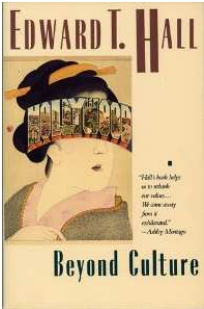


Beyond Culture



by Edward T. Hall

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The problems facing mankind are solvable. The key is for all of us to escape from the prisons of our respective cultures. Until we reach the point when we can transcend the limitations imposed by the multiple hidden dimensions of which we are not aware, the crises confronting the world will remain and become exacerbated. Said another way, while our problems are man-made, they cannot be resolved unless the individuals and groups that comprise the world are able to know and understand each other's ways of thinking and doing things. The paradox is that we need to go beyond culture if we are to communicate effectively on an intercultural level.

Edward Twitchell Hall Jr. (May 16, 1914 – July 20, 2009), the American-born anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher, is considered to be the founding father of the scholarly field of intercultural communication. He became aware of the issues or problems with respect to intercultural communication through personal experiences; his extensive career-long investigation of the topic stemmed from scholarly influences.

Hall is best known for having developed the concept of “high context” and “low context” cultures. In addition, he coined the term “polychronic” as a way of describing the ability to attend to multiple events simultaneously, as opposed to monochronic individuals and cultures that tend to handle events and order their lives sequentially. He is also credited with having created the concept of “proxemics,” or personal spaces, to describe the subjective dimensions that surround each of us and the physical distances one tries to keep

from other people as set by one's subtle latent cultural rules. Hall's approach to understanding different cultures is that "time and space are functions of each other."

First published in 1976, Beyond Culture was Hall's third book and had been preceded by The Silent Language (1959) and The Hidden Dimension (1966) – both of which were significant breakthroughs in terms of fostering and furthering better understanding of intercultural communication. Beyond Culture builds upon the foundation laid by the first two books which is that communication constitutes the core of culture. At the same time, it is also tangible evidence of the four major areas that Hall professed had a major influence on his work: cultural anthropology, linguistics, ethology (the study of animal behavior) and Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

It is from these four constructs that Hall attempts to proffer his view that if mankind is to save itself, we need to re-discover both our lost sense of self and lost sense of perspective. Throughout the book, Hall draws upon these areas in an effort to hold a metaphorical mirror in front of the reader as a way to help one see the awesome and vicious grip of culture on all of us.

At the time he was writing, Hall perceived two related crises in the world: "the population/environment crisis and humankind's relationships to its extensions, institutions, ideas, as well as the relationships among the many individuals and groups that inhabit the globe." In his view, neither problem will ever be solved through technology or political intervention. The crises are inextricably linked and "if both are not solved, neither will be."

The way out of this man-made mess is to recognize and accept what Hall terms "unconscious culture." Once we see our own cultures – both in their manifest and latent forms – we can free ourselves from captivity by going beyond culture to accept and understand other people. This "going beyond" effort would allow mankind "to evolve new alternatives, new possibilities, and new avenues for creative uses of the multiple and unusual talents so manifest in the diversity of the human race." Moreover, Hall writes that "there are many roads to truth and no culture has a corner on the path or is better equipped than others to search for it."

The main ideas of Beyond Culture are organized and developed topically, as opposed to chronologically. However, due to the lack of segues or the aid of transition statements, at times it seems like the book is a series of discrete or unconnected elements. Much is left to

the reader to follow and link the author's main points or to connect the dots, in a manner of speaking.

Hall's writing style is scholarly, yet not abstruse; somewhat formal but not dull; unpretentious, practical and from the perspective of "a self-professed professional observer of cultural patterns." Although it is not clear whom Hall viewed as the intended audience, Beyond Culture would appeal to the general public, students and scholars alike. However, some of the chapters may be a bit too focused on a single scientific topic and read like a text book to readers who lack a basic understanding of science or anthropology. For example, the Chapters entitled "Why Context?" and "Image and Memory" are replete with references to science, ethology, taxonomy methods, and various experiments and are the least helpful chapters.

Overall, Hall does an effective job of describing and elucidating the many influences and aspects of culture – "man's medium." His emphasis is on the nonverbal, unstated realm of culture and he depicts how cultural aspects are actually formed or put together as opposed to basing his views simply on theories. As such, the book describes and sets forth what we must do and why; unfortunately, it falls short of telling us how to do it.

Beyond Culture is a must read for anyone who is interested in the subject of intercultural studies. Readers who are currently involved in or have a background in the field will recognize how much Hall's work has influenced scholars and researchers who followed in his footsteps. For example, Hall writes that "culture is very closely related to if not synonymous with what has been defined as mind." Moreover, "culture is learned, not innate" and "the various aspects of culture are interrelated." Culture "is shared and defines the boundaries of different groups."

Throughout the book, Hall makes both specific and generalized observations about different cultures. He cites specific cultural aspects of the Navajo and Hopi Indians, and the Japanese. At other times, he cites the general differences between Western man and Asia or the Middle East. Therefore, readers who are looking for specific behaviors to use when travelling to or working in a specific country culture will not find answers. It wasn't until the research of Geert Hofstede – another key figure in the intercultural field – was published that one could have a model of cultural dimensions to apply to specific countries. In addition to his own significant contributions, Hofstede's research clearly validates and confirms much of what Hall observed, learned and wrote about.

All things considered, there really should be no problem when people of differing cultures meet or interact. Encounters are typically based on goodwill and there is awareness that each person has a different set of beliefs or customs. The difficulties begin when people have to work together, however. More often than not, neither party can make the other's system work – such is the grip of one's cultural identification. As Samuel Johnson (1709 – 1784) once observed, “the chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.” The challenge before us is that we must embark on the difficult journey beyond culture.