



# Culture's role in conflict and conflict management: Some suggestions, many questions<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

The contributions to this edition of the *Journal* are viewed as identifying two roles of culture in intergroup conflict. One is that culture separates people into an in-group and out-group based on the criterion of whether or not they share a common culture. According to social identity theory, this division creates the necessary condition for intergroup (intercultural) conflict. The second role is that culture shapes the individual's perception of conflict and how he or she will respond to the conflict. It is argued that embedded within the history and myths of a culture are stories that identify specific out-groups as likely protagonists. A model for achieving peaceful co-existence between cultural groups is presented. Peaceful co-existence has three components: cognition (acceptance of the right of the out-group to exist), emotion (low fear of the out-group), and behavior (willingness to engage in cooperative interaction with the out-group). It is argued that in order to achieve peaceful co-existence between cultural groups, intergroup contract must promote the security and identity of the ingroup, reduce the perceived threat of the out-group, and promote the perception of diversity within the out-group. The difficulties of achieving positive relations between cultural groups is recognized, and that a focus on intercultural relations should be prevention of hostility rather than reducing violent conflict after it has occurred.

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## 1. Introduction

When most people think of Hawaii, their thoughts turn to pounding surf, sandy beaches, and captivating hula dances. Hawaii is all of these, but when I moved to Hawaii 6 years ago, two additional characteristics were quickly added to my picture of paradise. Hawaii is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse places in the world; the most recent US. census identified the island of Hawaii as the most ethnically diverse county in the country. No single ethnic group constitutes a majority. The social landscape includes Hawaiians, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Pacific Islanders, and white Americans representing many ethnic backgrounds. As an example of this diversity, my immediate neighbors are a Hawaiian, a Chinese couple, a Japanese family, and a Portuguese family.

The second characteristic that captured my attention when I moved to Hawaii was the fertility of the soil. Everything grows here, and it grows year round. One can cut a branch from a plant, jab it into the ground, and several days later, it will begin to root. And best of all, I found that I could grow my own bananas in my back yard. With visions of fresh bananas every morning, I mined my back yard with small banana plants.

Who could find conflict and culture in this happy story? But conflict was lurking just around the corner. To my delight, my banana plants thrived. I was soon enjoying the fruits of my labor. But it was not long before I learned that rampant fertility can breed cultural confrontation. My banana plants multiplied like rabbits, refusing to recognize the boundaries of my property. The plants happily invaded my neighbors' lands. I hacked, poisoned, and cursed the plants, but for each one I killed, two more sprung up in its place!

Relief came when my Hawaiian neighbor smiled knowingly, joked about the "fruits of the land", and harvested the banana crop now growing on his land. But my Japanese neighbor scowled, and lost no opportunity to inform me that "this situation" was another indication of white haoles' insensitivity and arrogance; "they" (haoles) were bent on taking over the island and had no respect for their neighbors. (Even though the plants are now only bad memories, my neighbor [and my friend] still reminds me that "a Japanese family would never act this way.") My banana plants had created a haole vs. Japanese skirmish. My Chinese neighbor never said a word, but late at night I would hear strange chopping sounds (thump, thump), and in the morning I would find the remnants of banana plants stacked neatly in my yard. And my Portuguese neighbor responded by planting a variety of giant banana on our border, laughingly proclaiming, "You think you can grow bananas, now you'll see what a Portuguese banana can do!"

The banana plants are now gone (save one that we keep as a monument), and harmony has returned to the neighborhood, but important lessons remain. One lesson obviously is that one should not plant bananas in a small yard. But the broader lesson has to do with the role of culture in conflict and conflict management. Indeed, this lesson is also clearly evident in papers that comprise this edition of the *Journal*. Culture plays two related but distinct roles in the conflict. On one hand, culture (and ethnicity) serves as the vehicle for identifying and distinguishing the groups that are likely to be parties to conflict. This role is most clearly seen in the responses of my Japanese and Portuguese neighbors. For my Japanese neighbor, I represented white American culture and he represented Japanese culture. My runaway banana plants epitomized the evils of white American culture, and were viewed as a direct affront to Japanese culture. My neighbor and I represented two different groups separated by culture, as well as the boundaries of our land. Similarly, my Portuguese neighbor's comments showed his view that the "banana war" was one

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