

WORKING PAPER

Cultural Judgment

Toward an Intellectual Foundation

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1. The problem of judgment

Intercultural communication has accumulated an extensive vocabulary for describing what people need when they encounter cultural difference. We speak of cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural competence, Cultural Intelligence, mindfulness, perspective-taking, adaptability, and cultural agility. These concepts differ considerably in their theoretical origins and purposes, and it would be mistaken to treat them as interchangeable. Together, however, they have helped the field move beyond the assumption that factual knowledge about another society is sufficient for effective intercultural interaction. Knowing that “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” is not enough. Even if we know what “the Romans” are said to do, we still have to judge whether that knowledge applies to this person in this situation, what adaptation would actually mean here, and whether adaptation is appropriate at all. More than cultural knowledge is therefore required.

Yet one important human activity often remains in the background: judgment. We may have cultural knowledge, be aware of cultural differences, and be willing to adapt our behavior, but none of these tells us automatically what to do in a particular situation. We first have to understand what is happening. We have to judge whether culture might be relevant, which cultural knowledge might apply, whether adaptation is necessary, and what an appropriate response might be. **In other words, before we can decide how to act, we are already judging the situation.**

Consider a simple intercultural situation. A German executive presents a proposal to a Saudi counterpart. The counterpart listens attentively, asks several questions, and ends the meeting without explicitly accepting or rejecting the proposal. What has happened?

The apparently simple question immediately becomes difficult. The German executive may interpret the absence of disagreement as cautious agreement. It may instead indicate politeness, reluctance to reject or accept the proposal explicitly, insufficient authority to decide, a wish to consult others, strategic ambiguity, uncertainty about the proposal, concern about the relationship, or simply the personal communication style of this particular individual. Several explanations may be plausible at the same time, and the information available at that moment may not permit a definitive choice among them.

Cultural knowledge can help. Knowledge about hierarchy, face, indirect communication, relationships, decision-making, or Saudi business practices may allow the executive to consider explanations that might otherwise not have occurred to them. Cultural knowledge can therefore expand the range of possible interpretations. Yet it cannot determine by itself which interpretation deserves the greatest weight in this particular encounter. Indeed, as cultural knowledge increases, the number of plausible interpretations may increase as well.

Before asking how people should behave across cultures, therefore, there is a prior question: **How do people judge what is happening when culture may matter, but culture alone cannot explain what is happening?**

This is the problem that I call **Cultural Judgment**. The problem becomes more difficult when we consider the position of the person doing the judging. When we judge a situation, we rely on assumptions about what behavior means, what we can normally expect from others, what counts as reasonable, and what an appropriate response would be. Many of these assumptions have been learned through our cultural and social experience. Because they are familiar to us, however, we do not necessarily recognize them as culturally shaped. They may simply appear to us as common sense.

In this sense, our own culture is like water to a fish. The fish does not normally experience the water as something separate from itself; it is simply the environment in which it moves. In much the same way, we may not notice many of our culturally learned assumptions until we encounter people for whom those assumptions are not equally self-evident. What we regard as respectful behavior, appropriate disagreement, reasonable initiative, meaningful silence, honest feedback, responsible leadership, or proper use of authority may appear obvious to us without being obvious to someone else.

This means that we do not enter an intercultural situation from a culturally neutral position. We are already interpreting what happens through assumptions that may feel self-evident. Encountering cultural difference can make us aware of this limitation because behavior that initially seemed to have an obvious meaning may become open to other interpretations. Cultural knowledge is valuable precisely because it can help us recognize these possibilities.

But cultural knowledge can also create another problem. Instead of saying, "I know what this behavior means because it is obvious to me," we may begin to say, "I know what this behavior means because I know the culture." We have replaced one form of premature certainty with another. In the first case, we treat our own culturally learned assumptions as universal. In the second, we treat generalized knowledge about another culture as the explanation of a particular person in a particular situation. In both cases, we may stop asking questions too early.

Cultural Judgment begins precisely at this point. The question is not simply whether culture *can* explain a behavior. We have to judge whether culture is relevant to understanding this particular behavior, involving this particular person, in this particular situation. If culture is relevant, we still have to determine in what way it is relevant and how much explanatory weight it deserves in relation to other possible explanations. Cultural knowledge can help us formulate better hypotheses, but it cannot determine by itself which hypothesis best explains the case before us.

Cultural Judgment therefore makes the relevance of culture itself something that has to be judged. It does not ask us to ignore culture, but neither does it allow us to use culture as an automatic explanation. This is why Cultural Judgment cannot be reduced to having more cultural knowledge or knowing more about cultural differences. More knowledge can improve

judgment, but that knowledge still has to be related to the particular case, weighed against other information, and treated as open to revision.

Nor is Cultural Judgment intended simply as another intercultural competence model or as a new name for cultural competence. It begins with a more fundamental problem. Human beings have to understand situations before they can decide how to act in them, and that understanding is never completely given. We have to notice what is happening, interpret what it might mean, distinguish what we know from what we merely assume, evaluate what matters, and eventually decide what response is justified. Cultural complexity makes this more difficult because the people involved may not share the same assumptions about what behavior means, what deserves attention, what is appropriate, or what consequences a particular response may have.

To understand Cultural Judgment, therefore, we first have to understand what we mean by **judgment**.

2. What do we mean by judgment?

The English word *judgment* is deceptively simple. It can refer to a particular conclusion, as when someone says, "My judgment is that we should wait." It can refer to the activity of judging, as when someone is "judging the situation." It can also refer to a relatively enduring human capacity, as when we say that someone "has good judgment."

These different meanings of judgment need to be distinguished because judging what a situation means is not the same as evaluating a person or behavior positively or negatively. This distinction becomes particularly visible in German. An *Urteil* is a judgment that has been made. *Urteilkraft* refers to the capacity or faculty of judging. The distinction matters for Cultural Judgment because the concept is not intended primarily to designate an individual *Urteil* about another culture. It concerns the capacity through which judgments become possible and the quality with which that capacity is exercised in culturally complex situations.

Kant offers an important distinction for thinking about this problem. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), he distinguishes between determinative and reflective judgment. In determinative judgment, the general rule or concept is already available, and the task is to determine whether and how the particular case falls under it. Reflective judgment begins from the other direction. The particular case is given, but the general principle under which it should be understood is not already determined and must therefore be sought.

This distinction is particularly relevant to Cultural Judgment because cultural knowledge is usually available to us in generalized form, while intercultural encounters always take place as particular situations. We may know, for example, that indirect communication, hierarchy, face, relationship orientation, or particular forms of decision-making have been associated with a

cultural context. But none of these generalizations tells us whether it explains what is happening in the encounter before us. Sometimes a cultural concept may provide a useful interpretation. At other times, the behavior may be better explained by the person's role, personality, interests, previous experiences, the organizational context, the relationship between the people involved, or the immediate circumstances. Several of these explanations may also be relevant at the same time. The task is therefore not merely to place a particular behavior under an available cultural category, but to judge which concepts and explanations illuminate the situation and how much weight each deserves.

In this respect, culturally complex situations often resemble the problem Kant identifies in reflective judgment. The particular situation is before us, but the concept or rule through which it should be understood cannot simply be assumed in advance. This does not make Cultural Judgment identical to Kantian *Urteilkraft*. Kant develops reflective judgment within a much broader philosophical project, particularly in relation to aesthetic and teleological judgment. Cultural Judgment addresses a different problem: how people arrive at sufficiently warranted judgments when culturally shaped meanings, expectations, and explanations may be relevant but their relevance to the particular case remains uncertain. The importance of Kant for the present argument therefore lies in a more specific insight: **general knowledge does not determine its own application to the particular case. Judgment is required to make that connection.**

Cultural Judgment, however, does not end with understanding what a situation means. At some point, we have to decide how to act within it. This introduces a second problem: even when we have developed a reasonable understanding of a situation, general principles and knowledge may still not tell us exactly what should be done.

Aristotle's account of *phronesis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (fourth century BCE) is relevant at this point. *Phronesis*, usually translated as **practical wisdom**, concerns the capacity to deliberate well about what should be done in particular circumstances. General principles, knowledge, and experience remain important, but they cannot mechanically prescribe the appropriate action in every concrete situation. The particular matters, and acting well therefore requires discernment.

Cultural Judgment shares this concern with *phronesis*, but culturally complex situations introduce an additional difficulty. The person exercising practical judgment may be relying on culturally learned assumptions about what the situation means, what matters, and what an appropriate response would be. Judgments about what counts as respectful, proportionate, fair, decisive, evasive, or responsible may draw on expectations that normally remain tacit. When people do not share these expectations, the apparently self-evident background of practical judgment itself becomes questionable. Cultural Judgment does not therefore replace *phronesis*. It makes the cultural situatedness of practical judgment explicit and asks how judgment can proceed when that background cannot simply be assumed to be shared.

Franz Brentano's *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874) introduces another relevant problem through the concept of intentionality. Mental phenomena are directed towards an object; consciousness is consciousness of something. Brentano does not provide a theory of intercultural judgment. His relevance lies in drawing attention to the relationship between consciousness and what consciousness is directed towards. We do not first receive an entirely neutral world and only afterwards begin to interpret it. What we notice and attend to already shapes what becomes available to interpretation and judgment.

This becomes important once culture enters the argument. Culture may be relevant not only to the behavior we are trying to understand, but also to the way we perceive and interpret that behavior. Our culturally learned expectations may influence what attracts our attention, what appears unusual or significant, which explanations occur to us, and what we regard as appropriate or inappropriate.

Cultural Judgment must therefore examine both sides of the encounter. We have to ask what cultural influences may help us understand another person's behavior, but we also have to ask how our own culturally learned assumptions may be influencing our interpretation of that behavior. Culture is therefore not only something about which we judge. It may also be part of the background from which we judge.

3. Cultural Judgment and the existing intercultural vocabulary

The need to examine how judgment operates in culturally complex situations does not make the concepts already established within intercultural research obsolete. Cultural awareness, competence, intelligence, sensitivity, and adaptability illuminate different aspects of intercultural functioning. Cultural Judgment brings another problem into focus: the process through which we determine what is happening in a particular situation, what interpretations deserve weight, and what response is justified.

Awareness can make difference visible. Cultural knowledge can enlarge understanding of unfamiliar contexts. Competence concerns capacities associated with effective and appropriate interaction. Cultural Intelligence, developed by Earley and Ang (2003), conceptualizes capabilities for functioning effectively in culturally diverse settings. Adaptability and agility emphasize the ability to modify behavior across contexts.

Yet each encounters, in one form or another, a prior problem. Before I adapt, I must judge whether adaptation is called for. Before I apply cultural knowledge, I must judge which knowledge is relevant. Before I determine whether a response is appropriate, I must have some understanding of what kind of situation I am responding to. Before I take another person's perspective, I must distinguish what I have actually observed from what I have already inferred about that person's perspective.

Judgment therefore should not simply be added as another competence alongside the others. The more interesting proposition is that acts of judgment are already presupposed whenever intercultural knowledge is interpreted and translated into action.

This is also the point at which Cultural Judgment must be distinguished from intercultural competence rather than presented as an extension of it. Intercultural competence asks, in different theoretical traditions, which orientations, capabilities, and behaviors support effective and appropriate interaction across cultural difference. Cultural Judgment shifts the object of attention to the judgments through which an actor determines what counts as effective, what counts as appropriate, whether a difference is cultural, which knowledge is relevant, and whether adaptation is warranted in the first place. The claim is not that competence models lack judgment, but that the quality of this judging deserves analysis in its own right.

Cultural Judgment does not operate independently of other human capacities. What we notice, remember, feel, expect, and know all contribute to the way we understand a situation. Language, previous experience, motivation, relationships, and the social context also influence what becomes available to judgment. Cultural Judgment should therefore not be understood as a faculty that somehow contains all of these processes. Its particular concern begins when what we perceive, know, expect, or feel has to be interpreted and weighed in relation to a concrete situation. An observation may support several interpretations. Cultural knowledge may make one explanation plausible without establishing that it applies to the particular case. An emotional response may alert us that something important is happening without telling us what that something means. Different considerations may point towards different courses of action. At some point, these possibilities have to be examined in relation to one another if we are to arrive at a judgment and decide how to act.

Cultural Judgment concerns this capacity to move from what is available to us towards a sufficiently considered judgment of the particular situation: to examine what observations might mean, what can reasonably be inferred from them, which explanations deserve greater or lesser weight, what matters in the situation, and what response can be justified despite what remains uncertain.

4. Judgment across cultures is not Cultural Judgment

The distinction becomes particularly important in relation to psychological research on judgment and decision-making across cultures. Ji and Kaulius (2013) examine cross-cultural research concerning probability judgments and confidence, risk perception and risk-taking, consumer behavior, and business and economic decision-making. Their concern is whether cultural populations differ systematically in aspects of reasoning, judgment, and choice. In this research tradition, culture principally functions as something that may explain variation in judgment and decision-making.

Cultural Judgment begins with a different question. Judgment across cultures asks how culture influences human judgment. Cultural Judgment asks what it means to exercise judgment well when culture is part of the situation. The questions are related, but their analytical direction differs. In the first case, judgment is the phenomenon being explained and culture is among the explanatory factors. Researchers may ask whether members of different cultural populations differ systematically in confidence, probabilistic reasoning, or risk perception. In Cultural Judgment, by contrast, the person confronting a concrete situation must determine **whether and how culture is relevant to explaining what is happening**. Culture has moved from being primarily an explanatory factor in a research design to being one possible source of meaning within the field being judged.

This distinction becomes especially important because population-level cultural patterns cannot simply be reversed into explanations of individual behavior. Ji and Kaulius (2013) caution against sweeping generalizations and discuss findings in which populations commonly placed within similar broad cultural categories nevertheless differ. Their review therefore illustrates both propositions that Cultural Judgment must hold together: culture can matter systematically, and knowing that culture matters systematically does not tell us how much explanatory weight culture deserves in a particular encounter.

5. What do we mean by culture?

The discussion so far has clarified what is meant by judgment. The second term in Cultural Judgment now requires closer examination. What do we mean by culture, and what exactly are we referring to when we say that culture may be relevant to understanding a situation?

This question is less straightforward than it may appear. In everyday language, culture is often used to refer to countries, societies, traditions, values, or characteristic ways of behaving. In intercultural work, we also speak of cultural differences in communication, relationships, hierarchy, time, decision-making, or nonverbal behavior. These ways of speaking can be useful, but they bring together different things: observable patterns of behavior, shared or recurring meanings, social expectations, values, practices, and the institutions through which these are maintained and reproduced.

Cultural Judgment therefore requires an understanding of culture that allows us to speak meaningfully about cultural patterns without treating culture as a fixed set of characteristics belonging to every member of a group. The difficulty becomes visible in a very ordinary example.

Eye contact illustrates the problem particularly well. We can observe that a person maintains more or less eye contact, directs their gaze towards or away from another person, or changes their gaze during particular parts of an interaction. What we cannot observe directly is what that behavior means. "Respect," "submission," "interest," "avoidance," "sexual interest,"

“gender discrimination,” or “not taking someone seriously” are already interpretations of the observed behavior.

Cultural knowledge may help us interpret such observations because patterns of eye contact can differ across cultural and social contexts. This is where the distinction between a cultural generalization and a stereotype becomes important. A cultural generalization identifies a pattern that may occur with some regularity under particular conditions. It does not tell us that every member of a cultural group will behave according to that pattern. A stereotype arises when such a generalization is applied to an individual as though group membership were sufficient to determine what that person will do or what their behavior means. A stereotype may also arise when the supposed generalization itself rests on evidence too limited to justify it.

The eye-contact example therefore involves two different problems that should not be confused. The first concerns the movement from **observation to interpretation**: what does the behavior we have observed mean? The second concerns the movement from **cultural pattern to individual case**: to what extent does what we know about a broader cultural pattern help us understand this particular person in this particular interaction?

Neither question can be answered by observation alone. We may be able to describe and compare patterns of eye contact across different contexts, and research may establish meaningful differences between populations or situations. But the meaning of a particular person’s gaze in a particular encounter still has to be interpreted.

6. Culture as coordination of meaning and action

The eye-contact example points to a broader question. If the meaning of behavior is not simply contained in the behavior itself, how does that meaning arise? Why can the same observable behavior be understood as respectful in one context, evasive in another, and inappropriate in a third? Answering this question requires us to move beyond a conception of culture as a collection of characteristics or behavioral tendencies and consider how meaning is created and coordinated in social interaction.

A useful approach can be found in Bennett’s (2020) constructivist account of intercultural communication. Rather than treating culture primarily as a collection of traits possessed by members of a group, this perspective directs attention to the ways in which people coordinate meaning and action through learned cultural systems. Language, nonverbal conventions, communication patterns, roles, values, and institutions do not merely describe cultural groups. They help make coordinated social action possible.

People learn, often without explicit instruction, expectations about who may speak when, how disagreement can be expressed, what silence communicates, what constitutes commitment, how authority should be recognized, what counts as respectful behavior, when relationships

should precede tasks, how quickly trust can be extended, and what kinds of behavior require explanation at all. Culture, from this perspective, does not simply provide people with different values. It contributes to the systems through which behavior becomes mutually intelligible and socially coordinated.

Two actors may understand the literal words being exchanged and still encounter difficulty because they are organizing the interaction through different assumptions about how meaning and action should be coordinated. One expects an explicit verbal commitment; the other understands commitment as something that develops through relationship and subsequent action. One interprets immediate disagreement as professional engagement; the other treats public disagreement as a relational event requiring considerably more caution. One expects junior specialists to contribute expertise spontaneously; another assumes that participation is structured by status and authorization.

The problem in such cases is not simply that Culture A communicates differently from Culture B. Each actor may be attempting to coordinate the interaction according to a system that ordinarily works within familiar social environments.

Intercultural communication therefore requires more than decoding the other's message. It can require recognizing that one's own way of coordinating meaning and action is not identical with the structure of the situation itself. This provides a deeper reason why Cultural Judgment is necessary. But, before people can bridge coordinating systems, they have to judge which coordinating logics may be operating, where those logics diverge, what each is accomplishing, and what the divergence means in this particular interaction.

7. Culture between institutions and enacted social worlds

This coordinating conception also prevents culture from being reduced to nationality. A useful distinction can be made between what is sometimes described as "Big C" and "little c" culture. At one level, culture becomes sedimented in institutions, roles, conventions, and historically established practices. At another, culture is experienced and enacted through concrete interactions and local social worlds. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) provides an important theoretical background for this reciprocal movement. Human beings produce social worlds through interaction; repeated practices become institutionalized and acquire an apparent objectivity; individuals are subsequently socialized into these already established worlds; and through their own role enactment they reproduce, modify, or sometimes challenge them. Culture therefore cannot be located exclusively "outside" the individual in institutions, nor exclusively "inside" the individual as values, attitudes, or as a script for certain rules.

Another important aspect is that culture is not simply passed from one generation to the next as a fixed set of values or rules. People grow up and live within social worlds in which certain meanings, expectations, and ways of behaving have already become established. Through

family life, education, work, institutions, and everyday interaction, they learn what is normally expected in particular situations, how different social roles are understood, and what different forms of behavior are likely to mean. People then draw on these learned expectations when they interact with others and perform their social roles. In doing so, they may reproduce existing cultural patterns, but they may also modify them. What people repeatedly do can reinforce established expectations, while changing practices can gradually alter them. Culture is therefore both **inherited through socialization and continually enacted through social interaction**.

The formulations used here should not be read as competing definitions of a single cultural substance. Population-level regularities, institutionalized practices, socially transmitted repertoires of meaning, and locally enacted systems of coordination refer to different analytical levels. They can be related without being collapsed. Cultural Judgment requires a conception of culture that is patterned enough to make knowledge and generalization possible, yet open enough to recognize that no population-level pattern inevitably determines the meaning of an individual act.

This is particularly important for Cultural Judgment because it changes what cultural knowledge should be expected to accomplish. Cultural knowledge should not primarily tell us what an individual from Culture A will do. It should help us recognize possible repertoires of meaning, expectations, and coordinating logics through which behavior may become intelligible.

The question therefore changes from:

How do people from this culture behave?

to:

What culturally learned system of meaning and coordination might make this behavior intelligible in this situation?

Even the second question remains a hypothesis. A particular individual may reproduce the relevant cultural pattern, modify it, reject it, combine it with other cultural repertoires, or respond primarily to features of the immediate situation.

This is precisely where Culture × Person × Situation becomes necessary.

8. Cultural knowledge generates possibilities; Cultural Judgment determines their weight

Cultural knowledge can make interpretations available that might otherwise not occur to us. Knowledge about face, hierarchy, relational obligations, communication conventions, trust, decision authority, or status may, for example, make behavior that initially appears evasive, passive, or disrespectful understandable in another way.

Going back to the example of the German executive and the Saudi counterpart mentioned above. If the Saudi counterpart does not openly disagree with the German executive, knowledge about face and indirect communication may make relational protection one plausible interpretation. The counterpart may, however, be uncertain, lack decision authority, need to consult another person, dislike confrontation as an individual, have strategic reasons for withholding commitment, or simply not yet have formed a view. Several of these explanations may also interact. Cultural knowledge has expanded what can be considered, but it has not established which explanation best accounts for the particular encounter.

The distinction can therefore be formulated as follows:

Cultural knowledge enlarges the range of interpretations available. Cultural Judgment determines what weight those interpretations deserve in the particular case.

Weight here does not refer to a numerical calculation. It refers to the relative support an interpretation deserves in light of what has been observed, the concrete context, competing explanations, and what remains uncertain. How confidently we rely on an interpretation should also reflect what we intend to do with it. A tentative question can be based on less certainty than a consequential or irreversible decision.

This creates a particular difficulty for intercultural learning. The cultural categories that help us recognize previously unseen possibilities can also become shortcuts that prematurely settle interpretation. Terms such as “hierarchical,” “collectivistic,” “high-context,” “face-saving,” or “relationship-oriented,” as well as categories such as “German” or “Saudi,” can open the interpretive field, but they can also close it.

The discussion of heuristics in cross-cultural judgment research (Ji & Kaulius, 2013) is relevant here because cultural concepts can themselves acquire a heuristic function. Expertise does not necessarily remove this danger. An experienced intercultural practitioner may possess a larger and more readily accessible vocabulary through which behavior can be classified.

Cultural knowledge is therefore simultaneously a resource for Cultural Judgment and a potential source of misjudgment.

The challenge is not to judge without categories. Categories are necessary if we are to recognize patterns and make sense of experience. The challenge is to prevent a cultural category from becoming the explanation before we have examined the particular case. Once a cultural interpretation becomes plausible, we still need to ask how it relates to the person involved and to the situation in which the behavior occurs.

9. CuPS: Culture × Person × Situation

This is where Culture × Person × Situation (CuPS) becomes necessary. CuPS keeps three sources of explanation in view: cultural influences, the particular person, and the concrete

situation in which the behavior occurs. Its purpose is not to determine in advance which of these matters most. It is to prevent one of them, particularly culture, from becoming the explanation before their interaction has been examined.

Culture may provide learned meanings, expectations, norms, and ways of coordinating action. The person brings an individual history, personality, experience, interests, identities, preferences, and ways of responding. The situation introduces particular roles, relationships, constraints, interests, power relations, previous interactions, and immediate circumstances. The behavior we encounter emerges within the interaction of all three. CuPS therefore changes the question. Instead of asking, **"Is this behavior cultural?"**, we ask how Culture × Person × Situation together may help us understand why this person is behaving in this way under these particular circumstances.

What matters more in the CuPS proposition, Culture × Person × Situation → Behavior, is that the multiplication sign matters. Culture, person, and situation should not be imagined as three independent containers from which separate percentages of behavior can be allocated. They interact. This differentiation is analytical rather than ontological. A person is already culturally socialized, and a situation may already be constituted through institutions, roles, histories, and expectations that are culturally patterned. CuPS therefore does not claim that Culture, Person, and Situation exist as independent causal substances. It separates them provisionally because explanations become distorted when one is allowed to absorb the others. The multiplication sign marks their interaction and mutual conditioning rather than a calculation in which independent percentages of behavior could be assigned to each component.

CuPS can also be understood in relation to a much older proposition in psychology. Kurt Lewin famously formulated behavior as a function of the person and the environment, **$B = f(P, E)$** . The significance of this formulation lies in its interactionist logic: behavior cannot adequately be explained by characteristics of the person alone, independently of the environment in which that person acts. Cultural and cross-cultural psychology introduced a further problem into this relationship. Much psychological research had been developed from particular, predominantly Western populations and social environments while its findings were often treated as though they described human psychology universally. Making culture explicit therefore serves an important critical function. It asks whether assumptions about persons, behavior, and situations that appear universal may themselves reflect particular cultural conditions. In this sense, adding Culture to the explanatory field is not simply adding another variable. It challenges the assumption that Person and Situation can always be understood independently of the cultural worlds in which they have developed and acquired meaning.

This is also how I use CuPS in Cultural Judgment, but with an additional emphasis. **Culture × Person × Situation** should not become a formula for ensuring that every intercultural encounter receives a cultural explanation. Making culture explicit means that its possible relevance has to be considered, not that its relevance has already been established. In some

situations, cultural influences may carry considerable explanatory weight. In others, the person or the immediate situation may explain much more, and culture may contribute very little to understanding the behavior at all. Several influences may also interact in ways that make it impossible to isolate one as the decisive cause. CuPS therefore keeps culture available as an explanation without privileging it as the explanation. Cultural Judgment concerns the further task of determining, in the particular case, what explanatory significance culture, person, and situation deserve before arriving at a judgment.

This understanding follows the arguments of Leung and Cohen (2011) in which they resist approaches that force an unnecessary choice between cultural patterns and individual differences. Cultural differences can be meaningful while substantial heterogeneity exists within cultural populations. Their analysis emphasizes the need to consider culture, person, and situation jointly rather than treating one level as evidence against another. They also show how situations acquire meaning within broader cultural logics rather than functioning merely as neutral external settings (Leung & Cohen, 2011).

This establishes an important relationship between cross-cultural judgment research and CuPS. Research showing cultural variation tells us that culture cannot simply be dismissed. CuPS explains why evidence of cultural regularity cannot license a deterministic inference about the individual standing before us.

Suppose a manager encounters behavior that appears strongly hierarchical. A cultural explanation may be plausible. But the observed behavior could also be influenced by the individual's personality, organizational position, professional role, relationship with those present, previous experiences, perceived risk, incentives, the topic under discussion, or the particular stage of the relationship.

The relevant question is therefore neither "Is this culture or personality?" nor "Is this culture or situation?"

The more adequate question is: How much explanatory weight should culture receive in relation to this person and this situation?

Cultural Judgment therefore does not merely generate multiple explanations. It must discriminate among them. CuPS and Cultural Judgment are, at this point, not two separate operations handed off from one to the other. **CuPS is the model Cultural Judgment applies in order to reopen a field that a purely cultural explanation would have closed prematurely;** the discrimination that follows is not a second faculty taking over from a first, but the same act of judgment continuing under a model that now includes person and situation as live variables rather than noise.

This differentiates Cultural Judgment from a weak contextualism in which everything becomes possible and nothing can be concluded. The purpose of opening interpretation is not to remain indefinitely open. Some interpretations will fit the evidence better than others. Some

will explain more. Some will depend upon assumptions for which little evidence exists. Some will become less plausible as the interaction develops.

Cultural Judgment is therefore neither cultural determinism nor interpretive relativism. It is disciplined judgment under conditions in which several explanations may initially remain possible.

10. CuPS applies to the judged and the judging

There is a deeper implication of CuPS that becomes visible only when the framework is turned back upon the person doing the judging. The person whose behavior I am attempting to understand is Culture × Person × Situation. But so am I. CuPS therefore applies to both the object of judgment and the judging subject.

This is more than an argument for self-awareness. My interpretation of another person's behavior does not emerge from a culturally neutral position. What becomes salient to me, what surprises me, what I experience as respectful or disrespectful, what I classify as efficient, evasive, professional, passive, assertive, or hierarchical, and which explanations initially appear plausible are influenced by the interaction between my own cultural repertoires, biography, personality, role, interests, and present situation. This simply means that the judging subject is part of the explanatory field.

Consider a frequently reported situation in intercultural training: a participant says that men from a particular cultural background “do not take women seriously.” When asked what was actually observed, the participant may explain that a male client maintained little eye contact with a female employee.

What initially appears to be a description of the situation already contains several different judgments. The observation may be stated relatively cautiously: the man maintained little eye contact with the female employee. The first interpretation concerns the meaning of that behavior: he maintained little eye contact because she was a woman. An evaluation is then added: this indicates that he does not take women seriously. Finally, a cultural explanation may be introduced: women are treated unequally in certain male-dominated cultures, and his behavior is therefore interpreted as an expression of that cultural pattern.

The important point is not that any of these interpretations must be wrong. Each may be plausible. The problem is that **observation, interpretation, evaluation, and cultural explanation can easily become compressed into a single account of what happened**, as though each followed necessarily from the one before it. It does not. Each transition introduces an additional claim that requires its own support.

Cultural Judgment does not require us to conclude that the original interpretation is wrong. It requires us to recognize where judgment has already occurred and to reopen those judgments to examination.

Limited eye contact could indeed be gender-related. It could also express respect, discomfort, religiously influenced interaction norms, personality, shyness, status differences, uncertainty, or characteristics of the immediate situation. Additional evidence may strengthen some interpretations and weaken others.

At the same time, the female employee's experience cannot simply be dismissed because another cultural interpretation is available. The interaction has consequences regardless of intention. Feeling disregarded can affect trust and cooperation. Cultural Judgment therefore has to consider both the possible meaning of behavior to the actor and its meaning and consequences within the relationship.

Applying CuPS to both sides prevents the observer from disappearing from the analysis.

11. Observation is already more difficult than it appears

The eye-contact example exposes a problem that reaches below interpretation into description itself. The distinction between observation, interpretation, and evaluation is indispensable, but it should not lead us to imagine that observation is entirely neutral.

When someone says, "He avoided eye contact," the statement appears considerably more observational than "He did not take me seriously." Yet even avoided may imply intentionality. A more restrained description might be that the person maintained little eye contact during particular parts of the conversation.

Likewise, statements such as "they kept looping," "she was resistant," "he lacked initiative," "they were very hierarchical," or "the process was inefficient" may present themselves grammatically as descriptions while already containing substantial interpretation or evaluation.

Once an interpretation becomes incorporated into the description itself, subsequent reasoning may proceed as though the interpretation had already been established as fact.

Suppose someone says, "The client kept repeating the same points." That may resonate as an observation. If the person says, "The client was looping," the repetition has already been interpreted as a particular pattern. If the person says, "The client was inefficient," an evaluation has entered. If the conclusion becomes "This culture does not value efficiency in the same way we do," a cultural layer of explanation has been added. By the end of this sequence, the only relatively observable element—the repetition—may have disappeared beneath layers of interpretation, evaluation, and cultural attribution.

Cultural Judgment therefore requires the capacity to move backwards through one's own reasoning and ask **what was observed, what was inferred, what was evaluated, and where culture entered the explanation.**

This also clarifies why the familiar intercultural common-sense recommendation to "suspend judgment" is valuable but insufficient. Judgment cannot literally be suspended throughout an interaction. Perception involves selection. Interpretation cannot be eliminated. Action eventually becomes necessary. Even waiting rather than acting involves judgment.

The challenge is therefore not to stop judging. It is to prevent judgment from becoming premature closure.

12. Cultural Judgment as capacity

We can now answer more precisely what kind of concept Cultural Judgment is. Cultural Judgment is not primarily an outcome. It is not identical with a decision. It is not simply evaluation. It is not a sequence of cognitive steps. Its primary conceptual status is that of a human capacity for judgment exercised under conditions of cultural complexity.

At this stage, this should be understood as a theoretically proposed capacity, not as an empirically established latent trait. The concept does not yet warrant assumptions about stability across domains, psychometric separability from neighboring constructs, or the degree to which the capacity generalizes from one intercultural setting to another. Those are empirical questions that follow from the theory rather than premises on which it rests.

Cultural Judgment refers primarily to a capacity rather than to a particular conclusion reached in an intercultural situation. This distinction matters. A person may exercise Cultural Judgment while trying to understand what is happening without ever arriving at complete certainty about the situation. A cultural judgment, in the narrower sense, is the provisional conclusion that emerges when the person nevertheless has to determine what an observation means, what matters, or how to respond.

The distinction also prevents Cultural Judgment from being assessed solely by whether a particular conclusion later proves correct. Judgment takes place under conditions of incomplete knowledge. What matters is therefore not only the conclusion reached, but how that conclusion was reached: what was considered, what evidence supported it, what alternatives were examined, how uncertainty was handled, and whether the judgment remained open to revision.

The quality of Cultural Judgment therefore lies not in certainty, but in the quality with which a person arrives at a judgment when certainty is not available.

13. Judgment is not merely cognitive

Cultural Judgment unquestionably involves cognition: attention, categorization, memory, causal inference, comparison, prediction, and reasoning are all indispensable to it. But cognition alone does not exhaust judgment, because a person confronting an ambiguous intercultural situation is not simply calculating among pre-given alternatives. The alternatives

themselves often have to be constituted: the actor must determine what kind of situation this is, what information matters, what different behaviors might mean, which values are implicated, and which possible responses are even relevant. This is one reason conventional judgment and decision-making research cannot simply be transferred into Cultural Judgment without modification, since a decision among alternatives A, B, and C presupposes that A, B, and C have already become recognizable alternatives, and it also presupposes some representation of the situation and criteria according to which the alternatives can be compared.

Culturally complex situations frequently make precisely these presuppositions uncertain. Before asking whether I should confront, accommodate, wait, or escalate, I may first have to judge whether there is actually a conflict. Before deciding how directly to communicate, I must determine what the apparent indirectness means. Before adapting to hierarchy, I must judge whether hierarchy is actually organizing this interaction.

This is where Kant's distinction becomes useful without becoming determinative for the theory. Culturally complex situations frequently confront us with a particular before we know which available universal adequately organizes it. Judgment is therefore required not only after the situation has been interpreted, but in determining how the situation should be interpreted in the first place.

14. Provisional analytical dimensions of Cultural Judgment

If Cultural Judgment is a capacity rather than a single cognitive operation, its exercise can involve different kinds of judging. When trying to understand an intercultural situation, we may have to judge what we have actually observed, what an observation might mean, what can reasonably be inferred from the available evidence, which considerations matter, which standards should guide our evaluation, what consequences different responses may have, and ultimately what should be done.

These are not separate stages through which every act of Cultural Judgment must proceed, nor is it necessary at this point to turn them into a fixed taxonomy. They identify different questions that may arise within the exercise of judgment. Some concern interpretation, others the strength of our knowledge or inference, others evaluation and justification, and still others the practical consequences of acting.

The distinctions matter because strength in one respect does not guarantee strength in another. Someone may observe carefully but interpret what was observed poorly. An interpretation may be plausible but held with greater certainty than the evidence warrants. A cultural explanation may be relevant but given too much weight. An interpretation may be well supported but lead to an ethically questionable response. A reasonable understanding of the situation may still result in an ineffective intervention.

Cultural Judgment therefore cannot be evaluated by asking only whether a person interpreted the cultural situation correctly. Its quality depends on several different judgments that may become relevant as the person tries to understand what is happening and determine how to respond.

15. From interpretation to evaluation

Understanding what is happening does not by itself tell us what matters in the situation. Two people may arrive at a similar interpretation of an interaction and nevertheless differ in what significance they give to what they have understood. They may agree, for example, that a manager avoided openly contradicting a senior colleague because of hierarchical expectations, while disagreeing about whether this should be regarded as a minor communication issue, an appropriate form of respect, an obstacle to effective decision-making, or a serious organizational concern.

This introduces evaluation into Cultural Judgment. Evaluation, as the term is used here, does not simply mean deciding whether a person or behavior is good or bad. It concerns determining the significance and relative weight of what has been interpreted. What matters here? How much does it matter? Which considerations deserve greater weight when they point in different directions?

Interpretation and evaluation therefore need to be distinguished. Interpretation concerns what an observation or situation may mean. Evaluation concerns the significance we give to what we have understood. But evaluation introduces a further question. If we judge a behavior, expectation, or possible response to be appropriate, inappropriate, fair, respectful, effective, or problematic, **according to what standard are we making that judgment?**

16. Appropriate according to whom?

Once we begin to evaluate a situation, we also have to ask which standards we are using. Calling a behavior appropriate, inappropriate, fair, respectful, or problematic already involves a standard against which it is being judged. In culturally complex situations, different standards may lead to different conclusions.

A behavior may be appropriate according to local cultural expectations but conflict with professional or organizational responsibilities. It may be effective in achieving an immediate goal but damage a relationship in the longer term. Conversely, a behavior may be culturally unfamiliar without being wrong or inappropriate.

Understanding why a behavior makes sense within a particular cultural context does not mean that we must regard it as acceptable. Understanding and evaluating are different tasks. Cultural knowledge may help us understand why people behave in a particular way, but it

does not by itself tell us whether that behavior should be accepted, accommodated, challenged, or changed.

Cultural Judgment therefore cannot mean simply adapting to local cultural expectations. Nor can it mean applying our own standards without examining them. In a particular situation, cultural expectations, organizational responsibilities, professional standards, relationships, ethical considerations, and possible consequences may all matter.

These considerations may point in different directions. Cultural Judgment requires us to determine which of them matter in the particular situation and how much weight they should receive.

17. From difference to contradiction

Cultural complexity frequently brings different logics of action into contact. One actor may regard direct disagreement as evidence of honesty and professional respect. Another may regard public disagreement as unnecessary damage to dignity and relationship. One organization may treat standardized procedure as fairness. A local partner may regard differentiated treatment as evidence that the relationship itself is being taken seriously. One manager may regard participation as necessary for ownership. Another may regard visible authority as necessary for confidence and accountability.

It would be easy to convert these differences immediately into cultural oppositions. A mature Cultural Judgment should resist doing so. Different positions do not automatically constitute a paradox. They may result from misunderstanding, different information, different roles, incompatible interests, personality, organizational design, or situational constraints.

Only after these possibilities have been examined carefully should we ask whether two apparently contradictory but legitimate logics remain simultaneously relevant. This is where Connecting Contradictions (CC) becomes relevant.

Connecting Contradictions is the ability to recognize apparently contradictory but interdependent logics of action that remain relevant simultaneously in a concrete situation, to understand the function and consequences of each, and to develop an appropriate response without prematurely reducing the situation to an either/or choice or assuming that the underlying tension can be permanently resolved.

Directness can create clarity while threatening relational safety. Indirectness can preserve relational space while increasing ambiguity. Hierarchy can establish responsibility and coordination while suppressing information. Participation can release information and commitment while weakening clarity of authority or slowing action. Global consistency can protect fairness and institutional coherence, while local adaptation can protect contextual fit and legitimacy.

The Cultural Judgment question is not simply which side is culturally preferred. It is what each logic protects, enables, and endangers in this particular situation.

CuPS, Cultural Judgment, and Connecting Contradictions therefore should not be treated as three equivalent models, nor as three sequential stations through which an interaction simply passes in order. CuPS supplies the model through which Cultural Judgment reopens an explanatory field that a purely cultural attribution would have closed. Cultural Judgment is the act of weighing what that reopened field contains—an act that CuPS makes possible rather than one that follows it in a separate step. Connecting Contradictions becomes relevant only at a further point: when that weighing itself reveals that two competing but interdependent logics remain legitimately present and cannot adequately be reduced to an either/or resolution. The three names therefore mark a widening problem, not a fixed procedure.

18. Culture as object and condition of judgment

A deeper theoretical question now emerges from applying CuPS to both sides of the interaction.

Does Cultural Judgment mean judgment about culturally complex situations, or does it mean that judgment itself is culturally constituted?

The two claims are different, and both matter. In the first sense, culture modifies the object of judgment. A general human capacity for judgment is exercised in situations in which cultural meanings, expectations, or differences are relevant. In this respect, the expression resembles terms such as clinical judgment or legal judgment: judgment is being exercised within a distinctive domain. However, Cultural Judgment cannot stop there because the judging subject is not culturally neutral. Culture may influence what becomes salient, which interpretive categories are readily available, what causal explanations appear intuitive, which behavior seems normal, what counts as sufficient evidence, what is experienced as respectful, and which outcomes appear desirable.

Cross-cultural judgment research itself supports the broader proposition that culture can be associated with differences in processes such as confidence, probability judgment, and risk perception (Ji & Kaulius, 2013). Culture is therefore not simply an object standing before an unaffected faculty of judgment.

The stronger proposition is: **Culture can be part of what is being judged and part of the conditions through which judging occurs.**

This creates an unavoidable epistemological problem. If my own categories partly influence what I recognize as evidence, how can I distinguish an interpretation that is better warranted from one that merely feels more familiar to me?

Cultural Judgment cannot answer that question by imagining a culturally neutral standpoint from which the situation can finally be seen "as it really is." The German manager interprets the Saudi manager from within a particular cultural, personal, and situational position, while the Saudi manager simultaneously interprets the German manager from another cultural, personal, and situational position. Without diving deeply into this epistemological problem, we can now assume that the absence of a neutral standpoint does not make all interpretations equivalent. A culturally situated observer can still distinguish stronger from weaker judgments by making assumptions explicit, separating observation from inference, seeking evidence that could contradict a preferred interpretation, comparing alternative explanations, engaging other perspectives, and revising conclusions when subsequent events fail to support them. Objectivity, in this sense, is not a view from nowhere but a fallible discipline of warrant. The question is not whether the observer has escaped culture, but whether the judgment remains answerable to evidence, alternatives, consequences, and correction.

Each is observer and observed. Each interprets while being interpreted. Each person's behavior alters the other's situation. Intercultural interaction is therefore better understood as a reciprocal field of culturally situated judgment than as one culturally neutral observer decoding a culturally different other.

This also gives the idea of intercultural communication as meta-coordination its deeper significance. The actors are not simply coordinating different behaviors. They may be attempting to coordinate different systems for determining what behavior means and how coordinated action should proceed.

19. Judgment does not merely describe the situation: enactment

The reciprocal character of judgment becomes still more important once action enters the interaction.

Karl Weick's work on enactment challenges the simple sequence in which people first encounter an objective environment, then understand it, and finally act upon it. In his account of enacted sensemaking in crisis situations, Weick (1988) argues that action participates in understanding while simultaneously affecting the events being understood. Weick's later treatment of sensemaking in organizations (Weick, 1995) develops the same point more broadly: people do not first make sense and then act; sense is substantially made through acting, and through narrating what the acting produced.

Enactment therefore concerns both process and product. Actors bracket portions of experience according to prior conceptions, act in relation to what they have selected, and may thereby shape subsequent events in ways that reinforce those conceptions (Weick, 1988).

For Cultural Judgment, the implication is substantial. Suppose I interpret another person's hesitation as resistance. Perhaps I will respond more forcefully. My forcefulness makes the

person defensive. I then observe the defensiveness as evidence that my original interpretation was correct. My judgment has not merely described the interaction. It has participated in producing the interaction that subsequently appears to confirm it.

The same mechanism can operate through cultural categories. If I expect hierarchy, I may direct my communication almost exclusively toward senior people. Junior participants may consequently withdraw. Their withdrawal then appears to confirm my belief that the culture is hierarchical.

Cultural Judgment therefore requires more than awareness that my perspective is culturally situated. It requires reflexivity about enactment. The relevant question becomes not only, "What does their behavior tell me about the situation?" but also, "What has my own interpretation and action contributed to the situation I am now observing?"

This introduces the possibility of a self-confirming loop: interpretation → action → response → apparent confirmation of interpretation

Breaking that loop may be one of the most demanding forms of Cultural Judgment.

20. Judgment, action, and revision

We cannot always wait until we fully understand a situation before acting. In many intercultural encounters, we have to respond while we are still uncertain about what is happening. A manager must respond, a negotiator must decide what to say, and a teacher may have to intervene or wait. Even deciding not to act can affect what happens next.

Cultural Judgment therefore does not require certainty before action. The question is whether we understand enough to justify the response we are considering. This also depends on what is at stake. Asking a tentative question requires less certainty than making a serious accusation. A small and reversible adjustment can be made with more uncertainty than a decision that may have significant and lasting consequences.

Action can also help us understand the situation better. We may ask a question to see whether our interpretation is plausible, wait to see what happens next, or try a tentative response and observe how the other person reacts. But, as Weick's concept of enactment reminds us, our actions do not simply reveal a situation that remains unchanged. They become part of the situation and may influence what happens next (Weick, 1988).

This means that we sometimes have to reconsider our original judgment in light of what happens afterwards. At the same time, we have to ask whether the outcome resulted only from the situation we were trying to understand or was partly produced by our own response. Cultural Judgment must therefore remain open to revision.

21. The epistemic discipline of not knowing

A culturally knowledgeable person may recognize a genuinely plausible cultural explanation and still exercise poor judgment by becoming more certain of that explanation than the available evidence allows. There is a significant difference between concluding that we know what something means, regarding one explanation as probable, considering it merely plausible, recognizing several competing interpretations, and acknowledging that we do not yet have enough information to distinguish among them. These are not simply different ways of expressing confidence. They reflect different judgments about what the available evidence allows us to conclude.

This is where the idea of a **warranted judgment** becomes important. A judgment is warranted when there are sufficient reasons and evidence to support it. This does not mean that the judgment has been proven or that alternative explanations have been eliminated. It means that the conclusion does not go further than the available evidence reasonably allows. If the evidence supports only a plausible interpretation, treating that interpretation as certain would exceed what is warranted. If several explanations remain equally plausible, the warranted judgment may be precisely that there is not yet enough evidence to choose among them.

Cultural Judgment therefore does not require the elimination of uncertainty. It requires the degree of confidence placed in a judgment to correspond to the strength of the reasons supporting it. A person may reach a conclusion and act on it while still recognizing what remains uncertain and what additional information could lead to a different judgment.

This does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. Some interpretations may be better supported by what has been observed, fit the particular context more closely, account for more of the available information, or remain more convincing when alternative explanations are considered. Cultural Judgment requires these differences to be taken seriously. At the same time, the best-supported interpretation available at a particular moment should not be treated as certain merely because it is stronger than the alternatives.

The aim is therefore not certainty, but a judgment whose degree of confidence is justified by the evidence and reasons available at the time.

22. From suspending judgment to developing judgment

The principle of “suspending judgment” is well established in intercultural learning. It is useful because it encourages people not to move too quickly from encountering unfamiliar behavior to interpreting or evaluating it through their own familiar assumptions. When something appears strange, inappropriate, inefficient, or disrespectful, suspending judgment creates space to consider other possible meanings before reaching a conclusion. It is therefore an

important intervention against the tendency to rely automatically on stereotypes and familiar assumptions when interpreting culturally unfamiliar behavior.

Cultural Judgment goes beyond the suspension of judgment. In many situations, people eventually have to reach a judgment and act. Managers have to make decisions, teachers have to respond to situations in the classroom, negotiators have to decide how to interpret what is happening, and leaders may have to determine whether a particular behavior can be accepted or requires intervention. The question is therefore not whether we should judge, but when we have enough reason to do so and how certain we should be about the judgment we reach.

This also means that taking more time before judging is not necessarily a sign of better Cultural Judgment. Experience may sometimes allow a person to recognize relevant patterns more quickly, identify what information matters, consider alternative explanations, and recognize the limits of what can reasonably be concluded. In other situations, the same person may recognize that the available information is insufficient and that judgment should remain open. What matters is not how long judgment is suspended, but whether the degree of openness or closure is appropriate to what is known and what remains uncertain.

Daniel Kahneman's distinction between System 1 and System 2 provides a useful way of understanding part of this process. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), System 1 describes forms of thinking that operate quickly and automatically, while System 2 is associated with more deliberate and effortful thought. Many judgments in everyday interaction arise quickly. We recognize patterns, assign meaning to behavior, and form impressions without consciously examining every assumption involved. In an intercultural encounter, however, some of these automatic interpretations may rely on expectations learned in familiar cultural and social environments. Suspending judgment can create the space for a more deliberate examination of an initial interpretation: What did I actually observe? What am I assuming it means? What other interpretations are possible? What evidence supports the conclusion I am about to make?

Cultural Judgment should not, however, be understood as replacing System 1 with System 2. Intuitive judgment is unavoidable and often useful, while deliberate reasoning can also produce poor judgments. Cultural knowledge itself can become part of an automatic response: an experienced practitioner may quickly interpret a behavior in terms of hierarchy, face, collectivism, or indirect communication. The important question is not simply whether judgment is fast or slow, but whether the initial interpretation needs further examination and whether the conclusion eventually reached is supported by what is actually known.

Suspending judgment can therefore be understood as an important moment within Cultural Judgment rather than its final objective. We need to be able to open an initial interpretation to alternatives, compare those alternatives with the available evidence, and eventually reach a conclusion when there are sufficient reasons to proceed. That conclusion remains open to revision if new information becomes available.

The development of Cultural Judgment is therefore not a movement from judging to not judging. It is a development from **premature judgment towards better-grounded judgment**: knowing when an interpretation should remain open, when there are sufficient reasons to reach a conclusion, and when that conclusion needs to be reconsidered.

23. Five Questions for Practicing Cultural Judgment

The discussion so far can be brought into practice through five questions. These five questions form the practical backbone of Cultural Judgment, bringing together the distinctions developed throughout this paper without turning them into a fixed procedure. Each question addresses a different problem in judging culturally complex situations, but the questions remain connected and can be revisited as understanding develops.

1. What is actually happening? begins with the distinction between what we can observe and what we have already interpreted or evaluated. “He maintained little eye contact” and “he did not take me seriously” are not descriptions at the same level. The second statement already assigns meaning to the first. This is also where suspending premature judgment becomes important. An immediate interpretation may arise automatically and feel self-evident. Borrowing Kahneman’s distinction, the purpose is to interrupt System 1 for a moment and create room for the more deliberate examination associated with System 2. This does not mean that the initial interpretation must be wrong or that intuitive judgment should be suppressed. It means that we do not allow its immediacy to count as evidence of its correctness. The first question therefore asks: What did I actually observe? What do I know? What have I already inferred, interpreted, or evaluated?

2. What else could it mean? opens the initial interpretation to alternatives. This is where Culture × Person × Situation (CuPS) becomes particularly useful. Instead of moving immediately from an observed behavior to a cultural explanation, CuPS asks what different explanations become plausible when cultural influences, the particular person, and the concrete situation are considered together. Cultural knowledge may introduce meanings that would not have occurred to us from within our own familiar assumptions, while knowledge of the person or situation may point in quite different directions. The purpose is not to produce an endless list of possible explanations. It is to prevent the first plausible explanation, including the first plausible cultural explanation, from becoming the conclusion prematurely.

3. What is in tension? asks us to identify the actual difficulty once the explanatory field has been opened. Some apparent cultural conflicts disappear when the situation is examined more carefully. What initially appeared to be a conflict of values may turn out to be a misunderstanding, insufficient information, different roles, unequal authority, conflicting interests, or different interpretations of what has happened. Other tensions remain even after these possibilities have been examined. A manager may need both to preserve a relationship and address poor performance; a negotiator may need to respect a relationship-oriented

process while also meeting a deadline; an employee may face expectations of loyalty while carrying professional responsibilities that require disagreement. The purpose of the question is therefore not to search immediately for a “cultural contradiction,” but to establish more precisely what is pulling the situation in different directions and whether the apparent tension can be clarified or genuinely remains.

4. What matters on both sides? moves from explaining the situation to evaluating what is at stake. Once we understand the different positions more clearly, we still have to judge their significance. What is each person trying to protect, achieve, avoid, or preserve? A position that initially appears unreasonable may be connected to trust, face, professional responsibility, authority, fairness, autonomy, loyalty, reputation, belonging, or another concern that was not initially visible. Understanding these concerns does not mean accepting all of them, treating them as morally equivalent, or giving them equal weight. Cultural Judgment requires precisely the opposite: determining which considerations deserve weight in this particular situation and why. Cultural expectations may matter, but so may professional standards, organizational responsibilities, ethical boundaries, relationships, power differences, and the consequences for the people involved.

5. What response fits here? asks what can reasonably be done on the basis of the judgment reached. It is deliberately different from asking for the “culturally correct” response, because Cultural Judgment does not assume that cultural adaptation is always the appropriate outcome. The response has to take account of what is known, what remains uncertain, what matters to those involved, what responsibilities and constraints apply, and what consequences different courses of action may produce. Depending on the situation, the response may involve adaptation, clarification, negotiation, further inquiry, setting a boundary, postponing a decision, or deliberately refusing to accommodate a particular expectation.

At this point, **Connecting Contradictions (CC)** may become relevant, but only when the preceding questions have shown that the tension cannot simply be explained away. If two apparently contradictory but interdependent logics of action remain legitimate and simultaneously relevant, the task is no longer merely to determine which one is correct and eliminate the other. It is to understand what each logic contributes, what each protects or makes possible, and how a response can address the situation without prematurely reducing it to an either/or choice. Connecting Contradictions is therefore not an automatic part of every Cultural Judgment. It becomes necessary when genuine competing demands remain after simpler explanations and misunderstandings have been examined.

The five questions should not be understood as a sequence that mechanically produces a correct answer. The fifth question may reveal that the first was answered too quickly. Considering a response may expose an assumption that requires the interpretation to be reopened. New information may change the relative weight given to Culture, Person, and Situation. A tension may disappear after clarification, while another becomes visible only when

the consequences of a proposed response are considered. Judgment can therefore move back and forth among the questions as the situation develops.

24. Toward a definition of Cultural Judgment

The preceding discussion allows Cultural Judgment to be defined at two levels. The first is a working definition that captures the concept in language that can be readily understood and applied:

Cultural Judgment is the ability to read a concrete situation within its cultural, social, and organizational context, recognize different interpretations, expectations, and logics of action, weigh their relevance and possible consequences, and arrive at a reasoned and viable decision even under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty.

This definition captures the practical concern from which Cultural Judgment begins. In culturally complex situations, the difficulty is rarely a simple lack of cultural information. People have to make sense of what is happening, consider different possible meanings, determine which of them deserve greater weight, recognize what matters to those involved, and eventually decide how to respond. They usually have to do this without having complete information or being able to eliminate uncertainty.

The argument developed in this paper makes it possible to formulate the second-level concept more precisely:

Cultural Judgment is the human capacity to arrive at sufficiently warranted judgments in culturally complex situations while remaining capable of revising them. It involves discerning what is happening, examining alternative interpretations and explanations, determining what is known and what remains uncertain, judging the relevance of Culture × Person × Situation, weighing competing expectations, values, relationships, obligations, and possible consequences, and determining what action can be justified in the particular situation despite incomplete certainty.

The term **capacity** distinguishes Cultural Judgment from the particular judgment or decision that results from exercising it. Cultural Judgment is not the conclusion itself. It is the capacity through which a person examines a situation and arrives at a judgment about what it means, what matters, or what should be done.

A judgment is **sufficiently warranted** when there are enough reasons and evidence to rely on it for the judgment or action at hand. This does not mean that the conclusion has been proven or that all uncertainty has disappeared. It means that the conclusion does not claim more than the available evidence reasonably supports. A cultural explanation may therefore be plausible without being probable, probable without being certain, or one of several explanations that cannot yet be distinguished. What counts as sufficient also depends on what is at stake. Asking

a tentative question requires less confidence than making an accusation, terminating a relationship, or taking another consequential and difficult-to-reverse action.

A **culturally complex situation** does not refer only to encounters between people of different nationalities, nor does it imply that culture is necessarily the principal explanation for what is happening. Cultural complexity arises when different learned meanings, expectations, norms, or ways of coordinating action may be relevant to the situation. These may be associated with national or regional cultures, but also with organizations, professions, generations, social groups, or other cultural contexts. Whether culture is relevant in a particular case, and how much explanatory weight it deserves, cannot simply be assumed.

This is where Culture × Person × Situation (CuPS) becomes important. Cultural Judgment does not ask only whether a cultural explanation is available. It asks how much that explanation helps us understand this particular person in this particular situation. Cultural influences may deserve considerable weight in one case and relatively little in another. They may also interact with personal experience, interests, roles, relationships, organizational constraints, and immediate circumstances in ways that make a simple cultural explanation inadequate.

Cultural Judgment also extends beyond understanding and explanation. Even a well-supported interpretation does not determine by itself what should be done. Different expectations, relationships, responsibilities, values, obligations, constraints, and possible consequences may have to be weighed. Understanding why a behavior makes sense within a particular cultural context does not necessarily make that behavior acceptable, just as finding a behavior culturally unfamiliar does not make it inappropriate. Where legitimate but apparently contradictory demands remain simultaneously relevant after the situation has been clarified, Connecting Contradictions may become necessary in determining how to respond.

Cultural Judgment therefore does not require certainty, nor does it require judgment to remain suspended indefinitely. It requires the capacity to reach a sufficiently grounded judgment when action is necessary while remaining prepared to revise that judgment when new information or developments in the situation provide reasons to do so.

Experience alone does not necessarily improve this capacity. Repeated encounters can enlarge a person's understanding, but they can also reinforce existing assumptions. Someone who repeatedly interprets experience through rigid cultural categories may become more confident without becoming more discerning. Development therefore depends not simply on accumulating experience or cultural knowledge, but on becoming better able to examine interpretations, weigh evidence and alternatives, recognize uncertainty, and reconsider judgments when there are reasons to do so.

25. What Makes Cultural Judgment Good?

The quality of Cultural Judgment cannot be judged solely by whether an action produces the desired outcome. A strategically successful intervention may have been based on a false stereotype, while a carefully reasoned judgment may lead to an unsuccessful outcome because another person behaves unpredictably or circumstances change. Poor judgment can sometimes succeed through luck, just as good judgment cannot guarantee success.

The quality of Cultural Judgment must therefore also be examined in the judgment itself. Did the person distinguish what was observed from what was inferred or evaluated? Were plausible alternatives considered? Was cultural knowledge used to enlarge interpretation rather than prematurely close it? Was culture given explanatory weight because the evidence supported it rather than simply because the encounter was intercultural? Was the degree of confidence proportionate to what was actually known? Were relevant values, responsibilities, relationships, and consequences considered before action was taken?

These questions do not establish a standard of cultural correctness. Two people may examine the same situation carefully and still reach different judgments. Where evidence is incomplete, consequences uncertain, and legitimate considerations point in different directions, disagreement does not necessarily mean that one of them has exercised poor Cultural Judgment. What matters is whether the conclusion reached is sufficiently warranted by the available evidence and whether the action taken can be justified in relation to what was known, what remained uncertain, and what was at stake.

26. Cultural Judgment Is Not Cultural Correctness

Cultural Judgment does not promise a universally correct response to an intercultural situation. Cultural knowledge may tell us something about patterns of meaning and behavior. Interpretive ability may help us recognize what a behavior could mean. Adaptability may enable us to modify our own behavior. None of these, however, determines by itself what should be concluded or done in a particular situation.

Cultural Judgment asks a broader question: **Given what I can reasonably understand about what is happening here, what weight should I give to the competing interpretations and claims, what remains uncertain, and what action can I justify despite that uncertainty?**

This question matters because several sources of orientation may be relevant without any one of them providing the answer. Cultural expectations may matter, but so may professional responsibilities, organizational obligations, ethical considerations, relationships, interests, and anticipated consequences. Cultural Judgment is required precisely because these considerations have to be related to the particular situation and may not all point in the same direction.

The idea of **weight** is important here. Giving an interpretation greater weight does not mean assigning it a numerical value. It means having stronger reasons for relying on it. An interpretation deserves greater weight when it is better supported by what has been observed, fits the particular context, accounts for the relevant information without requiring unsupported assumptions, and remains credible when alternative explanations are considered. The degree of support required also depends on what will be done with the judgment. A tentative question can reasonably proceed on weaker evidence than an accusation, just as a reversible adjustment can tolerate more uncertainty than an irreversible decision with serious consequences.

Cultural Judgment therefore does not seek certainty where certainty is unavailable. It seeks sufficient warrant for the judgment that has to be made and the action that may follow from it.

27. Questions for Further Development

The concept developed here also leaves questions that require further work. Its relationship to established traditions of judgment and practical wisdom, particularly Aristotle's *phronesis* and Kant's *Urteilkraft*, needs to be examined more systematically. If Cultural Judgment is understood as a human capacity, its relationship to psychological processes such as perception, attention, metacognition, tolerance of ambiguity, and existing constructs of intercultural competence also requires clarification.

The epistemic dimension requires particular attention. The present paper has argued that judgments should be sufficiently warranted and that confidence should correspond to the available evidence, but further work is needed on how warrant should be assessed when cultural knowledge is probabilistic, evidence is incomplete, and population-level patterns have to be related to individual cases. The normative dimension raises a related question. Cultural understanding does not determine what should be accepted, accommodated, challenged, or changed, and the relationship between cultural expectations, ethical considerations, professional responsibilities, and organizational obligations therefore requires further examination.

A further question concerns development. If Cultural Judgment can be developed, the issue is not simply how people acquire more cultural knowledge or become more tolerant of ambiguity. The more difficult question is how people become better at recognizing when an interpretation should remain open, when there are sufficient grounds for reaching a judgment, how much confidence that judgment deserves, and when it needs to be reconsidered. These questions are important not only for further conceptual development but also for any future attempt to assess or deliberately develop Cultural Judgment.

28. Conclusion

This paper began with a dissatisfaction that gradually became a conceptual question. Intercultural work has become increasingly sophisticated in describing cultural differences, developing cultural awareness, and encouraging people to question their immediate interpretations. Yet the practical situations in which this knowledge is supposed to help us remain particular, ambiguous, and consequential. They require people not only to know about culture or remain open to difference, but to reach judgments about what is happening and what should be done.

The argument developed here is that this activity deserves to be treated explicitly as Cultural Judgment. Doing so changes the focus of intercultural inquiry. The central question is no longer only what people know about cultural difference, which competencies they possess, or how successfully they adapt their behavior. It also becomes possible to examine the quality of the judgments through which cultural knowledge and other forms of knowledge are brought to bear on a particular situation.

This shift has consequences for how intercultural expertise is understood. Expertise cannot consist simply in having more cultural explanations available. An expert may know more about hierarchy, face, communication styles, values, or culturally patterned behavior and still misjudge a particular situation. Greater knowledge increases the possibilities available for interpretation, but it also increases the number of categories through which a situation can be classified too quickly. Expertise therefore has to include the ability to determine when cultural knowledge illuminates a case, when it is being given too much weight, and when the available evidence requires a different explanation or continued uncertainty.

The concept also changes the developmental question. If the objective is Cultural Judgment, development cannot be measured simply by movement from cultural ignorance toward cultural knowledge, from ethnocentrism toward greater acceptance, or from rigidity toward greater adaptability. These developments may be valuable, but they do not settle whether a person judges a concrete situation well. A more demanding developmental question is whether people become better at examining the grounds of their interpretations, differentiating stronger from weaker explanations, recognizing the limits of what they know, weighing considerations that may legitimately conflict, and reaching decisions that they can justify without pretending to possess certainty they do not have.

This paper does not establish how Cultural Judgment should ultimately be measured, nor does it demonstrate empirically that it constitutes a psychological capacity distinct from existing constructs. It also leaves important philosophical, epistemological, normative, and developmental questions unresolved. These are not peripheral problems. They determine whether Cultural Judgment can eventually become more than a useful conceptual language for practitioners. In particular, further work will have to clarify what constitutes good judgment across different kinds of culturally complex situations, how sufficient warrant can be

assessed, how the capacity develops through experience and reflection, and how it relates empirically and conceptually to established constructs in intercultural research and neighboring fields. These questions provide a research agenda rather than weaknesses to be concealed.

The contribution of the present paper is therefore more limited, but also more fundamental. It proposes that judgment itself should become an explicit object of intercultural inquiry. Cultural difference does not only create a need for more knowledge about others. It creates situations in which the relevance of that knowledge, the meaning of what is observed, the significance of competing considerations, and the justification of action cannot be determined in advance by cultural knowledge alone. Once this problem is taken seriously, the question is no longer simply how much people know about culture, but how well they judge when culture may matter.

Cultural Judgment names that problem and provides a starting point for examining it.

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