

# Intercultural Communication in Climate Change Crisis Conversations

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## Keywords

Negotiations, Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Dialogue, International Relations, Cultural Competence



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## Information YCST

*Climate change will be one of the largest security threats in the (near) future. Yet, in recent years, little to no attention was paid towards climate change in the security domain. We understand the importance of supplying future decision makers with knowledge and skills to understand climate change and negate the challenges which it will bring. Hence, YCST was created in November 2021. The YCS Research Team was founded in September 2023, to further build upon this project. The Research Team gives young professionals and students the opportunity to write about climate security related topics and put their articles into public discourse.*

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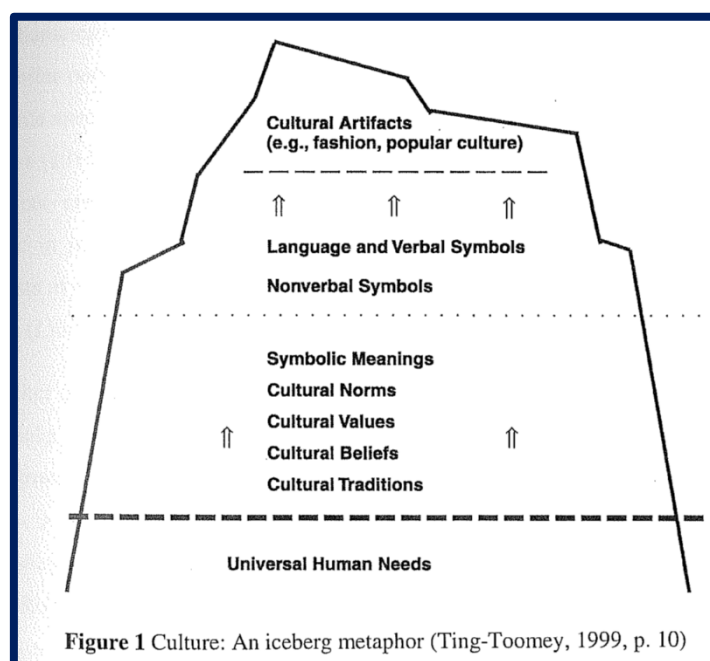
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In our previous Youth Climate Security Research Team article, my fellow member Jurre emphasised the need for international cooperation to combat climate change, as he rightfully argues it is a problem that is not limited by national boundaries. However, effective cross-cultural communication, especially in response to international crises like global warming, is no easy feat.

In fact, ahead of the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, Crawford and Mikulewicz argued that our failure to reach adequate international solutions to climate change is directly attributed to our lack of intercultural understanding, which they claim highlights “our chronic inability to work together to address the [climate] emergency” (2021). But what exactly are the barriers we may face in intercultural exchanges, and how can we as young leaders of climate security navigate these challenges to come to productive solutions?

### ***What is culture, and how does it manifest in our encounters?***

Academia has yet to reach a clear consensus as to what exactly ‘culture’ is. Some say it is a combination of both explicit and implicit knowledge about one’s society that you must learn to fit in (Goodenough, 1957), others say that it is a set of behaviours that you follow such as specific customs, habits or traditions (Robinson, 1985). Ting-Toomey (1999) likens culture to an iceberg, which has easily observable elements like clothing or language, and other non-visible features such as cultural values and symbols lurking beneath the surface:



Despite these varying definitions, it is agreed that culture forms the foundations of an individual's understanding of the world around them, as well as their preferred communication styles. In sum, your cultural background has the power to subconsciously influence how you understand and respond to the phenomena around you.

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Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) surveyed over 46,000 managers across 40 countries, to document generalised cultural preferences across the following 7 dimensions:

- **Universalism vs Particularism** (*What's more important: rules or relationships?*)
- **Individualism vs Collectivism** (*Who has priority: the individual or the group?*)
- **Specific vs Diffuse** (*How separate are your personal and work lives?*)
- **Neutral vs Emotional** (*How much do you control your emotions?*)
- **Achievement vs Ascription** (*Is respect dependent on your achievements or your status in society?*)
- **Sequential Time vs Synchronous Time** (*Do you solve problems one at a time, or all at once?*)
- **Internal Direction vs Outer Direction** (*Do you control your environment, or does it control you?*)

In the context of international cooperation, these dimensions may initially appear to be too obscure and irrelevant to have a direct impact on problem solving. However, van der Wurff (2009) has linked the diverging climate change policies of the UK, Germany and the USA to subtle, yet present cultural differences. For example, German people's tendency to be universalist means the German state generally leans towards structured rules and deadlines in its climate change policy, whereas the prominence of individualism in the USA means its government prefers soft targets and chooses to promote the individual's (voluntary) role in combating climate change, rather than striving for mass collectivist action. In countries like China, where individuals tend to have outer direction, people generally believe that their actions are controlled by their surrounding environments. Therefore, when the state implements authoritative and sudden climate change initiatives (Ruckman, 2022), they are not as taken aback and reluctant as their American counterparts, who strongly believe that they should be in total control of their lives.

In a similar vein, Ting-Toomey has noted the generalised differences in conflict management styles depending on one's home culture (1999). Individualists value step-by-step linear processes and brainstorming to directly address the problem at hand; whereas collectivists prefer to look at the 'big picture', understanding context behind an issue before beginning to resolve it. Likewise, people from emotional cultures are more likely to use impassioned personal stories to emphasise impact, whilst those from neutral cultures may lean more towards statistics and facts. Although not every single person from the same country will react identically to one another, it is documented that our culture has an impact on the ways we subconsciously approach our communication in problem and crisis resolution. However, what happens when people of different cultural backgrounds come together to solve a global issue?

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## *Ethnocentrism and intercultural dialogue*

When people from different cultural backgrounds interact with one another without adequate intercultural skills, there is the risk of misunderstandings arising. Those from the Global North may be more conscious of their personal carbon footprint, so actively take steps to combat this; whereas those from the Global South- *who on average produce far less than their Northern counterparts*- may feel less inclined to participate in environmentally friendly behaviours. In terms of misunderstandings in intercultural communication, if a person from an environmentally friendly nation comes into contact with someone who shows disregard for sustainable environmental practices, they may unconsciously adopt adverse attitudes towards them. For the climate conscious person, protecting the planet may just be a habit, something that is expected of them by society, or a particularly valued act in their culture; so, seeing someone act in opposition to these cultural rules may seem atypical and provoke a negative reaction within them. Such misunderstandings are not just limited to interpersonal interactions and can easily be seen on the international stage.

Originating from the combination of the Greek words “ethnos” (state) and “kentron” (centre), ‘ethnocentrism’ is a phenomenon whereby members of a particular group subconsciously consider their own practices, approaches and attitudes as the most ‘correct’ or ‘natural’. Evaluating other cultures according to the standards and customs of your own culture unsurprisingly leads to yours being classified as superior, with any deviations thus being considered inferior. Such an approach, although not always done deliberately, inevitably leads to distrust and breakdowns in cross-cultural communication.

The Council of Europe (2008, pg.17) defines intercultural dialogue as “an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect.” The term ‘dialogue’ in itself implies equality and reciprocity (Wierzbicka, 2006) and by this definition, it is therefore impossible to engage in effective intercultural dialogue if one has an ethnocentric approach to culture. This naturally has a profound effect on cooperation during international crises and conflict management.

Let’s explore some potential examples of cultural misunderstandings in two climate change-focused scenarios:

### *Case One*

*When working in an international group to combat the increase in wildfires, an individualist called ‘X’ may become frustrated by ‘Y’, a collectivist coworker who has a desire to gain a deep understanding of the general reasons behind wildfires. In X’s eyes, researching the causes of the fires is not a crucial step in the problem-solving process, so feels like the team is just wasting time. ‘Y’ on the other hand, feels uncomfortable by X’s eagerness to jump straight into generating solutions, as in their opinion, a holistic understanding of the problem can fuel more comprehensive results. They often argue and accuse the other of sabotaging the success of the team.*

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## Case Two

Person 'A' is a manager in an international team trying to highlight the impact of rising sea levels around the world. 'A' wants to include hard-hitting and extremely emotional, personal case studies with victims in their upcoming article, but the team doesn't seem responsive. Looking uncomfortable, they avoid eye contact with 'A' and look down at their computers, but no one directly opposes A's idea. Manager 'A' feels very disheartened by this and is now anxious about their ability as a leader. The team however feel like the article may come across as too sensationalised and dramatic and would rather stick with a more scientific approach. Nevertheless, 'A' is their manager, and they are worried about offending their boss and jeopardising their position in the team and wider company.

Needless to say, no one intentionally goes into such scenarios hoping that it ends in misunderstandings and failure. People generally feel more vulnerable when interacting with people from other cultures, for they cannot fall back upon the habitual patterns of communication that they have grown accustomed to (Ting-Toomey, 1999). However, in these two examples we can see that the underlying cultural values of individual members may have a direct impact on working relationships and the success of their respective projects.

### *How to be more interculturally competent?*

Intercultural competence is “the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural situations and to relate” with members of a different culture (Bennett & Bennett, 2004, p. 149). It generally incorporates a combination of knowledge of both yours and other cultures, practical skills, such as foreign language ability and behavioural attitudes like confidence and curiosity (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247–249). An interculturally competent person, contrary to popular belief, still faces barriers to communication based on culture, but it is the tools and resources that they use to combat this that sets them apart from others.

Should the reader ever find themselves in an intercultural situation, the best way to go about understanding cultural differences is to adopt what is known as a ***culture-relative approach***. When entering intercultural exchanges, people should be mindful of the ways in which their culture manifests in their own behaviours, values and attitudes, in addition to that of others (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Instead of evaluating others in accordance with *your* own cultural rules, try putting yourself in their shoes and approach experiences from their cultural frame of reference. Observing the ‘deviant’ cultural behaviours of others is a brilliant tool to experience alternative ways of thinking and feeling. In the climate change context, a good way of doing this is to be mindful of the climate inequalities that exist globally (Crawford and Mikulewicz, 2021)- e.g. knowing that someone is from a place that is directly impacted by climate change may be useful in explaining their actions and behaviours.

Furthermore, ***flexibility*** and ***having an open mind*** are vital components of intercultural competence. Not being too set in your own ways and having the ability to change your behaviour to accommodate a variety of scenarios is useful in mediating cultural

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misunderstandings. For instance, if you've observed that your international coworker considers workplace hierarchy particularly significant, try incorporating more formal language in conversations with them.

Similarly, practical skills of *language* and *communication* are also deemed essential. In the majority of intercultural scenarios, at least one party will be communicating in a non-native language. Regardless of an individual's fluency levels, it is important to avoid using localised language such as idioms, obscure cultural references or elusive terminology, otherwise "we will be talking to ourselves" (Wierzbicka, 2006, pg.701) and not those from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, there is a need for simplified language and an emphasis on universal human concepts in order to facilitate mutual understanding in international dialogues.

If in Cases One and Two, people incorporated such strategies when faced with cultural differences, it is likely that they would have smoother interactions with less misunderstandings, ultimately creating better workplace synergy. It would also be a useful way to develop a deeper interpersonal understanding of their coworkers and their home cultures.

Through various examples we have explored what 'culture' is, how it manifests in our interactions with one another, as well as discussed the risk of ethnocentrism in intercultural exchanges. It is important for people to recognise that intercultural competence is a skill that one can never fully master, as it is a lifelong process of observation, learning and behavioural experimentation. This is not said to dishearten the reader, rather it is a challenge that, should you choose to accept, will open your eyes to a myriad of different yet equally astonishing cultural practices and ways of thinking. My hope is that by writing this, I have given both the reader and my fellow YCSRT members an insight into how we, as aspiring international leaders, can be more mindful of the influence of culture on our international exchanges, moving forward more united than before in our fight against climate change.

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## **Perspectives from other members of the YCS Research Team on the article**

### **Marieke Jacobs (27)**

MSc Earth Science & MSc Energy Science at Utrecht University, working-student at Defensity College

*This intercultural difference is a good reminder for me how to find solutions for climate related cases in an international setting. As an earth scientist, I love to find solutions for a specific problem as fast as possible, most of the time by tackling the problem from the root, A+B gives C approach. However, it's good to realise that some tactics will not resonate with every culture, although I thought I was sure it would work from my perspective. I think this theory and the mentioned measures will help me to find better solutions that are in the long run and for a broad public more effective.*

### **Tor Lovell (21)**

BA Philosophy, Ethics and Religion student at the University of Leeds

*Catrin raises a great point, we can see everywhere the difficulties that arise between groups fighting for the same thing from different backgrounds. Nobody wants the climate to continue to warm yet the variety in approaches to combat this seem to clash. Culture closely relates to religion, and Catrin's points about subconsciously reflecting your own culture are the same concerning religion. Some environmental groups use Biblical imagery to convey the seriousness of climate change, using the idea of the end of the world and judgement day. This creates a whole new deterrence called apocalypticism. Just like with culture, inter-religious dialogue and understanding is necessary for global cooperation against climate change.*

### **Ytze de Vries (25)**

Graduate MSc Energy Science at Utrecht University, founder of the Youth Climate Security Talks and works at the Dutch ministry of Defense.

*Armed forces have a very unique culture, which is hard to find in other civil organisations. I think that this unique military culture can also pose a specific solution to climate change. Reflecting on the 7 dimensions presented in the article of Catrin, I view the culture of the Dutch Armed Forces as: **Universalism** instead of particularism, **Collectivism** instead of individualism, **diffuse** instead of specific, **neutral** instead of emotional, **ascription** instead of achievement, **synchronous** instead of sequential time, and **outer** instead of internal direction. It would be interesting to think of how this set of dimensions could contribute to advancing climate (security) actions.*

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**Jurre Kok (22)**

MA European Policy student at the University of Amsterdam and board member of Volt Utrecht.

*The problems which Catrin addresses are typical hurdles in the race we have to solve climate change, the implications of climate change and border-crossing problems in general. Within EU- and geopolitical context, the consequences of intercultural incompetence hinders solutions and the actual implementation of policy due to, among others, the 7 dimensions which Catrin presents. Climate change is a problem which can only be countered if global leaders become more understanding of one another and stop 'othering' in the name of personal benefit or other reasons. In the span of 80 years, democratic Europe has integrated despite the cultural differences, due to European Integration being mutually beneficial. Now it is time for future leaders to learn from Adenauer, De Gasperi and Mitterrand among others, and try to follow Catrin's advice to solve the global (security) implications of the changing climate.*



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