

READING

Introducing Borders

Pre-Reading Questions

Before you start to read, take a few minutes to consider the following questions:

- What kinds of borders exist in the world? What purposes do they serve?
- How can borders be helpful? How can they be harmful?
- How can borders affect our sense of belonging in the world?

Encountering Borders in Everyday Life

In our lives, we encounter many borders, which can take on a range of shapes and forms. Borders carry meaning, influence how we interact with others, and affect our sense of belonging in the world. Oftentimes, we think of a border as an edge or a dividing line. *Beyond Borders: A Cultural Reader* offers a different and more complex way of thinking about borders:

A border can be any place where differences come together, whether these differences are national, cultural and social, differences in values or language, or differences in gender, family heritage or economic status.

Thus, borders can be more than physical boundaries. They are dynamic places that we encounter every day, such as when we travel to school, pick out clothes to wear, chat with friends online, move to a new place, or speak multiple languages. Borders are complex, and we must all negotiate them as part of our lives.

Where differences come together, people or groups are rarely on an equal footing: there is almost always an imbalance—of power, resources, capital, trust, understanding, or desire. No matter who you are, you are negotiating these borders continually, making transactions across boundaries and maneuvering among differences.¹

¹ Young, Joy and Randall Bass *Beyond Borders: A Cultural Reader* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 2-3.

Individuals on opposite sides of a border can have different levels of power and status, and they might not share the same values or beliefs. Thus, borders can be places where disputes occur and where it can be difficult for individuals and groups to reach mutual agreements that benefit everyone.

Types of Borders

Some borders are visible and tangible (*can be touched*). **Visible and tangible borders** can follow a natural geographic feature, like a river or mountain range between two countries. For example, Mount Everest separates China and Nepal, and the Rio Grande forms part of the Mexico-United States border. Visible borders can also be human-made, like fences that divide properties or border walls or barriers created through government negotiations or community agreements.

Other borders are less tangible yet just as powerful. **Invisible and intangible borders** are boundaries or divisions that are not physically defined. They can exist between individuals, groups, communities, and regions. For example, imagine a wealthy neighborhood next to a low-income area, separated by an invisible border of economic disparity. Or imagine a school where there are distinct social groups or cliques, such as the athletes, the gamers, and the fine-arts kids. Although there may not be any physical barriers separating these groups, there may be invisible borders based on shared interests and characteristics. These invisible, and oftentimes unspoken, borders may influence where students sit in the cafeteria, who they pick for a team, who they invite to a group chat, or who they stand up for if they see or hear something unfair or unjust.

Regardless of whether they are tangible or intangible, **borders are complex and deeply felt by the individuals on either side.**

The Paradox of Borders: Helpful or Harmful?

Borders have played a significant role in human history, shaping the way individuals and societies interact with one another and often serving as a source of both safety and tension. While some people argue that borders are necessary to maintain order and safety, others believe that borders are arbitrary and can be destructive. Thus, borders can be full of contradictions.

On the one hand, **borders can be helpful** because they allow us to create order by categorizing and making sense of the world around us. They provide us with a sense of

belonging, defining groups and spaces by shared interests, values, and characteristics that make people feel safe and welcomed. In these cases, a border can create a sense of inclusivity, bringing people and communities together. It can also protect a group from external threats and give them a sense of identity.

On the other hand, **borders can also be harmful**. They can restrict our interactions with others and prevent us from forming meaningful connections. This can lead to prejudice, discrimination, and even conflict. A border can create exclusivity, making it difficult for individuals outside of the boundary to feel accepted or included. A border can also lead to unequal treatment and unfair laws, limiting the rights of certain groups and even limiting access to fundamental resources and protections like clean water and shelter. Borders can also limit our thinking and prevent us from seeing new possibilities or engaging with people who may seem different from us because of an aspect of their identity.

Conclusion

The borders we navigate every day have a significant impact on our lives and on the lives of others. While some borders provide structure, order, and a sense of belonging, others can lead to exclusion, discrimination, and limited understanding between different groups. Thus, borders can be both helpful and harmful, simultaneously fostering connections and creating divisions. It is important for us to recognize the complexities of borders and the potential they have to unite and divide us. Recognition is a first step in creating spaces where everyone feels empowered and accepted, regardless of the tangible and intangible borders that may exist around them.

Connection Questions

1. In your opinion, what is the most valuable idea in this reading? What makes you say that?
2. What ideas in this reading do you find challenging? In what way?
3. What are some examples of differences people may encounter on either side of a border?
4. How can individuals and groups work together to challenge the power dynamics and inequalities that happen across borders?

5. What kinds of borders have the biggest influence on our sense of belonging? What makes you say that?
6. How can borders be both helpful and harmful? In other words, how can borders create a sense of inclusivity for some and exclusivity for others?
7. How can we use our understanding of borders to create spaces that promote inclusivity and belonging, rather than exclusion?