Nearly two decades ago, I had the occasion to spend a Fulbright sabbatical in Israel working with my long-time colleague and mentor, Professor Miriam Erez, at the Technion in Haifa, Israel. Coincidentally, this was the year of the Gulf War in 1990–1. During these tense times, we sought refuge in humor and distraction in daily ironies. A colleague described the experiences of a recent immigrant to Israel who had decided to become a naturalized citizen. In pursuing citizenship, the person completed an extensive interview form, after which she was called in for a personal interview with a government official. During the interview, the official looked at her form and asked her, “What religion are you?,” to which she replied, “I’m an atheist.” After a few moments of reflection, the immigration officer again repeated his question, “What religion are you?,” and again, she answered, “I’m an atheist.” Now showing some irritation, the officer demanded, “No, what RELIGION are you?” and she angrily replied, “Look, there wasn’t a box for it on the form so I wrote in that I’m an atheist. . . . I don’t believe in God, and I’m an atheist.” The officer looked at her and said, with some frustration and bewilderment, “Fine—are you a Jewish Atheist, a Muslim Atheist, or a Christian Atheist?”

This incident conveys the underlying message of this chapter, namely, that people operate from a universal base of understanding, and they seek to reconcile differences into similarities through which they can interact with the world around them. Researchers have long sought to understand the nature of culture and its potential influence on human activity. When the first of our species crossed a desert or river and encountered neighbors who exhibited alternative ways of behaving, that was when the first cultural anthropologist emerged. Certainly, the formal study of groups of people by outsiders has been evidenced in Western and Eastern
civilizations for thousands of years (Mead, 1967). Of course, our fascination with cultural differences and similarities among people has been piqued again in the last and this century by the advance of business and economic transactions across national and geographic boundaries. It is with this spirit that we see modern-day cultural scientists who seek to understand the relevance of such differences among people working in an organizational or work context. Well beyond the scope of this particular chapter is a review of this vast literature, but I will focus on the task at hand—a brief review of major streams of cultural work, with some analysis of where we might wish to direct future efforts.

In my 2007 article in *Journal of International Business Studies*, I worked on a comparison of two general approaches of very significant scope and impact: Geert Hofstede’s seminal work compared with the approach taken by Robert House and his colleagues in the GLOBE project. In this chapter, I will continue this discussion and supplement it with my own take on some new directions of the field, including some work by Miriam Erez on identifying a universal work culture, as well as my own work on cultural intelligence.

I begin my analysis by using these distinctions to describe the nature of “culture,” how both camps define culture, and its relation to others’ use of the term, including culture as an interpretation of meaning at a collective or individual level. In the next section, I follow with a brief discussion of the several approaches and their focus on the fundamentals, including the nature of the analysis used and the level of constructs, followed by a discussion of the underlying quagmire implied by such levels. In the third section, I address the ideological similarities of these approaches, as well as their theory-driven versus empirically derived nature. Many of the existing approaches entangle levels (individual, collective) for purposes of analysis, constructs, and application. I suggest that many existing approaches provide very important empirical assessments of current cultural conditions while they underemphasize substantive theoretical underpinnings and overemphasize differences at the cost of universals. That is, there needs to be a refocusing of scholars’ efforts toward the development of key grand and mid-range theories that link nebulous assays such as these to organizational practices, activities, and outcomes.

**How cultured do we need to be?**

At least some of the confusion in the field of cross-cultural research stems from a loose and imprecise definition used of “culture.” One must remember that the construct has become so disagreeable that some