

## The intercultural paradox <sup>1</sup>

*Evelien van Asperen*<sup>2</sup> ©

### Introduction

Man is a special creature. He is capable of being supportive, but also of being intolerant. Does culture have anything to do with this? After all, no creature can be as aggressive towards his own kind as man. We know that groups will switch alliances in order to achieve their objectives, so today's enemy can be tomorrow's friend. If Martians would invade Earth, we would very quickly come together into one united humanity. And when the Martians have been driven out, the contrasts will likely re-appear. We need contrasts in themselves as a source of inspiration. But why is one contrast inspiring, while another is destructive?

The sense of threat plays an important role in the destructive variant, evoking primary psychological reactions to danger, like fleeing and fighting. But where can you still escape to nowadays, and does fighting (in this day and age) not lead to a dead end conflict? Although primary reactions appear to have a biological origin, it is questionable whether we can afford them in view of modern threats, such as overpopulation, environmental decline, epidemics like Aids and other viral diseases, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, authoritarian capitalism and religious fundamentalism. There are no borders that can keep out these dangers. In a globalising world with increasing communication, trade and mobility, the inclination to flee and to fight won't necessarily disappear, but it is advisable to consider if these reactions actually contribute to well-being. When we do that, it is not only a question of emotion, but especially whether the achieved effect is what we had envisioned. In other words, primary reactions may well work against us. What we actually need are carefully considered (secondary) reactions. Since the end of the Cold War, culture has become an important ideological reference point and there are warnings of clashing civilisations. Tensions exist in many places in the world, sometimes below the social surface, but often with open incidents. Western media pay a lot of attention to cultural differences, particularly where Muslims and the fear of terrorism are concerned. There is a lot of anti-Americanism in the rest of the world. Intercultural problems slowly develop in all facets of societies.

There is an increasing focus on intercultural communication in the preceding societal framework sketch, as well as in relation to the need for creating good manners. Cultural differences are usually the central reference point. But research indicates that on the shop floor a definition of culture dominates, which is partly the cause of problems that should be solved through interculturalization. This intercultural paradox causes dilemmas, circular arguments and power struggles. This evokes fear and uncertainty, which in turn interferes with communication.

In this article I will use some examples to clarify the paradox, along with analyses to gain insight into the underlying mechanisms associated with the dominant culture concept. That will still not give us any standard answers to questions or problems. But it will give us a more focused approach to finding solutions, because the analysis concludes that moral reference points and a creative approach are required for a preventative and curative response.

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## 1 The intercultural paradox in a case-study

The following is a case study which illustrates the paradox. I will use this case study to provide a detailed analysis of the underlying mechanisms.

*'Jim and Paula are colleagues. Jim would like to ask Hussein to join him for a beer after work. He tells Paula that he still hasn't asked Hussein. Can I offer a Muslim a beer? Muslims don't drink alcohol, do they? Although I know some who do, but I don't know if Hussein does. That's why I keep putting it off. It's confusing. Should I just treat him the same as a Dutchman, or should I be considerate of his culture?'*

*Paula says: I don't understand why people don't adapt more if they want to live here. After all, why do they come here? But when you say that, you run the risk that they think you're discriminating.*

*Jim: yes, that's my problem too. Do I discriminate when I ask a Muslim if he wants a beer, or do I discriminate when I don't ask him?'*

*Analysis of the case study:*

Jim and Paula are struggling with the issue of how to associate with people from a different cultural background. They have both learned some things about other cultures. Although Jim is prepared to be considerate of diverse cultural habits, Paula feels that immigrants should simply adapt. To put it bluntly: Jim is using a double standard! Using a double standard triggers a new problem, namely that there is no question of equal treatment. In other words, Jim wants to *be tolerant of a different lifestyle* and he wants to *satisfy the wish for equal treatment*. Paula thinks it would be better if the 'culturally different person' would adapt. But both are aware that there is a chance they will be accused of discrimination. And that's actually not what they want. So there is no apparent solution to the problem. Their knowledge of Islam customs is not helping them in this.

And yet, the solution should be simple for Jim. Why doesn't he simply ask Hussein to join him in the café and ask him what he wants to drink? Paula is not making it easy for herself, expecting Hussein to change, to adapt. Apparently, Paula has a distinct view of immigrants and non-immigrants, in which they differ considerably from each other. Even if this (prejudice) would be true, it's still not reasonable to expect the other to adapt without inflicting (psychological) harm. So her solution is not a very solid one.

Both Jim and Paula are blocking communication because of their knowledge of other cultures and their definition of culture. That knowledge makes them more vulnerable and less creative, while that is necessary for intercultural encounters. Jim and Paula can give a good description of their dilemma, but a lot more can be said about the underlying mechanisms.

## 2. Elaboration of the analysis

Most people get satisfaction from interactions with different people. However, research (Asperen 2003/2005) indicates that interaction with 'the culturally different' is being experienced as complicated, because the interpretation is such that expectations can be different, which creates uncertainty. Many institutions and businesses are quite willing to be considerate of other cultures. And yet, intercultural contacts often create friction, in spite of previously attended intercultural communication seminars. This is not surprising when you see, in the preceding case study, the kind of dilemmas that knowledge of other cultures can conjure up.

Such resistance is not only encountered in this particular situation, but it also influences common opinions of interculturalization. Promoting tolerance of cultural differences was initially intended

to cultivate a better understanding of differences, but unfortunately it also contributes to an us-them thought and communication pattern. The term 'culture' is often associated with groups of people, such as *the* Iranians, *the* Ghanese, *the* refugees, and so on.

The same research (Asperen 2003/2005) shows that in every day life, a definition of culture has been created which is quite dominant. Over the years, science has produced hundreds of definitions of culture. However, the view on culture which is dominant in practice was based on a combination of science and sentiments during the period of decolonisation. Education and media have propagated it in society as a kind of common factor.

The definition described by respondents in the research originates from the idea that culture consists of shared values and norms of a group of people, who pass them on from one generation to the next. It would be a matter of a shared history and a connection to a specific region. Culture would largely determine a person's behaviour and outsiders would not be acquainted with a strange culture. A person is determined by his culture and should be loyal to it. An important reference point is that one is entitled to a culture of his own and that cultures are of equal value. If we would be living in a world where cultures exist separately, and everyone within each culture lives in peace, then this would be an appropriate strategy. But this image does not exist, has never existed, and has the characteristics of a delusion. In fact, culture is not much more than a way to describe existing differences and that differences are organised differently. But a culture as entity does not exist and 'culture' does not explain anything. For example, a man in the Netherlands and a man in India may exhibit a lot of similarities in their ways of thinking, but based on the dominant definition of culture they will likely describe themselves as quite different. They would call it their difference in culture, because the culture concept has become a term used to declare differences beforehand. Where culture is used in this way, it generates prejudices itself. A person is classified in a cultural category on the basis of their nationality and their looks, such as skin colour and clothing. Books or experts can teach us about other cultures, but a migrant changes under the influence of the migration process and what does general knowledge say about one specific individual? You cannot say anything about that beforehand. Knowledge of different customs and of differences in connotation offers a wider view of the world, which is important. But it does not improve communication. If people want to learn something about each other, then they will have to have an encounter and afterwards draw their conclusions from that.

Therefore in this article the encounter is vital, rather than cultural difference, along with everything associated with it: prejudices, power relationships, friendship, and so on. It may be an open encounter, there may be aggression (mental and physical) and people may avoid each other (fleeing, apparent tolerance).

Aggression and avoidance often occur on the basis of an imagined boundary between population groups. People always differ from each other and in that sense, boundaries between them will always exist. But the crux of the matter is a boundary in the sense of a barrier that is erected beforehand. Such a barrier is entrenched in opinions about cultural groups and cultural differences, based on the assumption that a strange culture cannot be understood, and that the difference is insurmountable. Such a barrier is imaginary. And as strange as it may sound, such an imaginary barrier can seriously interfere with communication.

Essayist Amin Maalouf (2000) provided this description in his essay:

'What makes me myself rather than anyone else is the very fact that I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity.

So am I half French and half Lebanese? Of course not. Identity can't be compartmentalised. You can't divide it up into halves or thirds or any other separate segments. I haven't got several identities: I've got just one, made up of many components in a mixture that is unique to me, just as other people's identity is unique to them as individuals.

Sometimes, after I've been giving a detailed account of exactly why I lay claim to all my affiliations, someone comes and pats me on the shoulder, and says, 'Of course, of course – but what do you really feel, deep down inside?'

For a long time I found this oft-repeated question amusing, but it no longer makes me smile. It seems to reflect a view of humanity which, though it is widespread, is also in my opinion dangerous. It presupposes that 'deep down inside' everyone there is just one affiliation that really matters, a kind of 'fundamental truth' about each individual, an 'essence' determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter. As if the rest, all the rest – a person's whole journey through time as a free agent; the beliefs he acquires in the course of that journey; his own individual tastes, sensibilities and affinities; in short his life itself – counted for nothing.' (pg.1-2)

So on the one hand, Amin Maalouf describes an essentialist view of culture, just like it was verbalised by respondents during my research. He calls this dangerous. And on the other hand he discusses the personal assembly of identity based on experiences and choices that a person makes. The underlying question in this case can be put like this: 'is a person his culture?' or 'is a person associated with several value systems?'

Everything indicates that people are actually associated with various value systems, but in their attempt to understand the social reality of the stranger, they make use of the dominant essentialist definition of culture. In other words, there is a definition of culture that does not agree with what is happening in practice. When definition and reality do not correspond, then paradoxical situations are created due to internal contradictions. Although a paradoxical message does not have any logical meaning, it does have an effect. Because there is a message that needs to be satisfied, and yet on the basis of the same message, it should not be (Watzlawick et al. 1976). It is therefore not a real contradiction, but an apparent contradiction that stems from the difference between theory and everyday reality.

If we return to Jim's situation, then it is impossible to be considerate of someone else's culture, while at the same time giving that person equal treatment (like non-immigrants). The effect of such a message is that all approaches are wrong. In this case Jim can be accused of discriminating, either because he is not considerate of Hussein's culture, or because he does not give him equal treatment. So even if a paradoxical message is illogical and in fact meaningless, there is certainly an effect, namely the dilemma that Jim describes. He feels powerless and therefore delays the invitation.

According to Maalouf, Paula's idea about adapting is impossible. Any person may be able to change, but a complete assimilation (including one based on personal choice) can eventually lead to psychological damage, partly because the past is temporarily considered to be worthless. But why would you want people to adapt? Isn't Paula assuming beforehand that everything about the other person is inferior to her culture and doesn't she thereby exclude the option to learn from the 'culturally different'? In her thinking she is already doing that and is sending a paradoxical message with her demand to adapt. Adaptation cannot be demanded. In addition, such a demand is humiliating, because no value is attached to the other person. Adapting can only come from within a person, and only when the new environment is being experienced as positive, friendly and inviting. Moreover, her message is also truly contradictory. The other has to *learn* to adapt, yet she claims that she cannot *learn* anything from the 'culturally different'. Paula is taking a one-sided approach and practice tells us that one-sidedness does not work. Integration is possible, but only when it is viewed as a reciprocal (bilateral) approach, with

interest in each other, where we learn from each other and where we search together for creative solutions when problems occur.

### 3 The mechanisms of the paradox

#### 3.1 Stereotypes and generalisations

As long as the dominant culture concept has the upper hand, the question will always be ‘who should adapt to whom?’ It’s as if there is no alternative but to choose between one culture and another. This culture concept creates stereotypes and generalisations. Everyone has his own life story and is basically capable of thinking about himself and social situations. But that view of man is not a consideration in this definition, because he is determined by his culture. Stereotypes which are considered self-evident tend to affirm themselves, however. In the Netherlands that can be seen in the establishment of black and white neighbourhoods and schools. But meanwhile all these different people also run into each other: in the marketplace, at work and in the health care system. The stereotypes promote generalised statements. Pakistanis supposedly don’t eat pork or drink alcohol, people from the Caribbean are viewed as criminals, and refugees are considered profiteers of ‘our’ prosperity. This creates a strange situation when a Pakistani orders a beer and a ham sandwich. Because of these stereotypes, the ‘non-criminal’ people from the Caribbean are outside of our view and the heavily traumatised refugee does not feel acknowledged after all the horrors he has experienced.

Of course there are also people who offer a counterbalance by standing up for migrants. But this will also happen frequently in us-them statements, like: “Dutch people exclude migrants and migrants can teach us the real meaning of hospitality.’ In this case there is a positive image of migrants, possibly even exotic, but it is also a stereotype.

A complicating factor is that marginalised groups largely consist of migrants. This is an invitation to discuss migrants, but again, the question is whether the name is justified. Is ‘being a migrant’ the problem or is marginalisation? When people are constantly reminded by stereotypical views of culture, of who they are and of their status as marginalised people, then it becomes increasingly difficult to escape from that. Because of the way it is being talked about, they get pushed back every time. Stereotypical views can therefore lead to a self-fulfilling prophesy. That’s why many a migrant will grumble about having to prove himself twice.

#### 3.2 Who is right?

Another important question is this one: ‘how do you determine who is right when values clash?’ This question is directly related to the reference point that cultures are of equal value. But how can equal value be determined? How do you measure that? And is it in fact an important question? The effect of the reference point ‘equal value’ in any case is that it leads to a power vacuum, eventually resulting in a struggle for the right of the strongest. Here too, it would be a delusion to think that cultural equality exists, either economically, politically or morally. So here too, the paradoxical character of the dominant culture concept rules.

What happens when values clash? The real question is: who has the power? But how does it work, exactly? The basis of the dominant culture concept is that every man is entitled to his culture. But the right to one’s ‘own’ culture also gives the right to ethnocentrism, the *focusing* on one’s own culture. In addition, the culture concept demands tolerance for other cultures. This also leads to tolerance for intolerance, such as ethnocentrism. The emancipation of minorities can at times impede the emancipation of their women. *The essence of the intercultural paradox is now that one cannot be tolerant and ethnocentric at the same time.* As long as you remain at a

distance and clashing values are of no direct concern, then it is not difficult to avoid the conflict and to be (or to appear) tolerant. But if you are involved, you easily fall back on your own cultural values. Based on the dominant culture concept, people with different cultures will sooner or later be facing each other. This means that in order to escape from the intercultural paradox, we must be prepared to deal with this culture concept itself, because it is the cause of the paradox. The question 'is a person his culture?' or 'is a person associated with several value systems?' is in that case a logical step. The complex present-day society demands a different attitude towards the culture concept.

Because 'culture' is such an abstract concept, many assertions are made about culture that are improbable or ideological. Some examples of critical propositions about the culture concept:

- Cultures are not naturally just in all their aspects.
- Cultures have their blind spots, like people, and it is instructive when outsiders point that out.
- Instead of loyalty and cultural identity, co-operation and coexistence should be considered essential (for more critical propositions, see Asperen 2003/2005).

### *3.3 Illogical claims and a human attitude*

Recent research (Asperen 2003/2005) investigated how people would react when they get into a cultural conflict. The following problem was taken from this research, but it has been modified slightly.

'Just suppose, a newly arrived migrant starts work in a factory. Together with about six men and five women in his section, he is working on a single component of the production process. He behaves friendly towards his male colleagues, but he prefers not to talk to the women and when he says something, it is short and he may add a snarl. The women in his section find it peculiar and one of them would like to bring up the subject for discussion, because it spoils the team spirit. She asks him why his reactions to the female colleagues are so short and snarly. He replies that this kind of work is men's work in his culture; that's just how my culture is.'

The question to the respondent in this research was: 'How would you advise this woman to respond?' In summary, about half of the 65 respondents would recommend consideration for the man's culture and to leave him alone. The other half thought that the man should quickly get used to the way things work in this country. One respondent wanted to enter into discussions with the man about his opinion of female colleagues in the workplace.

When the same question was posed to people who are in fact facing this problem, it became apparent that for them it was a real conundrum and that, with one exception, they were not prepared to be considerate or to allow him the time to get used to it.

This reaction demonstrates that the closer a person is to a problem situation, the more he is likely to revert to his own norm. If the discussion could be held on the culture concept itself, then it might shed a different light on the situation. However, it's not yet very common to react to the statement 'that's just how my culture is' with: 'and what do you mean with that?'

And there are more examples. How do you explain to a refugee how the Dutch health care system functions? In a health centre, something was found on a child that required further examination. The doctor at the health centre referred the child to the family doctor. The family doctor subsequently referred the child to the hospital. As a consequence, the parents of the child were wondering if they were being discriminated against. Why weren't they referred to the hospital immediately? Afterwards, the doctor of the health centre could not really explain this himself either. That's how the system works, although it's not logical. The health centre doctor understood that the parents had their reservations about the course of events. In this case there is

not a single reason to remain loyal to the 'Dutch system'. Shared criticism can actually create a bond.

The interesting thing about intercultural encounters is that self-evidences, like the way a health care system works, become apparent. That is a great advantage and can be quite educational. However, in many instances the intercultural paradox generates a negative process. It restrains people from entering into an open encounter, or people feel forced to remain loyal to their 'own' system at any cost. Although these people are usually not aware of the intercultural paradox, they are experiencing its consequences, creating in advance a fear for dilemmas and therefore for intercultural encounters.

Those who know about the intercultural paradox must be aware that the paradox presents itself in all kinds of forms, every time demanding a new effort to understand it. There are also many statements that are unanswerable. The standard example is 'that's just how my culture is', which is the argument that the new migrant used in the factory, when he had a hard time with female colleagues. This reaction may stem from force of habit, but may also be from helplessness (I don't want it this way, but my environment demands it).

At least try to understand that the transition from one society to another is accompanied by insecurity. Show some understanding for that. Explain your own views on this and possibly ask your colleagues to do the same. Tell him that women have gained rights in this country, so that they can work alongside male colleagues in a factory. It's the insecurity that can lead to reticence and ethnocentrism. Show him that you're prepared to continue discussing this subject in a healthy atmosphere, but that his behaviour is conspicuous and has a negative effect on co-operation. This reaction from the woman is no guarantee for a better relationship between him and the female employees, but there is a better chance that it will. After all, she is making contact with him, which in itself can have positive results.

And to return briefly to the case of Jim and Paula: it became apparent that they were thinking about this themselves especially and were stuck in the vicious circle of their dilemma. Asking questions and providing answers are the ingredients for an intercultural encounter, also at a meta-level. On a meta-level you can discuss why someone reacts the way he does, you talk about the way a discussion progresses and you can make suggestions for a different way to interact. That brings us to the explanation of why the dominant culture concept has become dominant.

#### **4 Examining the dominant culture concept**

In previous paragraphs, the idea has already been expressed that thoughts of culture and diversity in this day and age require a different meaning. But that's easier said than done, when the current culture concept is considered to be self-evident. It's even considered to be an essential foundation of humanity. How can you tinker with that? However, my position is that there is a lot more diversity than just cultural diversity and in my theory, the unique person is central. The dominant culture concept is related to the notion which is called 'cultural relativism' (based on the belief in equal cultures; see for example, Herskovits 1972). Cultural relativism is in itself ambiguous, as it is based on an *absolute* culture concept. But why would cultural relativism itself not be relative? After all, the culture concept has meant many things through the centuries (historical relativism).

##### *4.1 History of the culture concept*

In ancient Greece, culture was considered to be something that could be used to elevate oneself because of a special talent, for example in philosophy or art. During the Middle Ages, culture referred to the lifestyle of nobility. After the French Revolution, after the elimination of the aristocracy, culture was tied to the European citizen (The Enlightenment). During that period, an

evolutionistic world view surfaced, in which the development of populations was regarded as a sequence of stages in the same development process. Mankind everywhere started as hunters and gatherers, followed by farming communities and commercial centres, and finally everyone should arrive at the top: i.e. the European citizen. Except that development did not take place at the same rate everywhere. This view, which was predominant during the colonial era, considered the inhabitants of the colonies to be primitive and barbarian. It was a reason for missions to educate them in the ways of European civilisation (Lemaire 1976; Procee 1997).

During that same period, a different development took place, where culture was something that the population should submit to and should be grateful for (Romanticism); man is just a little peg on a big wheel.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, another change took place. The colonies did not fare so well and sociologists were sent out to conduct a population census, aimed at improving control. However, there were problems with the counting, because individuals frequently switched between tribes (Breemen 1995). Sociologists therefore decided to live among the people and were surprised to discover that these societies had their own structure (this is the beginning of anthropology). They concluded that these were in fact cultures. As a result, a gradual change took place from an evolutionistic view of the world, to a cultural relativistic world view, which had its peak during the 1970's. It supported the decolonisation process and through decolonisation it spread and was embraced all over the world. This vision substantiated the necessity to withdraw from colonised regions and it condemned exploitation and slavery.

During the 1970's, in addition to the peak of decolonisation, yet another development took place. Economic prosperity in Western Europe was creating a large demand for migrant workers. The then poor guest workers from the Mediterranean regions came to wealthy Europe in large numbers to find unskilled work. Although the intent was that they would return to their own countries, Turkish and Moroccan migrants did not. They still did not have a future in their own countries, due to poverty, and therefore applied for family reunion in the Netherlands. The result was that large groups of migrants took up permanent residence in the Netherlands. They were followed by residents from Surinam, when Surinam became independent, and particularly after the end of the Cold War, by refugees from all over the world.

#### *4.2 The role of sociologists at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

Sociologists were asked how to approach the new situation in the Netherlands. The sociologists who were new to this question, borrowed (without question) from the relativistic culture concept that was developed by anthropologists during the period of decolonisation (see also van Binsbergen, 1999).

However, decolonisation and the multicultural society are two completely different situations. Although it was humanly speaking understandable to bring the interference of colonials to an end during decolonisation, a multicultural society will greatly benefit from closer contact and mutual deliberation. There is a struggle till this very day, because the culture concept does not provide a framework for debate; on the contrary, it generates the intercultural paradox.

In the context of the multicultural society, I prefer to call cultural relativism an intercultural ideology, in order to continue to validate cultural relativism during decolonisation. The changes that the culture concept has undergone through the centuries demonstrate that the culture concept is partly dependent on historical context. But once we become aware of the intercultural paradox, it becomes a matter of choice.

Revitalisation of society will therefore require a different way of thinking about culture and diversity. A debate about the currently dominant culture concept will be needed to initiate this revitalisation. Such a debate is comparable to the change from an evolutionistic view of the world, to a relativistic view of the world. Decolonisation was the reason at that time, while the

reference point now is the diverse society. Comparing cultural phenomena remains interesting, but it does not offer any solutions for intercultural problems.

Besides, as we have seen, ethnocentrism has not been eliminated by the intercultural ideology. After the attacks in the USA on September 11, 2001, we saw that previously tolerant Holland suddenly changed into a country demanding migrants to adapt. This transformation could easily occur, because tolerance (avoidance) and the demand to adapt (ethnocentrism) are both based on the same reference points. It only required a change from one variant of the ideology (avoidance / tolerance: hereafter called relativism) to the other (demanding ethnocentrism: hereafter called monism) (Asperen 2003/2005).

## **5 Ideology and an alternative**

The kind of solutions being discussed here cannot be found at the cultural level, but at a super-cultural or moral level, otherwise known as meta-level. Something like it already exists, but it is frequently under attack since it is supposedly one-sided (western). I am referring to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which entitles individuals to speak for themselves and to arrange their lives as they please, albeit in an environment where everyone has that right. Deliberation and co-operation are indispensable for survival. Manners, habits and traditions are in themselves no guarantee for humanity and justice, and therefore they need to be tested against the Rights. 'Communicative moral universalism' is the name I have given to this alternative based on encounters and human rights. The Declaration also specifies the right to culture and the right to religion, as long as it does not harm anyone.

The ultimate test for the tenability of The Rights is to ask people which rights they feel do not apply to them. In practice it is evident that those who do not agree with it usually relate it to others: dictators for their subjects, men for their wives, non-immigrants for migrants, and so on.

### *5.1 Analysis framework for diversity*




In order to clarify all of this, I have developed an analytical framework of views on diversity (Asperen 2003/2005). This framework includes a mix of visions and attitudes as reaction types and they are represented by more or less common remarks. It is a resource for self-reflection, analysis of interactions and for reviewing policies and theories. The vertical component of the framework has a clarifying function: it is about views of the world, visions of culture and diversity, and view of man. Horizontally it represents several reaction types or attitudes: 'monism', 'relativism' and 'communicative moral universalism'. The objective of the framework is to promote critical analyses.

Monism (starting from one's own view of the world) and relativism (understanding behaviour from the point of view that the world consists of cultures of equal value), are indicated as two attitudes based on *the* intercultural ideology. Communicative moral universalism is based on unique individuals, encounters, dialogue and universal values, and with its reactions it offers an alternative to the intercultural ideology.

The classification in the framework is theoretical. Reality is much more complex. It is exactly the simplicity of the framework that can assist in bringing insight in practical situations. In reality people may frequently modify their vision. That can even occur within a single discussion, depending on the course of the discussion and as a consequence of the feeling of security that one may experience during the discussion. Someone once related that she would prefer to base her reaction on the third vision, but that she moves to the first or second vision when she feels uneasy or threatened.



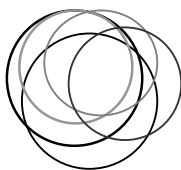
The framework in its entirety is very important for reflection, because such feelings of threat can happen anytime. It is never advisable to be guided strictly by feelings. Primary reactions to fear, such as avoidance (escaping) and aggression (fighting), can be transformed into carefully considered secondary reactions that serve the interests of everyone involved. The bottom line is that there is an active search for the right balance between one's own wishes and those of others. To attain that goal, super-cultural values are required, along with a communicative attitude. The entire analytical framework of views on diversity supports reflection of any kind.

### Analytical Framework of Diversity

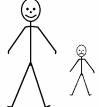
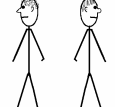

Intercultural ideology		Alternative
Views of the world:		
1. MONISM	2. RELATIVISM	3. COMMUNICATIVE MORAL UNIVERSALISM*)
		
Only <b>one single view of the world</b> can be correct:  It's either yours or mine, but actually it's <b>mine</b> .	The world consists of cultures of equal value.  Cultural views of the world can only be understood from inside that culture.  We allow each other <b>freedom</b> .	Diverse views of the world are possible. <b>Discussions</b> on diversity are crucial.  Universal fundamental values dictate that nobody has the right to exclude another.  There is a continuous search for a balance between dependence and autonomy.

\*) Vertical stripes symbolise different views of the world. Horizontal stripes symbolise universal fundamental rights.

#### Views on culture and diversity:

1. MONISM	2. RELATIVISM	3. COMMUNICATIVE MORAL UNIVERSALISM
		
There is only one civilisation.  Other cultures are primitive or backward.	Culture is determinant for people.  Cultures are completely separated phenomena.  Cultures are of equal value.	Every person is unique.  Cultural events, connotations and relationships are modified as a result of a continuous process of human interaction.

#### Views of Man:

1. MONISM	2. RELATIVISM	3. COMMUNICATIVE MORAL UNIVERSALISM
		
We are more competent than they are.  They are less competent than we are.  We should tell them how things are done.  (Us versus them)	A person is determined (by his culture).  A person is determined, and thus cannot be held responsible.  A person is shaped in the first years of life.  (us versus them)	Depending on circumstances, every person has some degree of free choice.  A person is responsible for his own behaviour and is in that sense also responsible for the greater community.  Persons are capable of change.  (all of us together)

## 5.2 *Some examples and applications*

### 5.2.1 *Influence of the ideology*

An example of a female teacher, Carla, who is guided by the intercultural ideology:

Carla says that she recognises her attitude in the framework, specifically reaction type 2. She relates that an 11-year-old Turkish boy, Tankir, is picked up by his mother and his 14-year-old sister. The bell has rung and Tankir still has to do his chores after class: clean the board and sweep the classroom floor. The mother tells his sister: 'you sweep the floor, that's not for boys'. Carla was so stunned that she didn't know how to react and therefore did not do anything. She shuts up and afterwards she is really angry about it. 'How could I go against that? Turks obviously have different customs and I should respect that. I can't just bluntly tell the mother that he should do it.'

Carla is prejudiced by the cultural standard and her dilemma is caused by switching between relativism and monism. For that reason the most obvious solution does not occur to her, namely to explain why children in the classroom are jointly responsible for cleaning the classroom. She could have explained that all children therefore take turns in doing chores after class and that this prepares them for a society where it is *important* that everyone is responsible for his environment. 'That is the objective of the chore-rotation system. Isn't that a good idea?' So Carla could have started by emphasizing responsibility. If Tankir's mother would enter into discussions with her, and some trust is created, then they might even discuss the importance of men learning household tasks.

### 5.2.2 *A comparative application*

An example about a refugee patient visiting a family doctor:

A refugee tells his doctor that he frequently suffers from headaches. The doctor explains that this is a common occurrence in his situation, that the patient doesn't have to worry and that he will write him a prescription for his pain. After several consultations the patient asks his doctor why he never examines his head.

Doctor A laughs politely and says: I don't need to look at it. How do you feel beside that?

Doctor B asks: 'Do doctors in your culture do that?' (and he thinks: why would that doctor do that?).

Doctor C asks his patient: 'Is there something you want me to look at, something specific, a swelling or so? Or do you want me to just do a general examination? I will also take a look at how your muscles function. How far can you turn your head? And when I press here (in the neck), does it hurt?'

Doctor A is focused on the medical model he was taught (medical monism) and rejects the patient's question, whereby he also rejects a vital opportunity to make contact. In fact he forces his model on the patient and leaves no room for ideas or wishes from the patient.

Doctor B is not really sure what he should base his reaction on. He has the feeling he needs to do something, but is not sure what; he comes across as doubtful and clumsy. He won't generate much trust.

Doctor C takes the patient's remark quite seriously and thereby the patient's interests.

Together with his client he tries to determine the root of the question and thereby opens the

door to contact so that trust can develop. This in itself is a precondition for the success of a treatment.

The patient can simply ask this question because it seems logical to him that his head will be examined. It is also possible that the root of the problem is indeed some muscle ailment. Perhaps the patient intends to get the doctor to discover scars that are the consequence of mistreatment during his period of incarceration, thereby looking for a way to start discussing his traumatic experience, or to have it acknowledged.

### *5.2.3 Creativity*

In the following case-study, co-operation on environmental problems is central, based on a creative approach (the alternative). Derived from an article by Boersma (Focaal 35, 2000, pp.89-111):

Debating environmental problems and negotiating environmental objectives between countries can stall on the basis of several underlying ways of thinking about, for example, the concepts of time and future. If these underlying ways of thinking don't become explicit, then the result may be time-consuming reasoning in circles, yielding nothing.

People in the western world tend to consider time and future to be linear, while for example in India people think about time and future in a circular fashion: occurrence and recurrence. To solve this predicament, Boersema develops a model in which linear thinking and circular thinking are complementary, which opens the way to communication about environmental problems. His model has the shape of a spiral, in which linear and circular thinking are interwoven.

Another case where creativity is central:

After an examination in relation to stomach- and headaches, in which no physical anomalies are found, the family doctor refers a Congolese woman to a psychotherapist. After a few conversations the woman says she is troubled by the ghost of her deceased sister. The sister passed away several months ago and she feels guilty that she was not at the funeral and did not perform any rituals. Instead of being at her wit's end, the social worker puts her at ease by telling her that her sister is sure to understand that she was not at the funeral, but that maybe she should still perform a mourning ritual. While talking through this they get the idea to put a candle near a photograph of the sister, to sprinkle some perfume that the woman got from her sister, and to sing a song that they used to sing together. She said she would do this once a day.

Afterwards the woman tells how the ritual had restored the connection with her sister and that after some time the complaints diminished.

## 6 Summary of the three attitude types

The following is a summary of the characteristics of the three reaction types in the framework.

### 6.1 A monistic attitude

Someone with a monistic attitude will consider someone from a different culture to be unequal, which will hamper a real interpersonal encounter. There is no basis for making contact because of a strong us-them feeling, us-them thinking and us-them actions. The connection that a monist feels with his own (us-) group is in fact an illusory connection. He projects himself on the members of his own group and believes to have a common foundation with them, which is actually much more diverse than he realises. He considers the others (them) to be different. If the monist is a member of a dominant group, he'll be inclined to consider the others as inferior. If he is a member of a minority group, then he may be inclined to see himself as inferior.

Someone with a monistic predisposition may have good intentions to help other people, but is not capable to help find ways that are compatible with the others. He wants to teach the others his own way. Xenophobia, or fear of that which is foreign or strange, is an example of extreme monism. A xenophobic person likewise projects himself on the members of his own group, but at the same time he projects his fears on other groups.

### 6.2 A relativistic attitude

Someone with a relativistic attitude is inclined to consider a person from another culture as exotic, which is also an impediment to a real encounter. A relativist also thinks in groups, like 'us' and 'them', but views the other group as unreachable beforehand. A 'relativist' remains an outsider in the encounter. He observes and signals, but in reality cannot do anything with it according to his own thoughts and senses, so that a real encounter does not happen.

Out of respect for the unfamiliar, well-intentioned 'relativists' do not want to risk intervening in the other person's peculiarities. Using the motto 'how can I judge that?' they avoid every confrontation. These people do not take an assertive position and this lack of a critical attitude generates a kind of *laissez faire* attitude, which creates a lot of uncertainty. This uncertainty exists especially for themselves. Their interest in other cultures is restricted to non-binding situations, such as books or vacations. In (workplace) relationships, it is particularly those with a relativistic predisposition who use culture as an excuse not to make contact.

### 6.3 A communicative moral universalistic attitude

Someone with this attitude will consider a person from another culture as a fellow human being, from whom he distinguishes himself like all other people. This attitude has the biggest chance of achieving a real encounter. Within this encounter it is possible to make mistakes in the contact without attributing the cause to cultural differences and breaking contact because of a small miscue. Someone with a communicative moral universalistic predisposition will try it again, because he realises that coexistence is a matter of trying *together*, exploring *together* and building *together*.

A communicative moral universalistic attitude allows someone to view another person as one who is organised differently than himself, and to realise that he never knows exactly how the other person thinks or feels. That's where the respect for the other person lies: the acceptance of being different, without tolerating everything. Someone with this attitude therefore takes an assertive, critical and unassuming position. This critical attitude is in his own interest, as well as in the interest of the other person. He realises that it will only work if you work together. With his critical attitude he shows that he is not finding fault with the other person, but is instead

taking him seriously by asking critical and compounding questions. It is exactly the 'not knowing' and the exploring together which makes an encounter possible. But what's to be done when a sympathetic approach does not work at all and real friction occurs, in other words, a conflict escalates in a destructive manner?

## 7 Conflict

A question in the introduction asked whether culture plays a role in creating intolerance. For example, are there certain cultures that are less tolerant than others? Here too, it holds that not everyone from the same culture will have the same opinions. Reading novels from various countries will give one some idea of this.

No single society respects human rights for 100%. Sometimes they are not accepted at the government level. Situations exist where mutilation is part of certain traditions, like in the case of circumcision of girls. In spite of governments prohibiting this custom by law, it is a tradition that is difficult to eradicate. Authoritarian, aggressive regimes exist, where inhumane actions against their own people take place. In some countries, women are *legal* property of men; first of their father, later their husband, and when the husband dies, the brother of the husband. People slaughter each other in wars, civil wars and terrorist attacks.

Conflicts are necessary, but only if they don't lead to violence. They may make people think, or even inspire them. Prevention of violence has been discussed extensively in previous paragraphs. Following this will be a discussion of out of control (violent) conflicts. Generally, two approaches can be distinguished.

### 7.1 Culturalistic approaches

The influential American Huntington (1996) discusses the clash of civilisations. He states that people desire culture more than anything. He predicts that cultural clashes will increase. Because culture is so important for people they should be proud of their culture; if they are not, they should become proud. This is a requirement for the preservation of culture. And, according to Huntington, culture is a precondition for survival.

If culture is a precondition for survival and every culture strives to strengthen itself, then a situation is created where stronger cultures will start to dominate other cultures. In the most favourable circumstances a situation of co-existence is created, but this situation will be unstable due to mutual distrust. A comparable situation is the Cold War (1946-1989). If the situation becomes unbalanced, then the risk of a destructive or violent conflict increases. Huntington's theory is based on a win-lose theory.

Another critical question for Huntington's theory is: who determines what the culture is? This is again the question of power. Decisions about culture are generally not made democratically. In this vision, a people must radiate strength as a whole, and such an interpretation of culture naturally demands loyalty. Culture is generated especially by influential individuals. A call for strengthening the culture can therefore entail a submission to power. Huntington's theory undermines personal responsibility. Culture and democracy can be at odds with each other. One of the threats to the present-day globalising world comes from an authoritarian capitalism and a coercive consumerism which is based on market forces. Democracy and the ideology of market forces, where the latter is considered to be an independent and self-evident system, are in conflict with each other. In the case of religious fundamentalist tendencies, the belief in a divine power also functions as an independent system. Power is attached to independent systems in the fields of cultures, markets and religions, such that human responsibility goes out of sight. The lack of criticism of these *dehumanised* systems is dangerous. Huntington doesn't take that into consideration.

## 7.2 *A pragmatic approach to problems*

There are other researchers and philosophers, such as Galtung (e.g. 1996) and Ellis (2003), who don't agree with Huntington either. They state that culture or ethnicity is used to legitimise the parties in a conflict, but the conflicts themselves have other causes, for example, insufficient opportunities for a decent existence, or a fundamental lack of recognition. Material poverty and humiliation play a role in this. For example, inadequate employment, shortage of agricultural lands or energy resources, a one-sided or lop-sided balance of power, social neglect and insufficient opportunities for a solid infrastructure, such as the lack of access to a harbour. Ellis also believes that conflicts develop on the basis of concrete problems. He sees cultural or ethnic contrasts as an aid to organise the feuding parties. Due to the increasing means of communication, negative propaganda - defaming the enemy - is a powerful and hard to control weapon. In a developing conflict, the images of the enemy become increasingly stereotypical and negative. Someone who is not sure which side he belongs to, is forced to choose. Those who don't choose sides risk accusations of being weak, or a coward, and to be treated as deserters. During the Balkan war in the 1990's we saw that mixed Bosnian-Serbian marriages experienced extra pressures, because they were married to the enemy. The result was a large number of divorces. A few 'mixed' couples chose each other and attempted to flee abroad. According to Ellis, a conflict is therefore not solved simply by discussing the cause of the conflict, but to discuss much more, such as concrete problems, the existing structure that impedes change and above all, the significance attributed to culture, ethnicity or religion, specifically in legitimising the conflicting parties. The main point here is the thinking in terms of *us* and *them*.

Us-them thinking does not always have to lead to war, but every war started with this somewhere along the way.

According to Galtung, people can survive with minimal means, but the situation changes when they do not have access to means that are accessible to others. This could be about a scarce water supply that is drained off upstream for agriculture, thereby creating a shortage of water in the lower-lying regions. But it could also be about access to schools, discos, jobs or optimal health care.

## 7.3 *Reflection on the approaches*

We are discussing really nasty problems here. Huntington could be right in the end if people continue to hold on to their culture: in his opinion, 'a person is his culture'. After all, according to Huntington, culture is a precondition for survival. Are people willing to risk a clash of civilisations and are they prepared to defend their culture? As long as the thinking remains culturalistic, the answer is probably yes. Culturalism can be considered a modern variant of nationalism, which easily declares another culture to be the enemy. Just consider the statement by president Bush about his war against terrorism: 'You are either with us, or against us!' But according to Ellis, practical problems are the issue (for example, access to energy resources), and they can be resolved. In his opinion, culture or religion which is used to legitimise feuding parties (like Muslims and Americans) is a symptom that must be opened for discussion. In addition to culturalism, Galtung also recognises tunnel vision in the feuding parties. After extensive analysis of the problems, he concentrates particularly on unexpected and creative solutions. All this in dialogue with those involved, where he attempts to break through the tunnel vision.

In view of my own theory of interculturalization and the necessity for further development of the culture and communication concept which is more relevant to the present, it has likely become evident that I consider Huntington much too culturalistic. But that does not alter the fact that mankind must choose an alternative direction, where culturalism will have to become less self-evident through intensive discussions on that topic. If that doesn't happen, then Huntington will likely be proven right. Not because there is no other way, but because culturalism is in fact a tunnel vision as well and there are many people that are stuck in that tunnel.

I agree with Ellis' vision, that, initially, problems always develop on a concrete level and only in a later stage does culture begin to play a more independent role in the propaganda surrounding the feuding parties. But above all, the way in which a conflict will develop is partly dependent on people's willingness to consider the role that they assign to culture during the development of the conflict. This is a matter of knowledge and choice, which can be supported by knowledge of the historical development of the culture concept and it means practice in looking for creative solutions. This is a task for the education system, to start with this as early as possible. Galtung states that people who have lived in regions of conflict for years, such as the Palestinians, have told him in discussions that they would like peace. During his attempts to mediate he puts a lot of emphasis on dialogue. His reference point is that people must make individual choices for solutions, otherwise it won't work. Neutral mediators, outsiders, may offer support with the development of creative ideas to accomplish that.

When a conflict has finally been resolved, with or without mediation, then it becomes important to provide after-care. After-care needs to be discussed at the mediation table. After the abolition of Apartheid in South Africa, truth commissions were established, where people could verbalise their suffering and perpetrators could confess. And quite frequently it was discovered that people were both victim and perpetrator.

## 8 Conclusions

To use cultural differences as reference point for interculturalization, resulting in the intercultural paradox and all related consequences, does not appear to be a good way to tackle problems constructively. A new attitude towards culture, or rather diversity, is absolutely necessary. Culturalism has to be fought against. It's a matter of life and death. Instead of submitting to power, it is necessary to submit to humanity, justice and creativity. This is about a permanent search for ways to co-operate, with attention for (self-) reflection in relation to the individual and society.

[For information about schooling and consultations based on this theory (*the Diavers Method*), see [www.pharos.nl](http://www.pharos.nl) and [www.diavers.nl](http://www.diavers.nl)]

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