

FOSDEM, 2023

Cultural Relativism: A Prism for Constructing Cross Cultural Communities

Claude N. Warren, Jr.

Claude Warren

- Member of Apache Foundation
- Member and leader of cross cultural teams.
- Not in Wikipedia – that is my father.
- Grew up in a framework of cultural relativism



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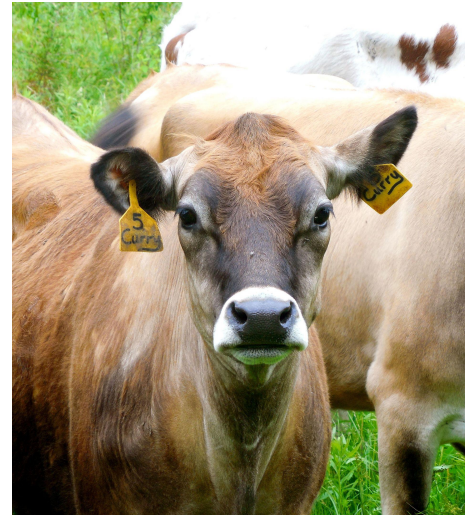
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Culture

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- Not that you eat, but what you eat.



Culture

- Learned behavior, a learned social framework.
- Not that you eat, but what you eat.
- Not that you perceive time, but how you perceive it.

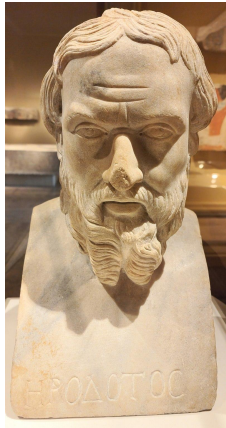


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- The idea that beliefs and practices can only be understood from the point of view of the culture that surrounds them.

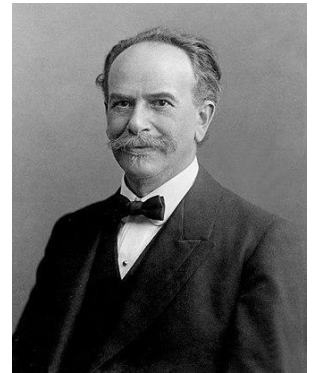
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- First recorded use: Alain Lock, 1924 to describe Robert Lowie's "extreme cultural relativism" in a review of Lowie's 1917 book *Culture and Ethnology*.

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 - Cause cohesive breakdown in the team.
 - Cause misunderstanding of work assignments.
 - Cause failure to deliver the correct work product.

Cultural Relativism – Example 1



With the exception of people with colour vision deficiencies, everybody perceives colour the same way.

Cultural Relativism – Example 2



just about



Cultural Relativism – Example 2



just about



Cultural Relativism – Example 3



Cultural Relativism -- Summary

"Judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation."

-- Melville Herskovits

Cross Cultural Teams – Example 1

- Project to transition development from one team (culture) to another.
- In the culture of the receiving team it was not permissible to show failure. This was perceived as a career limiting move.
- In the culture of the receiving team it was not acceptable to disagree with someone perceived to be of higher rank.

Cross Cultural Teams – Example 1, Solution

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 - Daily stand-ups were introduced in which discussion and dissent was encouraged.
 - “Indelicate” questions were not discouraged.

Cross Cultural Teams – Example 2

- All cultural team members are from “Western” cultures. This conversation occurred on Slack:

2:15 Claude Warren The schedule (without registering) does not give daily start/end times. Can someone tell me what is the start time on the 3rd (doors open) and what is the end time on the 6th (expected end of last presentation) and or doors close?

2:15 <redacted1> [@Claude Warren](#) the TALK SCHEDULE with timings are available here — <https://app.expopass.com/events/QXRRx0X/schedule>

2:18 <redacted2> Welcome keynotes start at 9. First breakout starts at 11:20. Final session ends at 17:40. BOFs start at 17:50

2:19 Claude Warren Thx

2:26 Claude Warren @<redacted1> that link only works if you are registered.

2:27 <redacted3> Sorry, for sanity's sake, we are only managing times on one schedule

2:27 <redacted2> [@Claude Warren](#) If you're not registered, why do you care?

Cross Cultural Teams – Example 2, Analysis

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- To me, they are people I have worked with for a long time. It would just take too long to say:

"I don't see why anyone who is not attending would be interested in the start/end times. Can you elaborate on why you want to know?"

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 - Consider cultural differences in:
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 - Use case definitions
 - Documentation
 - Make it safe to disagree and question.
 - Make it psychologically safe to fail.

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 - Management must lead by example: No “executive wash rooms.”
 - Failure must be public.
 - Management work items (non personnel) must be public in the project.
 - Treat everyone, every objection, every suggestion, every point of view with respect.

Closing Thought

When we're connected to others, we become better people.

-- Randy Pausch

The art of cross cultural team management resolves to this one point:

Be a better person

Thank You

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