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# Bridging Cultural Gaps: Towards Sustainable Collaborative Communication

## *Brücken bauen - Auf dem Weg zu nachhaltigen Beziehungen zwischen Kulturen*

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### **Abstract (Englisch)**

*Against the background of increasing divisions in society, this article proposes that a fresh approach is required if we are to bridge across currently entrenched cultural groups. The approach put forward here takes on a relational perspective in which the focus is shifted towards the basic human motives that are at play in any given situation. A non-binary stance is expounded, in which we both accept the validity of the other's point of view as well as respecting our own commitments and boundaries. If this balancing act is accompanied by relevant skills from the areas of self-competence, social-competence and strategic competence (Bolten 2020, p.63), and in particular mindful awareness, then we will have the greatest chance of establishing collaborative communication channels across cultural groups and moving towards sustainable relationships.*

*Keywords: Bridging cultures, Nonviolent Communication, Relationalism, Intercultural Communication, Mindfulness*

### **Abstract (Deutsch)**

*Angesichts zunehmender Spaltungen in der Gesellschaft wird der Einsatz einer angemessenen kollaborativen Kommunikation zwischen den verschiedenen kulturellen, voneinander distanziierten Gruppen noch dringlicher. Dafür schlägt dieser Artikel einen neuen Ansatz vor. Er geht von einer relationalen Perspektive aus, bei der der Schwerpunkt auf die grundlegenden menschlichen Motive verlagert wird, die in der jeweiligen Situation aktiviert werden. Es wird eine ausbalancierte, nicht-binäre Haltung dargelegt, die sowohl die Gültigkeit des Standpunkts des anderen akzeptiert als auch die eigenen Verpflichtungen und Grenzen respektiert. Wenn dieser Balanceakt von relevanten Fähigkeiten aus den Bereichen der Selbst-, Sozial- und Strategischen Kompetenz (Bolten 2020, p.63) sowie insbesondere von der Achtsamkeit begleitet wird, dann können kollaborative Kommunikationspraktiken und somit nachhaltige Beziehungen entstehen.*

*Schlagwörter: Gewaltfreie Kommunikation, Relationalismus, Interkulturalität, Achtsamkeit*

## 1. Introduction

Encountering people who have different opinions, ways of living, social norms, values and life objectives can lead to enrichment, connection and mutual benefit. It can also, however, trigger resentment, blaming or even violence and wars, as has been documented throughout human history. Which path is taken ultimately depends on the attitude through which we approach encounters with those who disagree with us and the skilfulness with which we employ communicative strategies to promote synergetic, sustainable relationships. Of course this is a two-sided process, which means that even if our own attitude is benevolent and our goal is mutual benefit, we can easily be thrown off course by attempts from the other side to blame, vilify or denigrate.

The volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity we are now encountering, otherwise known as a “VUCA” world (see Mack / Khare 2016) should be an invitation for us to reflect on the causes of this upheaval as well as on ways in which each individual can contribute to fostering greater collaboration and understanding among diverse people, whichever group they identify with.

The reasons for the current deterioration in social cohesion (Institute for Economics and Peace 2021) and our current inability to find consensus on a broad number of topics are relatively well understood: Cyber threats, climate change, changing demographic profiles, migration (OECD 2017, p.12) as well as the decentralisation of media, economic instability and now the coronavirus pandemic are commonly cited as contributing factors. The diffusion of media and its content creation has meant that traditional authorities' and institutions' guidance on what is *right and wrong*, *true and false* is failing to win the public's trust, since in such an ambiguous and threatening environment people are often more likely to trust those with whom they perceive

they have a close relationship (Paul / Morton, 2018). In addition to this, the institutions that were traditionally reliable information sources and garnered consensus are often considerably less vocal and skilled in their communication practices (Tufekci 2021). The resulting situation of almost complete relativity with regard to the authority of information has led to increased levels of uncertainty and ambiguity. Whereas in previous centuries citizens would look to authorities such as the Church, the aristocracy, governments, science or traditional media in order to find orientation regarding the way to live and what to believe, currently all of these sources have been thrown into doubt. And in reaction to these vastly increased levels of ambiguity, the established political institutions have appeared helpless in their efforts to re-establish a feeling of security and order. At the same time the availability of social media channels have served as a forum to vent and spread anger as a valid means of communication (Brady 2021) as well as acting as a catalyst to amplify group identities and demarcations, be they national, political or social. In short, all these phenomena are a consequence of an inability or unwillingness to deal constructively with new forms of ambiguity that have been thrown up by the lack of orientation and consensus surrounding new (real and perceived) threats and the pluralisation of knowledge.

In the raging debate regarding the nature of what should be the desirable social order, what normality should look like and which people or groups are deserving or undeserving, the type of argumentative logic that justifies and promotes absolutist views currently seems to have the upper hand (Berberoglu 2020). This new authoritarianism is attractive because it appears to give certainty and orientation in a VUCA world, with its emphasis on simple causes and a single identifiable guilty party or group. These absolutist tendencies stand in stark contrast to the

relativism with which media sources are viewed. However, movements promoting a worldview that seeks to build bridges, does not blame, recognises the relativity of diverse interpretations, whilst acknowledging the complexity of both causes and solutions are harder to find, despite their obvious superiority in relation to today's interconnected society. One of the reasons for this is the inherent difficulty in communicating these complexities in a simple message that most people can easily grasp. Even if ways could be found to present a multitude of influencing factors in any given situation, the interpretation of this information is likely to be autopoietic (Witchalls 2012), with individuals referencing the *set of stories* that form part of their group identity and perceived relationship to the information provider (White 2008). Whilst laudable in its intention of protecting less powerful groups, the increasing prevalence of postmodern ethno-relativist thinking has served to amplify these group identities and does little to explain how we might actually build bridges and foster dialogue across groups and cultures (Bennett 2018).

There seem, therefore, to be few voices that are neither interested in vilifying other groups nor demanding particular treatment for their own group, but instead focus their attention on building bridges between groups, even when the other group's views might be in stark opposition to their own.

In the light of this, the following article will suggest some tentative answers to the question: *How can we as individuals think and act in a way that has the greatest chance of bridging the gaps that have opened up between disparate groups in today's society?*

For the above reasons it seems evident that we require a disparate philosophy to that which underlies the current divisive dialogue. Our guiding roadmap will therefore bypass ideas of strong group identification and blaming of the other as a basis for communication. It

will avoid focussing on guilt or right and wrong of particular actions or persons. Further, we will suggest principles that enable us to confront complexity as well as taking on responsibility for oneself and practising due consideration for the other according to principles of non-harm. Paradoxically, an individual capable of bridging current societal gaps will be capable of recognising the validity of the other's worldview, while at the same time preserving the integrity of their own convictions and authenticity. This *positivism within relativism* seems counterintuitive, but is also the most promising way out from the pitfalls of extreme forms of absolutism and relativism (see Bennett 2018). If we could manage to straddle these two ideas, achieving a non-binary stance, then we would combine authenticity, respect, acceptance and constructive action. This article will combine ideas from Convivialism, Nonviolent Communication, the practice of mindful awareness and relevant concepts from the study of intercultural communication. Any of the concepts discussed would normally warrant many volumes of analysis in their own right. However, this article should be seen as an initial attempt to bring together concepts from a wide range of fields in order to suggest an overview of the key attributes of the type of communication that might achieve greater connection and understanding in the current climate. We will call this type of communication *Collaborative Communication*.

## **2. An Open, Constructivist Concept of Culture: Communication is Negotiation**

Before we examine the steps and characteristics that might be required to bridge across cultural groups, it is important to emphasise some basic postulates underlying a dynamic and open view of both culture and communication: In order to achieve genuine satisfaction on both sides, forging a connection with someone who is very different from us in terms of values, beliefs and

behaviours must be a dynamic, unique negotiation process. We assume that each person has multiple-affiliations to a wide-range of cultures (Hansen 2009), which in turn have blurred edges and are constantly changing (Bolten 2020, p. 56). Static models of communication between cultures (e.g. Hofstede 2010, Trompenaars 1994) do not account for the unique, continuously changing nature of communication between cultures. Successful, sustainable relationships cannot consist of a one-way adaptation (or non-adaptation) by one party to the other, as most guides on dealing with members of specific national cultures imply. In fact, from a constructivist point of view, if a satisfactory or even synergistic understanding between members of disparate cultures is to be developed, then this leaves no place for one-way adaptation, especially since this would imply a hierarchical relationship and not a reciprocal and egalitarian one. Such an unthinking unilateral adaptation necessarily infringes upon the interests of the party who adapts in the longer term and thus does not adhere to principles of reciprocity (Bolten 2013). Genuine reciprocity (not artificial harmony) that respects the needs and limits of both parties is vital if relationships are to be sustainable.

The negotiation process we suggest is a context-dependent, open engagement with the other, underpinned by the principles of mutual fulfilment of human motives while remaining open to the outcome of the process.

In the following we will examine some of the characteristics required for bridging cultures, both in terms of attitude and implementation, namely trust and goodwill, internal and external transparency, empathy and request. We will refer to three of Bolten's categories of communicative competence, namely self-competence, social competence and strategic competence (Bolten 2020, p.63).

### 3. Establishing Trust and Goodwill

Due to the nature of communicating across cultures, where a common framework of goals, interpretations and sense-making is lacking, our first task in meeting 'strangers' is to establish trust. Trust reduces complexity in the sense that it limits the scope of behavioural responses, but within this it also increases freedom regarding the behaviour that can be displayed without the need for extensive debate (Renn / Levine 1991, p.184). It is closely linked with the idea of *goodwill* or benevolent intention. If we view goodwill here as a *gift*, then the convivialist manifesto encapsulates the spirit that is needed to establish and maintain sustainable human connections:

*"Gift and trust are thus of fundamental importance for cooperation between the parties and for the establishment of social order overall, and the only reason they are so important is because they are, paradoxically, both compulsory and voluntary, both self-interested and selfless."* (Convivialist Manifesto 2014).

One of the key reasons why intercultural encounters fail is that the other party's utterances cannot easily be put into a framework of meaning due to a lack of common reference points and interpretations. This lack of orientation and plausibility often makes it difficult for us to identify the good intention behind the other's behaviour, which is particularly problematic. The idea of intention forms the basis for good relations across cultures, since if the other believes in our own benevolent intention, then subsequent communication will be interpreted upon this foundation. Contrary to the advice given by most guides on dealing with members of specific national cultures, if we succeed in building trust in our good intention, then breaking cultural norms/rules is relatively unproblematic, since a belief in the positive intention of the rule-breaker is likely to supersede any of these transgressions and will support a

benevolent interpretation. Building this trust is therefore the groundwork to any intercultural collaboration. The goal here is a transparency of intentions, and the focus should be primarily on the individual (not on cultural belonging or group identification), since prejudices and biases dissipate in the light of exposure to authentic human interaction (Pettigrew / Tropp 2006).

A good starting point for engendering trust would be the demonstration of our interest in the aspirations and well-being of the other through focused, open and active listening (Rogers 1978), in which an attitude of generous curiosity<sup>1</sup> is adopted. Our interest must be authentic, and might involve techniques such as more intensive paraphrasing and context-building than would be necessary with a person closer to our own cultural context. In context-building, we can attempt to map out meanings that are attached to the speaker's words<sup>2</sup>. This can focus on factual/structural transparency ("If I have understood you correctly, you are saying that [...] happened/ [...] is true"), affective/qualitative transparency ("My impression is that you strongly feel [...] towards this, is that right?") and normative / judgmental descriptions ("Would I be right in saying that you believe that this should/should not have happened/...is a good bad thing?"), or can take on a systemic perspective ("What were the reactions of.../What were the relationships between the people surrounding this event?"). As previously mentioned, when engaging in paraphrasing and context-building, it is essential to be sensitive to the reaction to our active listening (trial and error process), since this style of dialogue may be strange to the speaker and the reaction to this strangeness may cause resistance and hinder the flow and success of the process. In this case, these two techniques can be fine-tuned to become more or less explicit, depending on circumstances. Meta-communicative strategies could be used, i.e. we might describe how and why we are using this

form of speaking, and indeed what our intention is. Ultimately an *openness to outcome* regarding our communicative strategy is required here, where we are sensitive to reactions and prepared to change the way we seek to build trust. Our focus is on how we can help the other, create transparency with regard to intentions and goals with whichever methods seem appropriate (repertoire of communication styles), and subsequently investigate how both parties' needs can be met.

So, when trust-building across cultures, the challenges are two-fold. Firstly, more effort and time will be required through the trial-and-error process<sup>3</sup> with regard to communication style. In addition, significant effort is required to construct, through questioning, a new framework of meaning, since what is said by the other will exist within a wholly different semantic structure. This structure is not natural to us, hence the effort involved in constructing a new *map of meaning*. In order to create the truest version of this map of meaning, the type of empathy required here is not one in which we simply imagine ourselves in the position of the other, but one in which we imagine what it must be like for the other including all his/her background and personal characteristics. Active listening should therefore focus on the structural, qualitative and relational aspects of what is said, including affective attachments and judgments. Trust-building is always an ongoing, time-intensive, unfinished and constantly changing process. However, once a certain level of trust has been established, we are much more capable of engaging in particular shared projects, goals and also addressing potential conflict.

A part of building trust is also the creation of a mutually accepted *external transparency*, which refers to our perception and attitude concerning the state of the external world. Conflict can arise here when subjective claims are made and presented as fact. Indeed this is a major source of conflict today in the



light of a lack of consensus regarding the authority of information sources. A key to communicating with people from other cultures is therefore the ability to distinguish between objective fact and interpretation. Simple statements such as “Person x is angry/unfair/racist” might appear to be objective, but in reality often rest purely on the fact that other members of a person’s affiliation group believe this to be so. On closer analysis we can see that these assertions are in fact interpretations. If we take the case “person x is angry”, it may simply be the case that this person felt passionate, but not angry, for example. There is no objective proof here, even if the person’s voice was raised. An objective description might be that “person x left the room and closed the door audibly.” Rosenberg emphasises the necessity of observing without evaluation, since it is the evaluation that is likely to make others “apt to hear criticism and resist what we are saying” (Rosenberg 2003, p.26). This requires practice even in tendentially intracultural environments, and becomes particularly crucial in situations with a more intercultural character, since there are fewer common codes of interpretation and sense-making. This means that we not only need to ensure that we are observing as neutrally as possible, but we may also need to complete this picture by explaining the meaning that the external phenomenon has within our own semantic network from an associative but also qualitative point of view. We might even relate some of the “set of stories” (White 2008, p.187) that determine our perceived identity in that particular context and therefore our relative viewpoint. Although agreeing on a common interpretation of a particular situation in this way or at least an understanding of relative perceptions will involve more time, effort and revision of concepts, if we can manage to achieve this at least to a large extent, and can ask the other to confirm / reject the suggestion or contribute further information to the building of consensus (*constructivism*),

then the neutralising element of the observation can create a judgment-free space and a sense of reciprocity. In fact we can add to this judgment-free space by actively embracing *nescience* (Nazar-kiewicz 2020), the fact that we may not know or be able to define the situation. Within this space both parties are more likely to feel the freedom to express more of their lived experience to the other, enabling an authentic and empathetic exchange.

#### **4. Feelings & emotions: An empathic bridge**

The openness that is created by a largely objective and judgment-free description of the external world also encourages the sharing of each party’s ‘lived social experience’ (White 2008). And it is this sharing, and indeed the vulnerability that comes through sharing that allows an empathic connection to take place (Brown 2013, p.34). This empathic connection also reinforces the trust-building process. An important step towards establishing transparency regarding both parties’ inner experienced world can be structured into *feelings* and *needs* (Rosenberg 2003), whereby the feelings or emotions experienced might be viewed as the more immediate visceral phenomena that point to unmet basic human motives.

Feelings, of course, might be described or even experienced differently depending on the subject’s cultural context. We can distinguish, however, between *primary*, biologically based basic emotions, i.e. basic sensations that are experienced before an interpretation is made, and *secondary* feelings, where these raw emotions have already been assigned a meaning and are thus more culturally influenced. Ekman (1992) identified six primary and therefore universal emotions, namely fear, anger, joy, sadness, disgust, and surprise. More recent research on facial expression and recognition suggest that there might be only four biologically based emotions, namely happiness, sadness, fear/surprise (i.e. fast-approaching danger),

disgust/anger (i.e. stationary danger), (Jack et al 2014). According to this, fear, for example, would be a primary emotion, whereas jealousy, on the other hand, is already laden with many cultural meanings and associations. Due to the universal and biological nature of these primary emotions, it would seem that acknowledging and being attentive in particular to these (and the basic motives behind them) is likely to encourage a sense of openness and psychological safety since no judgments and cultural framing has occurred. Consensus and understanding is thus more likely, and on this basis empathy and connection can follow.

The more we construct layers of meanings and associations on top of these primary emotions, thus burying them deeply, the more friction and lack of acceptance we are likely to encounter. As Rosenberg (2003) emphasises, when attempting to establish transparency regarding this inner world, we also need to be careful not to build an accusation into the expression of feelings. Utterances such as “I feel let down” or “I feel manipulated” are likely to have an essentially similar effect to a direct accusation, and will therefore push the other party into a defensive position, achieving the opposite of the empathic bridge that we are intending to build.

The choice of terminology can also be crucial in preventing or enabling the process of bridge-building. According to the cultural context, certain synonyms might be more acceptable than others. To illustrate in English: “Did you feel a little upset about...?” might allow the process to flow more than “Did you feel sad about...?” Being sensitive to the contexts in which to use particular terminology in order to maintain face and generate an open and natural atmosphere is part of the aforementioned *transfer skill* (Bolten 2013) of a *social competence* that is required in intercultural competence. Thus it will not be enough to implement bridge-building well within one’s own, familiar

context, but each part of the process needs to be selected carefully and revised after a trial-and-error process in order to meet with acceptance and enable constructive action in an intercultural environment.

How much emphasis feelings or *basic emotions* receive in the process and which terminology is chosen can vary. Depending on the situation, we naturally reveal more or less of our inner world. Hence, consideration of the context and relationship might result in a more limited expression of feelings, or the expression of simple and acceptable feelings such as “I am frustrated...”. In cultural environments with particular sensitivities, the emphasis can be changed. For example, if we establish through observation that our counterpart tends to focus more on tasks rather than on relationships, then there may be less emphasis on the revelation of feelings. This decision needs to be taken in the knowledge that economising with the expression of our inner experienced world will incur a cost, namely the loss of an opportunity for empathy and connection with the other party. This is a balancing act that requires constant monitoring, whereby the revelation of one’s inner world should be performed according to the rule *as much and as truthful as possible* within a given context and without burdening the other party (see Schulz von Thun 2008, p.84).

Expressions of emotions must therefore depend on each unique situation, particularly in relation to what is appropriate for the cultural and relational context and what is conducive to collaboration. In intercultural situations we can attempt to approach the appropriate level of self-revelation gradually. In doing so we avoid causing a rupture in communication by using forms of expression which benefit the constructive process rather than cause the other party to experience an inner rejection and closure towards the process. Here, if an investment has already been made



in the establishment of goodwill and trust, then the opportunity for empathic connection will be greater than the danger of damaging the relationship.

As already alluded to, feelings can be seen as the *warning signals* that suggest that a deeper human need<sup>4</sup> has or has not been met. D'Ansembourg (2007) compares this to a car's warning light on the dashboard alerting us to a fault in the engine. So how then do we gain access to these basic human motives that might not be immediately obvious to us?

## 5. Expressing and Understanding Basic Human Motives

One of the most attractive attributes at the heart of the concept of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is its foundation on basic, universal, human needs. Such needs could be said to be the basic motivations that all of us experience naturally. They emanate from our relationship with others, ourselves and the environment around us and include safety, belonging, independence and self-expression. This could, in theory, be extremely helpful for communicating across cultures, since if we can design ways of communicating that uncover the basic needs behind communication or action, then motives become universally understandable and in so doing we uncover a path to empathy and connection. Thus, we could train ourselves to no longer 'see' the angry or unusual behaviour of our 'strange' other, but instead endeavour to find the basic need behind this behaviour and try to satisfy this. At an appropriate time we can then also express our own interests in terms of our basic needs. The idea is a simple and enticing one: address the universal, thereby circumventing the cultural.

The universal nature of these basic human needs or motives is of course a matter for debate. We might argue that any need other than the immediate bodily requirements of sustenance and shelter must be cultural. Some well-

cited studies such as that of Harlow & Zimmermann (1959) attempted to demonstrate that the need for comfort and care can in fact be more powerful than physical necessities. In this particular study young monkeys preferred a cuddly, milk-less surrogate to a wire monkey that distributed milk. More recently, evolutionary psychology considers that humans have multiple motivational and learning systems that map onto people's natural life histories and are hardwired into (different areas of) the brain (Schaller / Kenrick / Neel / Neuberg 2017). An infant first requires physical sustenance, after which comes self-protection, affiliation/belonging/love followed by self-actualisation/independence, mate acquisition, mate retention and parenting (adapted from Schaller / Kenrick / Neel / Neuberg 2017). The same authors sum up the consensus among evolutionary psychologists and biologists:

*"...there are innate biological underpinnings to motivational states other than physiological deficits such as hunger. If you do not drink when you are thirsty, you get thirstier and eventually die; if you do not have sex when you are feeling strong attraction, you will not die. Nonetheless, although higher or psychological needs are not typically deficit driven, they are likely to have important and revealing physiological correlates. For example, oxytocin, testosterone, progesterone, and estrogen have been linked to affiliation, parental care, status seeking, and mate choice (...)"* (adapted from Schaller / Kenrick / Neel / Neuberg 2017).

These basic motives are latent and not activated in every human, but become relevant in accordance with a person's particular life situation. Goal activation is thus highly sensitive to immediate contextual cues. These goals can be highly visceral. For example, the acoustic startle reflex (reflex reaction to loud noises) occurs due to the momentary activation of a self-protective goal. However, a similar self-protective goal can also be activated when the person

in question interprets a threat from an aggressive out-group member in social interaction (Ackerman / Shapiro / Neuberg et al. 2006). Basic, biological motives can therefore be triggered by very cultural interpretations. This does not, however negate the presence and importance of basic human motives, but simply encourages us to dig for them beneath the cultural layers of meaning. If we can understand how an -albeit unfamiliar- way of perceiving the world has triggered one of these basic human motives, as well as suspend our judgment regarding the manner of expression used (i.e. a disparate communication style), then we open the door to empathy and understanding.

Attempting to fulfil these fundamental needs can lead to satisfying outcomes, as is summarised by Schaller, Kenrick, Neel & Neuberg (2017):

*“Finally, although these evolved motivational systems are characterized as ‘fundamental’ because of their evolutionary origins and not because of their consequences for subjectively valued psychological states, they may nonetheless guide individuals’ pursuit of happiness and personal fulfilment. This is because reward mechanisms (e.g., neurochemical regulation of affective states) are integral to the suites of psychological adaptations that characterize these fundamental motives—with the consequence that many things that make people feel happy or fulfilled correspond to the successful pursuit of fundamental motives (...)”*

The above evidence would certainly seem to suggest that some very basic ‘needs’ such as those that fall in line with the human life history, might exist alongside the physical necessities of food and shelter. If this is true, then the attempt to find the basic, universal human need or needs behind each behaviour will help to alleviate many difficulties experienced through cultural forms of communication. As an example, if person A uses a style of communication that focusses on the factual content of a message, a style which we might call

*direct / content-oriented or task-oriented*, then this might offend person B, since his/her norms of communication style focus more on maintenance of harmony, i.e. the relationship aspect. In this case certain norms might have been violated according to person B’s interpretation of the interaction in this particular situation. However, if we could uncover the underlying needs behind person A’s behaviour, which might, for example, be the simple striving for safety/security through clarity of facts, then person B is much more likely to feel understanding and empathy for this. The motive of a basic human need, in this case security through clarity, is comprehensible regardless of culture and the revelation of this is likely to aid understanding, connection, and empathy.

The goal therefore, is to uncover needs and thus intentions of the other and express our own needs in order that both might be met through a sufficiently transparent negotiation process.

In the previous section we underlined the link between basic human emotions and basic human needs. With regard to establishing sustainable relationships across cultures, there is also a crucial connection between the fulfilment of basic human needs and empathy. When our needs are not met (for example we are not listened to), it is much harder to commit to experiencing empathy. Recent studies of neuro-cognition have started to clarify that empathy is largely a consciously motivated activity (e.g. Zaki 2014; Weisz / Zaki 2018). Therefore it seems logical that when our basic needs are not met, we are less likely to engage in empathy since we have no motivation to do so. This throws up a conundrum: If our own needs are not being met by our social partner, then we are less likely to choose to commit to empathising in return. This leads to non-fulfilment of their needs, too, and ends in an unfortunate vicious cycle. The only way to break this cycle is heightened awareness of these processes (see section 8 on mindful awareness)

and a commitment to unilateral empathising and an ability to suspend the fulfilment of our own needs. This is not an easy practice and of course is subject to our own boundaries of acceptability (self-set acceptance limits within the framework of collaborative communication).

## 6. Openness to Outcome

When we negotiate with members of other cultures and make a request, we find ourselves in a testing ground for whether the prerequisites for collaboration, i.e. genuine reciprocity and goodwill have been established. If trust-building and the establishment of transparency regarding the situation as well as the basic motives of both parties has gone well, the chances of a positive response are good. If this is not the case, then we need to engage in further trust-building, which might involve listening, observing and adapting from our repertoire of communication styles and “ways of being in the world” (Bennett 2017), via trial and error. According to Rosenberg (2003), even when the chances of acceptance are favourable, we still need to ensure that we adhere to two important principles when we make requests. In order to have the greatest chance of success, the request should be specific (to ensure that what we are asking is knowable and actionable), positive in nature (in order to focus on solutions not problems). A further principle, which is only implicitly expressed by Rosenberg is that of *openness to outcome*. This should be a genuine openness to all possible forms of the response, both linguistically as well as in terms of our consciousness. If we ask ‘Would you be prepared to...?’ whereas inwardly we are not willing to accept anything other than a positive response, then this does not represent authentic openness to outcome. If we do not monitor this principle every time we make a request, then it is easy to find ourselves implementing a subtly dominant and demanding mindset. We might summarise these three principles by saying: The specificity of the request

is a practical means to enable the other to understand and respond; a positive request formulation activates a more solution-oriented (and less defensive) mindset (see Spitzer 1999) and openness to outcome supports the basic human motive of self-determination.

The success of this phase is signalled by a willing acceptance of the request or a constructive negotiation, after which the needs of both parties are momentarily met (although this continues in the form of a constant negotiation process). The request phase requires us to transfer our *strategic competence* (Bolten 2020) into an ambiguous environment. The required openness to outcome necessitates a relationship without hierarchy, since neither takes on the role of judge, where there is no demanding, no apologising and no guilt. For cultures in which people have become accustomed to absolute authorities and a clear, binary notion of wrong and right, this aspect can be problematic. Accordingly, extra emphasis can be placed on the benevolent intention behind the process along with adaptability and willingness to accept a different path or outcome. We might also initially need to implement these principles unilaterally.<sup>5</sup>

## 7. A repertoire of behaviours and communication styles

When we meet a stranger, the composition of their multiple cultural affiliations (Hansen 2009) and all that this signifies for their values, thinking and behaviour is unknown. Therefore, even if we know the basic principles for establishing trust (empathy, authenticity, transparency of feelings, needs, intention and logic), we nevertheless cannot know which communicative strategies will serve these principles most effectively. The concrete process for establishing trust will accordingly be an informed trial and error endeavour. This process is *informed* when there is some knowledge of possible communication styles and *ways of being* in a particular cultural context. This might be called a *repertoire* of styles and behaviours

(Bennett 2017), from which we can select those which seem most promising in an intercultural encounter. Some styles can be deduced from the array of *cultural dimensions*<sup>6</sup> that have become popular in the last few decades. Thus, if we recognise, for example, a particular tendency along the cultural dimension *task / content orientation vs. relationship orientation* in a certain context, then we might adjust our behaviour (within our own acceptance and authenticity limits) and devote more time to focusing on relationship-building by using more personal language, for example. To give a further illustration, if we notice tendencies towards an explicit communication style then we might adjust our communication style and become more specific (“Let’s meet for lunch sometime” might become “How about lunch on Friday?”) and use meta-communicative strategies. A further example might occur if we notice in our conversation partner an orientation towards uncertainty avoidance, and adjust some of what we say to emphasise guarantees and allay safety concerns. At the same time we will express our own preferences in an effort to foster understanding and begin the construction of a mini culture (Rathje 2015, p.6) of mutually accepted behaviour, commonalities and collaboration.

These are just a few examples of the many polar dimensions that have been suggested in the study of intercultural communication and there are some caveats to be mentioned here. Firstly, a simplistic and often pre-determined use of a cultural dimension, especially when macro cultures such as national cultures are referenced is certainly not beneficial and can even be detrimental, since the other party can often feel unjustly and incorrectly ‘simplified’ in their being, leading to a feeling of confinement and defensiveness. If dimensions are to be used, then they need to be carefully and tentatively, observed through presence, active listening and questioning with an air of generous curiosity and openness. If this is not adhered to, then the fram-

ing effect will limit, rather than open up possibilities, rendering the use of such categories more dangerous useful. This means that noticing and presence is all the more important, in order to detect nuances and different ‘flavours’ of these dimensions or even different characteristics entirely. Further, each personality is a complex construct (Meleddu / Scalas 2006), which can accommodate apparent contradictions depending on context and therefore any dimensions used should relate to a particular sub-context while keeping an overview of the wider context.

Despite having emphasised the importance of developing a repertoire of behaviours and communication styles, these skills will always be subservient to the guiding principles behind successful intercultural interaction. We can imagine, for example, that listening actively (the strategy) would be non-sensical if we were then unable to suspend judgment (the principle) regarding the content of our partner’s dialogue. We might argue then that a person who embodies the guiding principles outlined in this article but only possesses a narrow repertoire of communicative strategies might be more successful at bridge-building than a person who masters a wide range of communicative strategies, but does not adhere to some basic principles of collaborative communication.

## 8. Mindful Awareness

Many of the principles described above might have elicited acceptance and internal acknowledgement from the reader. However, even if we adhere to these principles and have developed a wide-ranging repertoire of behaviours to deal with diverse communication styles, it is vital to recognise that thought processes change dramatically -despite knowing otherwise- when our state of mind changes (Hamilton 2015). When confronted with seemingly illogical or offensive comments from the other party, an occurrence that is unavoidable in an unfamiliar environ-

ment, our good intentions are likely to vanish as the perception of danger triggers an acute autonomic response. Correspondingly, the sympathetic nervous system (commonly known as the 'fight, flight, freeze' state) can be activated. In this state, along with a host of bodily reactions, our capacity for understanding of complexity is diminished as the amygdala inhibits the functioning of the prefrontal cortex (Hamilton 2015). Simplistic judgments, defensive and uncollaborative behaviour as well as a considerably narrower focus of attention is much more likely in this state, no matter how benevolent the initial intention. It is therefore crucial to recognise the moment when the autonomic nervous system is activated when communicating with disparate others, and one of the most effective activities to achieve this is the practice of mindful awareness.

By mindful awareness we mean "Cultivating Attention to the Present Moment Somatic and Sensory Experience" (Levit-Binnun / Arbel / Dorjee 2021) as a holistic<sup>7</sup> practise. We mean here the practise of deliberately focussing attention on sensations, whether inside the body or outside, during an allocated period of time. Through this focussed attention, the mindfulness practitioner becomes an *observer of thoughts*, catching distractions, ruminations and emotions while gently and repeatedly refocussing on the object or sensation chosen. The focus here aims at a balance between concentration and relaxation, resulting in a stable clarity and objectivity of mind (see Brintzinger 2021, chapter 4). In this way we not only learn more about and appreciate the functioning of the mind, but we also become aware of and improve our ability to let go of thoughts which do not serve our purpose (Holzel / Lazar / Gard et al. 2011). With repeated practice this awareness and skill transitions into everyday situations, meaning that we can, for example become aware of and let pass a judgmental thought that might otherwise have triggered an acute

autonomic response. This allows us to refocus on what is occurring in the moment and actively engage in empathy, since the perceived threat dissipates. This form of mindfulness has been shown to calm the autonomic nervous system, i.e. activate the parasympathetic system and re-establish a more peaceful mindset (e.g. Desteno / David / Lim / Daniel / Duong et. al 2018; Tang et al. 2009). By shining a light on the intense activity that occurs in the mind when danger is detected, the cycle of inflammatory thoughts can be interrupted. As a result, we are more likely to realise the complexity of the situation and also the unmet basic human motives on both sides. In this way we can return to constructive bridge-building behaviour. This type of mindful awareness needs to be trained as a prophylaxis, i.e. before such events occur, in order not to be swept away by our deep-rooted autonomic responses in the heat of the moment. To begin with, this might mean removing ourselves momentarily from the situation in order to re-affirm a mindful state. Or, if we have trained extensively beforehand, we will eventually be able to redirect our thoughts in the moment (*on-the-fly*) in order to re-activate the parasympathetic nervous system as events occur.

The ability to gain distance from impulsive thoughts and reactions through mindful awareness training not only enables us to interrupt the autonomic nervous system, but equally puts us in a better position in all phases of the collaborative communication process. We are more likely to formulate objectively (*external transparency*) and disengage from judgments and assumptions; Feeling and expressing empathy will be easier since we are no longer enveloped in our own emotion; Equally, our ability to identify our emotions and follow the path back to the underlying basic human motives will be enhanced; And finally, our request is more likely to have an air of genuine openness since we are no longer attached to the imperative of a single outcome.



If we do not train in this “simple but not easy” (Sofer 2018) self-management skill, then all other good intentions are likely to be sabotaged by our autonomic nervous system in the face of the unknown.

## 9. Limits and boundaries

We might be forgiven for assuming that this article’s plea for bridge-building, along with an adherence to principles such as non-harm and empathy might simply amount to the advocacy of generally agreeable behaviour. However, this would be to misconceive the principles and practices being proposed here. At the heart of collaborative communication is not *agreeableness*, but the effort to make transparent the inner experienced world of the parties involved, including interpretations of the situation itself and the intentions of both parties, with the aim of fulfilling the basic human motives of all participants without guilt or demand. This involves directing just as much respect and consideration towards our own motives as towards the needs of the other party. If our basic motives have not been met after repeated attempts at achieving consensus on common goals and methods according to collaborative principles, then we might decide that we have exhausted plausible alternatives while maintaining a healthy and authentic relationship with ourselves. This could be described as our own personal *positivism within relativism*. In accordance with principles of transparency and authenticity, these limits need to be communicated, but without falling into the trap of blame, bitterness and retaliation. An authentic ‘no’ that maintains integrity through non-blame is a valid option when all else fails. Paradoxically, a blame-free ‘no’ can contribute to the sustainability of the relationship at a future time since all the principles of collaborative communication are upheld through this action (authenticity, transparency, non-blame, constructivism, fulfilment of needs). This gives the relationship every chance of being re-

activated in the future, with the added advantage of enhanced sincerity and trust. The logic here is that if we know that — even in rejection — a person upholds these principles, then we can trust them at all times.

## 10. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to suggest an overview of the skills, attitudes and principles, taken from a range of disciplines, that might be necessary in order for any particular individual to contribute effectively to bridging the gap that has opened up between entrenched cultural groups in today’s society and thereby enhance collaboration. The suggestions here are intended to sketch out a possible roadmap for those who, in an atmosphere of division, wish to be agents of positive change.

Currently, with the areas of consensus in society becoming increasingly small across competing groups, it seems clear that the philosophy required cannot focus on concepts such as the superiority or inferiority of the ideas and values of groups or individuals if we are not to be engulfed in endless semantic, or even physical battles in the future. Instead it needs to centre around basic human motives, since these can help us to connect through empathy.

Given this focus on basic human motives, we require strategies and skills in order to bring these motives to light (*internal transparency*) and to emphasise our intention to fulfil these motives for all parties.

In order to be consistent with this goal it is imperative to avoid becoming sidetracked into binary *wrong-right* arguments through destructive or vilifying behaviour from the other party. Our autonomic nervous system (*fight/flight/freeze*) therefore needs to be mitigated when activated in the face of perceived attacks. Here we proposed that the most effective way of achieving this is through dedicated mindfulness practice that is holistic in essence, since it ultimately affects not only our relation-

ship with the self, including our own subjective representation of the world, but also our reciprocal relationships with others, the natural environment and possibly even our relationship with sources of meaning, which might be termed spirituality or a set of principles for living. Although mindful awareness is a training process requiring discipline and commitment, these practices enable us to achieve perspective and distance with regard to our role, including the crucial influence of our own acute autonomic, biological responses and enable us to take action before destructive behaviour follows.

Equipped with this *self-competence*, we can proceed to explore the basic motives of the other with an attitude of *generous curiosity*. This will involve the exploration of intentions, emotions and motives on both sides through a unique negotiation process whose outcome will be open. This process will involve the use of a selection of communication styles and *ways of being* from our repertoire, for example with variation in aspects such as explicitness, intensity or focus, for example with regard to content or relationship. Our degree of adaptation, however, will extend only as much as is necessary for reciprocity and consensus here, while respecting our own convictions and authenticity.

Collaboration involves requesting what we desire from the other. If we are not open to all outcomes here then we are essentially imposing our demands on others. This openness also means in a minority of cases that we might legitimately decide that we cannot adapt further without infringing upon our boundaries of acceptability (our own *positivism within relativism*). In this case the goal would be to part without resentment and possibly return to the matter at a later date. However, in most cases, once good intentions and basic motives are evident, a situation will have been established in which each party actively desires to engage in collaboration and fulfil the other party's request.

The characteristics of the ideal bridge-builder as outlined here are manifold and complex. In fact they will probably involve retraining some deeply engrained practices and beliefs, especially surrounding the necessary detachment from most absolute notions of wrong and right. Therefore it is no surprise that seminars that dedicate just a few seminar days to achieving intercultural competence can hardly begin to scratch the surface. There are, however, few alternatives to attempting to navigate our way through dissonance with a non-binary stance where we both accept others' views, however incongruent they appear to us, while at the same time maintaining a personal commitment to our own convictions and boundaries. This is a commensurate challenge, and requires a willingness to consistently perform this balancing act in order to ensure that we have the greatest possible chance of reaching a place of greater understanding, empathy and collaboration across cultures.

## 11. Literature

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## 12. Endnotes

1 “Generous curiosity” is a term that surfaced in a workshop run by the author at Sietar Spain’s annual conference (2017).

2 See Donnelly, Sol Gamsu & Sam Whewall (2020)

3 This can be conceptualized in a manner akin to Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984)

4 ‘Needs’ is used here in the meaning attached to the term by Marshall Rosenberg (1999). Rosenberg himself did not like this term, since it might be construed as ‘neediness’, which is not the intention here. For this reason the word ‘motives’ will be preferred in most instances in this article.

5 A note on the cultural specificity of the method of making a request above: Although there are some arguments in favour of the universal nature of the method described above, it could be argued that this style of communication is in fact culturally specific. In response, I would point to the impossibility of communicating in a manner that is ‘culture-free’, and therefore to the inevitability of ‘picking’ a particular communication style as our starting point. As long as there is adaptability and openness to outcome, we at least have a good chance (although no guarantee) of achieving goodwill and cooperation through this process.

6 For an overview of the concept and use of cultural dimensions see Smith & Bond (2020).

7 Mindfulness is mainly a self-competence, which can be seen as a foundation for all other skills in communicating successfully across differences. However, mindfulness could also be viewed as a holistic practice in which all four of our reciprocal relationships -to ourselves, to others, to the environment and to sources of meaning (see Bolten 2014, p.19) - are influenced. In addition to changes in our relationship with ourselves through observation of our thoughts and emotions, reciprocal effects can also be evident in our relationship with the environment while observing stimuli from outside the body. Further, our relationship to others can be affected both through mindfulness’ inherent relinquishing of many judgments (questioning our necessarily subjective representation of the world) as well as through meditation practices such as Metta-Bhavana (e.g. Chisman / Brooks 2018). As a result of these alterations to our reciprocal relationships we may also experience a change in a fourth relationship, our relationship to sources of meaning, whether these are religious, spiritual or simply a set of principles to live by. All four relationships -since they are interconnected- are therefore influenced to some extent by mindfulness practices.