Why we have to deal well with cultural differences – and how to do it

In today's globalized and diverse world, we constantly encounter people with different ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. Most of the time, our differences are very enriching, they inspire us and open up new horizons of thought. And we can often deal well with differences that we spontaneously find strange – as long as they do not affect our own values, norms or plans. Because when that happens, we often no longer react as tolerantly, but rather find differences unpleasant and disturbing and tensions and conflicts can arise. To prevent this from happening, we must be conscious about how we deal with cultural differences.

Psychological basics

First of all, we should know that human behavior is characterized by three levels: the universal, the cultural and the individual (Nunez et al. 2007). Universal are those behavioral patterns that all humans share as a species, based on biological, psychological and evolutionary similarities. And there really are a lot of them. We have much more in common than and differences. These universals include basic needs such as food, security and social connections, for example the fact that we regularly get hungry. Cultural are all behaviors that have developed within specific social groups. They are the result of socialization, i.e. the adoption of norms, values and traditions that prevail in a particular group. This includes, for example, all eating habits, i.e. what we eat, how it is prepared, who we eat with, when, where, etc. . Ultimately, all behaviors that distinguish an individual from all other people are individual - after all, in addition to everything universal and cultural, each of us has a very unique life story, personal experiences and an individual character. In our food example, this could be a special preference for an additional pinch of salt in the food.
In everyday situations we often cannot clearly separate these levels. Because human behavior is always multifactorial and depends on a variety of influences. So we have to be very careful when attributing it to “cultural” because not everything that could be explained at first glance by “cultural differences” holds up to this argument upon closer inspection.

Before we address the cultural level of human behavior, we should address two basic psychological mechanisms that explain why we 1. divide people into in-groups and out-groups and 2. prefer in-group members. Let's turn to the first point. We humans can maintain closer social ties with around 150 people (=Dunbar number) - anything beyond that exceeds our cognitive capacities (Dunbar 1993). From an evolutionary perspective, this makes sense because humans have lived together in smaller, manageable groups for thousands of years. We can observe the same thing with our closest relatives in the animal kingdom (Harari 2014: 32ff). For bonobos, the group sizes are around 30 to 80 animals, for chimpanzees an average of around 35 to a maximum of 150 animals. This means that the human brain is evolutionarily designed to interact in small, manageable communities. In such groups we can build social bonds, resolve conflicts and cooperate without losing track of things or becoming too overwhelmed.
However, in today's modern societies we live together with far more than 150 people. To guarantee social stability in these extremely large groups, we depend on abstract institutions

and collective imaginations (Harari 2014: 32ff). To manage our social relationships, our brain categorizes those around us. Two large categories can be distinguished: the “in-groups” (people who are very close to us = “our group/s”) and the “out-groups” (the group/s of the “others”) (Everett et al. 2024). Since we humans have a tendency to learn through observation and imitation (“social learning theory”), many similarities emerge in human groups over time. We usually have a lot in common with “in-group” people; the mutual confirmation and the resulting feeling of belonging strengthens our sense of identity. We tend to have less in common with “out-group” people.
What is fatal is that in everyday interactions, the first impression usually determines the perceived closeness or distance to a person. Visual (characteristics of biological or acquired appearance) and auditory (speech and voice modulation) impressions are particularly important. In just a few seconds, our brain decides whether someone has the potential to become part of our in-group or belongs to the out-group. It is important that we are clear about these mechanisms. We can then consciously perceive our first impression and our natural tendency to categorize and then decide to remain open and have a more differentiated perception.

Behaviors and characteristics of the “in-groups” are often idealized and preferred, while those of the “out-groups” are evaluated more negatively (Everett et al. 2024). There is a second mechanism behind this: so-called predictive coding. This is a theory from cognitive and neuroscience. Our brain is fundamentally a very energy-intensive organ. In order to save energy and increase processing speed, our brain works with constant predictions about our environment instead of fully processing each new piece of information (Andersen et al. 2023: 466f). We use previously experienced patterns and experiences to make predictions. For example, when we attend a workshop that takes place in a particular room, our brain is already making a selection of likely predictions about what we will find when we open the door as we push down the doorknob. If these predictions are correct, i.e. the room looks as we know it and the expected people are in the room, etc., that is efficient and pleasant for our brain. However, when the predictions don't come true - for example, because there are completely different people in the room or the interior design has been changed - this leads to a feeling of ambiguity or discomfort as our brain has to expend more energy to resolve the discrepancy between the prediction and the actual one to cope with experience.
Cultural differences make other people less predictable to us because they have more behaviors that are unfamiliar to us. These make the encounter potentially more stressful for our brain as we have to “rethink”. This leads us to (often unconsciously) prefer people who are more culturally similar. To avoid this, we must consciously reflect on this mechanism of our brain. We should also strengthen our curiosity and desire for knowledge - because these are considered pull factors in intercultural interactions (Samochowiec & Florack 2010).

Ethnocentrism and stereotypes

When people don't know much about cultural differences or perhaps live in a more culturally homogeneous environment, they often adopt an ethnocentric perspective. Ethnocentrism describes the tendency to perceive one's own cultural influences as “normal” and, conversely, to view anything unfamiliar with suspicion (Keith 2019: 23-28). One's own social, moral or religious norms are perceived as the only "right" ones and the unfamiliar, self-centered ones are perceived as "wrong" or "inferior". An ethnocentric perspective distorts perception and prevents a deeper understanding of other people.

Another danger when dealing with cultural differences are stereotypes. Who doesn't know the expression "That's just how they are!"? This sentence is based on the assumption that it is possible to describe other people with generalizations and to draw conclusions about general rules or characteristics from individual observations or experiences. Although generalizations help us to quickly organize the world and navigate complex social situations, they can also become problematic if they are applied unreflectively or in a generalized way. Generalizations are part of our natural way of thinking. They allow us to process information and make decisions quickly without having to analyze all the details in detail. However, if we derive a general rule based on a few, isolated experiences or observations, we risk distorting the diversity and complexity of reality. In social interactions, this often leads to a tendency to put people in boxes and judge them based on certain, supposedly universal characteristics. But stereotypes are not insurmountable. The crucial step is to become aware of them and reflect on how they influence our thoughts and actions (Welpinghus 2020). In our complex everyday social life, we basically need two almost opposite skills: We must be able to recognize and understand cultural differences on a general, higher-level level, but at the same time we must recognize that in everyday life we are not homogeneous , culturally stereotypical people, but rather culturally hybrid hybrid creatures, i.e. people who combine a wide variety of and sometimes even contradictory cultural influences and individual experiences (Fuchs 2022).

Culturally sensitive approach to our differences

In order to be able to deal well with cultural differences, we need cultural self-awareness, knowledge about cultural differences and an open and non-judgmental attitude. Cultural self-awareness means that we can recognize how much our own culturally learned behavior patterns shape our feelings, thoughts and actions, because only then can we understand the influences of other people. We also need a lot of knowledge about cultural differences in order to see how cultural differences can be effective in different areas of life. A well-known quote from Sigmund Freud goes: "If we could understand the reasons for other people's behavior, everything would suddenly make sense." If we don't find other people's behavior to make sense, it's usually because we don't understand their internal logic or thought patterns have not yet been understood or we lack information. And we must not confuse understanding with "finding it good". In this context, understanding is the purely cognitive process of being able to understand a logical causal chain.
However, we can never know everything to understand other people's worlds. That's why we also need a fundamentally non-judgmental attitude towards unknown behaviors. Even if I encounter a pattern of thinking, feeling or behavior that I cannot yet understand, it is always advisable to first trust that there is a sensible explanation for it rather than rushing to make a negative judgment. Because every person acts sensibly in their own cosmos - and it is up to us to understand what makes other people tick. In this text we deal with knowledge that helps us to deal well with cultural differences.

Inter-/and transcultural sensitivity means that we are aware of human differences and acknowledge and respect them without judging them. As a rule, we can only do this once we are aware of our own cultural influences (cultural self-awareness) and recognize that every person has different influences. With this awareness, we can put our own influences into perspective and recognize that our own perspective is just one of many. We begin to move with an open attitude in a nonjudgmental space without judging other people's patterns of thinking, feeling or acting. This is the only way we can adopt an appreciative attitude

towards the diversity of human experiences and treat individual people with their unusual behavior with respect. Judgments are replaced by curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. Like all cultural phenomena, we can only understand other people's patterns of thinking, feeling or acting from their own logic and cultural context (Geertz 2008). Why does this person think this way? Why is this person doing this or that? We assume that all people act meaningfully from their perspective and we want to understand other people's logical causal chains. This understanding is the key to people. Such a perspective is cultural relativist (Howson 2009; Seremetakis 2017: 8). It is recognized that all people are socialized in particular historical, social and geographical contexts and that culture-specific phenomena are the result of specific historical and social processes. This also requires the willingness to critically question one's own cultural assumptions. When you do this, you sometimes notice that things we consider normal can actually be considered quite strange (e.g. certain eating habits, gender roles, religious practices, etc.).

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