

# Beyond Intractability

[Home](#) | [Sponsors](#) | [Comment & Suggest](#) | [Write & Edit](#) | [Affiliates](#) | [Search](#) | [Browse](#)  
[Core Knowledge](#) | [Essays](#) | [User Guides](#) | [Education & Training](#) | [Services](#) | [About](#) | [Help](#)



[Printer-friendly version](#) [Send by email](#)

## Culture and Conflict

By  
**Michelle LeBaron**

July 2003

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.

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 to remember 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.

Cultural messages, simply, are what everyone in a group knows that outsiders do not know. They are the water fish swim in, unaware of its effect on their vision. They are a series of lenses that shape what we see and don't see, how we perceive and interpret, and where we draw boundaries. In shaping our values, cultures contain starting points and currencies[1]. Starting points are those places it is natural to begin, whether with individual or group concerns, with the big picture or particularities. Currencies are those things we care about that influence and shape our interactions with others.

### How Cultures Work

Though largely below the surface, cultures are a shifting, dynamic set of starting points that orient us in particular ways and away from other directions. Each of us belongs to multiple cultures that give us messages about what is normal, appropriate, and expected. When others do not meet our expectations, it is often a cue that our cultural expectations are different. We may mistake differences between others and us for evidence of bad faith or lack of common sense on the part of others, not realizing that common sense is also cultural. What is common to one group may seem strange, counterintuitive, or wrong to another.

Cultural messages shape our understandings of relationships, and of how to deal with the conflict and harmony that are always present whenever two or more people come together. Writing about or working across cultures is complicated, but not impossible. Here are some complications in working with cultural dimensions of conflict, and the implications that flow from them:

Culture is multi-layered -- what you see on the surface may mask differences below the surface.

*Therefore, cultural generalizations are not the whole story, and there is no substitute for building relationships and sharing experiences, coming to know others more deeply over time.*

Culture is constantly in flux -- as conditions change, cultural groups adapt in dynamic and sometimes unpredictable ways.

*Therefore, no comprehensive description can ever be formulated about a particular group. Any attempt to understand a group must take the dimensions of time, context, and individual differences into account.*

Culture is elastic -- knowing the cultural norms of a given group does not predict the behavior of a member of that group, who may not conform to norms for individual or contextual reasons.

*Therefore, taxonomies (e.g. "Italians think this way," or "Buddhists prefer that") have limited use, and can lead to error if not checked with experience.*

Culture is largely below the surface, influencing identities and meaning-making, or who we believe ourselves to be and what we care about -- it is not easy to access these symbolic levels since they are largely outside our awareness.

*Therefore, it is important to use many ways of learning about the cultural dimensions of those involved in a conflict, especially indirect ways, including stories, metaphors, and rituals.*

- [Guidelines](#) for using *Beyond Intractability* resources
- [Citing](#) *Beyond Intractability* resources

### Summary Slideshow



Additional insights into **culture and conflict** are offered by Beyond Intractability project participants.

[Login](#)  
[Join the Learning Community](#)  
[What's New](#)  
[System Status](#)  
[Acknowledgements](#)

Beyond Intractability and CRInfo are [sponsored](#) in part by:



[View All Sponsors](#)

Follow Beyond Intractability:



**Beyond Intractability**  
 is tackling the tough problems at the frontier of the Peace and Conflict fields

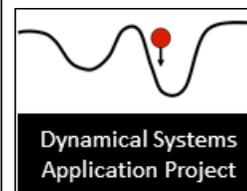
[View Our Sponsors](#)

**Donate**

Safe & Secure

[Additional Support Options](#)

Beyond Intractability and CRInfo [affiliated](#) projects include:



[View All Affiliates](#)

*Peace is not the product of a victory or a command. It has no finishing line, no final deadline, no fixed definition of achievement. Peace is a never-ending process, the work of many decisions.*

- Oscar Arias

Cultural influences and identities become important depending on context. When an aspect of cultural identity is threatened or misunderstood, it may become relatively more important than other cultural identities and this fixed, narrow identity may become the focus of [stereotyping](#), negative projection, and conflict. This is a very common situation in intractable conflicts.

*Therefore, it is useful for people in conflict to have interactive experiences that help them see each other as broadly as possible, experiences that foster the recognition of shared [identities](#) as well as those that are different.*

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. Cultural awareness leads us to apply the Platinum Rule in place of the Golden Rule. Rather than the maxim "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," the Platinum Rule advises: "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them."

## Culture and Conflict: Connections

Cultures are embedded in every conflict because conflicts arise in human relationships. Cultures affect the ways we name, frame, blame, and attempt to tame conflicts. Whether a conflict exists at all is a cultural question. In an interview conducted in Canada, an elderly Chinese man indicated he had experienced no conflict at all for the previous 40 years.[2] Among the possible reasons for his denial was a cultural preference to see the world through lenses of harmony rather than conflict, as encouraged by his Confucian upbringing. Labeling some of our interactions as conflicts and analyzing them into smaller component parts is a distinctly Western approach that may obscure other aspects of relationships.

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.

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.

When the cultural groups we belong to are a large majority in our community or nation, we are less likely to be aware of the content of the messages they send us. Cultures shared by dominant groups often seem to be "natural," "normal" -- "the way things are done." We only notice the effect of cultures that are different from our own, attending to behaviors that we label exotic or strange.

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.

## Culture and Conflict: How to Respond

Given culture's important role in conflicts, what should be done to keep it in mind and include it in response plans? Cultures may act like temperamental children: complicated, elusive, and difficult to predict. Unless we develop comfort with culture as an integral part of conflict, we may find ourselves tangled in its net of complexity, limited by our own cultural lenses. Cultural fluency is a key tool for disentangling and managing multilayered, cultural conflicts.

*Cultural fluency* means familiarity with cultures: their natures, how they work, and ways they intertwine with our relationships in times of conflict and harmony. Cultural fluency means awareness of several dimensions of culture, including

- Communication,
- Ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict,
- Approaches to meaning making,
- Identities and roles.

Each of these is described in more detail below.

Communication refers to different starting points about how to relate to and with others. There are many variations on these starting points, and they are outlined in detail in the topic [Communication, Culture, and Conflict](#). Some of the major variations relate to the division between high- and low-context communications, a classification devised by Edward T. Hall.[3]

In high-context communication, most of a message is conveyed by the context surrounding it, rather than being named explicitly in words. The physical setting, the way things are said, and shared understandings are relied upon to give communication meaning. Interactions feature formalized and stylized rituals, telegraphing ideas without spelling them out. Nonverbal cues and signals are essential to comprehension of the message. The context is trusted to communicate in the absence of verbal expressions, or sometimes in addition to them. High-context communication may help [save face](#) because it is less direct than low-context communication, but it may increase the possibilities of miscommunication because much of the intended message is unstated.

Low-context communication emphasizes directness rather than relying on the context to communicate. From this starting point, verbal communication is specific and literal, and less is conveyed in implied, indirect signals. Low-context communicators tend to "say what they mean and mean what they say." Low-context communication may help prevent [misunderstandings](#), but it can also [escalate](#) conflict because it is more confrontational than high-context communication.

As people communicate, they move along a continuum between high- and low-context. Depending on the kind of relationship, the context, and the purpose of communication, they may be more or less explicit and direct. In close relationships, communication shorthand is often used, which makes communication opaque to outsiders but perfectly clear to the parties. With strangers, the same people may choose low-context communication.

Low- and high-context communication refers not only to individual communication strategies, but may be used to understand cultural groups. Generally, Western cultures tend to gravitate toward low-context starting points, while Eastern and Southern cultures tend to high-context communication. Within these huge categories, there are important differences and many variations. Where high-context communication tends to be featured, it is useful to pay specific attention to nonverbal cues and the behavior of others who may know more of the unstated rules governing the communication. Where low-context communication is the norm, directness is likely to be expected in return.

There are many other ways that communication varies across cultures. High- and low-context communication and several other dimensions are explored in [Communication, Culture, and Conflict](#).

Ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict vary across cultural boundaries. As the example of the elderly Chinese interviewee illustrates, not everyone agrees on what constitutes a conflict. For those accustomed to subdued, calm discussion, an emotional exchange among family members may seem a threatening conflict. The family members themselves may look at their exchange as a normal and desirable airing of differing views. Intractable conflicts are also subject to different interpretations. Is an event a skirmish, a provocation, an escalation, or a mere trifle, hardly worth noticing? The answer depends on perspective, context, and how identity relates to the situation.

Just as there is no consensus across cultures or situations on what constitutes a conflict or how events in the interaction should be framed, so there are many different ways of thinking about how to tame it. Should those involved meet face to face, sharing their perspectives and stories with or without the help of an outside mediator? Or should a trusted friend talk with each of those involved and try to help smooth the waters? Should a third party be known to the [parties](#) or a stranger to those involved?

John Paul Lederach, in his book *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*, identifies two third-party roles that exist in U.S. and Somali settings, respectively -- the formal mediator and the traditional elder.[4] The formal mediator is generally not known to those involved, and he or she tries to act without favoritism or investment in any particular outcome. Traditional elders are revered for their local knowledge and relationships, and are relied upon for direction and advice, as well as for their skills in helping parties communicate with each other. The roles of [insider partial](#) (someone known to the parties who is familiar with the history of the situation and the webs of relationships) and [outsider neutral](#) (someone unknown to the parties who has no stake in the outcome or continuing relationship with the parties) appear in a range of cultural contexts. Generally, insider partials tend to be preferred in traditional, high-context settings, while outside neutrals are more common in low-context settings.

These are just some of the ways that taming conflict varies across cultures. Third parties may use different strategies with quite different goals, depending on their cultural sense of what is needed. In multicultural contexts, parties' expectations of how conflict should be addressed may vary, further escalating an existing conflict.

Approaches to meaning-making also vary across cultures. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars suggest that people have a range of starting points for making sense of their lives, including:

- universalist (favoring rules, laws, and generalizations) and particularist (favoring exceptions, relations, and contextual evaluation)
- specificity (preferring explicit definitions, breaking down wholes into component parts, and measurable results) and diffuseness (focusing on patterns, the big picture, and process over outcome)
- inner direction (sees virtue in individuals who strive to realize their conscious purpose) and outer direction (where virtue is outside each of us in natural rhythms, nature, beauty, and relationships)
- synchronous time (cyclical and spiraling) and sequential time (linear and unidirectional).[5]

When we don't understand that others may have quite different starting points, conflict is more likely to occur and to escalate. Even though the starting points themselves are neutral, negative motives are easily attributed to someone who begins from a different end of the continuum.[6]

For example, when First Nations people sit down with government representatives to negotiate land claims in Canada or Australia, different ideas of time may make it difficult to establish rapport and make progress. First Nations people tend to see time as stretching forward and back, binding them in relationship with seven generations in both directions. Their actions and choices in the present are thus relevant to history and to their progeny. Government negotiators acculturated to Western European ideas of time may find the telling of historical tales and the consideration of projections generations into the future tedious and irrelevant unless they understand the variations in the way time is understood by First Nations people.

Of course, this example draws on generalizations that may or may not apply in a particular situation. There are many different Aboriginal peoples in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and elsewhere. Each has a distinct culture, and these cultures have different relationships to time, different ideas about negotiation, and unique identities. Government negotiators may also have a range of ethno cultural identities, and may not fit the stereotype of the woman or man in a hurry, with a measured, pressured orientation toward time.

Examples can also be drawn from the other three dimensions identified by Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars. When an intractable conflict has been ongoing for years or even generations, should there be recourse to international standards and interveners, or local rules and practices? Those favoring a universalist starting point are more likely to prefer international intervention and the setting of international standards. Particularists will be more comfortable with a tailor-made, home-grown approach than with the imposition of general rules that may or may not fit their needs and context.

Specificity and diffuseness also lead to conflict and conflict escalation in many instances. People, who speak in specifics, looking for practical solutions to challenges that can be implemented and measured, may find those who focus on process, feelings, and the big picture obstructionist and frustrating. On the other hand, those whose starting points are diffuse are more apt to catch the flaw in the sum that is not easy to detect by looking at the component parts, and to see the context into which specific ideas must fit.

Inner-directed people tend to feel confident that they can affect change, believing that they are "the masters of their fate, the captains of their souls." [7] They focus more on product than process. Imagine their frustration when faced with outer-directed people, whose attention goes to nurturing relationships, living in harmony with nature, going with the flow, and paying attention to processes rather than products. As with each of the above sets of starting points, neither is right or wrong; they are simply different. A focus on process is helpful, but not if it completely fails to ignore outcomes. A focus on outcomes is useful, but it is also important to monitor the tone and direction of the process. Cultural fluency means being aware of different sets of starting points, and having a way to speak in both dialects, helping translate between them when they are making conflict worse.

These continua are not absolute, nor do they explain human relations broadly. They are clues to what might be happening when people are in conflict over long periods of time. We are meaning-making creatures, [telling stories](#) and creating understandings that preserve our sense of self and relate to our purpose. As we come to realize this, we can look into the process of meaning making for those in a conflict and find ways to help them make their meaning-making processes and conclusions more apparent to each other.

This can be done by storytelling and by the creation of shared stories, stories that are co-constructed to make room for multiple points of view within them. Often, people in conflict tell stories that sound as though both cannot be true. Narrative conflict-resolution approaches help them leave their concern with truth and being right on the sideline for a time, turning their attention instead to stories in which they can both see themselves.

Another way to explore meaning making is through metaphors. Metaphors are compact, tightly packaged word pictures that convey a great deal of information in shorthand form. For example, in exploring how a conflict began, one side may talk about its origins being buried in the mists of time before there were boundaries and roads and written laws. The other may see it as the offspring of a vexatious lawsuit begun in 1946. Neither is wrong -- the issue may well have deep roots, and the lawsuit was surely a part of the evolution of the conflict. As the two sides talk about their metaphors, the more diffuse starting point wrapped up in the mists of time meets the more specific one, attached to a particular legal action. As the two talk, they deepen their understanding of each other in context, and learn more about their respective roles and identities.

**Identities** and roles refer to conceptions of the self. Am I an individual unit, autonomous, a free agent, ultimately responsible for myself? Or am I first and foremost a member of a group, weighing choices and actions by how the group will perceive them and be affected by them? Those who see themselves as separate individuals likely come from societies anthropologists call individualist. Those for whom group allegiance is primary usually come from settings anthropologists call collectivist, or communitarian.

In collectivist settings, the following values tend to be privileged:

- cooperation
- filial piety (respect for and deference toward elders)
- participation in shared progress
- reputation of the group
- interdependence

In individualist settings, the following values tend to be privileged:

- competition
- independence
- individual achievement
- personal growth and fulfillment
- self-reliance

When individualist and communitarian starting points influence those on either side of a conflict, escalation may result. Individualists may see no problem with "no holds barred" confrontation, while communitarian counterparts shrink from bringing dishonor or face-loss to their group by behaving in unseemly ways. Individualists may expect to make agreements with communitarians, and may feel betrayed when the latter indicate that they have to take their **understandings** back to a larger public or group before they can come to closure. In the end, one should remember that, as with other patterns described, most people are not purely individualist or communitarian. Rather, people tend to have individualist or communitarian starting points, depending on one's upbringing, experience, and the context of the situation.

## Conclusion

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.

---

[1] See also the essays on [Cultural and Worldview Frames](#) and [Communication Tools for Understanding Cultural Differences](#).

[2] LeBaron, Michelle and Bruce Grundison. 1993. *Conflict and Culture: Research in Five Communities in British Columbia, Canada*. Victoria, British Columbia: University of Victoria Institute for Dispute Resolution.

[3] Hall, Edward T. 1976. *Beyond Culture*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

[4] Lederach, John Paul. 1995. *Preparing for Peace. Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, pp. 94.

[5] Hampden-Turner, Charles and Fons Trompenaars. 2000. *Building Cross Cultural Competence. How to Create Wealth from Conflicting Values*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

[6] There is also the set of essays on [framing](#) which is closely related to the idea of meaning making.

[7] *Ibid.*, 244.

---

### Use the following to cite this article:

LeBaron, Michelle. "Culture and Conflict." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: July 2003 <<http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture-conflict>>.

---

## Additional Resources

---

Post a comment or suggestion about this page or topic...

(If you have a comment or suggestion about the *system in general*, please post it on our [Comments and Suggestions](#) page instead.)

» [Login](#) to post comments

**Beyond Intractability**

Copyright © 2003-2012 The Beyond Intractability Project, The Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado;  
All rights reserved. Content may not be reproduced without prior written permission.

[Inquire](#) about affordable reprint/republication rights.

Beyond Intractability is a Registered Trademark of the University of Colorado

[Contact Beyond Intractability](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

**The Beyond Intractability Knowledge Base Project**

[Guy Burgess](#) and [Heidi Burgess](#), Co-Directors and Editors

c/o [Conflict Information Consortium](#) (Formerly *Conflict Research Consortium*), University of Colorado  
580 UCB, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309, USA -- Phone: (303) 492-1635 -- [Contact](#)

