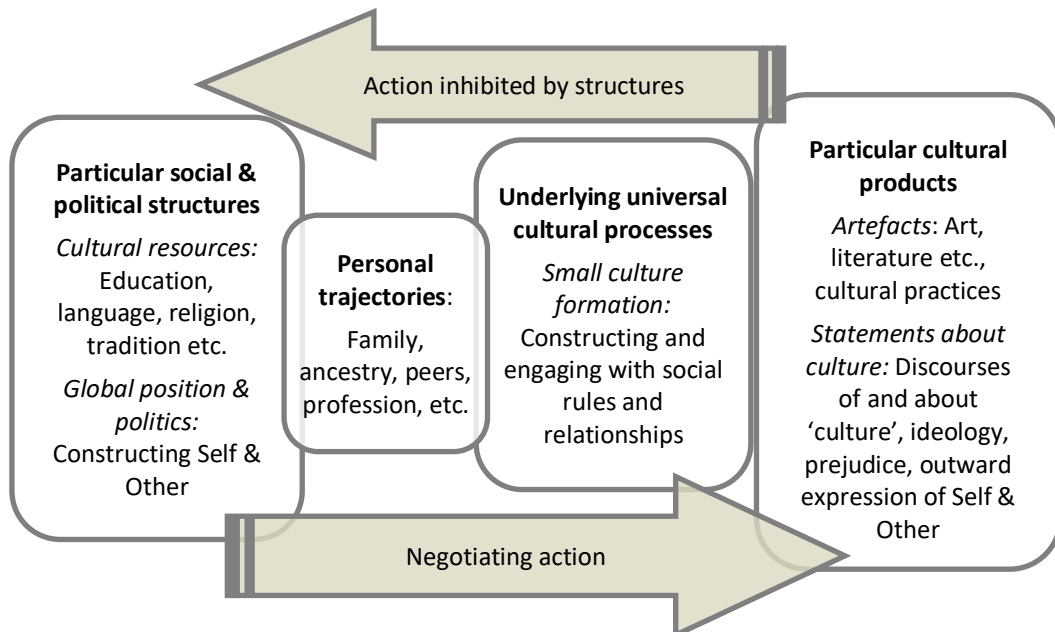


# A grammar of culture: a brief description

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Posted at <http://adrianholliday.com/articles/>, January 2018

My grammar of culture is introduced in Holliday (2011a: 131), and its workings in everyday life are developed in detail in (Holliday forthcoming), and its usefulness in research in Holliday (2016). It also grows from my concept of small cultures (Holliday 1999; 2011b). It is an imaginary map which can help us cautiously to read intercultural events, and must never be mistaken for the real terrain, which is too complex and deep to be mapped too accurately. The intention is not to over-define or to pin anything down. The grammar is characterised by loose relationships which represent a conversation between different domains, each of which I shall describe briefly below. The diagram is a simplified version.



## Underlying universal cultural processes

In the centre and core of the grammar, this is the domain that is least dealt with in other discussions of culture. These processes are shared by all of us. They are common across national boundaries. They involve skills and strategies through which everyone regardless of background participates in and negotiates their position within the cultural landscapes to which they belong. This is the basis upon which we are able to read culture.

**Small culture formation** is the major area where they come into operation. Small cultures are cultural environments which are located in proximity to the people concerned. There are thus small social groupings or activities, wherever there is cohesive behaviour, such as families, leisure and work groups, where people form rules for how to behave which will bind them together. Small cultures are the basic cultural entities from which all other cultural realities grow. Wherever we go we automatically either take part in or begin to build small cultures. In this

sense, small culture formation happens all the time and is a basic essence of being human. **Small culture formation on the go** is the continuous process of constructing and dealing with cultural realities, every day, everywhere, with whoever we meet or even think about.

Moving towards the left of the grammar, **personal trajectories** comprise the individual's personal travel through society, bringing histories from their ancestors and origins. Through these trajectories they are able to step out from and dialogue with the **particular social and political structures** that surround them and even cross into new and foreign domains. This domain thus crosses the subtle boundary with **underlying universal cultural processes**.

#### Particular social and political structures

On the left of the grammar, these are structures which in many ways form us and make us different from each other. They include nation, religion, language and the economic system. These structures may in particular circumstances map precisely onto each other, for example were a nation state corresponds largely with one religious group, one language and one economic system, but in most cases they will not.

The first of the domains in this part of the grammar, **cultural resources**, is the influence on our daily lives of the society where we were born and brought up. It relates to what many of us refer to as 'our culture', or national culture. The way we were educated, our national institutions, the manner of our government, our media, our economy, and so on are different from nation to nation and will undoubtedly impact in the way we are as people. These are resources in the sense that we draw on them, but they do not confine everything we do and think.

Next, **global position and politics** concern how we are also influenced by the way we position ourselves and our society with regard to the rest of the world. This positioning may well be influenced by **cultural resources**. Examples of this are how people in the West view non-Western countries, how people outside the West view the West, at a more local level, how Britain and continental Europe view each other, how Middle Eastern nations view each other and the concept of the Arab World, and so on. This is a key area which is often ignored in intercultural studies texts and is very hard to see around *because* of the degree to which we are all inscribed by long-standing constructions of who we are in relationship to others – Self and Other – in our histories, education, institutions, upbringing and media representations, and that these are rooted profoundly in a world which is not politically or economically equal.

#### Particular cultural products

On the right of the grammar, these are the outcome of cultural activity. The first domain, **artefacts**, includes the 'big-C' cultural artefacts such as literature and the arts. They also include cultural practices, which are the day-to-day things we do which can seem strange for people coming from foreign cultural backgrounds – how we eat, wash, greet, show respect, organise our environment, and so on. These are the things which are most commonly associated with 'our culture' or national culture; but they also differ between small groups within a particular society.

The second domain, **statements about culture**, is perhaps the hardest of all the domains in the grammar to make sense of. It is to do with how we present ourselves and what we choose to call 'my culture'. For example, 'In my culture we are always on time', 'we don't make decisions without consulting the group', 'we respect our parents' or 'we value the individual'.

However, there is a deep and tacit politics here which means that what we choose to say and project may not actually represent how things are, but rather our dreams and aspirations about how we would like them to be, or the spin we place upon them to create the impact we wish to have on others. This is not to do with lying or deceiving, but with a genuine presentation of Self which involves a sophisticated manipulation of reality.

These statements can represent powerful discourses of and about culture – ways of talking which structure the way we think about culture, very often without being aware.

### Cultural negotiation

The arrows across the top and the bottom of the grammar indicate that throughout the grammar is a dialogue between the power of **underlying universal cultural processes** possessed by the individual and the influences of the particular cultural realities which derive from national structures. Moving from left to right, at the bottom of the grammar, **personal trajectories** and **underlying universal cultural processes** enable individuals or groups of individuals to introduce their personal cultural realities into existing structures. Moving from right to left, at the top of the grammar, the degree to which this can be successful will depend on how far existing structures are confirmed or resisted. Here I am particularly interested in the potential for newcomers to be cultural innovators.

### References

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