

ETHICAL CONFLICTS ACROSS CULTURES

IS MY CULTURE SUPERIOR?

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When we visit another country, we may find ourselves in an apparent clash of values. It's no easy matter to interpret the actions of people from another culture. To do so, we have to overcome self-complacency, lack of perspective and communication problems. Ultimately, we should focus on underlying values rather than on the way they are enacted.

BUSINESS ETHICS • ETHICAL CONFLICTS •
CULTURAL DIVERSITY • UNIVERSAL VALUES

In the 1980s, in order to file a lawsuit in Spain, a plaintiff had to make an under-the-table payment to cover “costs.” These “costs” were set at a standard, modest amount, and paying them ensured that the suit would be processed according to established procedure.

The practice was illegal and coercive: a file that was not paid for was not processed. The system of costs didn't affect the legal outcome of cases, however. From a practical point of view, it functioned like a fee, and it in fact amended some of the inequalities in the remuneration of court officials, but it had not been established legally.

Lawyers and court officials understood that this situation was not ideal, but they didn't see it as a major problem. From outside Spain, things looked different. I remember the indignation of a French lawyer encountering the practice for the first time. To him it was an unacceptable manifestation of corruption in the judicial system. Seen from within, it wasn't a big deal.

We are used to the fact that things look different from inside and outside a given system. The practice of costs wasn't all that strange in the Spain of the time, but it would have been unthinkable in France. As it happens, since this practice is now

over, both systems have tended to converge into what clearly is a more positive state of affairs.

BIAS IN THE EVALUATION OF CONFLICTS

For individuals and businesses, national borders are among the most difficult frontiers to traverse. We face the question of how to distinguish behaviors that are simply different (and maybe even attractive and interesting in their exoticism) and those that seem illegitimate and immoral (and particularly irritating).

This problem is made worse by the fact that we find it difficult to shake off the idea that our own way is right and the other's way is wrong. Let us take the mundane example of Mom's omelet. Without harboring any malice toward other mothers, we often believe that our own mother's omelet is the best, because once we're inside a system it's hard to get the necessary perspective to analyze that system objectively. Our mothers have taught us, omelet after omelet, what an omelet is. And her omelets would have to be really bad before we would concede that someone else's mother's omelet is the authentic omelet, the yardstick for the evaluation of all omelets. Our standards for what we consider to be a good omelet are often biased and can be difficult to modify. The issue



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becomes even more complicated when a restaurant menu uses the word “omelet” to refer to something that more closely resembles what we would call scrambled eggs.

The omelet analogy represents the three specific problems of cultural plurality that we encounter every time we have to evaluate issues of ethical behavior in different cultures (in contrast, problems of ethical and prudential judgment are mostly independent of the cultural surroundings). First, we tend to think that, like Mom’s omelet, our culture is superior to the rest. Second, we find it difficult to assess the traits of a culture from within that same culture (My mom’s omelet is the gold standard of omelets). Finally, we face communicative and linguistic challenges in cross-cultural relationships (Is it an omelet or scrambled eggs?).

Many Western executives, for example, complain that Chinese companies are less reliable than Western ones in meeting product delivery deadlines. From the outset we can see that this kind of claim is so generic that it is unlikely to be tenable. But when we examine Chinese norms of communication more closely, we see a strong tendency to try to reduce the potential for conflict.

Imagine the following question: “Can you deliver the finished product this month?” Faced with insurmountable obstacles to meeting the deadline, a Westerner might say, “No, that’s impossible.” However, a Chinese counterpart facing the same circumstances may say, “It will be difficult, but we will try with all our might and I think we will succeed.”

Obviously, if we take these statements literally (which is what people in the West tend to do), we might conclude that the provider is lying in saying, “It will be difficult but I think we will succeed,” rather than the more realistic, “No, that’s impossible.” And that would be an accurate conclusion from the inside, if the conversation were taking place among Westerners. But from the outside, managing codes of communication is more complex. The proof

is that if that conversation were to take place between two Chinese people, there would be no confusion. The person asking the question would understand that the product would not be ready by the end of the month.

And let's not fall into the trap of thinking that one mode of communication is simply better than the other; they are both equally good once we understand how they should be used. In the end, it is reckless to deal with people of another culture without first understanding what differences in communication may separate us.

COMMON VALUES, DIFFERENT EXPRESSION

● Clearly, communication difficulties can give rise to misunderstandings that lead us to wrongly question the ethics of people from other cultures. We must take a step beyond this point to ask a more basic question: Despite cultural differences, can we rely on universal principles or values that have transcultural validity?

First, we need to clarify what is at stake when we talk about cultural conflicts. It is very common to hear that such conflicts arise from a clash between two different sets of values. This approach is a dead-end. If the issue is opposing values, negotiation and compromise become impossible, because values are the foundation of any hypothetical agreement.

In reality, however, behind many of these conflicts are not incompatible values, but rather different manifestations of a shared value. For example, funeral rites have caused clashes and conflicts between people who find each other's practices surrounding the dead and their final journey to be insulting. Nonetheless, numerous anthropological studies reveal a difference between practices and underlying values. Conflicts between different mortuary practices (burial versus cremation, for example) obfuscate shared values, such as respect for the dead and filial piety. We must also remember that

values are not merely discovered and defined in their complete and perfect state, but rather their conceptualization happens over time. Consider, for example, the shared value of the dignity of the human being. Throughout history, we see how the definition of this value has evolved. This process resulted in the fight against slavery, for example. This is a considerable step forward, and today we see that all cultures have progressed in this regard.

Another realization of the value of human dignity is in the fight for equality among individuals and, in particular, between men and women. Different cultures today are at different stages in the realization of this value, and despite advances, no one is so naive as to conclude that equality has been fully achieved.

In short, we share universal values, but they develop at different paces over time and space, with advances and occasional setbacks. The ultimate sign of progress is the fact that, despite difficulties, we are witnessing clear progress in the definition and understanding of universal values.

A very simple test of progress would be to ask people of a certain era if they would prefer to live with the values and practices of a previous era, or if, on the contrary, they would prefer those of a future time. The answer is that, despite the pull of nostalgia, we tend to project ourselves into the future, not into the past. This does not change the fact that in different times and places some practices and not others become the expression of this progress.

Ultimately, as long as underlying values are protected, the key is the extent to which proper respect is shown to different historical and cultural manifestations. It makes no sense to necessarily turn these differences into a cause for conflict and confrontation. On the contrary, once we accept that values can be expressed differently we can reach a deeper understanding of the nature and extent of cross-cultural conflicts.

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MORE INFORMATION

- Sanchez-Runde, Nardon and Seers, "The Cultural Roots of Ethical Conflicts in Global Business," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2013, 116, pp. 689-701.
- Seers, Nardon and Sanchez-Runde, "Management Across Cultures," 2013, Cambridge University Press.