

CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICT

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Summary

Conflict is competition by groups or individuals over incompatible goals, scarce resources, or the sources of power needed to acquire them. This competition is also determined by individuals' perceptions of goals, resources, and power, and such perceptions may differ greatly among individuals. One determinant of perception is culture, the socially inherited, shared and learned ways of living possessed by individuals in virtue of their membership in social groups. Conflict that occurs across cultural boundaries thus is also occurring across cognitive and perceptual boundaries, and is especially susceptible to problems of intercultural miscommunication and misunderstanding. These problems exacerbate the conflict, no matter what the root causes of it—including strictly material interests—may be. In this sense culture is an important factor in many sorts of conflicts that at first may appear to be exclusively about material resources or negotiable interests.

In addition to framing the contexts in which conflict is understood and pursued by individuals, culture also links individual identities to collective ones. This fact is important in understanding the basis of most ethnic or nationalist conflicts, in which selected cultural material is utilized to constitute special sorts of social groups, those based upon putative (and primordial) ties of shared kinship, history, language, or religion.

Understanding the impact of cultural difference is especially important for analysts or practitioners of conflict resolution who work in intercultural contexts, since culture affects many of the communicational or interlocutory processes that lie at the heart of most conflict resolution techniques. Finally, because of increasing transnational exchanges, the coming century will see many more encounters among individuals of all

backgrounds that are intercultural in nature.

1. The Nature of Conflict

Conflict is a feature of all human societies, and potentially an aspect of all social relationships. However, ideas about the root causes of conflict differ widely, and how one conceives of conflict determines to a large degree the sorts of methods we ultimately design to manage or resolve it. One conception of conflict roots it in the material world, as competition between individuals or groups over incompatible goals or scarce resources, or over the sources of power needed to reach those goals or control these resources, including the denial of control to others. A different conception locates the basic causes of conflict not so much in material scarcity as in divergent perceptions or beliefs about the nature of the situation, the other party, or oneself. The first orientation to conflict (and the world) is sometimes called “realism,” the second “constructivism.” But these terms, and the dichotomous way of thinking they enjoin, in actuality mask a great deal of social and behavioral complexity, both about the nature of conflict and about the possibilities for managing or resolving it.

One key to understanding the complexity of conflict and, ultimately, conflict resolution is to be found in the insight that many conflicts do not involve parties in unbridled, all-out competition with a “winner takes all” mentality. Often conflicting parties find areas where cooperation is valued and sought after, even if it is only the cooperation inherent in keeping the basic relationship between them a continuing and viable one. Many conflicts, therefore, involve “mixed motives” (competition and cooperation). A second and equally important insight is that most conflicts are some combination of competition over goals or resources *and* the perceptions, beliefs, or values that the parties bring to the competition. For any given conflict, what matters is that parties believe or perceive themselves to be divided over goals, or believe or perceive the resources to be scarce, since parties will in the event act on the basis of their beliefs and perceptions.

According to realist conceptions, when resources are “objectively” scarce the course of conflict is limited to a few possible outcomes. An important variable in realist thinking is power. If there are significant imbalances of power between the parties, then one party yields to the other—the weaker to the stronger. This can occur following some overt test of strength (say, a war), or as the result of preemptive action—exit or surrender—by the weaker party. If the power of the two parties is more evenly balanced, however, then realist thinking expects some sort of negotiation to occur, for example compromise or distributive bargaining, such that resources are shared at some minimal level of mutual satisfaction. (Alternatively, in place of bargaining, one or both parties may seek to gain a power advantage through forming alliances with other parties.) One goal of “conflict resolution” in this mode is to encourage verbal or other symbolic bargaining to take place in lieu of a physical contest involving violence. A more advanced form of conflict resolution entails bringing the parties from purely distributive bargaining to integrative problem-solving, where the parties maximize their joint gains rather than settle for minimizing respective losses (or simply “split the difference” at some notional midpoint, as in compromise). But in any case, whether with contentious, distributive, or integrative outcomes, in its “purest” form (best modeled in some forms

of game-theory), realist thinking on conflict assumes that all the parties share precisely the same metric for objectively measuring (perceiving) the main parameters of the contest, such as power, resources, and scarcity. In other words, realists assume that everyone understands these things in the same way.

By contrast, in the case where “subjectivity” of one sort or another enters the picture—where the parties’ perceptions of key parameters (power, resources, scarcity) of the contest differ significantly, so that everyone does not understand the world in the same way—then while the ensuing *conflict* may look the same (resulting in physical violence or war, for example), the prescription for *conflict resolution* looks very different. Now those committed to resolution must be concerned with such problems as cognitive or perceptual distortions, failures to communicate, or other sorts of communicational, interlocutory, or interpretive dysfunction.

It is important to caution that not all (perhaps not even most) conflicts can be boiled down *simply* to failures of communication or mutually faulty interpretation. But neither should it be assumed that all conflicts are always simply about objective scarcity between parties who always share the same understanding of the world. Nor should it be assumed that even if perceptions of scarcity are shared, that communication between the parties is unproblematic or “transparent.” This means that conflict analysts and those committed to conflict resolution must pay attention to any factors that potentially impede or complicate communication between parties.

It is the combination of both objective and subjective dimensions that makes social conflict complex. Analytically, the proportional “mix” of these dimensions is always an empirical question, as it varies from conflict to conflict, party to party, and occasion to occasion. With respect to the practice of conflict resolution, it is in the “space” between the objective bases of conflict and the parties’ subjective (or, more precisely, “intersubjective”) understandings of the conflict that a good deal of contemporary conflict resolution does its work. For it is unlikely that parties will ever get any bargaining done, distributive much less integrative if, lacking common metrics, they occupy significantly different perceptual universes.

An analytical language or discourse is necessary for talking about both sorts of conflict and conflict resolution. The wholly “objective” sort is well served by the powerful discourse derived from neoclassical economics. Here one speaks of, among other things, utility functions, optimization, and maximization; and one presumes a universal model of decision-making based on universal principles of *rational choice*. The “intersubjective” orientation to conflict and conflict resolution, stressing communication, interpretation, and the possibility of diverse metrics for decision-making, needs another language. Historically, one candidate is the discourse of *culture*, which stresses cultural description and analysis.

2. Culture

Partly because it has come down from the nineteenth century with very different usages and meanings, the concept of “culture” is complicated. Nevertheless, one of the things that all contemporary social scientific definitions of culture have in common is that for

none of them is culture connected primarily to “high art,” advanced education, superior knowledge, exalted social standing, refinement, or “taste.” (This, indeed, is one of the main nineteenth century meanings of the term that has so confused contemporary usage.) For no anthropologist, certainly, is “culture” something possessed only by the upper classes. Everyone “has” culture. In fact, everyone “has” potentially *several* cultures—this is yet another reason why the concept is complicated. Very generally, culture may be defined as socially inherited, shared, and learned ways of living possessed by persons by virtue of their membership in social groups.

To this broad definition must be added the observation that culture is always manifested in two ways, sometimes called *generic* and *local*. Generic culture is an attribute of all humankind, an adaptive feature of our species on this planet for at least a million years or so. Generic culture directs attention to universal attributes of human behavior, to “human nature.” In contrast, local culture refers to those complex systems of meanings (encoded in symbols, schemas, and other sorts of cognitive representations) created, shared, and transmitted (socially reproduced and inherited) by individuals in *particular* social groups, at particular points in time. Local culture directs attention to diversity and difference. Most contemporary discussions of culture stress the local sense, focusing on difference. Certainly, this is the sense in which people usually connect culture to conflict. But it is important to remember that culture also represents generic or universalistic capabilities, especially when one moves from conflict to conflict resolution. For example, all human beings, regardless of what “local” language they happen to speak, possess the universal or generic capacity of language acquisition. Some people acquire fluency in several different languages. This means that translation between languages is possible, even as locally spoken languages may separate language-communities and speakers from one another. Following the language analogy, just as individuals may attain varying degrees of fluency in a number of languages throughout their lives (multilingualism), so too is “multiculturalism” (in the sense of fluency or “competence” in a number of different local cultures) possible. And so too is “translation” across local cultural boundaries. More than possible, it is more widespread and common than many people believe. This is in fact one sense in which people may “have” several cultures.

There is at least one other point about culture to be made from an analogy to language. A cursory comparison between the English of Shakespeare’s time and that spoken today demonstrates that languages change through time. Similarly, the English of London’s East End and Manhattan’s Lower East Side, as spoken today, are not identical. No language is immutable across time and space, or insensitive to external influence—despite what many linguistic chauvinists would like to believe about “their” language. Culture, too, is dynamic, not timeless or changeless—regardless of what cultural chauvinists might like to proclaim. The implications of cultural change for conflict are varied. On the one hand, the susceptibility of culture to (sometimes rapid and deep) change can lead to social instability, and this may in turn lead to conflict. On the other hand, possibilities for change mean that cultures may prove adaptive to new situations, and that individual bearers of local cultures may use cultural resources to accommodate to change (or to bring about positive change), and respond to potential conflict in prosocial ways. History, of course, provides examples of both possibilities. Histories of social conflict, especially those steeped in violence and war, highlight the first set.

Those committed to peaceful conflict resolution would like to see in the future more history reflecting the second, adaptive and prosocial, use of and response to cultural change.

3. Cross-Cultural Conflict

By definition, conflict occurring between individuals or social groups that are separated by cultural boundaries can be considered “cross-cultural conflict.” But individuals, even in the same society, are potentially members of many different groups, organized in different ways by different criteria: for example, by kinship into families or clans; by language, religion, ethnicity, or nationality; by socioeconomic characteristics into social classes; by geographical region into political interest groups; and by education, occupation, or institutional memberships into professions, trade unions, organizations, industries, bureaucracies, political parties, or militaries. The more complex and differentiated the society the more numerous are potential groupings. Each of these groups is a potential “container” for culture, and thus any complex society is likely to be made up various “subcultures,” that is of individuals who, by virtue of overlapping and multiple group memberships, are themselves “multicultural.” This means that conflict across cultural boundaries may occur simultaneously at many different levels, not just at the higher levels of social grouping—for example, those that separate “American” from “Japanese” cultures.

As an example, consider a United Nations peacekeeping or humanitarian operation that brings together military contingents from a number of very different member nations, with international civil servants, civilian NGOs, and humanitarian aid organizations from those same nations. Add international media and the indigenous population, and one has a complex operation taking place in a complicated *multicultural* field of national, ethnic, institutional, and professional interactions. In this field, an American military officer and an American civilian aid worker may share many of the same understandings and perceptions of the world, based on shared American culture, and on many matters the ease of communication between them reflects this. However, on matters relating to security, force protection, command-and-control, or rules of engagement, the American military officer may share much more with an Indian, Pakistani, or Nigerian military colleague; and the shared premises of a transnational “military culture” will facilitate communication between them. This is the case even in the face of strictly linguistic differences that require the services of a translator. On the other hand, within the NGO community, even the English-speaking one, conflicts may arise because of differences in the organizational culture and value systems of relief workers, focused on quick response and crisis problem solving, and those of workers on the development side of aid, who have longer-term or infrastructural concerns.

Another example from cross-cultural research is that of national delegations to international treaty conferences made up of different specialists: diplomats, lawyers, scientists and engineers. Although it might be expected that differences in “national negotiating styles” will be important elements in delegates’ communication with each other, in fact for any particular issue under discussion, the scientists and engineers may more easily converse with each other “across the table” than they do with fellow nationals on their own side. What links them in this case are the shared presuppositions

of their professional subculture, resulting from the commonalities of educational, occupational, or professional socialization to careers in science or engineering.

In addition to underlining the overlapping and cross-cutting character of multicultural social relationships, what these examples of cross-cultural conflict have in common is that they highlight the effects of cultural difference on communicational competence, on mutual understanding or shared “metrics” and perceptions. Note that except in the strict sense of promoting “a failure to communicate” across cultural boundaries, the mere existence of cultural difference is not necessarily the primary cause of conflict between groups. This argues against the position taken by such scholars as Samuel Huntington, who conceptualize a post-Cold War world divided into six or seven “civilizations” (Western, Confucian, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African), destined in some way to clash with one another by virtue of their respective essential differences. (Huntington sees Islam and the West in an especially contentious relationship in the future, but the scenario he envisions basically involves “the West against the rest.”) Nevertheless, while it is important not to see cultural difference *per se* as an autonomous cause of conflict, it is the case that culture is almost always a refracting lens through which the perceptions according to which conflict is pursued are formed. (See the Branch Davidian example below for cultural differences functioning in both ways.)

This is because culture frames the contexts in which conflict occurs. It does so by indicating, among other things, what sorts of resources are subjects for competition or objects of dispute, often by postulating their high value or relative scarcity: honor here, purity there, capital and profits somewhere else. It does so also by stipulating rules (sometimes precise, usually less so) for how contests should be pursued, including when and how to begin, and when and how to end, them. It does so, finally, by providing individuals with cognitive, symbolic, and affective frameworks for interpreting the behavior and motives of others and themselves.

For instance, the scholar Raymond Cohen has written about how miscommunication can occur when even elite specialists—diplomats—must negotiate across cultural boundaries. One of his examples focuses on the Egyptian-Israeli conflict through the 1970s. He questions why, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Israeli deterrence based on large-scale use of force against Egypt for terrorist attacks emanating out of Egypt against Israel, failed to actually deter attacks. A cultural analysis revealed deep differences between Israeli and Egyptian understandings relating to violence, vengeance, and vendetta. He concluded that Israel’s use of massive force violated Egyptian understandings about culturally “appropriate” vengeance and retribution. In particular, Israelis misunderstood Egyptian conventions of appropriate “proportionality” in these matters. The “cultural logic” of Israeli deterrence was that the more disproportionate the punishment the greater the compliance. But Egyptians understood matters differently. What they regarded as highly disproportionate vengeance on Israel’s part had the effect of shaming and humiliating them, leading to a serious loss of honor in a culture where honor is deeply valued. To erase the shame and regain the lost honor, Egypt supported further attacks against Israel. The effect Israelis hoped to achieve, Egyptian compliance in stopping cross-border attacks to avoid mounting reprisals, was not achieved. Israeli action produced the opposite effect, providing Egyptians with

strong reasons to ensure their support of incursions into Israel. In this case cultural misunderstandings led to an intensification of the conflict, producing what is sometimes called a “conflict spiral.” Ultimately, this cost many lives on both sides.

Another example, also costly in human life, did not involve cultural miscommunication across overtly grand “civilizational” boundaries--linguistic, national, ethnic, or religious. In this case, all the parties spoke English to one another, and almost all them were self-identified Christians. Yet, the cultural differences separating members of the American unconventional and millennial religious community calling itself Branch Davidians from the US federal law enforcement personnel who negotiated with them fruitlessly between February 28 and April 19, 1993 outside Waco, Texas, were deep and tragically fateful. It can be said in this case that the great differences in perception and understanding of the world between the Branch Davidians and the larger American community were in some measure a cause of the conflict. Branch Davidians followed a form of Christianity that held the End of Days was close at hand; they stockpiled weapons against the coming chaos of the apocalypse, and practiced unconventional gender and familial arrangements. They also harbored a deep distrust of secular institutions like the government. Their non-standard beliefs and practices troubled some in the larger American community around them, and their possession of many weapons, some thought to be illegal, brought them to the attention of police. When US federal law enforcement agents raided the settlement in force, the Davidians reacted violently, and four federal agents, among others, were killed. Thus began a 51-day siege, during which federal law enforcement tried to negotiate a nonviolent surrender, but unsuccessfully so. On April 19, after negotiations had been stalled for weeks, a forceful entry was attempted, in the course of which the complex burned and more than one hundred people, including 21 children, died. The repercussions of this tragedy have been felt ever since in America, often expressed as continuing mistrust, hostility, and even rage, by some citizens toward the federal government. On April 19, 1995, the second anniversary of the violent end of the Waco stand-off, the federal building in Oklahoma City was bombed, before September 11, 2001, killing 168 people and injured more than 500 in the deadliest act of terrorism committed on American soil before September 11, 2001. It turned out that this was conceived as an act of vengeance, linked directly to the events at Waco.

Whatever religious differences separated the Branch Davidian community from mainstream American society and culture, when these differences erupted into open social conflict, the unsuccessful “processing” of the conflict, ending in lethal violence, was shaped primarily by the communicational difficulties bedeviling the negotiation. It was more than a matter of differences in respective “negotiation styles.” The scholar Jayne Docherty has analyzed transcripts of the negotiations between the parties and found that that they revealed, in her words, profound differences in the respective “worldviews” of both sides. Police negotiators brought their own perception of the situation to the negotiations, and presumed they could bargain instrumentally with the Branch Davidians. When they ran into difficulties, they assumed that the charismatic, but psychopathological, Branch Davidian leader, David Koresh, had “brainwashed” his followers, who were thus “irrational.” Docherty’s point is that a full understanding of Branch Davidian beliefs would lead one to see not psychopathology or irrationality but another, *alternative* rationality, a completely logical one in the world constituted by

Branch Davidian culture. Rejecting this world out of hand, and bound by the realities of their own culture and experience, FBI negotiators and Branch Davidians faced each other for almost two months across the great cognitive and moral divide of different worldviews, and managed at the end only a dialogue of the deaf that ended in death.

4. Culture, Identity, and Conflict

In the last example cited it is clear that the particular version of apocalyptic, fundamentalist Christianity that structured Branch Davidian culture and worldview did not only provide cognitive and discursive frames for interpersonal communication, but also endowed individual Branch Davidians with profoundly meaningful identities. Culture is connected to identity in two main ways. First, culture makes available a reservoir of shared symbols able to constitute collective or group identity. Secondly, because many of these symbols are invested with great affect or emotion, and since membership in certain groups is emotionally binding for individuals, such collective identity anchors individual identity. Culture, in short, links individual and collective identities, at the same time defining potential boundaries between social groups.

One set of powerful symbols illustrative of this linking process and especially relevant for understanding the relationship of culture to conflict, involves what the scholar Vamik Volkan has called “chosen traumas.” These refer to experiences of great hurt or victimization by others that are part of a group’s historical memory. These experiences come to symbolize for group members tremendous threat, fear, pain, and feelings of hopelessness. Examples include the Nazi Holocaust for Jews, New World slavery for African Americans, and the Fourteenth century Turkish defeat of Serbs in Kosovo. For analysts of conflict, such remembered traumas tender key linkages between individual and collectivity. First, they symbolize individual and group distinctiveness in emotionally compelling ways, in the course of which they provide a potential site for political mobilization. Secondly, they provide individual members of the group (and especially the elite decision-makers among them, who are sensitive to group public opinion and support), cognitive and emotional “maps” of the nature of the world (including other groups) that surrounds them. Given common effects of trauma, that world is usually perceived as hostile, uncaring, or evil—and dangerous. The mindset constituted by identities based upon chosen trauma is ripe for conflict, since one possible response to psychological trauma is agonistic, reactive aggression towards self or others.

5. Culture, Ethnicity, and Ethnic Conflict

While so-called chosen traumas are the most extreme examples of culture’s identity-constituting potential, they are not the only ones. Culture, as a source of shared symbols for making sense of the world, can constitute collective identities in more benign ways. But with whatever degree of affective intensity, culture affords symbolic resources for defining group boundaries, and within them for effecting political organization and mobilization.

When culture is “enlisted” in this way by members of social groups it most often manifests itself in the guise of *ethnicity*, and the social groups so constituted out of it are

ethnic groups. Similarly, cross-cultural conflict is in the main perceived as ethnic conflict. But “culture” and “ethnicity,” though closely related, are not the same things. Analysts of cross-cultural conflict, especially if they are oriented towards conflict resolution, must attend to the differences.

To begin with, culture refers to a much broader class of possible differences, subsuming ethnic ones. In some of the examples cited above it will be noted that soldiers, diplomats, scientists, or engineers do not necessarily need to come from different ethnic groups in order to experience intercultural communication problems with one another. Professions, institutions, or work organizations can all be sites for cultural (or subcultural) differentiation. Next, because it serves to shape peoples’ basic perceptions of their world, culture appears to individuals as a totally “natural” phenomenon—indeed, often as “common sense”—and operates cognitively well below the level of individual conscious awareness. By contrast ethnicity, when it is experienced by individuals (self or others’), usually invokes or accompanies highly conscious perceptions of difference and distinction. Ethnicity, at least to outside observers, often has a self-consciously “constructed” quality about it. Finally, ethnicity, as the cultural “content” of ethnic groups, is a resource usually mobilized by individuals and groups for political purposes.

Ethnicity utilizes bits of culture that have been “objectified” by political actors. These actors are sometimes referred to as “ethnic entrepreneurs.” The objectified bits are then projected—often performed—onto public domains, such as festivals, rituals, remembrance days, or marches. Although ethnic groups are typically constituted out of linkages among members based upon putative ties of kinship, history, language, or religion, the actual content of the cultural bits matters less than their ability to differentiate one group from another: “*We* march today, *they* do not.” An ethnic group is always defined by its boundaries. This is where culture comes in. Cultural differences between groups (religious, linguistic, racial) are enlisted to constitute these boundaries. But it takes very little “cultural content” to make of cultural difference a social boundary-marker between groups.

For example, two groups may speak virtually identical languages (so far as linguists describe them), yet use different orthographies and call their languages by different names. This is the case in the former Yugoslavia, where Serbs call the language “Serbian,” Croats call it “Croatian.” Nowadays, in Sarajevo, the language is likely to be called “Bosnian.” Another example is the supposed antiquity of certain traditions or customs that characterize ethnic groups—that is, that set them apart from other such groups. Investigating these, historians often find them to be of fairly recent origin, and sometimes outrightly invented. Nevertheless, these same traditions are believed by group members to be ancient and venerable, and partaking in them is subjectively experienced by group members as profoundly meaningful. This means that contestants typically experience ethnic conflict as cultural conflict, an important fact to remember when attempting conflict resolution. But it is equally important for analysts or practitioners not to mistake the two. Ethnic conflict may or may not be characterized by the serious communicational dissonances that characterize genuine, deep cross-cultural conflict. Serb and Croat, for example, may not experience difficulties in communication even while their conflict turns increasingly virulent. In contrast, Branch Davidian and

FBI negotiators may think that they are all Americans and Christians, speaking the same language, even members of the same ethnic group, while communication breaks down in the face of profound and consequential cultural differences.

Not only is the absolute magnitude of cultural difference almost irrelevant in the formation ethnic groups, but the nature of the difference involved can change through time or circumstance. For instance, in the nineteenth century the cultural markers that separated French-speaking from English-speaking Canadians were usually conceived as a combination of religion (francophones were Roman Catholic, anglophones predominantly Protestant) and lifestyle: francophone society was overwhelmingly rural and village-based. By the time Quebecois ethnicity developed into full-blown Quebecois nationalism and separatism, religion was no longer an attractive marker to many of the separatists for ideological reasons, and Quebecois society was substantially urbanized. By the 1970s, linguistic differences alone were made the major boundary-marker between the two groups, and French-only legislation and activism in Quebec became a major area of intra-Canadian conflict. An observer who thought she understood the “true” nature of this cross-cultural conflict in 1899 would be surprised to learn its “true” nature in 1999. Summing up the relationship between ethnicity and culture, the scholar J. D. Eller has argued that ethnic groups in conflict are fighting not *about* culture, but *with* culture. This is an important distinction to keep in mind when moving from cross-cultural conflict analysis to cross-cultural conflict resolution.

6. Cross-Cultural Conflict Resolution

With respect to conflict, the discourse of culture directs attention to problems of intercultural communication, interpretation, and the possibility of diverse metrics for decision-making. It makes analysts or practitioners aware that in dealing with conflict across cultural boundaries they are dealing with more than superficial differences in “style,” but with something foundational. It also makes them aware that in the most common “culture-type” conflicts—ethnic conflicts—they may be dealing with situations of *low* culture conflict no matter how politically intense the confrontation; contrariwise, some conflicts may appear to be “cultural” at all (that is, overtly ethnic or national in nature), but in fact are deeply cultural when examined from cognitive, communicative, or worldview perspectives.

To promote better understanding of cross-cultural conflict and better conflict resolution techniques, some scholars and practitioners have sought to develop typologies for characterizing different sorts of cultures, and by extension different kinds of intercultural communication problem areas, amenable to different types of conflict resolution procedures. Most of the research on cross-cultural conflict resolution thus far has concentrated on negotiation, rather than third party processes such as mediation or facilitation, or more specialized forms such as the problem-solving workshop. A lot of this work relies on Edward T. Hall’s seminal distinction between “high context” and “low context” communicational styles. Low context styles (and by extension, cultures) are based on instrumental, direct, and unembellished use of language, with little reliance on paralinguistic cues, such as facial expression, gesture, or body-language. High context styles (cultures), in contrast, are oriented around expressive, indirect, and nuanced language use, with high reliance on paralinguistic cues. These styles are often

correlated with individualistic (low context) versus collectivist, interdependent, or communal (high context) cultures. Occasionally they are also correlated to different basic assumptions about the nature of the conflict resolution or negotiation process: a concern with outcome or “results,” on the one hand (typical of individualistic cultures), compared to a concern with the overall “process,” that is with the maintenance of valued social relationships, on the other hand. Some researchers have investigated different cultural orientations towards risk-taking or uncertainty avoidance. Hall has also done pioneering work on cultural attitudes towards time, comparing “monochronic” cultures (time is linear and nonrepetitive, and events and social action move sequentially towards some outcome) with “polychronic” ones (time here is circular or repetitive, and events and social action occur in simultaneity towards recurring or iterative ends).

The assumption underlying all of these typologies is that when individuals from polar-opposite cultures (say, low context versus high context) interact with one another in the course of some dispute—or, as negotiators, in the course of trying to resolve a dispute—the effects of the differences are powerful enough to create communicational dissonance and misunderstanding. Some of this research has been criticized for over-simplifying or reducing culture’s richness and diversity, for assuming a greater degree of homogeneity in a culture than is warranted, or for focusing exclusively on very high levels of cultural organization, such as “national negotiating styles.” These critiques have merit, but this research remains valuable for helping analysts to begin to understand the effects of cultural difference on conflict processes, and to sensitize practitioners of conflict resolution to pay attention to some of the broader ways in which cultural difference is manifested, as well as to become aware of their own cultural categories, assumptions and presupposition about the world, and the biases these may impose.

It is not necessary to accept all the dire predictions of the “clash of civilizations” way of thinking to agree that this century will see increasing contact between individuals of different cultural orientations, in the form of higher levels of transnational interaction. For this reason it is more important than ever to understand the dynamics of cross-cultural communication so that conflicts, when they occur, can be resolved in the most effective and humane ways possible.

Glossary

- Conflict:** Competition between groups or individuals over perceived incompatible goals, scarce resources, or the power needed to acquire them.
- Culture:** Socially inherited, shared, and learned ways of living possessed by individuals by virtue of their membership in social groups.
- Ethnicity:** Selected aspects of culture used to constitute ethnic groups.
- Ethnic groups:** Social groups based upon members’ putative ties of shared ethnicity, especially around kinship, history, language, or religion.

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Biographical Sketch

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