

Cross-Cultural Perspective Taking

by Louise Rasmussen - June 04, 2012

<https://www.globalcognition.org/cross-cultural-perspective-taking/>

Can we really ‘put ourselves in the shoes’ of someone who has a different cultural background? Can we truly take a cultural perspective? The success of so many of our daily interactions depends on our ability to make sense of other people’s point of view—figuring out why they do the things they do and what they want.

Often it even seems difficult to understand where people who are close to us are coming from. Understanding how others who are different from us experience the world by adopting a cultural perspective can be a very difficult task.

We tend to think about and experience the world around us in a certain way—one that is influenced by our own personal history and cultural heritage. Being able to consider the cultural perspective of others during intercultural encounters can help reduce conflict and misunderstandings. It's a critical [component of cultural competence](#). The key to taking a cross-cultural perspective is having a framework that can help you begin to appreciate the other person’s point of view.

[Louise Rasmussen](#) and [Winston Sieck](#) of Global Cognition studied how people make sense of the thoughts and decisions of others with different cultural backgrounds. One cultural perspective study was conducted with Americans who had limited cross-cultural experience, and no specific experience with Afghan culture. In the study, these Americans were asked to take the perspectives of Afghan characters in a set of narratives. Rasmussen and Sieck then presented the same scenarios to Afghans and compared the answers the two cultural groups gave.

The researchers found that when culturally inexperienced Americans try to take the perspective of Afghans, they draw the wrong conclusions about what the Afghans are thinking and feeling. The comparison revealed that the ideas, beliefs, and values Americans attributed to Afghans were different from those used by Afghans to explain the behavior of other Afghans. For example, the Afghans said that the characters in the narrative cared about maintaining their social status and expected mutual benefits in interactions with others.

The American interviewees were not aware of many of the cultural values and beliefs that were important to the Afghans. They would instead attribute thoughts and intentions to them that Americans might be more likely to have in those situations. Rasmussen and Sieck published these findings as a chapter, [Using Cultural Models of Decision Making to Assess and Develop Cultural Sensemaking Competence](#), in the book, *Advances in Cross-Cultural Decision Making*.

Fairly little is known about how we think about the point of view of people with different cultural backgrounds. Research has shown that in the case of same-culture, or social perspective-taking, people tend to believe that others think and care about the same things they do themselves. This simple strategy may work for the most part when we interact with people from our own culture. But when we [interact](#)

[cross-culturally](#), it can lead us astray.

An important practical question is: what and how much do we need to know about another person's history and background in order to be able to take a cultural perspective when we interact with them?

In order to successfully take the perspective of another person in an inter-cultural situation, you must [understand the influences on their thoughts and decisions](#) in the specific context where you're interacting with them. To understand those influences it can be useful to ask yourself, what are the things that are important to this person right now, and why are they important?

If the situation allows, you may even [ask the person directly](#). In many situations this may not be possible. Instead, make a guess that is based on what would be important to you if you were in their shoes. This can be a good place to start, even when the other person has a different cultural background.

Starting with a guess about the other person's perspective that you know is likely to be wrong is a fine strategy, as long as you are aware of that possibility. Make changes to your initial guess to get a cultural perspective by factoring in things you know about the person and where they come from to account for possible differences. In the process of looking for cues that support or contradict your initial guess you are likely to be able to develop a better guess and get closer to what the other person might actually be thinking.

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