

FINDING OUR WAY INTO EACH OTHER'S WORLDS: MUSINGS ON CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE TAKING

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Like many readers of this blog, I follow Paul's dispatches with delight. Each story invites me to halt the busyness of my everyday life and try to see the world through his eyes and through the eyes of those he interviews. With poetry and precision he brings us "there" to witness the world slowly unfolding as experienced by fellow human beings crafting their lives.

Perspective taking, the capacity to understand how others view their world is at a premium in a world of increasing diversity and complexity. It was also the topic of a class on global learning that Liz Dawes Duraisingh and I taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Education before the end of the year. In this class, a group of students and I experimented with trying to take on the perspectives of different individuals described in Paul's dispatch Tomatoes – a moving description of his encounter with Syrian refugees eking out a living on the fringes of the desert in Jordan. We tried to imagine these individuals' worlds shaped by majestic deserts and stubborn wars. Our efforts proved both challenging and generative as they raised essential puzzles of cultural perspective taking.

How can one begin to imagine the tapestry of values that inform these individuals' actions? How much do we need to know about the war in Syria before attempting to make sense of these lives? What do we do with the paralyzing fear of putting our ignorance on the table? How not to be hurt by others' misconceptions about people and cultures we love and know well? We even asked ... is a legitimate form of cultural perspective taking possible in our cacophonous world? Not surprisingly, addressing some of these puzzles requires that we put "perspective taking" itself in perspective.

A core human capacity

The capacity to take perspective is evolutionarily engrained in our human biology. For over a decade neuroscientists have studied the working of "mirror neurons" a special type of neurons in our brains by which we tend to emulate within our own neural systems other people's physical movements and states of mind.[1]

Cognitive psychologists have shown how, as early as age four, children construct a “theory of mind” – a personal mental picture of the perspectives, beliefs and motivations of others.[2] Luckily, it does not take much for us to learn that others can have a different point of view.

Sociologists too have helped us see that our understanding of others emerges through social interactions. Through the blow by blow of our exchanges with others, we gain a sense of who they are, while shaping our sense of ourselves. We are constantly interacting with others, mutually calibrating our views of and *with* them[3].

Furthermore, our capacity to take perspective is aided by the fact that, regardless of distance, we share important experiences with other human beings—we love, we protect our children, we associate with friends, we fear, we learn, we fight. Whether we live in Harvard Square, a village in the Andes, or a Syrian refugee camp these aspects of the human experience bind us together and offer a powerful common ground for conversation.[4]

Perspective taking, we may conclude, is a profoundly human endeavor, a capacity we are more or less able to develop simply by virtue of being members of social groups and recognizing our humanity... And that is, clearly, good news!!

A fuller story

A core human proclivity toward perspective taking is not the full tale, however. In a world that requires that we become more cosmopolitan, more understanding of others and ourselves, another side of this story must be told. Taking perspective requires that we also understand that having friends, protecting our children, fearing danger, takes on different meanings as they unfold in cultural, religious, historical, and situational contexts that are often different from our own. And the *not-so-good* news is that our intuitive attempts to understand other people’s views and experiences are not always the most productive.

We are wired to live in small homogenous village-like communities surrounded by people who we would have known all our lives. Confronted with more complex societies we are prone to stereotyping and oversimplifying. We engage all too easily in “group think” favoring going with the flow of the group over thinking differently and for ourselves. We are prone to “confirmation bias,” which means granting greater credibility to the people with whom we agree and disbelieving those who hold a different view. These human limitations in perspective taking are not our fault; they are simply the way we are inclined to behave. So becoming more sophisticated at taking perspective will require special attention, especially in today’s world, where strong migratory movements and ubiquitous connectivity create conditions for us to encounter people from all walks of life on a regular basis.

In my work with teachers, students, and peers on these matters I have learned that the journey toward complex perspective taking requires that we traverse some possible risks: The risk of paralysis induced by our sense of respect for other cultures and our fear of misunderstanding them; the risk of being offended by others' perceptions of our backgrounds or places of origin. These are legitimate sources of discomfort when we make an effort to understand the perspectives of others. They are also most generative windows into new worlds.

Learning *with* others

In education today, a large number of welcome efforts are underway to cast a more global outlook across the curriculum. It matters greatly that our young are informed about world histories, traditions, cultures, and geographies. Yet I find it essential to take a stance towards perspective taking that is not singlehandedly dependent on having descriptive information about cultures. The world is too broad to be "covered" in the information sense! Rather, I have come to favor a more dialogical and inquiry-oriented disposition—one in which we learn to view "the other" in their full human potential. being at once a woman, a citizen, a mother, a patient, a friend, a cook, a daughter and, yes, also a refugee.

A case in point was Laura, an North American teacher and friend, who recently found herself responsible for teaching Hibaaq (all names are pseudonyms), a 4th grade Somali refugee girl trying to find her way between worlds of bare feet on the desert sand and freezing mittens in her new home in Portland, Maine. Understandably, Laura felt ill prepared to teach a child whose story was so very foreign to her. Forgetting about culture and teaching the grammar and punctuation seemed an improbable solution. Reading about Somalia? Perhaps. But it was only when this empathic teacher turned to Hibaaq herself, to ask about her grandmother, her family stories and her friends, that Laura broke through the glass door that separates Hibaaq "the student in class" from Hibaaq "the full human being" and they both found their way into one another's world.

The dialogical approach to perspective taking I favor finds its strength in our capacity to recognize the limits of our understanding, to calibrate our understanding *with* others, and to acknowledge our propensity for error. It is also rooted in our commitment to continuously trying to find our way into other people's worldviews, bringing respect and compassion to our interactions. Compassion for others—and a bit for ourselves as we give ourselves the chance to explore new worlds. On this, we would do well to learn from Paul to keep our shared humanity at the center of our conversation and stand ready to be changed by what we learn.

Footnotes

[1] Immordino-Yang, M. H. (2008). The smoke around mirror neurons: Goals as sociocultural and emotional organizers of perception and action in learning. *Mind, Brain, and Education* 2(2), 67–73.

[2] Wellman, H. (1990). *The child's theory of mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. Rogoff, B. (1995). Observing sociocultural activity on three planes. In Wertsch (Ed.), *Sociocultural studies of mind*. Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press. Karmiloff-Smith, A. (1992). *Beyond modularity : A developmental perspective on cognitive science*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

[3] Mead, G. H. (1967). *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[4] See Appiah, A. (2006) *Cosmopolitanism, Ethics in a World of Strangers* New York NY: Norton. Wikan, U. (1982). *Behind the veil in Arabia: Women in Oman*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.