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OPINION

# Are humans capable of cross-cultural understanding?

As our culture shapes our world-view, leaving us with distorted perspectives, our interior worlds can be filled with minefields of ignorance.

By **Thelma Fayle** Contributor

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Raised as a Catholic Anglophone in Montreal in the 1960s, I held preconceived ideas about French people, Protestants, people with disabilities, gays, First Nations and the wealthy. Now, in hindsight, I realize how often individuals — and nations — get it wrong.

Perhaps when there are no more graves of First Nations children to be unearthed in Canada, Canadians can start pointing their moral fingers at abuses in other countries. And when privately owned U.S. prisons stop using incarcerated young, Black men for cheap labour, maybe then Americans can fairly comment on the Chinese treatment of the Uyghurs. And perhaps when the brilliant contemporary artist, Ai Weiwei, no longer has reason to be critical of his government's stance on human rights, maybe then China can fairly hold themselves as a role model for the world.

I am not saying we should not rail against international atrocities; just that we consider introspection. Every nation has skeletons and before we point fingers, we should address our own unconscious biases and conscious actions. As the culture we grow up in shapes our world-view, leaving us with distorted perspectives, our interior worlds can be filled with minefields of ignorance. And in 2022, we know too well that social media will harden rather than expand attitudes — turning us against each other with alarming consequences.

Harvard evolutionary biologist Joseph Henrich offers a brilliant acronym to describe Westerners who perceive non-Western cultures as being “strange” and inferior. According to Henrich, WEIRDs (Western, Educated, Individualistic, Rich and Democratic) think their decisions are driven by rationality — and without bias.

How do we adjust the distorted vision we get from wearing stereotype-skewed lenses? How can we better understand deep-rooted cultural differences — knowing full-well that assumptions and stereotypes are usually more often wrong than right?

In “The Changing World Order,” Ray Dalio recognizes the sensitivity of the Taiwan issue to the Chinese. His world history, as told through a financial lens, suggests Americans misunderstand the Chinese. Given 30-plus years of business experience with the Chinese — his son lived with a Chinese family and was educated in public school there in the early 1990s — he offers insights to move beyond the use of unproductive and misleading caricaturistic stereotypes. With eerie simplicity, Dalio made me believe we humans might be capable of learning to think without bias.

Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan irritated the Chinese. Do we understand the larger context of China's sensitivity about Taiwan? Where are they coming from? How do they see North Americans? If the U.S. speaker of the House of Representatives had truly

considered the historical and cultural complexities of the China-Taiwan relationship, would she have conveniently poured gasoline on flames in the name of promoting democracy?

The pandemic, geopolitical tensions, the rise of autocrats and the lessening of globalization hasn't helped as countries around the world have become more insular at a time when the biggest challenges — climate change, the pandemic, refugees — need our undivided, collective attention.

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One of my heroes growing up was the writer, John Stoessinger. His book, "Nations in Darkness," a text in my first political science class, offers spine-chilling descriptions of 15 bloody conflicts caused by cross-cultural misunderstandings among three superpowers. As key to avoiding catastrophic confrontations, Stoessinger recommended "learning to understand people from other cultures to get to the realization that all human beings are brothers and sisters."

As an adult reflecting on my own history, I realize that personal experiences have helped me outgrow stereotypes. As a society, we need to become curious anthropologists of our world. We need to learn to listen, ask questions, find common ground, cooperate and respect differences. We need courageous world leaders who will own the humility it takes to lay bare our collective stereotypes. And above all, we need to expose the tensions between what is *true* and *not true* in cross-cultural situations.

If we keep our eyes on the place we want to be — we might master the art of cross-cultural understanding.

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