

# Free essay on culture and conflict

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Culture has several different meanings, its definition is not limited to ones appreciation of food, music, art, language and literature. For some, culture refers to heritage or ethnic origin. One may also identify another's culture based on physical features. However, culture is more than just what meets the eye. There is a deeper context of culture that people need to understand in order to see the world in a wider and meaningful perspective. Culture is something that human use as a tool to survive and survival is determined by how people of different cultures adapt to the changes. This is because culture moves constantly with the changes in its environment. The lack of deeper knowledge of culture's context and diversity would make it easily lost because culture exists only in human minds (O'Neil, 2006). Therefore, culture is part of human nature and its diversity is a variation of human nature, which is distinguished by common habits and belief. Habitat for example can distinguish cultural differences owed from environmental variation. It means solving adaptation to change problems differ from place to place. Thus, cultural variation exist not because humans have different mind designs, but largely because of the difference in human habitat's history and resources (Sugiyama, 2002, p. 383).

Understanding cultural variation is not as simple as differentiating a Louis Vuitton bag from a Gucci. Although they are both luxury brand bags, there are several elements that differentiates them from one another. The same can be said on the discussion about cultural variation, even if it's synonymously about culture there are several elements that needs to be dissected in order to distinguish the difference. The most effective way of identifying and describing the different worldviews on cultural variation is by

looking at its models. There are several model of cultural variation, but only few are considered useful.

## **Models of Cultural Variation**

Understanding cultural differences is a daunting task, but it is important in many ways because it is tied up with communication and conflict. It is apparent that miscommunication and misunderstandings eventually lead to conflicts. Therefore, effective communication is the best solution to resolve conflict before it further escalates (LeBaron, 2003). Having said that, understanding cultural variation involves examining the models that describes it and one of the most effective tool is the high and low context communication. This tool refers to the degree of the speaker's reliance on factors apart from speech in order to convey meanings (E. Hall as cited from LeBaron, 2003). Edward T. Hall developed the communication tool and suggests that communication is differentiated by the degree of dependence. Therefore, it can be classified into two categories namely the high-context and the low-context. Field dependence by definition refers to the degree of things surrounding the communication process that has a direct impact its meaning. A good example of that is when a child was requested to sit down, it may be clear and simple to the child of what the context of the request is all about. However, if the same request was made to a grown-up, it may convey the same context, but a slightest difference in delivery and the context could be perceived differently.

Culture is a screening mechanism in the communication tool, it sets a selective filter that screen messages, which in return shapes interpretations.

The high-context settings put emphasis on the conveyed meanings based on physical action, common understanding and relational clues. The low-context settings on the other hand gives direct attention to the literal context of the words being spoken and less concern about the underlying context. Going back to the given example of the child being asked to sit down, the literal meaning of the words are the child's main focus of attention. The child does not care much about the rationale behind him being asked to sit down. However, if the request to sit down were spoken on a high-context setting, it would imply several meanings. It could mean that the request was given because having not to sit down causes distraction or the other way around. The high and low context communication tool applies to cultural variation because people from different groups have different perceptions of communication. Communication methods vary from culture to culture, but understanding cultural variation requires knowledge of high and low context. This concept represents a tool that prevents conflict in cross-cultural communications.

Individualism and Communitarianism is another concept in cultural variation. It is the second important dimension of conflict resolution apart from high and low context communication. Communitarianism or otherwise collectivist settings refer to people relating their identity to a specific group. Cultures in these setting put emphasis on their group's identity and adopt as their own. It is correlated to the saying " tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are". People are identified based on the group they are associated with, they tend to assume the overall identity of their group as their own because they are rewarded for adhering to the norms and values of the

group. In the event that a conflict emerges, response and behavior are collectively chosen according to the values that the group represents. Individualism on the other hand involves ideas that are more autonomous and self-directed. People that belong in this group are most of the time working for their own gains and interest. Individualists has a different approach to conflict resolution because their preferences are not governed by a certain group. These two identities define every person's way of existence in the world. They directly connect to the subject of cultural variation groups are consist of individuals and all individuals are in a way related to a particular group (LeBaron, 2003). The only difference is the starting point, meaning people may start to establish their identity as an individual or someone that belongs in a group. The bottom line is that in order to understand the diversity that culture has, it is important to know one's concept of himself and the others.

Geert Hofstede, a known Dutch psychologist and culture expert also created a model of cultural variation based on cultural dimensions. According to his model, cultural variation is consist of five dimensions. The first one is power and distance, which refers to the level of existing inequality accepted by the people. The second dimension is individualism, it refers to the people's association in the community its level of strength. Third dimension is masculinity, it refers to values demonstrated by the society based on the traditional gender roles. The fourth dimension is the uncertainty and avoidance index, which relates to the amount of anxiety that people feel when facing uncertain situations. Lastly, long-term orientation that refers to the way society values the long-term values and traditions as opposed to

short-term (Mindtools. com, n. d.). These five dimensions represent a model that is widely accepted by theorists and multi-national businesses around the world (Ghemawat and Reiche, 2011). The model simply justifies and categorize cultures according to their dominant characteristics. Cultural differences are explained by how the model define each dimension in Hofstede's index, making it easier for average individual to understand its context.

The discussed models and tools for understanding cultural variation generally applies to people that experienced a real interaction with an unfamiliar culture at one point in their life. For example, I have experienced interacting with people from different walks of life and cultural backgrounds. The discussed tools and model are useful on certain levels, but not all of them will work effectively on all circumstances. The high and low context communication tool works only in a setting where communication is being made by people conversing in common tongue. Since it is essential that the message and its context has to be communicated in order to assume understanding. Therefore, in order to achieve understanding the manner of conversation has to be done in a language familiar to both people conversing. Language barrier is the main problem in this tool because cultural difference is not only defined by diversity of values and belief, but also with language. One of the main reason people engage in conflict and misunderstood people are because of the difference in language. At one time we experience being agitated and frustrated because the person we are talking to cannot understand the words we are saying and the same goes for

them. Such situation escalates to wrong interpretation of one another and eventually result to conflict.

Individualist and communitarian concept on the other hand is not as effective either. This is because people in various cultures cannot just be classified as individualist or communitarian in order to establish their variation. Being in a group sharing common characteristics, belief and upholding the values of the group do not always mean being in the same cultural orientation. Religion for example is shared by several groups around the world and are different in various cultures. However, people from other cultures cross the boundaries of religion and adapt elements of its values because people simply believes in its principles. But, sharing beliefs doesn't mean manifestation of cultural familiarity. For example, when Pope John Paul II died people from all over the world even leaders of Muslim communities came over to pay their last respect for the late pope. Muslims and Christians are known to have centuries-long religious conflicts, they are two very different worlds. However, some of the Muslims even its leaders believe in the ideologies of Pope John Paul II. It only goes to show that people share and practice communitarian concept not just because they belong in the same culture, but only to share ideological agreements. Lastly, Hofstede's model, which could be considered a more comprehensive approach in understanding cultural variations. It is mainly because the model itself showed diversification to define a subject as diverse as culture. Every characteristics common and uncommon were put into categories that will best describe a cultural group. For example, the dimension of power and

distance can be seen as a gap between a corporate executive and an entry-level staff, which is apparent in most cultures.

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