01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 1

1

What Is Your Culture?

This chapter:

> Outlines the nature and importance of cultures

> Uses a fictional example to demonstrate that people do not belong in an uncomplicated way to cultures that have clear and unchanging boundaries

> Invites you to consider your own cultural identity as a way of underlining some of the key issues

> Discusses, in particular, the question of 'Englishness' as a form of cultural identity

I was sitting in on a staff meeting at a fairly large nursery, listening to a discussion about the steps they would take to improve the setting following a recent review they had conducted. One of the decisions was to purchase more 'cultural playthings'. I knew what they meant, of course. They were talking about playthings that came from, or at least reflected, cultures other than the white British one to which all of us present belonged. However, the implication that the climbing frame, the copy of *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, the toy farmyard and the runaround toy in the form of Noddy's little car had no cultural connotations at all was rather odd.

Behind the phrase 'cultural playthings' there lay an unspoken assumption: 'We are normal and some other people have cultures'. Cultures might, of course, be very colourful and interesting – worth more than a quick look. The way they are described might, in other words, sound very positive. It remains the case that they can be seen as exotic, abnormal, something unusual that it requires a particular effort to understand.

The word 'culture' has a number of meanings. On the one hand, it refers to higher forms of refined sensibility and their products in the forms of art,

01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 2

music, literature and comparable activities. On the other hand, it is now used frequently to refer to the rules and habits that bind a particular society together. More recently, there has been greater interest in the academic world in cultural products – popular fiction, fashion, the mass media and so on – that may not aspire to the status of great art but are also important as reflections and developers of values.

The idea of culture as the set of practices that keep a society together and allow its members to find meaning in their lives was first articulated in the studies conducted by social anthropologists from the late-19th century onwards. Much of this research was undertaken among remote peoples whose ways of life were very different from those of Europe. It may have become a term we apply to ourselves as well as to peoples whose lives are significantly different from ours, but for some people the idea that the word 'culture' refers to the exotic remains. To have a culture is to be different, and what those who have a culture are different from is 'us'.

The complications of cultural identity

Life is a bit more complicated than that. Take the (fictional) case of a particular individual.

Mary is a woman in her thirties working as an early years practitioner in a Sure Start Children's Centre in the north east of England. She is married, with two young children. She and her husband are practising Roman Catholics. Already busy, she still finds time for her hobby of painting pictures.

So far, the story sounds fairly simple. Let me now add that Mary and her husband are both Hakka-speaking ethnic Chinese from Mauritius who came to the UK soon after their marriage.

What has been added is not just another bit of information. Mary does not have a Hakka/Chinese culture in the way that she might have, say, a nice fitted kitchen. It is not a simple possession. Perhaps she brings to the care of her own children values and practices she learned growing up in Mauritius. Perhaps her paintings are influenced by Chinese brush painting. However, it gets more complicated than that. Her religion (Roman Catholicism) was introduced to the Far East in relatively recent times and was seen for centuries in England, where she now lives, as an alien and threatening religion (much as Islam is seen by many people today). How does she see her religion fitting in with her Hakka culture or her British nationality? Her understanding of her faith may have been influenced by other parts of her life. Aspects of her background may have brought her to see her professional work with children in a slightly different light from

01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 3

that of her colleagues. Her work in the Sure Start Centre may have brought her into contact with a wider range of beliefs and attitudes and experiences in ways that have led her to re-think aspects of her faith.

Mary is neither just another early years practitioner more or less like any other, nor is she merely a representative of Hakka culture. She is someone living her life and trying to make sense of it with a variety of tools drawn from a variety of cultural influences – Hakka society, the north east of England, her church and her professional training among them. She has in some ways a culture of her own. It is not so much that she has a particular culture as that everything she does is shaped by a complex interaction of cultural perspectives drawn from all the aspects of her life so far.

The best of the early social anthropologists would have had little difficulty in recognizing this. People such as Franz Boas (1858–1942) described particular cultures as accurately as they could, but recognized that cultures were products of history and changed with changes of circumstance, including interaction between different societies. It was not so much that people were governed by a culture to which they belonged as that they had to develop cultural norms in order to interact effectively with those around them. Cultures might be conservative because the very purpose of their existence was to make social interaction as predictable as possible, but social anthropologists recognized that they always have the capacity to change.

The importance of the cultural dimension of our lives can be difficult to acknowledge. For example, the study of child development was until recently usually based on what happened in middle-class Anglo-Saxon communities. Assumptions that were made about what is natural and biologically determined were, in fact, derived from observing the culture of such societies in action. However, it is clear that the young child's response to the 'strange' situation of the child development laboratory where she is left by her mother or encounters unfamiliar figures is going to depend significantly on the extent to which care in her everyday social circle belongs primarily to a maternal figure and how often she encounters unfamiliar people. The need for security is built into her. What security means to her in practice will depend on the culture in which she is being raised. In other words, a child's responses may be based on biological need, but they can only be expressed through culture (Cole, 1998, especially pp. 22–6; Super & Harkness, 1998; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2001).

In spite of this, there is still a strong tendency to see what happens in middle-class Anglo-Saxon society as natural and other forms of behaviour as oddities that have to be explained by understanding other cultures. Similarly, when dealing as an early years practitioner with families from a different cultural background, it can be very easy to see their culture as a special explanatory factor of a kind that does not come into play if children are white British.

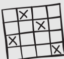
01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 4

The case of Mary demonstrates something of the complexity of cultural identity. Her situation demands of her that she reconciles various ways of being in the world that have come to her from her ethnicity, her religion, her profession, her roles as a wife and mother, her whole personal and family history. It is not that she is an individual in the sense that she was born with a fully developed personality or has simply invented the type of person she wants to be. All the 'scripts' she uses (consciously or unconsciously) to form her identity were largely written before she came along. On the other hand, the 'scripts' are many and in using them she is also modifying them. In this respect her situation is the same as that of all of us today.

Identifying your own culture

If you were asked to identify your own culture, you might find this task easy or difficult. You might be inclined to deny that you had a particular culture. Alternatively, you might identify yourself quite readily with a nationality, ethnicity or some other grouping. People whose lives involve periods in different countries may have alternative identities. Uwins (2008, p.43) speaks of one early years practitioner who 'considers herself to be black British when she resides in Britain and black African when she is in Nigeria'. Some people have the opposite reaction, speaking proudly of their original cultural or national identity while in Britain, but becoming aware of how British they are when visiting the homeland of their ancestors. The cultural identity that someone develops will be an adaptation to circumstance – perhaps quite unconscious in the case of someone who stays in more or less the same society all her life, much more self-conscious in the case of someone who chooses to live elsewhere or is for one reason or another an exile from her place of origin.

The two activities that follow are intended to get you thinking about your own cultural identity.



Exercise

What aspects of your life help to determine your identity? In answering this question you can take into account:

- your family roles (partner, daughter, son, parent)
- your family's history
- your profession
- your social class

01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 5

- your nationality
- the part of the country in which you live
- your affiliation to a religion (if you have one)
- your ethnic identity
- your interests, your taste in music, reading and so on
- anything else that is important to you.

How far has thinking about those things made it possible for you to identify your culture?

You can do this as an individual exercise or get all the members of a group to do it and then share what they have written down.

Quite possibly, answering all those questions has still left you uncertain of what to say about your cultural identity. Part of the reason for this may be that you are uncertain of what to say about some of the elements listed above. Take the case of nationality. You may be a British citizen, but wish to identify yourself as black British or Welsh or in some other way. Are you then saying that your culture is British, but that you belong to some specific sub-section of a wider British culture?

If you can identify your nationality without any question, do you feel comfortable with everything that seems to be implied by that? For example, I would say that I am English and that this is a key element in my identity. However,

- I do not drink tea very often
- I am not a member of the Church of England whose participation in church services is, nevertheless, restricted to weddings and funerals
- I am not interested in cricket
- I speak more than one language
- I rarely use an umbrella.

In other words, there are several ways in which I do not match the stereotype of what many people in other countries, and even other Englishmen, would think of as typically English. (In other respects, of course, I fit the stereotype more neatly.)

Have another stab at discerning your cultural identity by tackling the next exercise.

01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 6

Exercise

Imagine that there has been a major disaster. The economy and public services are in serious disarray. It has been decided that, in order to cope with the situation, the majority of those fit to travel will have to be evacuated to other countries that have agreed to take them as refugees. This exercise is being organized by the United Nations.

You and your immediate family are to be evacuated to another country. Because of the gravity of the situation, you have no say on the matter of your destination. The emergency will last for some time, so you must expect your stay to be long-term, perhaps permanent.

Write down:

- five things you would want to take with you. These can be of practical or sentimental value. You should be able to fit all five plus some changes of clothing into a small suitcase.
- five things you would want to continue doing once you arrive; examples might include wearing British-style clothing or working in the same occupation.
- five things you would be willing to do in order to fit in with the society you are about to join; examples might include learning a local language, studying a citizenship course and so on.

You can do this as an individual exercise or ask members of a group to write down individual responses and then share them. Some people might be reluctant to share some of their answers with the whole group. For example, the objects someone wishes to take might include one whose significance is so personal that she is reluctant to discuss it in the whole group. That is fine. The object of the exercise is to help each participant focus on what she or he finds important. Sharing that information is optional.

Do not worry too much about the feasibility of the scenario. The point is to get people thinking about what is important to them and what this indicates about their identities.

01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 7

I have not identified the country to which you are being sent. If someone in your group comes from or is reasonably knowledgeable about a particular country, you might decide to select that as your country of refuge and ask that person questions which might influence some of your responses.

Doing this exercise might help people to see the situation of asylum-seekers in a new light. If so, that is all to the good. However, the key purpose is to help people think about what is important to their own identities.

If you have undertaken the exercise on your own, ask yourself how far the objects you have chosen to take reflect your cultural identity. They may seem to be about your personal life or tastes, but still reflect your cultural background. Taking a wedding ring or some other token of a significant relationship will itself say something about how relationships are seen by people of your cultural background. It may just happen to be the case that you like marmite or thick–cut marmalade, but many people would see these as typical of a peculiarly English taste in food. You can also ask yourself how far your answers to the second and third question help you name those aspects of your identity that are so important to you that you would be unwilling to abandon them, however flexible you wished to be in your new circumstances. If you have run it as a group exercise, encourage participants to share as much as they are happy to share about their answers and look at some of the common features and those where there are differences.

Has this exercise taken you much further forward in defining your own culture?

The particular case of Englishness

There is always a tendency to think that the way we do things is normal and that deviations from that pattern are oddities requiring explanation. This is a key factor in the way in which cultures other than white British may be seen. There is, however, an additional complication in the case of the English. For a long time – and still to a great extent today – the terms ‘British’ and ‘English’ were seen (by the English at least) as interchangeable.

01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 8

Scottish, Welsh, Irish or other forms of national identity were seen as mere regional variations, no more significant than being from Yorkshire, Devon or Kent. It is still possible for a serious report to speak of something being true of the United Kingdom when it is true only of England. Clark & Waller (2007, p.5) describe an example.

This situation has been altered by the process of handing over aspects of government to new assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the pressures that led to that constitutional change. People in other parts of the United Kingdom are now much less likely than the English to identify themselves as British. The saints' days of St Patrick, St Andrew and St David are celebrated in a way that St George's Day is not. The decline in the military and political power of the United Kingdom and the recognition of much that was wrong with the establishment and administration of the British Empire have undermined the ability of people to feel pride in the British identity. At the same time there remains a further uncertainty about pride in being English.

This situation has led to the publication in recent years of a range of books that approach the English identity in different ways. Some are content to list and praise the more attractive places in the country. A few pamphleteers take an assertively nationalist stance. Bragg (2006) celebrates the progressive strand in English history and sees this as the basis for a different form of patriotism. Miles (2005) traces the ethnic mix that has led to the English nation. Paxman (1999) observes his fellow countrymen with the sardonic detachment of a journalist. Fox (2004) is also humorous, but also brings to the subject her skills as a social anthropologist. Ackroyd (2002) uses history, literature and other arts to describe the nature of England in ways that may surprise many. Jones (1998) moves even further from the conventional, seeing England not as the 'Protestant nation' many would have described in the past, but as having its real foundations in the Catholic Middle Ages. The vast differences of approach and understanding among these authors illustrate the uncertainty as to what it means to be English.

The complication of national identity is brought out by the fact that many black and Asian people living in England are happy to fly the English flag during the World Cup or other international sports competitions, but would shun the Union flag, which the far right has taught them to see as a symbol of racism (Bagguly & Hussain, 2005). At the same time, many white English people are suspicious of English nationalism and prefer to speak of Britishness. There have also been cases of those in authority trying to prevent the flying of the English flag on the grounds that it might offend black people.

01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 9

You may have your own views on Englishness. Whether or not you are English yourself, try the following exercise as a way into defining what you think English culture might be.

Exercise

The following statements are taken from a discussion among people from a small town in the middle of the country about the way they see their cultural identity and national heritage.

How many of these statements would you be prepared to describe as typically English? Can you construct some kind of picture of English culture from them?

- Our patron saint is St George and you often see representations of him on public buildings etc. but I don't think he means very much to most people. He is not an important symbol.
- The flag is very important. It is a symbol around which everyone can rally. I think it has become more important in that sense in recent years.
- Conquering Everest was a big step for us. It made us feel we had literally 'made it to the top'.
- What really distinguishes us from other countries and their people is our common sense.
- There may be examples of intolerance, but basically we are a very tolerant society. We make people welcome as long as they meet us halfway. I think that is the value that distinguishes us from many other nations.
- We are very practical and pragmatic.
- When people talk about 'cultural heritage' you think about grand buildings etc. but other things are just as significant. Lavatory jokes, for example. People might say they disapprove of them, but they always raise a laugh.
- It is in doing the ordinary, simple things that you feel our common heritage – like decorating the tree at Christmas.
- Our old churches are part of what makes us feel part of a nation. People might not go to church very often, but they have strong feelings about the great cathedrals.

(Continued)

01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 10

(Continued)

- If you really want to know what it means to belong to our nation, you have to go to the countryside. The cities are big, anonymous places and with so many international retail outlets you could be anywhere in the world a lot of the time. It is the country that represents what is best about our society. We have to defend it.

You can undertake this as an individual exercise or in a group. The composition of a group will have an obvious impact on the degree of consensus it is possible to reach and on what that consensus will be. A group of English people might come up with different responses from a more mixed group.

If you undertake this exercise as the facilitator of a group, wait until the discussion is over before revealing that the 'town in the middle of the country' is Sabadell. If that name is unfamiliar, it is because the discussion did not take place in England at all, but in Catalonia, a region of Spain, which has its own language and where the regional government has a considerable amount of devolved power. To the extent that many of the statements sounded true of England, or at least as though they were the sort of thing that English people might say about themselves, this exercise shows up how problematic the idea of a unique national identity can be. I have cheated, of course. Catalonia is in Western Europe and has many features in common with England as with other West European countries. I have also suppressed some of the things that were said when this conversation took place because they would have given the game away. The exercise does, however, raise questions about claims to the uniqueness of any given national culture.

Summary

In all our dealings with other people we rely on habits, conventions and rules that we may help to modify but which came from outside us. We can (with some effort) change the cultural context in which we operate. We cannot hope to operate outside any cultural context at all.

01-Baldock-3993-CH-01:Baldock-3993-CH-01 16/12/2009 6:16 PM Page 11

However, this is about culture as a means of understanding the world and making effective relationships. It does not mean that any of us belongs to quite specific cultures with closed boundaries and unchanging natures. All cultures are subject to the historical process of change. All of us operate in a number of cultural spheres determined by our nationality, preferred language, religious faith or secular values, profession or a number of other things to which we belong and which give us ways of deciding how to live our lives and to seek significance for ourselves.

Any approach in an early years setting or elsewhere to people whose cultural background is significantly different from our own depends on our understanding of this fact. It is in this light that we can consider the broad question of multiculturalism or the specific questions that arise from daily practice.

Further reading

You may want to look at some of the books mentioned in the chapter. Siraj-Blatchford (2000) *Supporting Identity, Diversity and Language in the Early Years* is a particularly good book on this topic. Fox (2004) *Watching the English* offers a light read on the question of the English character, but is underpinned by some very clear thinking.

I have deliberately avoided saying a great deal about social anthropology, but that academic discipline lies behind much of what has been said here. Hendry (2008) *An Introduction to Social Anthropology* is a readable text for those who already know something about the subject as well as for newcomers.

The topic of the cultural dimension of child development is covered in Smidt (2006) *The Developing Child in the 21st Century*.