

By nature, I am a biologist. I like to organize, categorize, prioritize, test, and quantify. I like to understand the basic workings that compose the physical structure of the world around us and I like to concisely define things with empiricism.

I recently had a conversation with an Italian boy who said to me, “I want to live in America, because everyone is nice and no racism exists.” This caught me by surprise, because he said it with such conviction even though it was not entirely true. It dawned on me that while both of us are trying desperately to learn about each other’s culture, it is entirely possible that, even though we think we understand the basics of a culture, we cumbersomely stumble over the slight nuances that make a world of difference. Of course, America’s history *is* stuffed full of success stories of individuals achieving the lusted after American Dream— the acquisition of a meaningful life and that seemingly insurmountable social and economic barriers can be surpassed with a little hard work and lots of dedication. Unfortunately, I know that this is not always the case—racism exists, and there are many different people in the states. I wanted to then, with my barely adequate Italian, inform him that though America is a beautiful country, struggles still exist there. The culture is not completely one way or another, but is entirely on a spectrum. I suddenly realized however that when I think of Italy, I too have certain ideals in my mind that, up until now, I was not entirely ready to relinquish. I think of the country’s love affair with food, how everyone must be a good cook, how fashion is paramount, and that everyone has so much passion about everything. Though these categories may very well exist, it dawned on me that, just like the boy I was talking to, I already had a very specific expectation and opinion of Italian culture in my mind.

Culture, contrary to science, is based on a shared, collected mindset—how people live their lives in both the public and private spheres, how they choose to confront the world, and how they decide to pepper the world with beauty and meaning or, unfortunately, how they choose to take that beauty away. A culture is not just the history they have filled their textbooks with or the stereotypes that the rest of the world uses to define them. It may not be organized and classifiable, but that's okay. Culture is a beautiful *mescolanza* of the very things that make us human. Science explains how our existence currently is and came to be, but culture embodies our very being. After studying abroad for a few months here, I have come to the scientific conclusion that it is impossible to set parameters on and accurately categorize something as complex and subjective as a culture outside of our own. I realize now that a culture is largely made up of the little things that make it entirely unique and striking.

I think I finally understand an interaction I shared with an Italian professor before I came to Florence. I asked him why is it that at our school, whenever someone decides to double major in Italian and one of the sciences, the science is always biology? And he responded, “Well, that's a simple one. It's because biology is life, and Italian is life.” I don't think I am off in saying that Italians are passionate—however, I now see that, like my own culture, there is a complex spectrum and network of people, mindsets, and culture, which take considerable time to completely understand. I feel humbled. Though I haven't been able to satiate my desire for a neat, seamless answer of what makes Italian culture, I will say this: to me, Italian culture is represented by word (and pastry) *sfogliatelle*—though I may not know how to make it or the inner workings of it (yet), I am more than happy to completely savor all the layers and enjoy every bit of it.