Intercultural workspaces

[Quinten De Meyer] & [Alexander Conserva]

For this assignment, you can decide to pair up with somebody or make the assignment alone. Please consider that you will have to stick with that decision the rest of the first semester and the first half of the second semester.

1. Playing by different rules

In week 10, we play the **Barnga game**. How did it go for you? Was it frustrating? Did you struggle when you had to move to a new table? What did you do when you hit resistance from other players? And finally: what does the simulation suggest about what to do when you are in this situation in the 'real world'? Aim for 75 to 150 words.

If later this semester you decide to make this assignment in pairs, just post each person's answer underneath one another below. Once you get started on part 2 (intercultural body language) you will have to stick with your decision for the rest of the first and most of the second semester.

Alexander: I just did not think about it. I just played and put cards and waited to see if I won or not. One round someone new came to our table and had already 3 cards before we even started and played different. Also, he sometimes did not want to put a card down so after the game he had still 4 cards left when he normally would have had 0 left. The hole table just went with it and left him be. But because of that I was the loser, so I had to leave the table. In the real world it shows that some people try to adapt, resist, or just go with the flow.

Quinten: I predicted that the rules for every table would be different. It went well for me and was not frustrating because if you just cheat with confidence and act like you won, the opponents cannot criticize you. They think you won by your rules, and what are they going to do, nothing. They are not allowed to convince me. I pick the trick and win they cannot steal it. However, one time I did steal, it was on the first game when I disagreed with the winner, pointed at my card, and acted like I won. He believed me.

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2. Intercultural body language

1. Select two distinct cultures (e.g., Japanese, Brazilian etc.) known for their unique body language characteristics.
2. Conduct research on the **body language norms** and practices of each culture. You can use academic articles and credible websites to gather information. Focus on areas such as (hand) gestures, eye contact, proxemics, and touch. You can add other relevant areas.
3. Collect images, symbols, videos, or artworks that capture the spirit of the body language within these cultures.
4. Using the collected materials, create a visually engaging summary that outlines the key differences (and similarities, if you can find them) in body language between the two cultures. Include the before mentioned images, symbols, and short descriptions to really support your story. These images support but do not replace your written conclusions.

Remember what you learned about information management and scientific writing.
Paste the result of your research below. Aim at 400 to 500 words.

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1. Greetings

Saudi Arabia
- Handshakes are common among men but brief. Handshakes between genders are rare unless initiated by the woman.
- Placing the right hand over the heart after a handshake shows sincerity and respect.
- Men may greet close friends or family with a kiss on both cheeks, but this is gender related.

India
- The "namaste" gesture (palms pressed together at chest level with a slight bow) is a common greeting.
- Younger individuals may touch elders' feet as a sign of respect in traditional settings.
- A side-to-side head wobble indicates agreement, acknowledgment or listening.

Figure 1: Saudis kissing on the cheek (Source: Insidesuadi.com)

Figure 2: Namaste greet (Source: iStock)

2. Eye Contact

Saudi Arabia
- Long eye contact is common in same-gender interactions and shows trust.
- Cross-gender interactions avoid direct eye contact to maintain modesty. Looking at the chin is preferred.

India
- Avoiding direct eye contact with elders or superiors shows respect.
- In informal settings, direct eye contact is acceptable but varies by region.

Similarities: Both cultures adjust eye contact based on social hierarchy, but Saudi norms are stricter due to Islam's modesty.

3. Gestures

Saudi Arabia:
- Beckoning is done with the palm facing down and fingers waving inward.
- Showing the soles of shoes or pointing feet at others is offensive.

India:
- Touching someone's head is considered disrespectful, not necessarily inappropriate, but generally avoided especially for elders or in formal contexts.
- Pointing at objects with feet or showing the soles of feet is seen as rude.

Similarities: In both India and Saudi Arabia, using feet can be offensive and the direction of the beckoning hand (palm up or down) indicates respect.

4. Personal Space and Touch

Saudi Arabia
- Same-gender interactions involve close physical proximity (10–20 cm), but mixed-gender groups maintain distance.
- Same-gender friends may hold hands or link arms, but cross-gender touch is restricted.

India
- Personal space is smaller in crowded areas but larger in formal settings.
- Touch is conservative in public, handshakes are more common in urban areas.

Difference: Saudi Arabia has stricter gender-based touch rules, while India's norms vary between urban and rural areas.

5. Unique Practices

Saudi Arabia
- Raising hands palms-up during religious supplication (dua).
- Pauses during conversations show careful consideration, not discomfort.

India
- Hand movements (mudras) in traditional dances like Bharatanatyam.
- Silence during elders' speech shows attentiveness, especially in rural areas.

Figure 3: Dua, Islam (Source: Shutterstock)

Figure 4: Mudras (Source: Vecteezy.com)

Paste your **bibliography** for '2. Intercultural body language' here. You should have <u>at least 5</u> different sources in your bibliography.

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3. Hofstede's dimensions

Research **Power Distance Index** in a specific culture. Try to narrow down that culture as much as possible. Cite your sources, separate fact from opinion and give specific examples. Aim at 500 to 550 words.

Intro

Hofstede's Power Distance Index indicates to which less powerful members of society accept unequal power distribution. Malaysia is well known for its very high PDI score, particularly within its dominant Malay culture, where hierarchical relationships are deeply embedded in social, educational and professional settings. According to Hofstede Insights, Malaysia's overall PDI score is among the highest globally (Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

Key Characteristics:

- **Hierarchical Structures:**
    - Formal authority is respected in government, business and family systems.
    - Decision-making is centralized, with senior figures holding considerable influence.
- **Cultural Traditions:**
    - Malay traditions, intertwined with Islamic values, emphasize respect for elders and authority.
    - Traditional practices in ceremonies and education further reinforce hierarchy.
- **Organizational Behaviour:**
    - In many Malaysian companies (e.g., state-owned enterprises), instructions flow top-down and subordinates rarely challenge decisions.
    - Educational institutions often rely on teacher authority, reflecting the broader social acceptance of hierarchical order.

Specific Examples:

- **Educational Settings:** Malaysian schools typically follow a strict teacher-student hierarchy where questioning authority is uncommon.
- **Family Dynamics:** Within traditional Malay households, elders hold decision-making power and are respected, further following the national cultural norm.

Fact vs. Opinion:

- *Fact:* Malaysian culture, particularly among ethnic Malays is characterized by a high acceptance of unequal power distribution as demonstrated by standard practices and everyday interactions (Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

- *Opinion:*
Quinten: I think while this hierarchical structure can create social stability and clear lines of responsibilities, it may also hinder creativeness in work environments where collaborative problem solving is important, because people might be too scared to come with their own views and ideas.

Alexander: I feel like people would just not share their opinion or question the disccisions of a higher up. This could be bad for the company because it could be a bad disccision and some employees may know it but just don't say anything.

Summary:

- **Fact Summary:**
  - Malaysia's PDI is exceptionally high.
  - Hierarchy is reinforced in education, business and family life.
  - Cultural traditions and religious values support a top-down power structure.
- **Opinion Summary:**
  - **Quinten:** stability and structure at the cost of creativeness and equality.
  - **Alexander:** People can't be themselves and share their opinion.

Conclusion

Malaysian culture provides an interesting situation for understanding high PDI. The interaction of religious values, traditional customs and modern organizational practices creates a consistent acceptance of hierarchy. While the stability this brings is valuable, there is also an emerging conversation on how to balance respect for authority with the need for creative, participatory decision-making. This picture is essential for anyone studying the dynamics of power in culturally diverse societies.

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Choose a culture from a different continent than the culture you discussed for PDI. Research **individualism** in that culture. Cite your sources, separate fact from opinion and give specific examples. Aim at 500 to 550 words.

Individualism in the United States

The United States is one of the most individualistic society in the world. According to Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory the U.S. scores 91 out of 100 on the Individualism Index making it one of the highest globally. This score indicates a cultural importance on personal freedom, self-reliance and individual achievement over group harmony or collective identity (Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

In highly individualistic cultures like the U.S., people are primarily expected to look after themselves and their family. Success is also typically measured in terms of personal accomplishments such as career achievements, wealth or public recognition. The cultural story of the "American Dream" reinforces the idea that anyone can succeed through individual effort and determination.

This conflicts with collectivist societies where group membership, loyalty and friendships are prioritized. In the U.S. independence is taught from an early age where children are encouraged to make their own decisions, express their personal opinions and develop a unique identity.

A typical American teenager might leave their hometown at 18 to attend university in another state, a move that reflects both independence and social expectation. In collectivist cultures like China or India young adults may remain with or close to their families much longer.

The U.S. is also a low-context communication culture which means people are more direct and clear. This aligns with individualistic values like self-expression and assertiveness are seen as strengths. Silence in conversations is often uncomfortable as it may be interpreted as a lack of opinion or disengagement.

In a professional setting American employees are expected to speak up during meetings and ask questions. Performance reviews often focus on individual contributions and rewards such as promotions or bonuses are usually individual rather than group based.

Individual responsibility is both empowering and stressful. But while it creates room for innovation and personal growth it can also lead to pressure as individuals may feel only accountable for their successes or failures. But I do feel like Americans can also be more confident in themselves than other countries.

In customer service Americans generally expect responses. If there's a problem, customers are encouraged to voice complaints directly and companies see this as valuable feedback.

The high level of individualism in the U.S. shapes everything from education and work to family life and communication. While this promotes self-expression, innovation and freedom it also means that individuals must navigate life largely on their own. Understanding these traits is essential for intercultural communication, especially when working with or within American society.

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Choose a culture from a different continent than the previous cultures you discussed. Research **masculinity** and the prevalence of the **male gaze** in that culture. Cite your sources, separate fact from opinion and give specific examples. Comparing your chosen culture to other cultures may help

you make your point more clearly. Make sure that all comparisons are rooted in verifiable facts. Aim at 600 to 650 words.

Masculinity and the Male Gaze in Hungary

Hungary is one of the most traditionally masculine countries in Europe. According to Hofstede's Masculinity Index, it scores 88 out of 100. That means Hungarian culture tends to value things like competition, ambition and success. People often measure success by how much money someone makes, their job title or what they own. There are also clearer expectations for how men and women should behave with more pressure to stick to traditional gender roles.

In Hungary, men are often expected to be strong, confident and not show too much emotion. Meanwhile women, are more likely to be judged based on how they look or how well they take care of a family. This ties into the idea of the male gaze, a way of seeing the world where women are mainly viewed through a man's perspective, often as objects of beauty rather than full complex people.

You can see this in Hungarian media. On TV and in ads, women are often shown as housewives, love interests or models, while men are shown as leaders, workers or problem-solvers. In talent shows or reality TV, women often get comments about their appearance or outfits, while men are judged more for what they do. This reinforces the idea that women should be looked at and men should act.

This divide also shows up at work. In Hungary, far fewer women hold leadership roles compared to the European average. Men are more likely to be seen as the ones in charge, while women are often expected to take on support roles. Things are changing slowly, but it can still be harder for women to get ahead in careers that reward assertiveness and dominance, traits that are more traditionally linked with masculinity.

Masculinity also shapes how emotions are handled. Hungarian men are usually expected to stay tough and keep their feelings to themselves. Being independent and in control is valued more than being open or vulnerable. Because of this, many men feel pressure to hide their stress or mental health struggles, which can lead to serious issues that go untreated.

On the other side, Sweden is one of the least masculine countries, scoring just 5 out of 100 on the same index. Swedish culture puts more emphasis on things like quality of life, cooperation and balance between work and personal life. Gender roles are more flexible and both men and women are encouraged to show emotion and share responsibilities at home and work.

For example, in Sweden both parents are given generous leave when they have a child and it's totally normal for dads to stay home and take care of their kids. In Hungary, even though the same leave exists, it's mostly mothers who use it. Swedish media also tends to show more realistic and respectful portrayals of women, with less focus on how they look and more on who they are.

Hungary is slowly changing, but traditional masculine values still shape how people think about gender, power and identity. Understanding these cultural patterns helps explain both the challenges people face and the progress that's being made. When you compare it to Sweden, it becomes clear how different ideas about masculinity and gender roles can really shape everyday life, from the workplace and media to relationships and emotional well-being.
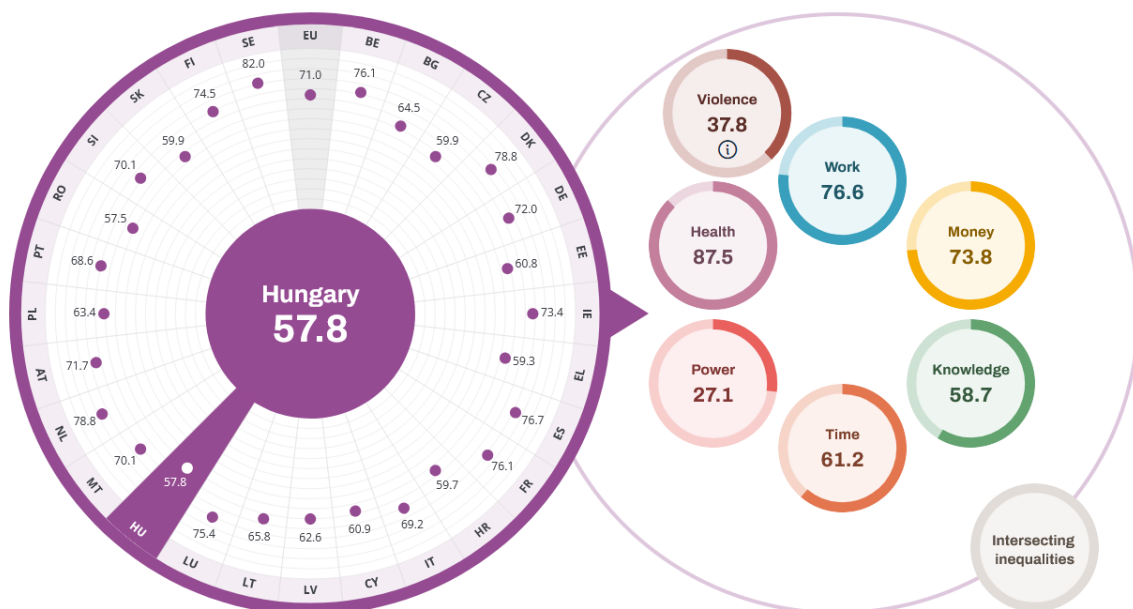
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Choose a culture from a different continent than the previous cultures you discussed. Research the **Uncertainty Avoidance Index** of a specific culture. Try to narrow down that culture as much as possible. Cite your sources, separate fact from opinion and give specific examples. Aim for 400 to 450 words.

Understanding Uncertainty Avoidance in Portugal

Portugal is one of the countries with the highest scores on Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance Index, scoring 104 just behind Greece at the top of the list. This means that people in Portugal generally don't like uncertainty or unexpected changes. They prefer things to be clear, well-planned and organized.

In Portuguese culture rules and structure are very important. People like to know what to expect and often follow systems that help reduce the unknown. For example, in the workplace decisions usually go through a proper process with signatures, official documents or approvals. Things aren't typically done on the spot or without a plan. Everything tends to be carefully thought out and discussed ahead of time.

The same goes for their daily life and education. Students are taught to follow set rules and stick to what the curriculum says. There's not as much focus on thinking outside the box or doing things in new ways. Being prepared and sticking to the plan is what makes people feel secure.

Of course, this way of thinking also shows up in how people deal with time. Punctuality is important and planning ahead is common. People like to know what's happening next instead of just going with the flow.

On the other hand, this need for certainty can sometimes slow things down. It might make it harder for new ideas or changes to take place quickly. For example, in places like Denmark or Jamaica countries with a low UAI, the people are more relaxed about rules and more open to change. They're comfortable figuring things out as they go, while in Portugal people tend to feel more stressed if there's no clear plan or structure.

Portuguese culture values stability, clear instructions and careful planning. This makes the country feel safe and predictable for many people. But it can also mean that creativity or quick changes take longer to be accepted. Knowing this can really help when working with Portuguese people or businesses, as it helps you understand why they may prefer doing things a certain way.

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Research **Long-Term Orientation** in a culture that you have not discussed yet. Try to narrow down that culture as much as possible. Cite your sources, separate fact from opinion and give specific examples. Aim at 200 to 250 words.

Long-Term Orientation in Japan

Japan is a prime example of a high Long-Term Orientation culture. According to Hofstede's framework, Japan ranks high in this dimension, meaning its society values future rewards, perseverance and continuous self-improvement (Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

This long-term mindset is deeply embedded in Japanese business culture and social life. Japanese companies like Toyota and Sony are renowned for their focus on sustainable growth, long-term planning and quality through methods such as Kaizen. The practice of continuous improvement. These companies often prioritize long-term reputation over short-term profits, making decisions that may take years to develop.

Education is another area where Japan's high LTO is evident. Students are expected to dedicate themselves to academic and moral development from an early age and competition for entrance into prestigious universities is intense. This cultural commitment and discipline is mirrored in Japan's strong work ethic and respect for elders and teachers.

While I respect the discipline and planning behind Japan's high LTO, it honestly sounds exhausting. It's common that employees can't leave the office until their boss does and if the boss wants to go out for drinks you're expected to go. That level of social obligation and pressure explains why so many people are tired and burnt out. It's a system that values long-term gains, but it seems to come at the cost of personal well-being.

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Research **Indulgence** in a culture that you have not discussed yet, from any continent. Try to narrow down that culture as much as possible. Cite your sources, separate fact from opinion and give specific examples. Comparing your chosen culture to other cultures may help you make your point more clearly. Make sure that all comparisons are rooted in verifiable facts. Aim at 250 to 300 words.

Indulgence in Mexican Culture

Mexico is one of the most indulgent countries in the world, scoring 97 out of 100 on Hofstede's Indulgence Index. That basically means people in Mexico believe in enjoying life, expressing emotions and having fun. There's a strong cultural focus on living in the moment and finding joy in everyday experiences.

One clear example of this is how Mexicans celebrate. Holidays like Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) and Las Posadas are full of colour, music, dancing and food. These aren't just parties, they're deep traditions that show how important it is to celebrate life, even when remembering those who have passed. Community gatherings and emotional expression are at the heart of these events.

In day-to-day life, you also see this indulgent mindset. People in Mexico often value personal time, relationships and enjoyment more than strict routines. There's a popular saying: "Mexicans don't live to work, they work to live." That really captures how fun, connection and enjoying the present are seen as essential parts of life.

You'll also notice that people tend to be warm and expressive. Hugs, cheek kisses and lively conversations are common. Whether it's through music, dancing or just chatting with friends, showing emotion openly is a normal and welcome part of social life.

When you compare this to more restrained cultures, like Russia or Pakistan, there's a big difference. In those places social norms or religious rules often limit open emotional expression or indulgent behaviour. In contrast, Mexico encourages people to be spontaneous, optimistic and emotionally open.

In a work setting, this cultural style can be important to understand. Celebrating birthdays or promotions at the office is common and building personal connections can help build trust. At the same time people from more structured cultures, like Germany or Japan, might find Mexico's relaxed attitude toward time or deadlines a bit challenging. That's why cultural awareness matters, being flexible and respectful goes a long way.

Overall, indulgence is a big part of what makes Mexican culture so lively and welcoming. It's not just about having fun, it's about finding joy in life, expressing yourself freely and staying connected to others.

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  timing/

4. Professional Growth

How did you experience the **International Days** in March? Did you notice any cultural differences in the workshops you attended? Were you able to network or learn anything new? Can you see the value in intercultural exchange of knowledge and experience?

Quinten: I really liked the team project, but I didn't find the lectures useful. **The lectures** felt more like a promotional advertisement for their business / school. The fact that they were from a different country didn't highlight a different culture at all. The lecturers mostly just taught about what they do, and it wasn't really that useful for me.

As for the **team project,** I really liked working with students with a different study program. A team member studied agriculture so he could guide us with his knowledge about farming and possibilities. Another member studied business, so he was very strong at pitching our idea. Now the unfortunate part was that we had no international student in our team so we basically all had Belgian culture. There were 2 foreign teachers, but their help didn't feel any more different than a Belgian teacher.

So all in all, it was a fun learning experience featuring teamwork with colleagues studying different capabilities. However, I didn't feel any impact or benefit of calling it a multicultural international day. This day felt more like a forced "work in English" day.

Alexander: I find that the workshops I attended didn't have any cultural differences other than speaking good English because the first lecture it was difficult to understand sometimes. I learned that working with a team you have never seen before or talked to is very difficult if you have to make a project on the same day. But it did show me how intercultural exchange can add value to a project.

At some point this schoolyear, you will attend a guest lecture by **Sophie Mirgaux**. What did you learn from this lecture? How did you perform in the workshop? Aim for 75 to 150 words.

Quinten: Sophie Mirgaux works with the Belgian federal government in Belgium's Special Envoy for the Ocean. The ocean doesn't have a voice for itself, so she acts a bit like the ocean's voice. She spoke about her role in the UN with Diplomats and negotiators. She talked about our importance and activities at Belgium's sea. Activities like pioneering with windmills, researching the ocean, experimenting and innovating system for the ocean, even preserving nature, life and habitats in the ocean. Belgium doesn't have that much power as the US and Russia which have a lot of conflicting opinions.

There is a lot of negotiating in EU's rotating presidency system, they need to prepare a lot of proposals for Belgium to have a better chance of being included. A lot of focus was put on the fact that waste will end up in the ocean, thus ending up in our bodies. This encourages us to recycle.

Alexander: From this video I learned that culture affects the way we communicate, not just what we say, but how we say it. Sherwood Fleming talked about something called "cultural autopilot" where we all have these default ways of speaking based on where we are from and we don't even realize it. She also said that all communication basically boils down to five things: making requests, offers, promises, sharing opinions and declarations. What really stuck with me is how easily misunderstandings can happen even when everyone speaks English, just because of tone or body language. The biggest tip was to keep things clear and simple especially in international or

business situations. It's not about sounding super fancy. It's about making sure the other person gets what you mean. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okx6blzW1Kw)

In general, what have you learned from your research and the classes and events you attended? This encompasses both the first and second semester. How would you use these new perspectives in your **future career**?

Alexander: Looking back at everything I worked on during this course, I've definitely learned a lot. Not just about IT, history or culture, but also about myself.
One of the biggest things I noticed is that I'm now more aware of how culture shapes the way people live, think and work. Before, I didn't really pay much attention to cultural differences or their impact. But after researching these topics I've started to see things from a wider perspective. Also learning how to deal with different types of people and how to give presentations.
Visiting the Africa Museum especially changed my view on museums. I used to think they were boring, but after that visit it showed me how meaningful they can be. It even made me curious to visit more.

Quinten: This assignment showed me how much culture affects how people work, think, and communicate. Different countries have different values, like how they handle power, emotions, or personal space, and that really matters in teamwork, especially when there are different cultures working together. What stood out to me most was how useful it is to work with people from different backgrounds or fields. Everyone brings something different, and it makes the end result stronger and have more perspectives. I didn't just learn facts, I learned how to be more aware and flexible, which I think will help in any future job.