Cultural boundaries

Author(s): Lehtonen, Tommi

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Tommi Lehtonen

ORCID:0000-0002-0286-3059
University of Vaasa
School of Management, Philosophy[1]

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Summary

This paper seeks to resolve the problem of redefining cultural boundaries. Therefore, the following questions are addressed: 1) To what do cultural boundaries refer, and of what do they basically consist? 2) On what conditions and to what extent is the metaphor of cultural boundaries appropriate? 3) On what conditions can cultural boundaries be broken or crossed? These questions are examined based on a philosophical analysis that draws from Dave Elder-Vass's *The Reality of Social Construction* (2012) and Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (2003). As a major result, it is shown that the metaphor of boundaries is an appropriate tool for cultural studies, insofar as it helps to explain why different norms are followed in different cultures, and how cultural conflicts are related to breaking of norms endorsed and enforced by different social groups. The metaphor of boundaries fits this task, because with the help of it different cultures and social groups can be structured and represented as distinct collective entities, yet with blurred and changing borders, that can side, collide, and overlap with each other.

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[1] University of Vaasa, School of Management, Philosophy, Yliopistonranta 10, 65200 Vaasa, Fabriikki F339; author's email address: Tommi.Lehtonen@uwasa.fi

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The questions to be addressed

This paper seeks to resolve the problem of redefining cultural boundaries. Therefore, the following questions are addressed: 1) To what do cultural boundaries refer, and of what do they basically consist? 2) On what conditions and to what extent is the metaphor of cultural boundaries appropriate? 3) On what conditions can cultural boundaries be broken or crossed? I examine these and other related questions based on a philosophical analysis that draws from Dave Elder-Vass's *The Reality of Social Construction* (2012) and Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (2003). Elder-Vass combines a philosophical analysis of the concepts of cultural studies with the perspective of sociology of culture and introduces the novel idea of norm circles which is a powerful tool for analyzing the issues of cultural encounters. MacIntyre, for his part, discusses requirements for cultural understanding and strongly criticizes relativism that questions the possibility of making valid truth claims from within any one tradition. For this paper, MacIntyre's view is relevant because it keeps the doors for cultural comparisons open and thus unlocks (real or imaginary) boundaries between different cultures. This paper provides a clear understanding of the basis of cultural differences and of transcending cultural boundaries through building on and expanding the ideas presented by Elder-Vass and MacIntyre.

The notion of cultural boundaries

In his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chinua Achebe describes the clash of the tribal culture of the Igbos of Nigeria and the colonial culture of British Christian missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century. The cultures begin to blend when the white men come and try to communicate and live together with tribespeople. The novel explains how cultures with different ideas and beliefs can clash and be intolerant toward one another. Much of the theme is developed through the main character, Okonkwo, and his struggle against fear and anger. Throughout the book, Okonkwo tries to resolve the problems that develop all around him and within himself. As the story progresses, conflict overwhelms Okonkwo and leads to the downfall of his own culture and that of the Igbo tribespeople. In the light of this, Achebe's novel presents a gloomy example of a cultural encounter (Lehtonen, 2015, p. 47).

In general, cultural conflicts can take place in one of two main ways both of which are presented in Achebe's novel. In the first way, the representatives of a culture (e.g., missionaries) do not acknowledge the cultural value and rights of another group, but instead forbid and prevent—with threats and bribes—traditions, practices, and customs of the group concerned. Colonialism (i.e., the exploitation of peoples by other peoples) and terrorism (for example motivated by religion) are extreme forms of this type of

cultural conflict. In the second way, traditions, practices, and customs of one culture are peacefully, and even inadvertently, replaced by those of another culture. This method of cultural conflict is often referred to as one of the (intended or unintended) effects of globalization (Ritzer, 2004). Thus, (i) deliberate cultural oppression and (ii) peaceful cultural replacement (often driven by the economy) must be distinguished as separate forms of cultural conflicts. Both can take place slowly or rapidly and more-or-less systematically.

The concept of cultural conflicts involves another notion that is highly relevant here: cultural boundaries. The notion of cultural boundaries entails that different cultures form distinct entities with clear criteria for identity (Grathoff, Kłoskowska, 1994; Hannerz, 2002). Those criteria are supposed to make different cultures unique and capable of being differentiated from each other. Consequently, insofar as different cultures are identifiable, they cannot be reduced to being equal one another, nor can they be amalgamated without losing their separate identities. However, the distinctness of cultures is open to debate because, for example, the distinguishing criteria for different cultures are negotiable and tradition-dependent rather than necessary and universally accepted. Accordingly, defining cultural boundaries is not like doing mathematics, where there is only one correct answer, but rather cultural boundaries are interest- and perspective-dependent, and even arbitrary to some extent (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 162–163, 171–173).

However, despite this vagueness, cultural boundaries have often been considered to be like walls that cannot be broken or crossed easily, because such crossing or breaking would require "intercultural learning" or "cultural acclimatization" in a kind of interim space (frontier or "brackish water") between cultures. However, under certain conditions the learning is possible, meaning that people are able to interact and approach different cultures with tolerance and a benevolent curiosity. Activating this ability requires empathy and metacognitive skills such as interpreting, self-reflection, and help seeking.

It is also important to remember that borders and boundaries not only separate people, or are potential causes of conflict, but borders also structure the world and make it comprehensible (Hannerz, 2002, p. 7; Douglas, 2003, p. 53). Thus, boundaries do not only demarcate, but also serve as sites of convergence—places that meet and connect. Therefore, cultural boundaries can be said to be axiomatic and become the basis for cultural knowledge.

Herein is worth considering the concept of borders in a greater detail. Firstly, a border always has two sides—inside and outside, top and bottom, left and right, past and future—that can be concrete (spatio-temporal) or abstract (conceptual), and sharp or fuzzy to different degrees (O'Neill, 2016, p. 2). Consequently, a bordered entity (such as, paradigmatically, a solid matter) can have both an inner surface and an outer surface, and the surface can either prevent or promote the transfer of elements from inside and outside. Supposing that cultures are discrete and internally unified entities (which is something that is questioned in this article), what is outside a culture is either another culture or a frontier ("uncivilized wilderness"). Cultures as bounded entities can then either absorb influences from other cultures or can prevent foreign influences from entering. Moreover,

what is considered to be the inside and outside, or the past and future, of a culture depends on point of view of the observer and, among other things, on her or his cultural and historical context. It is basically in this sense that cultural boundaries are perspectival.

Secondly, the fact that a border has two sides entails an important epistemological argument. For example, verifying the border of a country requires observing both sides of that border (e.g., in a map, photo or nature). Thus, observing the border requires a suitable point of view of examination. This requirement also concerns abstract borders such as cultural and conceptual boundaries. In the case of identifying cultural boundaries (and more generally, in the case of cultural comparisons), this brings along the fact that cultures are not the final meaning horizons of understanding, but that there must be a point of view that transcends the horizons of individual cultures and related language games (note that language is the most important cultural system because it mediates all the others). According to Karl-Otto Apel, different language games can be examined together in a language-game that is transcendental to them and that concerns the general and relatively constant requirements of the determination of meaning related to the structures of human life (Apel, 1973, p. 256; cf. the concept of "The Common Behavior of Mankind" in *Philosophical Investigations* § 206, Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 70e). Charles Taylor (1989, pp. 19–21, 78), in turn, claims that although the *content* of each interpretative framework is specific and particular, it is universal as an interpretative *form* (i.e., as a form that interprets human experiences, deeds, emotions, and desires). Thus, Taylor is more cautious than Apel regarding the assumption of a universal content of the framework of interpretation. Yet, both authors lend support to the view that different cultures—as different horizons of understanding and frameworks of interpretation—can be meaningfully (though not exhaustively) compared and transcended in a unifying framework that provides a ground for intercultural learning.

The concept of intercultural learning includes not only the knowledge exchange between cultures and the transfer of cultural content and values, but also skills (such as language skills, cultural empathy, and perception) and tools (i.e., concepts, metaphors, models, theories, and frameworks) required for such learning. Diverse skills and tools are also required for a general understanding of what culture is, including which facts are cultural and which are not, and in what sense and in what way different cultures can encounter one another.

The highest form of intercultural learning relates to the conditions under which the breaking of cultural norms is tolerable and making amends for cultural transgressions is appropriate. Recognizing such lenient conditions helps to increase the possibilities of a peaceful coexistence of different cultures. The conditions can include foreigners' sincere ignorance of cultural norms, the high social and epistemological status of the person who breaks a cultural norm, the personal tolerance of the persons involved, and special occasions (such as the celebration of a foreign culture's festival in the middle of another culture—in which cases there may be more leeway in terms of cultural norms of both cultures). These and other relevant conditions form the basis for reconstructive dealings with cultural conflicts. The required measures include efforts for positive interaction

between people regardless of their cultural background, considerate effort for discussing cultural transgressions and other problems related to cultural encounters, showing regret, apologizing, saying that the purpose was not to offend, and showing a general sympathetic attitude to the traditions of other people. The skill of using these and other related measures can be regarded as the highest form of cultural knowledge.

The dichotomy between culture and nature has often been seen as crucial in the understanding of what culture is. That dichotomy means, among other things, that culture and nature are interrelated, so that culture is anything that is not nature and nature is anything that is not man-made and has not been manipulated by humans. Thus, culture is based on human agency, whereas nature is not. This opinion has been problematized and powerfully questioned by authors such as Judith Butler and Timothy Morton. They consider nature as a human invention and the result of human conceptualization and demarcation (Butler, 1990; Morton, 2007, 2010, 2013). In their view, the difference between culture and nature disappears, or is, at least, relativized. Whatever our final opinion of the dichotomy between culture and nature may be, the dichotomy has heuristic relevance, leading us to motivate and define our concept of culture. Such defining also helps to distinguish between different cultures, which is an important task for cultural studies. Therefore, we need at least an initial idea of what culture is in general and how it works.

As is well known, many definitions of culture have been set forth, but two main types are most commonly referred to: substantive and functional. Substantive definitions focus on what culture is, whereas functional definitions try to explain what culture does. The difference between these two is not necessarily clear cut, even more so because many definitions define the essence of culture through the functions of culture (Lehtonen, 2015, p. 48). An example of this is the definition presented by Dave Elder-Vass. According to him, culture consists of institutionalized practices and artefacts that convey decipherable meanings relating to life and the world (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 38–39). Culture is thus a shared set of practices and objects, and culture creates and maintains meanings and understandings. Existence of those different types of definitions of culture demonstrate the underlying fact that cultures are social constructions and their constituent elements can be chosen and determined in various ways. Accordingly, cultural boundaries are constructed and, to some extent, imaginary—not inherent or natural.

Cultural encounters

By referring above to Achebe's novel, (i) deliberate cultural oppression and (ii) peaceful cultural replacement were distinguished as the main forms of cultural conflicts. Apparently, cultural encounters can also take place without conflict which is something to be expected insofar as cultural boundaries are artificial, imaginary, and subject to change. These non-conflicting (or not necessarily conflicting) means of cultural encounters include the following:

1) Individuals and groups with different cultural backgrounds (e.g. original population, immigrants, exchange students, expats, tourists) occasionally meet each other, ask

each other various questions, get to know one another, and share things about one another's culture.

2) Different traditions (such as various religions and livelihoods) and their adherents and representatives (i.e., cultural majorities and minorities) live side by side—for example, in the same city or country—and have practical dealings (e.g., businesses, administration, and other activities) with one another on a regular basis.

3) Cultural events (like concerts, art exhibitions, and dance performances) gather and blend examples of different cultures' art and artefacts (e.g., dance, music, paintings, theatre, architecture).

4) An artefact or work of art, such as a novel, painting, sculpture, garment, dance, or building, combines elements and styles from different cultures and traditions.

5) Schoolchildren, students and other people learn during lessons about cultures; they read books, articles, and blogs, see movies and documentary films, and listen to radio programs presenting various cultures.

6) A visible manifestation of an alien culture is erected in the middle of another culture (for example, a mosque is built in the middle of a Christian city).

7) Scholars study and classify different cultures and present their research results to academic and other audiences. (Lehtonen, 2015, pp. 48–49.)

Based on this in-no-way comprehensive list, we can conclude that basic forms of cultural encounters are (i) personal and (ii) non-personal. That is, they are (i) encounters between individuals and groups with different cultural backgrounds, and (ii) encounters with non-personal manifestations and representations of different cultures (manifestations that are naturally created, experienced, and thought by people).

Another common assumption, in addition to cultural conflicts and boundaries, is that cultures overlap or intersect in regard to some of their constituent elements. The nature of this overlap remains unclear, unless it simply means that the same traditions and practices can exist simultaneously in different cultures. In the light of this, cultures are hybrids consisting of elements from different historical periods and geographical areas, and some elements such as traditions and customs can exist in different cultures. For example, Islam and Christianity are traditions of various past and present cultures. There are many examples of cultural hybrids that work well even if they consist of conflicting interests and agendas. Modern examples are the combination of market and state-planned economies in China, as well as the combination of secularization and new forms of religiosity in the West.

Elder-Vass asks whether the boundaries of culture can be defined objectively even though cultures intersect, meaning that they may have one or many practices, habits, and traditions in common (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 162–163, 171–173). His answer is that intersection makes defining cultural boundaries inevitably arbitrary. As a result, one person places two or more practices in the same culture, while another person places them in different cultures. Furthermore, even when some practices really are unique to the culture concerned, there is something arbitrary about choosing those practices rather than others to define that culture (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 171). Thus, a greater or

lesser discretion exists affecting the definitions of culture. Therefore, cultures are very far from being natural aspects of the practices that constitute them. Quite the contrary, a culture is in some respects a purely nominalist category of practices. Thus, what unites the practices that constitute a culture, and excludes others, is nothing more than the fact that the constituent practices have been labelled as components of that particular culture. In view of this, it is tempting to see cultures as a product of discursive construction. Nevertheless, the practices and traditions that are bundled into cultures exist objectively and independently of the cultural labels attached to them. However, the idea that the practices and traditions collectively form a culture is purely the result of naming them as such. Elder-Vass emphasizes that such naming only becomes effective when it is collective (i.e., when there is a group of people prepared to endorse and enforce it) (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 171–172). So, if something about cultures is illusory and socially constructed, there is also something real, namely actual social groups promoting actual social norms (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 54). It can also be said that diachronically, cultures are the outcome of a causal process in which people influence one another. Synchronically, cultures depend upon the existence of socially coordinated beliefs and dispositions in the members of the group concerned (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 172). Elder-Vass concludes the following: "Cultures, then, are nominal rather than objective categories of practices and they are socially constructed, but they are nevertheless real in the sense that they are endorsed and enforced by actual social entities" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 173).

Based on this view, cultural hybrids can be defined as cultures, practices, and artefacts that combine styles and elements (e.g., traditions, designs, and ways of thinking) from different cultures (Douglas, 1996). Furthermore, cultural hybridity and multiculturalism belong together as both refer to societies in which various ethnic groups and cultures live together. Many, even the most modern and ancient cultures are hybrids and multicultural in this sense, and only a few very isolated, small, and idiosyncratic cultures can be considered to be non-hybrid and monocultural.

Even if cultural hybridity, as defined above, may seem to be an obvious fact, Elder-Vass surprisingly points out that the concept of cultural hybridity is perhaps internally contradictory, and thus impossible. This astonishing conclusion is due to the fact that cultural hybridity is a phenomenon that is only possible if we have distinct cultures to start with and yet its very occurrence undermines the distinctness of cultures (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 170). In my opinion, the lesson here is that cultural hybridity must be understood as a dual phenomenon with internal and external aspects. An example of internal hybridity, or complexity, is the fact that even uniform national cultures are composed of many elements, practices and artefacts and are thus not simple and plain. Different traditions and practices of a culture can be copied or adapted to other cultures. Furthermore, cultural variation—in the sense of different groups of people following (slightly or markedly) different rules—can exist even inside one and the same culture. In external hybridity at least some of the elements of a culture originated from another culture. This dual nature of hybridity can be paralleled by the distinction between open systems, which allow interactions between their internal elements and the environment, and closed systems

which are isolated from their environment (Bertalanffy, 1969, pp. 39–41). Similarly, cultural hybrids can be open or closed. External cultural hybridity requires interactions between cultures (or between "open cultural systems"), whereas internal cultural hybridity (or a "closed cultural system") does not. Furthermore, the dual nature of cultural hybridity goes together with the two main ways of crossing cultural boundaries: (i) breaking or transcending the norms of one's own culture and (ii) breaking or transcending the norms of another culture.

In spite of cultural transfer and mixing, some people consider different cultures to be incompatible with one another for ethical, religious, national, aesthetic, or other normative factors. For this reason, among others, the crossing of cultural boundaries may be considered trespassing. Likewise, factual reasons can be the basis for considering different cultures incompatible. Such reasons include different basic beliefs, ways of life, customs and practices, as well as different social systems advanced and followed in different cultures. Behind factual reasons, there are often, however, some norm-related reasons. A normative reason why cultures have been considered to be incompatible is the idea of cultural purity (i.e., a cleansing of culture from the poisoning of outside influences) which is important within totalitarian systems and national ideologies (Douglas, 1966). The idea of cultural purity and the related idea of incompatibility of cultures are, however, problematic for both ethical and factual reasons. For example, how would the Finnish tradition of going to sauna on Saturdays and the British habit of five o'clock tea conflict with each other? While these traditions belong to different national cultures, they in no way exclude each other, but could be combined; one can very well have both sauna and tea. Even if this is true, one might point out that the sauna and the tea traditions exemplify other, more deep-rooted differences between the British and Finnish cultures, and that some of the differences may be incompatible. The more categorical and unconditional a cultural norm is, the more likely it will conflict with the norms of another culture. Such norms are often related to religion and social hierarchies (one could point out, for example, that Britain is still much more a class society than the rest of Europe). However, even if certain cultural norms are inconsistent with the norms of another culture, different cultures can well coexist in peace and harmony insofar as their specific norms are taken to be binding only for their own members, and insofar as people tolerate those who follow different cultural norms than they do. In this respect, cultural, religious, and political converts are often less tolerated than those who are natural-born members of a foreign culture. For example, in the West, many people have a negative attitude toward Westerners who have converted to Islam—often more negative than toward natural-born Muslims. This indicates that cultural apostasy and convertism are considered to violate strong group norms and values, such as esteem of one's own culture and loyalty to one's own group. This is further highlighted by the fact that in some religious traditions, apostasy is criminalized and even punishable by death.

The strangeness that people may feel in a culture other than their own also plays a role here. A feeling of strangeness or unfamiliarity is, however, always relative, and can quickly melt away through learning and social interaction. Thus, cultural unfamiliarity

does not necessarily need to lead to an actual (personal or social, mental or physical) conflict. Quite the contrary, cultural distance and strangeness can be a magnet, drawing positive interest to a foreign tradition and its representatives. The whole tourist industry, among other examples.

Norm circles as the creators and maintainers of cultures

Collective agents that generate, intentionally or unintentionally, boundaries between different cultures and thus separate them from one another are what Elder-Vass calls *norm circles*. According to him, cultures are composed of complexes of mutually referencing and supporting norms that are advanced by the corresponding norm circles (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 166, 255). *Norm circle* can be defined as the group of people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 22). Rules, for their part, are norms that have been verbalized and communicated (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 48). Each norm has its own circle, and the membership of these norm circles may differ. The membership of norm circles may also overlap. Furthermore, Elder-Vass contends that culture is produced by specifically cultural norm circles (Elder-Vass 2012, pp. 30, 54). *Specifically cultural* refers to the norms that regulate the practices and customs considered central and constitutive of a culture. However, in my opinion, this is a more complex issue than it may appear at first, as what is considered central and constitutive depends on the point of view, specifically, what is different for the insiders and the outsiders of a culture.

It is obvious that the commitment of the members of a norm circle to its norms can be conscious or unconscious, deliberate or automatic. Furthermore, what is especially important in norm circles as social groups is that they have the causal power to produce a tendency in individuals to follow standardized practices (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 67, 74, 254). If such standards are violated, which can easily happen to foreigners who are not familiar with another culture's standards and values, a cultural clash in the form of a breach of a cultural norm can take place. Thus, cultural boundaries can be crossed in a negative way, meaning that cultural norms and values can be violated and remain unheeded which can cause strong irritation in the members of the culture concerned. However, violations of cultural norms can also be eye-opening to the members of the culture involved and can thus raise awareness and understanding of cultural differences and characteristics.

It is worth pointing out that no norm circle is completely isolated and impenetrable like a solid billiard ball. Instead, norm circles can be compared to soft, spongy balls with a flexible and porous surface that allows for an exchange between all sides. In the same vein, norm circles can be compared to bubbles in soap suds that yield against each other and can be clustered and merged together, or even nested inside each other. Similarly, different traditions and practices can be clustered and merged together to form new cultural constellations.

Based on the concept of a norm circle, an interim space between cultures can be understood to refer to the circumstances under which identifying, learning, comparing,

negotiating and reconciling between different norms and norm circles (i.e., representatives of different cultures) are possible. These activities firstly require suitable qualities of the persons involved, including tolerance, compassion, and an interest in other cultures and persons. Secondly, the interim space between cultures consists of knowledge of higher-order norms and concepts that are necessary for the identification and categorization of different cultures and cultural norms. Such higher-order norms include the distinctions between different types of cultural practices, products, and values, as well as between essential and nonessential cultural differences. In addition, language translations of different cultural norms may be required and, therefore, among other reasons, language skills are necessary for people who work in intercultural and international settings. All of these together—a sympathetic attitude toward other cultures, language skills, and general cultural knowledge—form an interim space between cultures. Critically, one could remark that this interim space is a (meta-)culture of its own that is not neutral, but rather strongly influenced by Western standards of rationality and of cultural studies. However, even if this criticism is, at least, partly justified, it is not completely accurate. The interim space concerned does not need to be fixed, but rather can be open to various standards, practices, and traditions. Moreover, there can be different interim spaces between cultures (Lehtonen, 2015, p. 51).

We have seen that in Elder-Vass's view cultures are said to be composed of norms that are advanced by norm circles (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 54, 166, 255). Thus, the essence of culture can be characterized, first, in terms of the norms that guide human behavior and practices and, second, in terms of the collective agent (norm circles, or the social form of norm source) that maintains and strengthens those norms. Accordingly, cultural conflicts can raise between norms or between norm circles. Cultural conflicts often concern different norms and rules that are recognized and followed by different individuals and groups. However, cultural conflicts can also raise among different norm circles, especially if those social groups are very self-important and power seeking. Thus, various norm circles can also create conflicts over their influence and authority, and not only over norms endorsed by them.

In conclusion, the most significant obstacles for and difficulties in cultural encounters are related firstly to different norms that are endorsed in different cultures, and secondly, to the collisions of interests between various norm circles that maintain and strengthen those norms. As far as I can see, the difficulties in cultural encounters concern cultural recognition and involvement rather than cognitive understanding of different cultural habits and traditions. This view is in line with the more general fact that it's easier to learn to understand what an unfamiliar practice consists of than to adopt such a practice as part of one's self-identity.

Types of cultural conflicts

When considered in greater detail, the following main types of cultural conflicts can be distinguished:

1. Conflicts between individuals representing different cultures.
2. Conflicts between different practices, customs, and traditions originated in different cultures.
3. Conflicts between different cultural norms.
4. Conflicts between various norm circles behind cultural norms. (Lehtonen, 2015, p. 52.)

Thus, individuals and collectives, their practices and ways of thinking, and norms and norm circles can conflict with and challenge each other. However, by no means am I suggesting that all conflicts between people are due to their different cultural backgrounds or are related to different cultural norms. Therefore, we should add that a conflict of the first type mentioned above is truly cultural only if the conflict is based on one or another of the subsequent types of cultural conflicts. Fortunately, cultural conflicts are not inevitable, which is demonstrated by history's many examples of different cultures and their representatives existing side by side peacefully and influencing each other positively (for example, the interaction between Islamic and Western philosophy in the medieval context). Basically, cultural conflicts can be avoided, firstly, by negotiating, reinterpreting, and harmonizing cultural norms, and secondly, by suitably limiting and containing the scope of conflicting norms (e.g., by restricting the manifestations of cultural identity only in private life). Thus, harmonization and considered limitation ("sectorization") are the main pathways to a peaceful coexistence of cultures.

Cultural conflicts can cause different types of processes, including struggles for cultural hegemony, isolation and withdrawal from intercultural contacts, and changes in cultural norms. Could it then be put forward as a conceptual truth that changing the constitutive norms of a culture results in the transformation of that culture? This must be considered carefully, and the answer depends on what *constitutive* means. If *constitutive* means "held as important and central", then we can very well conceive that the norms of a culture can remain unchanged even if their mutual status or significance changes. This is the case in the West, where religion continues to have a presence in societies while secularization has significantly progressed. Thus, what is considered to be important and worth pursuing in a culture can change from time to time and from one point of view to another, without necessarily resulting in a complete dissolution of certain cultural norms and traditions. However, if *constitutive* means "essential and necessary," then changing the constitutive norms of a culture obviously results in the transformation of the essence of that culture.

Based on Elder-Vass's view, one could say that to encounter and understand a culture in its own terms, the constitutive norms of that culture should be identified and recognized. However, such identification is dependent on our prior concept of culture. Thus, the identification of the constitutive norms of a culture is not a completely innocent act, but a subject to the prior identification of culture in general, and the particular culture concerned, specifically. Different pre-understandings of cultures are potential sources of cultural conflicts. For example, many people in the West are alleged to have a biased and negative pre-understanding of Islamic culture (and *vice versa*), and this pre-understanding is a potential source of conflict.

What then does *recognizing a culture* mean in this context? It could mean something like "at least temporarily adopting a tradition in imagination, but not necessarily permanently assenting it." However, a looser view of the requirements for cultural recognition and understanding is also available. According to this looser view, the adoption of the norms of other cultures is not necessary for cultural encounters—not even in one's imagination (i.e., it is not necessary to consider what it would be like to follow the norms of another culture). Rather, it is necessary to have a basically benevolent attitude toward other cultures and traditions and their representatives. It seems to me that the difference between imaginary adoption (in the sense of being able to feel empathy and to know what it would be like to belong to another culture) and a sympathetic attitude is not enormous here.

Different traditions and practices can be distinguished both conceptually and ontologically. This is seen in the fact that tradition, as a whole, does not necessarily perish if a practice that has been part of that tradition dies out. Consider, for example, changing farming traditions in different cultures (Lehtonen, 2015, p. 54). Traditions are, thus, historically changing collections of diverse practices, and different traditions may share many practices (Lehtonen, 2014a, pp. 89–90). According to Elder-Vass, a practice is only an element of culture when it is shared by a norm circle and when that group puts some sort of pressure on individuals to conform to it (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 160). This pressure can be stronger or weaker. If the conforming pressure is strong, encounters with other cultures can be unconstructive and apt to end in nothing but collision (consider the "billiard ball" metaphor). However, a conflict does not necessarily need to develop, because a culture can also conform in its tolerant and sympathetic attitudes toward other (perhaps not-so-tolerant) cultures (consider the "soft balls and soap suds" metaphor). I call this attitude multi-attractedness (Lehtonen, 2014b, pp. 40–43).

The concept of multi-attractedness refers to the interest aroused by mutually competing alternatives that someone experiences in a situation of choice. The multi-attracted person responds to opposite and even mutually contradictory options as equally attractive and worthy of consideration. Such person can be drawn, for example, to the leftist and rightist ideas, to degrowth thinking or financial growth, and to religiousness and secularism as well. One might say that the strength of those who are multi-attracted lies in their ability to see different views "from the inside." They understand opposites and are interested in them. This makes it possible to calmly deal with social issues without losing multi-voicedness, a benefit when sitting down at the negotiating table to seek optimal solutions to complex problems, cultural problems included.

The perspective challenge

To get an even more detailed view of the metaphor of cultural boundaries it is recommended to examine the perspective challenge discussed by Alasdair MacIntyre. The perspective challenge questions the possibility of making universally valid truth claims from within any one tradition, since the very existence of rival traditions, each with different criteria for truth and falsehood, relativizes and challenges all truth claims. Thus,

the perspective challenge means that different people are epistemologically constrained and separated by different cultures and traditions. Therefore, perspectivists may argue that cultural boundaries are real and substantive, not imaginary.

The perspective challenge rests on the following line of reasoning: All people live within certain social and cultural traditions. They have grown into their own traditions, into their practices and institutions, into their systems of belief, and they have adopted their account of rationality. Their particular traditions are something they have accepted as given and not acquired as a result of individual choice. As partakers of traditions, they have no means of adopting general and timeless standards through which they could ascend above the particularity of their situation or that of others (MacIntyre, 2003, p. 350). MacIntyre crystallizes the essence of the perspective challenge as follows: "If there is a multiplicity of rival traditions, each with its own characteristic modes of rational justification internal to it, then that very fact entails that no one tradition can offer those outside it good reasons for excluding the theses of its rivals" (MacIntyre, 2003, p. 352).

The solution for perspectivists is thus to abandon the traditional meanings of "true" and "false" as taken to be universal and constant. Perspectivists also contend that, instead of seeing rival traditions as something exclusive and incompatible, they should be seen as different and complementary points of view concerning the realities they are addressing (MacIntyre, 2003, p. 352). For perspectivists, different traditions inhabit the same (physical) world but conceptualize and categorize it differently. It is as if different traditions form separate horizons of understanding from which general agreement and common standards of rationality are doomed to remain unattainable. Thus, if the perspectivists are right, different cultures are distinct from each other because of the different culturally determined perspectives of their representatives. One might say that the existence of different, culturally determined perspectives reinforces the notion of cultural boundaries.

Even though the perspectivists' view may seem plausible, even compelling, MacIntyre (2003, p. 353) considers it to be fundamentally misconceived and misdirected. According to him, the proponents of the perspective challenge fail to see the possibility of learning an alien tradition from within as if it were one's own tradition. This apparently requires "going native" or immersing oneself in an alien language as a "second first language". MacIntyre elucidates this requirement by invoking anthropology: anthropologists who have resided among natives long enough have learned a foreign language as a "second first language" (or so it has been claimed). As a result, anthropologists have been able to translate and re-create the ideas and concepts of the natives' tradition into their "first first language" (MacIntyre, 2003, p. 374). Such translations are successfully carried out if the participant in the native tradition identifies her or his own tradition in the translation (MacIntyre, 2003, p. 375). This requires (although MacIntyre does not say so himself) that both the translator (an anthropologist) and the evaluator of the translation (a native) master each other's first language. Both persons should therefore be bilingual or should understand both the source and the target language. In the case of small languages, such competent translator/evaluator pairs may be rare, even non-existent, which may

temporarily prevent the evaluations of the validity of a translation (which does not, of course, prevent the translation from being adequate).

Learning the language of an alien tradition as a second first language makes it feasible that one tradition not only disproves the views and practices of the other but the first tradition also views the second tradition as failure, according to its own standards of rationality and consistency. Recognizing such "successes" or "failures" of one's own tradition does not require a universal or tradition-independent perspective. Instead the "success" or "failure" of a tradition can be seen and identified in different ways from various tradition-bound perspectives. An example of this is the conflict between Galileo, a representative of modern natural science, and the Catholic Church. Finally, after centuries, the Church admitted that the heliocentric model of the solar system, proposed by Galileo and Copernicus is correct. One might say that, due to the Galileo affair, the Catholic Church has overcome its epistemological crisis by incorporating scientific principles and results into its world-view. Thus, the Church has increased its means of dealing with epistemological crises by adopting at least some scientific standards (MacIntyre, 2003, p. 365).

MacIntyre suggests that one tradition can defeat another in terms of its ability to solve various epistemic, ethical, or social problems. Such a defeat is possible if one tradition reaches a more advanced stage of development than another, and is able to prove this by overcoming views that have previously been held by both traditions, or by the rival tradition only. It follows that although no absolute or universal point of view exists, the perspective challenge is powerless against a tradition-bound form of inquiry that begins, but does not necessarily end, with received ideas, beliefs, and presuppositions of one's own tradition (MacIntyre, 2003, pp. 364–368). This kind of inquiry can result in new ideas, beliefs, and presuppositions that might not have arisen otherwise. Therefore, newly originated ideas and understandings can also be new for the encountering cultures. This potential ability to create new understandings is one of the most important benefits of cultural encounters. Thus, according to MacIntyre, the boundaries between different cultures can be positively crossed and, through such crossings, intercultural learning can take place.

Therefore, for MacIntyre, the representatives of different cultures can benefit from points of view that differ from their own tradition-bound perspectives. For most people this takes place largely through translations and other second-hand information. Based on translations, books, and films, among other things, people may see that other cultures cope better or worse with some issues than their own culture does. Despite being perspectival, selective, and limited, such "insight" can still be realistic in the sense that it represents the reality of other cultures from the observer's point of view.

Based on this reasoning, MacIntyre firmly rejects attempts to invoke and develop a tradition-independent and universal form of inquiry. According to him, "It is an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground […] which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions" (MacIntyre, 2003, p. 367). The history of hermeneutics and cultural studies shows, however, that a good

number of scholars—such as Karl-Otto Apel—have held the opposite view, on various grounds.

According to MacIntyre, the perspectivist "fails to recognize how integral the conception of truth is to tradition-constituted forms of enquiry" (MacIntyre, 2003, p. 367). This failure is accompanied by the supposition that it is possible to switch the point of view between different traditions. However, MacIntyre holds that the multiplicity of traditions does not mean multiple perspectives between which we could switch, but only that it provides "a multiplicity of antagonist commitments, between which only conflict […] is possible" (MacIntyre, 2003, p. 368).

In my opinion, MacIntyre's solution to the perspective challenge needs a major revision. The component analysis of the concept of a point of view presented in my earlier study (Lehtonen, 2014a) remedies the following problems in MacIntyre's argument: (1) the presupposition that one is committed to a concept of rationality that allows for the possibility of one's own tradition to err, and (2) the assumption that people are irrevocably tied to the commitments of their own traditions. The first presupposition is made more flexible and thus less problematic when one points out that the other does not necessarily need to be committed to a change of her or his point of view. For a member of a rigid religious or political tradition, for example, such a change of commitment may be an impossible option. Nonetheless, even an earnestly committed believer may be able to use her or his imagination to take some perspective-changing steps to pave the way for at least some understanding of another tradition. It is thus enough that one can imagine and understand what reality would look like if a component of one's tradition and perspective were different from what it actually is. Thus, a loosening of the first assumption is obviously possible. It does not require an extraordinary power of imagination to understand what a change in point of view would mean for someone's opinion.

Second, MacIntyre's view of the traditions' inability to complete each other is clearly overstated and, therefore, to be dismissed. Based on empirical evidence, we have strong reasons to believe, contrary to what MacIntyre says, that different traditions can complete and develop each other, at least as far as the individual components of their points of view are concerned. These components include: the observer; the observer's spatial and temporal positions; the observer's social, cultural, political, and economic positions; the observer's mental attitude; the object and its features; the environment or context in which the object appears; observational instruments; the conceptual apparatus; the method or approach to viewing; and many other things. Thus, I defend the view that although it may be impossible to change all constituent elements of a point of view in one undertaking, at least some of them are changeable step by step (Lehtonen, 2014a, pp. 99–101). This view provides the basis for the conclusion that perspective-related and perspective-dependent cultural boundaries can be broken down, and that people can go through the process of learning new cultural skills and acquiring new cultural knowledge—thus cultural boundaries are changed through a gradual change of one's own point of view.

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, we can conclude that cultural boundaries refer primarily to different social norms endorsed and enforced by various social groups called norm circles. Social norms govern different traditions, practices, customs, and ways of thinking that are considered to be characteristic of different cultures. The fact that different definitions of culture exist demonstrates the underlying facts that cultures are social constructions and their constituent elements can be chosen and determined in various ways. Cultural boundaries too are man-made but real in the sense that different cultural norms can conflict with each other, and different norm circles (or social groups) can disagree. The metaphor of boundaries is thus an appropriate tool for cultural studies, insofar as it helps to explain why cultural conflicts exist, and how cultural conflicts are related to the breaking of norms endorsed and enforced by different social groups. The metaphor of boundaries fits this task. With its help, different cultures and social groups can be structured and represented as distinct collective entities, yet with blurred and changing borders, that can side, collide, and overlap with each other. Different cultural norms do not, of course, only separate and repel, but can also attract and magnetize people. Furthermore, no culture is categorically closed to influences from other cultures. Instead, different cultural norm circles interact and can adopt traditions and practices from each other, upon which new cultural hybrids and innovations can originate. Therefore, different cultures can be compared, along with another related metaphor, to spongy soft balls and penetrable bubbles in soap suds rather than to solid billiard balls. The soap suds metaphor is suitable also because cultural boundaries are, to some extent, artificial and subject to change as different traditions can be clustered and merged together to form new cultural constellations. A peaceful crossing of cultural boundaries requires cultural exchange and a constant effort to genuinely understand other people's points of view.

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Pogranicza kulturowe

Streszczenie

Autor artykułu stara się rozwikłać kwestię przedefiniowania granic kulturowych. Zadaje w związku z tym następujące pytania: 1) Do czego nawiązują granice kulturowe i z czego się składają? 2) Na jakich warunkach i w jakim zakresie zasadna jest metafora granic kulturowych? 3) Na jakich zasadach granice kulturowe mogą być łamane lub przekraczane? Zagadnienia te są rozważane na podstawie filozoficznej analizy, która czerpie z tekstów *The Reality of Social Construction* (2012) Dave'a Elder-Vassa oraz *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (2003) Alasdaira MacIntyre'a. Metafora granic jest ważnym narzę-

dziem do studiowania kultury, ponieważ pomaga wytłumaczyć, dlaczego różne zasady panują w różnych kulturach oraz jaki związek mają konflikty kulturowe z łamaniem tychże zasad utrzymywanych i wzmacnianych przez różnorodne grupy społeczne. Metafora granic pasuje do tego zadania, ponieważ z jej pomocą różne kultury i grupy społeczne mogą być ustrukturyzowane oraz postrzegane jako odmienne byty kolektywne, jednak z zacierającymi się i zmieniającymi się granicami, mogą one także się wspierać, wchodzić w konflikt lub przenikać się ze sobą.

Słowa kluczowe: granica kulturowa, konflikt kulturowy, spotkanie kulturowe, krąg norm, uczenie się międzykulturowe