



Cultural Contracts Theory

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What is it?

Cultural contracts theory examines the negotiation of cultural identity, and explains what happens when a part of one's identity or worldview is compromised or feels altered in some way. Everyone is born into a culture having norms, beliefs, values, and traditions. These cultures represent contracts, and when these are interrupted via interaction with others having different contracts, thus different expectations, participants need to figure out a way to relationally coordinate actions. There are three types of contracts: ready-to-sign (assimilation expected), quasi-completed (occasional accommodation expected), and co-created (mutual respect expected). Contracts can be exchanged in an instant, but contract negotiation can also take years, or never be completed.

Who uses the concept?

Communication scholars and cultural trainers who want to help others to recognize the possible conflict that comes with cultural differences currently use cultural contract theory. Others who could benefit from getting to know and use this theory are cross-cultural counselors, ambassadors, members of multinational corporations, and anyone needing to create a climate conducive for inclusive excellence. In practice, of course, cultural contracts are used every day every time we interact with people within and outside of our own cultures.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Intercultural dialogue is impossible without coordination, respect, and valuation of differences. Cultural contracts theory recognizes that and tries to

help make sense of what is being negotiated so participants can understand the stressors, adaptive behaviors, and concomitant resilience necessary to cope when difference is devalued. The implications of this paradigm are clearly connected to the ethical mandate for anyone who calls herself a global citizen to consider the possibilities of improving dialogue across cultures.

What work remains?

This theory needs testing across more populations: different domestic U.S. and international cultures, among people from marginalized groups, various age groups, and communities arranged via group identification, including religious groups. The larger work that remains is the goal of social justice: when everyone's humanity is valued, when cultural difference is no longer stigmatized, and when learning about various cultures' contributions is not sequestered to one day on a university syllabus.

Resources

- Jackson, R.L. (2002). Cultural contracts theory: Toward an understanding of identity negotiation. *Communication Quarterly*, 50(3/4), 359-367.
- Lamsam, T.T. (2014). A cultural contracts perspective: Examining American Indian identity negotiations in academia. *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, 21(1), 29-35.
- Robinson-Moore, C. (2010). Cultural contracts theory. In R. L. Jackson (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of identity* (pp. 164-169). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.