a tool that was developed to help us observe, understand and compare different cultures.

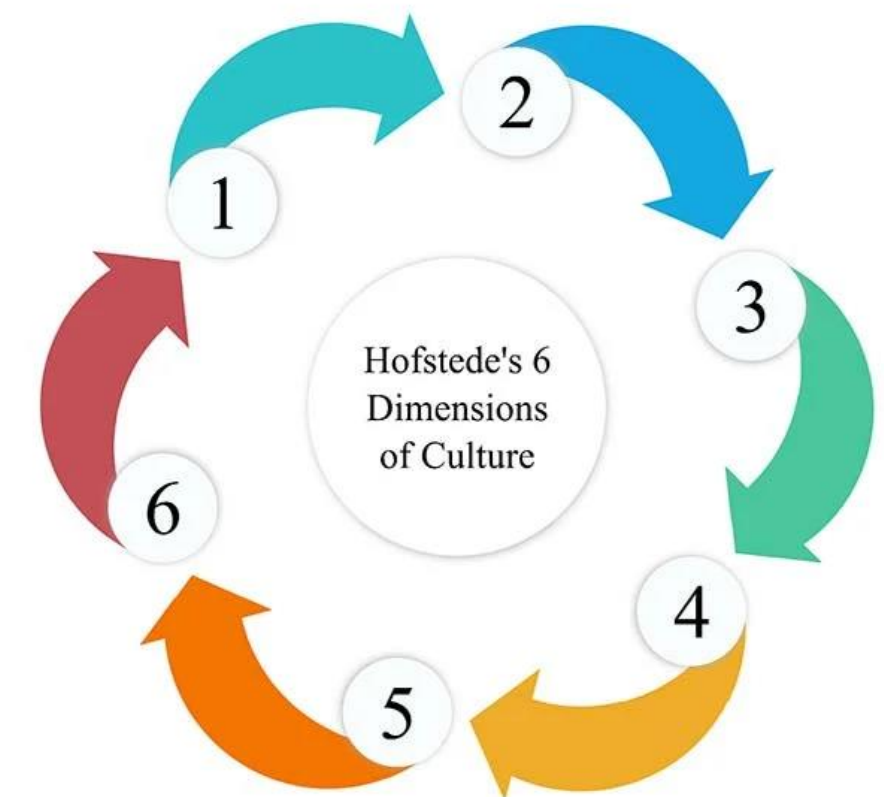
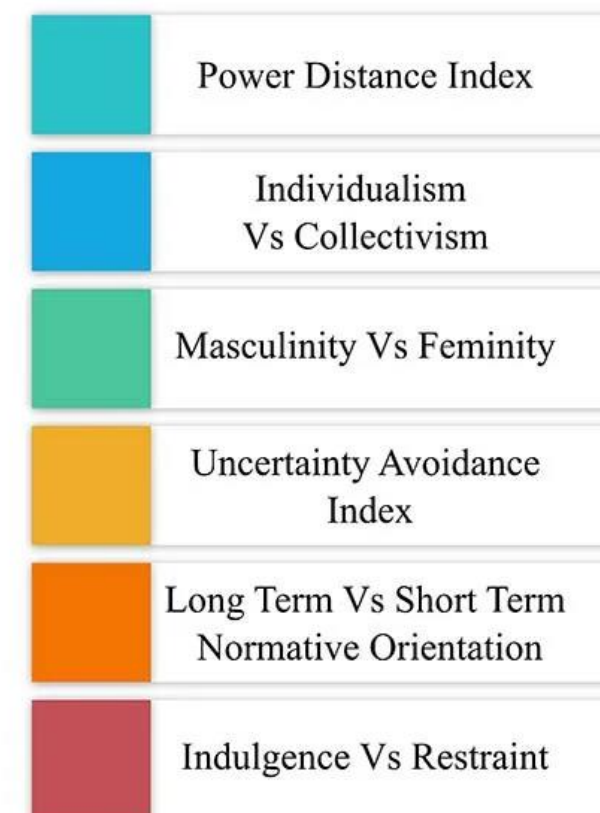


Image source:

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/hofstedes-cultural-dimensions-theory.html#:~:text=Masculinity%20vs.%20Femininity,often%20emphasise%20performance%20and%20advancement.>

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Example: High/low context cultural dimension in a medical context

- In low-context cultures, topics are addressed explicitly.
- In high-context cultures, indirect language dominates.
- One must read between the lines and pay attention to non-verbal communication in order to understand meanings correctly.
- People with a 'high context' are accustomed to conveying feelings and emotions such as insecurity and fear without directly referring to the situation.

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In our culture, the explanation of illnesses reflects the idea that the body and mind act separately from one another and that individual organs can become diseased in isolation.

In many other cultures, illness is seen as the result of a disharmony that affects the whole person and not just a single organ.

In some cultures, it is believed that illnesses are caused by supernatural forces (e.g., the evil eye, demons, spirits) or by sins, e.g. as punishment for one's own actions. People then often find it difficult to talk about their illness.

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Example:

Description/self-diagnosis of illnesses:

- The way people diagnose their illnesses varies from country to country.
- In France and Italy, people usually attribute their discomfort to the liver or other digestive organs.
- In German-speaking countries, people more often complain of cardiovascular problems.
- Residents of Muslim or Arab countries often describe mental stress as headaches.

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Raising awareness of physical and mental well-being through exercises in class.



Important!

Learners can talk about their personal experiences, but they should not be pressured to do so.

A relaxed and trusting atmosphere promotes exchange between participants. Here is an example of how the topic of health can be integrated into lessons. You can adapt the exercises to suit your circumstances.

Borderless German: an open-access curriculum for beginning German

<https://grenzenlos-deutsch.com/sozial/e1/l2/#gsc.tab=0>



<https://pixabay.com/de/illustrations/de-menz-alzheimer-alter-puzzle-595638/>