

*Sixth Pan-European Conference on
International Relations*

*Culture, Dignity and
Empowerment*

By: Milena Beric

*Turin, Italy
September, 2007*

Culture

The word culture, from the Latin **colo, -ere**, with its root meaning "**to cultivate**", generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activity significance. Different definitions of "culture" reflect different theoretical bases for understanding, or criteria for evaluating, human activity. Anthropologists most commonly use the term "culture" to refer to the universal human capacity to classify, codify and communicate their experiences symbolically. This capacity is long been taken as a defining feature of the genus Homo. However, primatologists such as Jane Goodall have identified aspects of culture among our closest relatives in the animal kingdom.

Defining Culture

I would define culture as "**the way of life for an entire society**". As such, it embeds the codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, norms of behavior and systems of belief for a certain group of people. Various definitions of culture reflect differing theories for understanding, or criteria for evaluating, human activity. For example, Sir Edward B. Taylor writing from the perspective of social anthropology in the U.K. in the late nineteenth century described culture in the following way: "**Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.**" More recently, the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization UNESCO (2002) described culture as follows: "**...culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs**". While these two definitions cover a range of meaning, they do not exhaust the many uses of the term "culture." In 1952 Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn compiled a list of more than 200 definitions of "culture" in "Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions". These definitions, and many others, provide a catalog of the elements of culture. The items catalogued (e.g., a law, a stone tool, a marriage) each have an existence and life-line of their own. They come into space-time at one set of coordinates and go out of it another. While here, they change, so that one may speak of the evolution of the law or the tool.

I believe that culture on the other hand is an effective instrument of fostering national and international **understanding**. It is the **best bridge between people** and is the language of the soul, the heart and reason. It is the power which makes a man capable of appreciating the life around him and the power of making that life worth appreciating. Thus, a humanized academe will bring the richness of our culture to the world through its students, its faculty members, its administrators.

Dignity

“The sanctity of our humanity is best realized when we acknowledge that we are not, nor were our parents, or theirs before, self caused. Our humanity and its value derive from the fact that we were born into the dignity that we call humanity. Dignity does not come from a revolt against our inherent human characteristics. True liberty comes from the acceptance of who we are as we were created.”

Richard D. Ackerman
United States Justice Foundation

Dignity in humans involves the earning or the expectation of personal **respect** or of **esteem**. To esteem persons or things means to assign to them a high value. Esteem for persons or things assesses their value as high.

(Of course, that not all expressions of respect confer dignity. One can respect and/or esteem the skills of (say) criminals while despising those same criminals, disrespecting their persons and affording them no dignity at all...).

Dignity Principles

- 1. Every human being has a right to lead a dignified life.**
- 2. A dignified life means an opportunity to fulfill one’s potential, which is based on having a human level of health care, education, income and security.**
- 3. Dignity means having the freedom to make decisions on one’s life and to be met with respect for this right.**
- 4. Dignity should be the basic guiding principle for all actions.**
- 5. Ultimately, our own dignity is interdependent with the dignity of others.**

Source: (<http://www.globaldignity.org/index.php>)

National Dignity

Conscious or not, the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia, as well as ex Yugoslavian republics are, by and large, not building toward the old destructive nationalism of Europe. They are aiming at the condition of national dignity and relative self-sufficiency long since attained by European nations and already taken for granted, like the air we breathe, a condition which would have been attained and which would have been even more widespread in Europe had the unfortunate aspects of nationalism

been kept within bounds. To us, nationalism is a force for the attainment in the future of what Europe attained long ago. If our nationalism at times manifests some of the symptoms of old-style, European nationalism, it is unfortunate, but it is within our power to apply the remedy. The disastrous experiences of other nations should serve as a strong corrective and surely we are not so blind as to fail completely to read and learn the lessons of history. After such a lengthy warning against the perverted brand of nationalism, it will doubtless sound inconsistent for me to advocate cultural nationalism.

The very term “cultural nationalism” brings echoes of precisely the kind of stupid jingoism which I strongly condemn. It spontaneously brings memories of the Nazi claims to a superior “Aryan” (that is to say, German) culture, the proof of Aryan superiority and the justification for the subjugation and even extermination of lesser breeds. I readily grant the objection to the term “cultural nationalism,” but there is no more reason to reject the term because of its connotations in other lands than there is for rejecting the term nationalism itself for the same reason.

At this point, I cannot think of a better term and perhaps the term will be less objectionable if we clarify and delimit it in the same way as nationalism itself and exclude from its idea the same perversions that we excluded from genuine nationalism. What then do I mean by cultural nationalism? First and foremost, it must be something positive, constructive, and realistic. It must be rational and logical, not excluding sentiment but keeping it firmly under control. It involves caution, but not cowardly fear of anything foreign or new merely because it is foreign or new.

Cultural nationalism demands an unprejudiced mind, so that we may be able to take stock of ourselves and act accordingly, be able to appraise foreign influences so that that contact with foreign cultures may be a process of selective, enriching, assimilation rather than indiscriminate acceptance or rejection, with inevitable cultural disintegration or arrest.

We want cultural preservation and growth, but not petrification or a loss of identity.

The process must be an organic one, as the word assimilation indicates, not one of mere external addition, as one dumps more stones on a pile of stones to make the heap grow. We speak of preservation and growth, but is there anything to be preserved or to grow? Is there a Serbian culture at all? Only ignorance or stupidity can deny it.

Competent students of culture have not, to my knowledge, denied the existence of our culture, of “a way of life common to (Serbs) based on a social tradition and manifesting itself in (their) institutions, literature, and art.” (Christopher Dawson). It is not surprising that our fellow-countrymen who have made cultural investigations should realize its existence with relative ease, but that foreign sociologists and cultural anthropologists inevitably come to the same conclusion and recognize our culture even better than the average Serbian places the conclusion beyond dispute. In my opinion this attitude is untenable. The attitude gives too much credit to the ability of American culture to supplant our previous culture and replace it with something different; the attitude also gives no credit whatsoever to our ancestors for any capacity to transform and assimilate foreign influences, giving them a distinctively Serbian character.

One who holds such a view turns his back to the most significant and most remarkable, I would say most admirable, fact about our culture and ourselves: that complexity has not prevented unity, nor unity led to monotonous uniformity. Instead of our being proud of our unique cultural achievement, it is our achievement.

Pride in our culture

Can we continue to do so?

Only a strong cultural nationalism, a pride in our culture and heritage and the determination that we shall not be stamped into change by anything foreign, that whatever changes we make, of native or foreign origin will be through our own well-considered judgment, through an organic process which will not shatter our culture but strengthen and improve it only such a strong cultural nationalism can save us and serve as a firm anchor for our nationalism.

Empowerment

Empowerment, in my point of view, refers to **increasing the political, social or economic strength of individuals**. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities. Sociological empowerment often addresses members of groups that social discrimination processes have excluded from decision-making processes through, for example, discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender. In the sphere of **management** and organizational theory, "empowerment" often refers loosely to processes for giving subordinates (or workers generally) greater discretion and resources: distributing control in order to better serve both customers and the interests of employing organizations. In **economic development**, the empowerment approach focuses on mobilizing the self-help efforts of the poor, rather than providing them with social welfare. In the arena of **personal development**, empowerment forms an apogee of many a system of self-realization or of identity (re-)formation. Realizing the solipsistic impracticality of everyone anarchistically attempting to exercise power over everyone else, empowerment advocates have adopted the word "empowerment" to offer the attractions of such power, but they generally constrain its individual exercise to potentiality and to feel-good uses within the individual psyche. The concept of personal development is seen as important by many employers, with emphasis placed on continuous learning, increased self-awareness and emotional intelligence. **Empowerment is ultimately driven by the individual's belief in their capability to influence events.**

Ethics of Community Empowerment

Introduction

Every community is unique. However, every community has certain fundamental common elements: It contains people, who have a chosen identity (beliefs, values, norms), needs (survival, education, health, ambitions), and varying levels of access to resources (food, water, health services, educational institutions, employment). Community empowerment is primarily focused upon trying to match resources to needs, within the context of their chosen identity. It seeks to achieve this through a specific method: Assisting people to help themselves, starting with using the resources at hand, and then increasing these as needed.

Nowadays the term empowerment is used to indicate a wide range of activities, including housing projects, feeding schemes, education, social upliftment, to name a few. However, many such skills-focused programs have encountered similar problems concerning obtaining community involvement, and ensuring that communities will sustain such projects. These are the areas that I would like to focus upon: The **motivational empowerment of communities to enroll in, and sustain, community projects**. There are many examples where this motivational empowerment is critical: Persuading communities to enroll in learning how to grow home gardens, get tested for HIV, maintain anti-malaria measures, clean water to prevent stomach illnesses, attend support groups, register to vote in elections. In other words, how do we overcome issues of stigma and apathy or:

How do we get people involved in community improvement projects?

In practice, it is difficult to impose a specific model of community empowerment, simply because each **community is different in both needs and resources**.

It is a fallacy to believe that there is a stable and cohesive '**traditional culture**' in much of the developing world. Instead, the existing cultures are in reality transitional, with elements of old and new traditions and norms merging, often conflicting. There are few communities left who have not been profoundly affected by radio, television, democracy, capitalism, technology, literacy, HIV and AIDS, and a range of other factors. Often, the art of community empowerment involves investigating the functionality of traditions, and finding new ways to fulfill that function, within the existing realities. Without this facilitation, you have the classic heated debate about 'our culture says', being defended by someone with a cellular phone! At the same time, we have to recognize that technology has, in many cases, been introduced to many communities in a rather odd way: We may have access to cellular phones and satellite internet, but inadequate medical services, high unemployment, and gender inequities in education.

Contextual factors of empowerment

It is the experience of many development workers that you do not simply enter a community, transfer the apparently “missing” skill or resource, and walk away, job well done. Often, such a naive approach results in rejection and disillusionment. There are a multitude of contextual factors that determine receptivity and the appropriateness and success of such transfers of resources. The following are some of the **most important considerations of factors** that help or hinder such processes, which are typically ignored due to the fact that they are not visible, but rather form part of the fabric of the value and identity systems of communities.

In all communities, the first consideration of empowerment is the fundamental need for an **identity**: Who we are, what we want, and what we value. It is much more difficult to change a value system than it is to identify such values, and work within them. This is achieved by asking members of the community what they really want, and what their primary values and sense of identity are. However, it is a common experience that the most fundamental beliefs and desires of a community are not always conscious or readily accessible. Therefore, specific methods are used to allow such desires and beliefs to become conscious.

The second consideration in community empowerment is the strength of the **conscious value and appreciation of life** itself. Although it is commonly assumed that ‘everyone wants to live’, this is in fact not true. For many people, life is painful, hard, and sometimes plain boring. War, AIDS, malaria, political upheaval, and droughts have created a situation where life itself is not valued, and many people do not have a strong and compelling urge to protect their lives, and do what it takes to improve their lives. It is often a shock for many people to discover how little they truly value their lives, and this is the beginning of the process of change for many. Part of this process is awareness of the value of ‘**I**’, plus awareness that ‘**we**’ are necessary in order to proceed to create the future I and we desire, despite differences.

The third consideration is the presence (or absence) of the **community’s desire (or dream) for a potential future where specific desires and needs are met**, and values respected. Although this may appear strange to development workers and planners who are goal-focused, many traditional cultures exist within a paradigm where the adherence to specific ways of being leads to achievement of needs. Goals are defined by these ways of being. When environmental factors change, it is often very difficult to individually or collectively ‘dream’ of future situations that deviate from traditional ways of being. Instead, a sense of hopelessness sets in, particularly when traditional ways of being are failing to fulfill basic needs. A classic example would be how the traditional role of women defines a woman’s skill to dream or set goals for her, versus having the future defined by a man.

The fundamental objective is to resurrect a desirable future in the community, something to work towards. Once this is in place, the subsequent empowerment methods (food security, health and wellness methods, etc) have a context which motivates people to implement. With these first three considerations: identity, value of life, and presence

of a desired future, the dynamics of empowerment change fundamentally, for individuals and groups. When the first three elements are in place, there is a context, a 'why', for subsequent empowerment projects to attract involvement, and remain sustained.

The fourth consideration in community empowerment differs from community to community, and involves **resources** - access to water, food, education, medical services, and basic amenities. Clearly, the specifics depend upon what the community has stated it wants and needs. It is worth noting that, in the absence of the first three factors (identity, future dream, value of life), even existing resources are frequently not utilized to their full potential. Simplistically, resources need to be placed within a psychosocial vessel of values, goals and identity. Without such a vessel, they usually dissipate into the barren sand of good intentions. It should be obvious that, prior to any empowerment (i.e., the first three considerations), there needs to be a detailed factual analysis of the resources available to the specific community. There is, for example, no point in utilizing the tools to encourage people to get tested for HIV (or take malaria prophylaxis), when the physical resources for such actions are simply not available. Therefore, empowerment, in the sense that we are describing, needs to be an integrated approach, which links with existing programs and facilities.

The role players in empowerment

Just as the communities you seek to serve have a sense of identity and a value system that define their behavior and what they consider desirable and obtainable, so do you. The forces that form the community's realities apply to you as well, leading you to view things as more or less desirable, right/wrong, achievable, and not achievable. This can, and does, have a profound impact upon the work you do. Therefore, it is critical for you to get clear on what your influences are, so that you can decide whether they serve the work you do or not.

In any given empowerment situation, there are at least **three groups** of players:

- 1. You (I)**
- 2. The person(s) you seek to empower (YOU)**
- 3. The 'gatekeepers' who influence what is considered possible or feasible. We refer to these as 'THEY', as in the statement 'They will not let me ...'.**

So, in many of the exercises aimed at identifying resources (skills, beliefs, etc) that assist or hinder empowerment, we will refer to these **three Positions**:

First Position: How do I see this (issue/problem)?

Second Position: How do YOU see this (issue/problem)?

Third Position: How do THEY see this (issue/problem)?

As a point of clarity: '**They**' can refer to anyone. It can refer to the people who provide funding, the tribal leader, politicians, parents, ancestors, priests, religious leaders, teachers, your boss etc. anyone who has a say in **how the empowerment process**

operates. However, for the purpose of this introduction, it refers to the collective world view of the community itself, which has its origin in the development of the community itself, what holds it together, which is a set of unquestioned beliefs and values.

Empowerment ethics: The ethic of relationship

It should be clear that, no matter how hard we strive **to be objective**, a value derived from the rational scientific approach in our empowerment efforts, this is simply not possible. In many respect, modern physics (Quantum Physics) has clearly demonstrated that the old-styled approach of neutrality of the observer is a fiction, there is no such thing as being neutral: Whether we like it or not, **we affect the world by virtue of our personal histories and preferences, and also the cultural paradigm we were raised in.** We see, hear and respond to the world according to what we are capable of seeing, hearing and responding to.

Ethics- Why bother?

Value systems vary from community to community. This is also quite apparent from personal experiences of exposure to different communities. Therefore, we are quite prone to trying to impose our values upon others. Is this ethical? Which leads us to the question: What are 'ethics', and why should we bother with them at all? Why don't we simply do what we believe to be right, and when others differ, force them to comply? After all, **don't we know better than they do?** In other words, aren't some people more qualified to know what is good and bad?

An ethic may be viewed as a higher-order value system – a value system from which other values (and thus perceptions, decision, and behaviors) emerge. It is closely linked to the term 'paradigm' – the way we see the world. **An ethic is a value system that directs behaviors**, based upon what we believe to be fundamentally true about ourselves, others, and the world (i.e., our world-view, or paradigm). In essence, **an ethic is a set of norms** (what to do, and not do) based upon what we believe our life truly means. Although we are often not aware of our background ethical system, it is useful, essential, to be aware that it exists, as it has a profound impact upon what we do, why we do it, and how we do it.

So, we see the world in a specific way (our paradigm), and then conclude that there are ways of doing things that are more or less meaningful (our ethics, or principles). From this, we develop '**rules**' to guide our behavior and relationships (values and norms). Usually, the basic world-view we operate from is the same as the one we were raised in, educated in, and work in. We therefore typically conclude that it is '**the only way**', and other paradigms are defective, and need to be changed to fit ours. After all, if I have figured out what to do to be happy in my world, all that other people need to do is to agree to see the world my way, and then do what I do, and they will be happy too! This is well-intentioned approach, but not necessarily effective.

However, when we deal with communities with a different world-view, how can we tell

the difference between interfering and empowering? To follow are a few basic ethical guidelines that we have found to be effective for us, as they **protect the dignity and choice of those we seek to empower**. This implies that our primary ethic is that the evolution of life to its fullest potential is most likely to occur through respect for, and facilitation of, conscious choice and awareness of the inherent power within each person to shape her or his world. It is also implied that choices made from a position of awareness of inherent power and resourcefulness are more likely to enhance and respect the lives of the individual and others they are in relationship with.

Ethics of empowerment

Empowerment ethic 1: SEEK TO INCREASE CONSCIOUS CHOICE

We believe that the only way we can truly protect and respect **the dignity** and inherent value of life, is to **honor and protect the conscious choices made by others**. I.e., if someone does not want what we have to offer, we respect that. If someone does not recognize their choice in a matter, we maintain our view that they have that choice. Without this belief, we cannot speak of genuine empowerment (i.e., recognizing and facilitating the power within to emerge, so that the other person is enhanced - self-sustaining, more able to control his/her world) through the interaction, versus becoming dependant). However, this is not as simple as it sounds. Due to a variety of reasons (events and socialization), a person or group may not be consciously aware of their power and choices. Therefore, it is sometimes necessary to first facilitate conscious awareness of choice before seeking to enquire what that choice is. For example: If a person is deeply depressed and wants to end his or her life, is he or she operating from conscious choice? Usually, they are not. Nor, would we argue, do young children (partially, at least), mentally challenged people, or those in semi- or fully unconscious states.

Empowerment ethic 2: RESPECT THEIR MAP OF THE WORLD

Every person, including you, has a 'map of the world'. This refers to the **way you see the world**, your resources (past and present), how your world actually is (resources), what you value, believe, language, religion, relationships, and so forth. This has been referred to previously as your paradigm. One of the basic premises, or values, of empowerment is to seek to understand and respect the other person's (or group's) map of the world. This also means making an effort to work from within their map of the world.

Empowerment ethic 3: PEOPLE ARE DOING THE BEST THEY KNOW HOW, WITH THE RESOURCES THAT HAVE AVAILABLE

This is not always an easy ethic to hold, as some people do some strange and harmful things. However, when you consider that ‘resources’ includes internal beliefs, feelings, and sometimes the **lack of internal resources** (confidence, feeling safe, loved, etc), this ethic makes sense. It also provides an avenue or way of thinking that seeks to uncover what resources led to the behavior, and therefore the possibility of changing behavior through modification of resources. In the case of criminal behavior – usually the area we get stuck on regarding this ethic – this means that justice (i.e., trial, sentence, imprisonment) is still appropriate. However, instead of doing this to simply remove the person from society, the true purpose of the penal system becomes important: **Rehabilitation** (i.e., internal resource empowerment).

Empowerment ethic 4: PEOPLE ARE NOT THEIR BEHAVIOURS

This means that we do not seek to judge who people are. Instead, we seek to facilitate changes in what they do, if they choose to change.

Empowerment ethic 5: TRUE EMPOWERMENT INCREASES WHOLENESS (EMPOWERMENT NEEDS TO BE SUSTAINABLE AND ECOLOGICAL)

This is an important ethic, as it focuses our attention upon sustainable empowerment. It is true that we can facilitate change in specific people, in specific areas of their lives. However, can these changes be sustained (by them) afterwards? What are the consequences for the individual and/or community? It is easy to fall into anger on certain problems, and seek dramatic change. However, it is important to always consider the whole person or community – what are the consequences? It is sometimes necessary to step out of our map of the world, examine the situation from their map of the world, and seek ways to empower that work for them, with due consideration of the consequences. Classic example: Empower a woman to say ‘No’ to sex without a condom, without consideration of what will happen as a result. Wholeness means that the husband is included in the empowerment process as a ‘THEY’ position.

Useful values for communication

The following two additional ethics are most useful for facilitators of empowerment:

Empowerment ethic 6: THERE IS NO FAILURE, ONLY FEEDBACK

This ethic or principle can be difficult, especially when you have tried hard to achieve something, and not obtained it. However, when you view such results as **feedback** – i.e., important information regarding how you are doing in the process – there is no such

thing as failure, only **'incomplete success'**. With this principle in mind, we examine the results of our efforts, and adjust what needs to be adjusted, and we carry on.

Empowerment ethic 7: THE MEANING OF COMMUNICATION IS THE RESPONSE YOU GET

In many ways, this principle brings together many of the other ethics. If you communicate, then the response (or lack thereof) is simply a reflection of your communication. If you communicate differently, you will get different results. Examine their map of the world again. If you keep on doing what you have always done, you will get the same results. You cannot expect people to change, when you are not willing to consider changing yourself, and the way you communicate. The Law of Requisite Variety (an evolutionary principle) says that: The system or person with the most flexibility of behavior (and this includes communication) will have the most influence or power within that system. Therefore, your willingness to be flexible will directly determine how effective you are in empowering the communities you seek to empower.

Rights and responsibilities

The ethics of empowerment as listed in previous paragraphs, inevitably lead to a specific area of **conflict and confusion: What is the 'right' thing to do when the values and choices of one person (or group) conflict with another person's (or group)?** Often, development workers face this dilemma when they witness one person harming another, in the name of 'that's what we do – it's my right'. Often, such situations (e.g., abuse of children or women) evoke great emotions, even from the most neutral observer, and justifiably so. It is in situations like this that our ethics are most clearly challenged, and the desire to isolate, retaliate in kind, control and punish emerges. What do we do in situations like this? How does 'empowerment' operate in such situations? First, we **ask ourselves** whether the ethic serves our needs – does it contain the scope of meaning that is required for us to live with dignity, and does it serve our relationships? To do this, we need to be conscious of what our higher values are, and what kind of future we seek to create. Second, we **examine our ethics closely**. We ask ourselves what the ethics imply, and we explore the depths of meaning. We **debate, discuss, and interpret, collectively**. We form agreements of what the ethic means. Finally, we ask ourselves what the ethic requires us to do. Sometimes, this is obvious, and other times it is a challenge to evolve and develop new skills and resources.

Conclusion

Ethics are not mere 'rules'. Instead, ethics are values that we strive to live up to. As a result, they invoke evolution and development, personally and socially. The question is: What set of values are most effective and efficient in guiding our efforts to empower others (and ourselves) in the long-term? I.e., what values most closely matches the hidden potential contained in us all, and evokes that potential to emerge? I

believe that the ethics listed there go a long way to guiding us in the release of such potential.

Is there American Culture? American cultural “Power” or is it cultural empowerment?

I didn't want to discuss on this issue but I present you one text with some arguments so you can make your judgment about it. I would like to stress out that this text is opposite in many points of view with believes of mine. What do you think about it?

“It is fashionable among world intellectual elites to decry "American culture," with our domestic critics among the loudest in complaint. But traditional intellectual elites are of shrinking relevance, replaced by cognitive-practical elites-figures such as Bill Gates, Steven Spielberg, Madonna, or our most successful politicians-human beings that can recognize or create popular appetites, recreating themselves as necessary. Contemporary American culture is the most powerful in history, and the most destructive of competitor cultures. While some other cultures, such as those of East Asia, appear strong enough to survive the onslaught by adaptive behaviors, most are not. The genius, the secret weapon, of American culture is the essence that the elites despise: ours is the first genuine people's culture. It stresses comfort and convenience and it generates pleasure for the masses. We are Karl Marx's dream, and his nightmare. Our cultural empire has the addicted, men and women everywhere, clamoring for more. American culture is criticized for its impermanence, its "disposable" products. But there in lies its strength. All previous cultures sought ideal achievement which, once reached, might endure in static perfection. American culture is not about the end, but the means, the dynamic process that creates, destroys, and creates anew. If our works are transient, then so are life's greatest gifts-passion, beauty, the quality of light on a winter afternoon, even life itself. American culture is alive. All previous cultures have sought to achieve an ideal form of life and then fix it in cement. Americans, in and out of uniform, have always embraced change (though many individuals have not, and their conservatism has acted as a healthy brake on our national excesses). American culture is the culture of the unafraid. American action films, often in dreadful copies, are available from the Upper Amazon to Mandalay. They are even more popular than our music, because they are easier to understand. There is a useful German expression, "Die Lage war immer so ernst," that translates very freely as "The sky has always been falling." Despite our relish of fears and complaints, we live in the most powerful, robust culture on earth. Its discontinuities and contradictions are often its strengths. We are incapable of five-year plans, and it is a saving grace. Our fluidity, in consumption, technology, and on the battlefield, is a strength our nearest competitors cannot approach. We move very fast. Our national appetite for information and our sophistication in handling it will enable us to outlast and outperform all hierarchical cultures, information-controlling societies, and projectionist states. Yes, foreign cultures are reasserting their threatened identities-usually with marginal, if any, success-and yes, **they are attempting to escape our influence.** But American culture is

infectious, a plague of pleasure, and you don't have to die of it to be hindered or crippled in your integrity or competitiveness. The very struggle of other cultures to resist American cultural intrusion fatefully diverts their energies from the pursuit of the future. Culture is fate. Countries, clans, military services, and individual soldiers are products of their respective cultures, **and they are either empowered or imprisoned**. The majority of the world's inhabitants are prisoners of their cultures, and they will rage against inadequacies they cannot admit, cannot bear, and cannot escape. The current chest-thumping of some Asian leaders about the degeneracy, weakness, and vulnerability of American culture is reminiscent of nothing so much as of the ranting of Japanese militarists on the eve of the Pacific War. I do not suggest that any of those Asian leaders intend to attack us, only that they are wrong. Liberty always looks like weakness to those who fear it. In the wake of the Soviet collapse, some commentators declared that freedom had won and history was at an end. **But freedom will always find enemies.**"

Source: <http://quaker-mole.livejournal.com/662257.html>

The role of culture in conflict resolution

"OK, I think it's important to admit, up front, that we don't always.....well...get along."

Nikki Giovanni

In the past decade we have witnessed a growing number of conflicts around the world, be it the crisis in my country as well as in the Arab-Israeli conflict or the conflict in Northern Ireland. A detailed theoretical analysis of the fundamentals of conflicts as a prerequisite to finding a stable solution is therefore clearly a welcome contribution to the debate on international conflict resolution.

Conflict is one thing that no human being or functioning organization can escape. We all experience conflict and deal with it routinely as we interact to build families, make friends, earn a living, define ourselves, enhance our social status, and carry out our duties toward others. Conflict may destroy existing relationships and may create opportunities for the establishment of new ones, making it both painful and promising. To explain how and why conflict arises, what role it plays in shaping our lives and international relations, and how to manage it in a manner that minimizes the pain and maximizes the promise is a complex and most difficult task. But without trying, our suffering will increase and certain opportunities created by conflict will be lost. The role of conflict resolution is therefore to find the grounds on which the needs of conflict participants can be fulfilled. I believe that communication within the problem-solving workshop should take into account human needs and the role of the individual in conflict resolution, whose main endeavor is to maximize fulfillment of his needs. Needs can thus

be seen as the main reason why participants enter the problem-solving workshop because the benefits of the workshop's outcome outweigh the costs.

Culture is an essential part of conflict and conflict resolution. Cultures are like underground rivers that run through our lives and relationships, giving us messages that shape our perceptions, attributions, judgments, and ideas of self and other. Though cultures are powerful, they are often unconscious, influencing conflict and attempts to resolve conflict in imperceptible ways. But what the culture is? And does it can be factor of conflict? Unfortunately yes. Culture is inextricable from conflict, though it does not cause it. When differences surface in families, organizations, or communities, culture is always present, shaping perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes.

Cultures are more than language, dress, and food customs. Cultural groups may share race, ethnicity, or nationality, but they also arise from cleavages of generation, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, ability and disability, political and religious affiliation, language, and gender- to name only a few. Two things are essential surely about cultures: they are always changing, and they relate to the symbolic dimension of life. The symbolic dimension is the place where we are constantly making meaning and enacting our identities. Cultural messages from the groups we belong to give us information about what is meaningful or important, and who we are in the world and in relation to others- our identities. **Since culture is so closely related to our identities** (who we think we are), and the ways we make meaning (what is important to us and how), **it is always a factor in conflict.** Culture is always a factor in conflict, whether it plays a central role or influences it subtly and gently. For any conflict that touches us where it matters, where we make meaning and hold our identities, there is always a cultural component. Intractable conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir are not just about territorial, boundary, and sovereignty issues -- they are also about acknowledgement, representation, and legitimization of different identities and ways of living, being, and making meaning. Conflicts between teenagers and parents are shaped by generational culture, and conflicts between spouses or partners are influenced by gender culture. In organizations, conflicts arising from different disciplinary cultures escalate tensions between co-workers, creating strained or inaccurate communication and stressed relationships. Culture permeates conflict no matter what; sometimes pushing forth with intensity, other times quietly snaking along, hardly announcing its presence until surprised people nearly stumble on it. Though culture is intertwined with conflict, some approaches to conflict resolution minimize cultural issues and influences. Since culture is like an iceberg, largely submerged, it is important to include it in our analyses and interventions. Icebergs unacknowledged can be dangerous, and it is impossible to make choices about them if we don't know their size or place. Acknowledging culture and bringing cultural fluency to conflicts can help all kinds of people make more intentional, adaptive choices.

I would like to stress the importance of culture and socially constructed typifications in conflict resolution and offer alternative images and hierarchies of human existence. Because the human "being" is culturally and socially constructed, the problem-solving conflict resolution workshop must take into account the cultural and social reality of individuals, the way they interpret reality¹ and the relations between the individual, social group and culture. The aim of the conflict resolution workshop is to discover the

shared reality based on an analysis of the cultural and social context of the conflict. The main tools in conflict resolutions are negotiations in which typifications are harmonized by finding a common language. Culture is finally receiving due recognition as a key factor in the evolution and resolution of conflicts. Unfortunately, however, when theorists and practitioners of conflict resolution speak of “culture,” they often understand and use it in a bewildering and unhelpful variety of ways.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to conflict resolution, since **culture is always a factor**. Cultural fluency is therefore a core competency for those who intervene in conflicts or simply want to function more effectively in their own lives and situations. Cultural fluency involves recognizing and acting respectfully from the knowledge that communication, ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict, approaches to meaning-making, and identities and roles vary across cultures.

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