

Diana Madibekova  
*LL.M. International and European Law Programme*  
*Faculty of Law, Administration and Economics*  
*University of Wrocław*

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY: HOW TO MAKE IT WORK?

### RÓŻNORODNOŚĆ KULTUROWA: JAK SPRAWIĆ, BY FUNKCJONOWAŁA?

#### **Summary**

In this paper the author analyzes the importance of cultural diversity in modern world. The aim of this article is to present the board issue of cultural diversity that is the subject of interest of various academic disciplines. The text is also a reflection on a question about the way in which contemporary national cultures change under the influence of global trends.

#### **Keywords**

culture, diversity, cross cultural communication, challenges, globalization

#### **Streszczenie**

W artykule autorka dokonuje analizy znaczenia i wpływu różnorodności kulturowej na współczesną cywilizację. Celem artykułu jest prezentacja szerokiego spektrum problemów związanych z różnorodnością kulturową będącą przedmiotem badań różnych dyscyplin naukowych. Artykuł stanowi próbę refleksji nad sposobami zmian współczesnej kultury pod wpływem globalnych trendów.

#### **Słowa kluczowe**

kultura, różnorodność, komunikacja międzykulturowa, wyzwania, globalizacja

## **INTRODUCTION**

The world we are living in currently is more diverse, more multicultural and constantly evolving than ever before in the history. Human beings feel the necessity of belonging to a particular grouping for various reasons. Becoming a member of the group is followed by adjusting to the internal rules of the culture and being devoted to its identity. With the movement of people from one geographical point to another, individuals from different cultural settings that come along together to perform human interaction face misinterpretation or misunderstanding of each other's behavior style. While culture is part of human personality, it may not always be the case, and may not be used as a ref-

erence to identify an individual. During a cross-cultural interaction, humans usually do not focus much on adapting to the host culture but feel the need to take pride in their native one. It is important to balance both preserving the familiar cultural identity and making effort of embracing new cultural logic for a successful intercultural conversation. The paradigm of multiculturalism cultivates a climate in which individuals from dominant and non-dominant cultures coexist as well as thrive. This article proposes a new process for managing diversity that facilitates the development of a multicultural world by offering a way of thinking that focuses on establishing discussion and action on common issues we share as members of human race, rather than of specific cultural groupings.

## **1. Definitions of Culture and Diversity**

The definition of culture has long been a controversy and the term is used within many contexts. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary culture is understood as the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group and/or the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations [Merriam Webster Dictionary (1)]. Diversity is described as the condition of having or being composed of differing elements: variety; especially: the inclusion of different types of people (such as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization programs intended to promote diversity in schools [Merriam Webster Dictionary (2)]. Stereotype: a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong [Cambridge Dictionary]. We, as humans, seek information around our environment, the world that is both near and far. While doing that, it often happens that a widely held but fixed beliefs about a particular nationality, race, religion, ethnicity or any other grouping settles in the brain regardless that those might not always be an accurate way of adopting an opinion. This starts with a very common question but one that has a predetermining definition of our judgment: “Where are you from?” Once we get an answer to it, we draw a picture in our head of who they are, what should we expect and whether we want to continue the conversation. While culture is part of human personality, it may not always be the case, and may not be used as a reference to identify an individual. During a cross-cultural interaction, humans usually do not focus much on adapting to the host culture but feel the need to take pride in their native one. It is important to balance both preserving the familiar cultural identity and making effort of embracing new cultural logic for a successful intercultural conversation. Addressing the challenges of transcultural issues is itself challenging. Values comprise ideas about the things that are important in life and they guide the rest of the manifestations of culture.

Beliefs include basic concepts, such as what is right and what is wrong, how relationship shall start, continue or terminate, etiquette of conversation with familiar and unfamiliar people, whether at social events, campus or professional environment.

## **2. Globalization, Internalization and Culture**

Global synergy is a messy process. Building multicultural teams takes longer, since more people are more up-front about more of the issues that must be dealt with if they are indeed to work together for the long term. Part of this comes from the particular problems each player is going through when dealing with the global context, which is new for most, even before they get down to dealing with each other's differences [Barnum, Gaster, 1991]. We are often not aware that our attitudes and the processes by which we reach decisions are influenced by our subconscious as well as our conscious minds. As a result, we may inadvertently take a position on a subject which is not so much a reflection of our own thoughtful processes, but more a reflection of the value systems on which we draw. Which have, in large measure, been inherited from our parents and the people with whom we grew up [Gately, Lessem, 1995]. Kilroy J. Oldster said: "We build a self-image from stored memories including a swarm of physical and social interactions, evocative emotions, and other associative experiences. Selfhood also comes from the language, symbols, and artifacts, which potent combinations create cultural beliefs. We build a self upon real as well as imaginary experiences. A person's rational and irrational beliefs forge a sense of self. The books that we read, the music we listen to, the films we watch, and what church or other social gatherings we attend constitute meaningful activities that congeal and work together to shape our sense of identity. Cultural determinants drive how we work, play, worship, and raise our children. Culture has its own sources of reinforcement that can influence members of society to adopt an interdependent, communal sense of self, or an independent, individualistic sense of self. Culture is not fate, but none of us is immune from the great octopus of culture; its tentacles touch us every direction that we turn. Our self-identity is subtly influenced by the prevailing political-social culture as well as affected by our perceived social status, economic or otherwise." [Oldster, 2016] When we all work diligently towards implementing diversity plans and ensuring that each individual feels liberated and accepted in the social, academic, professional setting, they experience a greater feeling of belongingness among themselves, free flow of ideas, variety of enriching perspectives, a collective burst of positive energy and many more. Diversity not only brings foreign and unknown cultures together but also is a platform for new and creative ideas, implementation techniques and is an added value to any development.

An increasing internationalization of campuses, companies, and communities shows that intercultural communication skills are in high need. Culture is a quality of society, not of an individual and it is acquired through the process of active socialization. Each culture is a unique set of characteristics dictating behavior in every aspect of our lives. Thus, culture can be compared to a moral law because it contains information about the society in which individuals find themselves. It provides rules about social roles, the structure of interpersonal relationships, etiquette and how everyday life should be arranged.

While it is obvious that culture is a system of particular beliefs, there are various systems too. According to Edward T. Hall who first used the term “intercultural communication” in his book, *The Silent Language*, and has been acknowledged to be the founder of the field of intercultural communication, states that culture is a guideline for social interaction, but it is only valid in the social context in which this program is internalized among its members; therefore, it is necessary to understand the other members of the global society and their program [Hall, 1976]. So that means global interconnect- edness has become of greater need than ever before in the history of a mankind. We are all members of one single system of culture but we are members of a universal system of cultures as well.

In the beginning of 1990 international relations scholars began exploring culture’s role in conflict resolution and security studies. As intercultural communication scholars John Condon and Fathi Yousef noted, “We cannot separate culture from communication, for as soon as we start to talk about one we are almost inevitably talking about the other, too” [Condon, Fathi, 1975, p. 34].

Culture is primarily a vehicle for understanding and a tool for communicating with people. The certain aspects of culture that people can observe, listen to, or talk openly about represent the explicit side of culture. An awareness or mindfulness can play a positive role in enhancing relations and communication between people. However, there is also an implicit, unspoken side of culture that cannot be always positive. Aspects of culture include language, religion, nationality, ethnicity, values, customs, family and social structures, and so the differences are vast. Being part of a culture is learned, initially from family and friends, later from widening social surroundings. Whereas there are positive sides of cultures, the main problem for intercultural communication is prejudice, a judgment made on the basis of past experience rather than an evaluation of present circumstances. In fact, prejudice can be positive or negative, but practically it is associated with negative judgments and bias. Prejudice can also be a stereotype judgment made on the basis of communicated information rather than personal experience. The solution of dealing with prejudices can be conversation which is built through language.

Language is more than just a means of communication, language is a tool for empowerment. Since communication and culture are acquired simultaneously, language can be considered the key to a culture. Every language deeply rooted in a particular culture conveys a unique representation of the world. Good argumentative points and diplomatic techniques are useless without the ability to communicate them. As there are strong differences in verbal and nonverbal communication across cultures and subcultures, language can also be an obstacle to a successful diplomatic process because of possible cross-cultural misinterpretations. As such, language skills are one of the most important tools. Edward T. Hall also differentiates the methods of communication between high and low context cultures. High context communication implies the transfer of frequent unspoken messages within communication; communication occurs through allusion, making the context of what is said as important as the content [Haslett, 1989]. Conversely, low context communication contains the exchange of all intended information through speaking; hardly anything is implied apart from what is explicitly spoken. Even if the negotiating partners use the same language, it can be difficult or even impossible to communicate the meaning and relevance of a certain word. Some words have a completely different meaning depending on the origin of the culture in which they are used; hence, it may be insufficient to simply translate them from one language to another. This different use of language can cause misunderstandings, leading to a communication gap. Shah identifies the following six stumbling blocks in cross-cultural communications and understanding [Shah, 2004]:

1. *assumption of similarities*: this might temporarily ease the discomfort of “walking on thin ice”, but it can be seriously misleading,
2. *language differences*: communication competence studies insist that knowing the language is not enough unless and until it is supported by cultural knowledge,
3. *nonverbal misinterpretations*: nonverbal messages and signals are located within cultures and patterns of behavior and, therefore, cannot be learned through mere language acquisition (e.g. a nodding implies “Yes” in many cultures but means “No” in parts of Greece),
4. *preconceptions and stereotypes*: intercultural communication takes place in the backdrop of preconceptions and stereotypes deriving from initial contacts with other cultures,
5. *tendency to evaluate*: evaluations are made in comparison with the known value systems and patterns of behavior, derived from one’s own cultural background,
6. *high anxiety*: In intercultural interaction, the participants might experience both stress and anxiety at the prospect of dealing with the “unknown.” [Shah, 2004]

Harvard Professor Akira Iriye's idea that "all international relations are intercultural relations" may be similar to the thought that all international communication is intercultural communication [Iriye, 1997]. While culture was initially seen as the inevitable cause of conflict, it is also important to note that culture may also be a valuable tool for preventing and mitigating conflict. As different cultural groups communicate differently, the culture of people who are interacting within the same setting is important to consider. Therefore, the probability of mistakes and misunderstandings increases when the interaction is cross-national [Russell, 1990]. Cultural communication in general tends to focus on understanding communication within one culture from the insiders' points of view [Gudykunst, Mody, 2002]. Thus, understanding cross-cultural communication should be a prerequisite to understanding intercultural communication and how successful cultural diversity functions.

Not only public actors, but also private citizens, everyone who is interacting in a multicultural environment should and can acquire a communication technique where words are chosen with care. Once one finds themselves within other cultural settings very different from their own, it immediately becomes a greater challenge. We may easily offend someone without even knowing it, just from using the inappropriate words. In this sense it is worthwhile to study local customs in advance. Being culturally aware does not mean not letting your opinions known, it means evaluating a situation, waiting for the right moment before speaking or acting. The modern world has become so mixed and interacted that it requires every single human being to be diplomatic and adjust to change and diversity. The interconnectedness of people is a clear proof to embracing things that are different from our usual scope of vision. Not only global leaders should encourage the values of the universally acceptable norms of international comity and courtesy, but we, as individuals shall also contribute, even in the smallest way, into building respect and trust among cultures, fostering peaceful societies and cooperating for success.

At the most fundamental level, each individual's interpretation of the world is different, but according to the groups to which people belong (national, regional, local, and professional) they share some interpretations with others [Russell, 1990]. Culture is a system of beliefs and values shared by a particular group of people, and thus, skills described below, which constitute cultural fluency, are essential to become successful global players:

1. *tolerance of ambiguity* (the ability to accept lack of clarity and to be able to deal with ambiguous situations constructively),
2. *behavior flexibility* (the ability to adapt own behavior to different requirements/situations),

3. *knowledge discovery* (the ability to acquire new knowledge in real-time communication),
4. *communicative awareness* (the ability to use communicative conventions of people from other cultural backgrounds and to modify own forms of expression correspondingly),
5. *respect for otherness* (curiosity and openness, as well as a readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about own cultures),
6. *empathy* (the ability to understand intuitively what other people think and how they feel in given situations).

When people of various cultures interact, cultural fluency is the appropriate application of respect, empathy, interest, healthy level of curiosity, moderate openness, the willingness to suspend judgment, tolerance for ambiguity, and a little bit of sense of humor.

## CONCLUSION

The possible solutions for a successful intercultural interaction, in my view, whether at workplace, academic community or social events, require three steps:

1. avoiding the human categorization based on combinations of physical traits and external looks, for e.g. assuming an African looking person to be from Ghana, Asian looking person to be from China, or Hispanic looking person to be from Mexico. Labeling someone because of their face, eye shape or skin color creates an atmosphere of imitating power over the person who is being assumed to be from a specific race. Communication is about respect and equality,
2. when meeting new person or people or entering a foreign culture, it is worth being open minded, meaning to acknowledge that our previous information about them might mislead and interrupt the process of authentic interaction. While it is unavoidable to have some sort of idea about someone from country A, because we heard some story or read the news about it, that cannot be the final judgment,
3. remembering that some people may be a part of one culture in name but not necessarily in spirit, due to many reasons, such as different upbringing in childhood, distant travels, being born in mixed family, etc. It is important to understand that sometimes an individual is not a product of the culture they are from. Being a representative of culture B does not stamp a person with the widely common known values or behavior of that culture if the person in question identifies himself or herself as an entity separate from and not influenced by it.

It is my utmost belief that cultural diversity works if each of us every day puts drop into the ocean by making effort to lessen our generalization about others. We shall all have stereotypes and general knowledge about specific cultures, of which I am convinced that some are true, however, we should never allow ourselves to make culturally inappropriate statements that might offend another person or feel incomplete about themselves just because of their external features. Within the context of understanding intercultural sensitivity and awareness, we can build a better, kinder and safer world.

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