Intercultural Competencies: Understanding Cultural Relativism[1]

Sofia Chianella and Pablo Lamino[2]

This third publication in the *Intercultural Competencies* series provides insights and recommendations to Extension agents for understanding and applying cultural relativism. The world today is more interconnected; thus, navigating cultures is essential for professionals in various fields, including agriculture and community development (Aririguzoh, 2022; Yuna et al., 2022). In Florida — a state characterized by cultural variability — understanding and respecting the values, norms, and communication styles of multicultural communities is essential for the success of Extension programming (Florida Farm Bureau, 2024; McCormick, 2018). As the state's population continues to expand, the Cooperative Extension System must adapt accordingly to remain relevant and wide-ranging (Cyrus et al., 2015; Wyman et al., 2012). Developing a deep understanding of the clientele's cultural backgrounds can enhance collaboration and significantly improve the design and implementation of educational programs that are both effective and culturally responsive (Leung et al., 2014).

As part of developing a deep understanding of clients' cultural norms, Extension professionals must cultivate intercultural competencies, which serve as essential tools for effective engagement (Deen et al., 2014; Diaz et al., 2023). Some examples of how to develop intercultural competencies are available in the previous publications of the *Intercultural Competencies* series. Among these competencies, understanding and applying cultural relativism is particularly important (Yuliya et al., 2022). Cultural relativism helps facilitate meaningful interactions and guide decision-making in multicultural environments by encouraging individuals to interpret cultural practices from perspectives different from their own (Jandt, 2025). To enhance cross-cultural engagement, cultural relativism needs to be incorporated by Extension agents. Cultural relativism consists of understanding different cultural practices from a viewpoint that varies from one's own culture. By incorporating this, Extension agents can create programming and environments that are more comprehensive for the clientele. In a world full of various cultural communities, understanding the aspects of intercultural competencies is extremely important as cultural relativism influences how people perceive cultures and how they interact with them (Yuliya et al., 2022).

Developing educational programs that effectively strengthen communities requires a solid understanding of intercultural competencies. This knowledge helps bridge the gap between research and practice, ultimately leading to more relevant and impactful initiatives (Diaz et al., 2022; Diaz et al., 2019). Because Extension professionals often work with multicultural groups, this publication explores the challenges, advantages, differences, and practical applications of cultural relativism.

A strong example of contextualizing cultural relativism comes from south Florida, where an Extension nutrition program tailored its messaging to better serve Latino and Haitian families (UF/IFAS Extension, 2025). Rather than using dietary guidelines for their program that were generic, Extension agents highlighted healthy recipes that members of these communities were familiar with. Through this approach, cultural values that focused on family and food were respected and taken into consideration, showing how intercultural competencies such as adaptability, empathy, and cultural relativism can be integrated to foster engagement and trust.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is the principle of understanding a culture's beliefs and practices within their own context, rather than judging them by the standards of another culture. It encourages individuals to recognize their own cultural biases and to respect that each culture operates according to its own values and traditions (Rosado, 1994; Yuliya et al., 2022). This foundational concept in anthropology was introduced by Franz Boas in 1940, who claimed that a culture should be examined within its own environmental and historical contexts (Brown, 2008).

Cultural relativism can explain why different foods are eaten at certain meals by specific cultures. More specifically, traditional breakfast in the United States differs from that in Japan, as one culture's breakfast consists of pancakes and scrambled eggs while the other's breakfast consists of soup and rice (Nickerson, 2023). In cultural relativism, the differences between these cultures are recognized rather than assigning superiority to one or another (Nickerson, 2023). Cultural relativism

understands these customary practices as part of a culture rather than as a "right" or "wrong" practice.

In Florida's agricultural landscape, cultural relativism is evident in the varying farming practices used by different cultural groups that have settled in the region. For instance, traditional farming methods employed by Cuban immigrant farmers differ markedly from those used by established Anglo-American farmers. Cuban farmers may emphasize small-scale, intensive cultivation techniques using crops such as plantains and malanga, which are staples in their diet and hold cultural significance. Conversely, some Anglo-American farmers in Florida rely on large-scale monoculture systems such as citrus or sugarcane.

Rather than judging one system as more efficient or modern than the other, Extension agents are encouraged, through the lens of cultural relativism, to understand each farming practice within its cultural and historical context. The Cuban approach reflects adaptation to limited land access and a focus on diverse, nutritious crops familiar to their heritage, while Anglo-American methods align with broader commercial agricultural markets. Extension agents who recognize these differences can tailor their recommendations to support each group's farming goals and cultural priorities, fostering more effective communication and collaboration.

This example highlights how cultural relativism respects agricultural diversity by valuing different cultural approaches to farming, rather than imposing a single "best" method. By appreciating these culturally rooted practices, agricultural programs in Florida can better serve the needs and preferences of varied farming communities.

The Importance of Cultural Relativism in Enhancing Cross-Cultural Engagement for Extension Agents

Through cultural relativism, Extension professionals are helped in fostering understanding and empathy, improving the sense of adaptability in international workplaces, and reducing biases that are present in multicultural settings.

1. Empathy

Extension agents must incorporate cultural relativism to enhance cross-cultural engagement (Diaz et al., 2022). One of the key advantages of practicing cultural relativism is that it promotes empathy — an essential quality for meaningful and respectful interactions across cultures. Rather than approaching cultural practices with preconceived notions, cultural relativism encourages agents to see those practices from the perspective of cultural insiders, fostering deeper understanding and

connection (Eriksen, 2015). Empathy, in this context, involves more than just recognizing differences: it requires Extension agents to actively listen to community members' stories, observe how cultural beliefs and practices shape daily life, and intentionally suspend judgment. By doing so, agents can respond with greater sensitivity and tailor their programming to reflect the values and experiences of the communities they serve. This empathetic approach not only supports relationship-building but also enhances the effectiveness of Extension initiatives by ensuring they are culturally relevant and respectful.

Various farming communities throughout Florida are multicultural. By actively listening to the stories and experiences of community members, Extension agents can foster empathy. Hosting crop diversification workshops and listening to different traditional farming methods of groups and their unique food customs would allow Extension agents to build trust and encourage intercultural communication in an approach fueled by empathy. Instead of just hearing about traditional farming methods, Extension agents can use these workshops to understand the cultural pride and emotional connections that are tied to these practices. Empathy can emerge in these situations when agents recognize the history behind each farming method, showing an understanding of the value that is placed on these practices by farmers through their experiences and perspectives. Rather than making assumptions about the preferences of workshop participants, agents should take the time to listen to the perspectives of individuals. After gathering this information, agents can tailor the workshop to address the best practices for the group and invite farmers to share personal examples to enhance the training. This would make the training simultaneously affirming and comprehensive.

2. Adaptability

Along with empathy, cultural relativism enhances adaptability in Extension programming by motivating professionals to respect and recognize the various cultural practices of the different communities they are working to serve. Adaptability, in this context, refers to the ability of Extension agents to modify their outreach and educational strategies based on the cultural norms, communication styles, and agricultural traditions of their target audience. For example, when working with immigrant farming communities, Extension agents may adapt their training methods by incorporating culturally preferred communication styles, such as storytelling, oral instruction, or hands-on demonstrations, and drawing on traditional agricultural knowledge that community members already value and understand.

This culturally responsive approach allows Extension professionals to design more effective, audience-centered programs that resonate with local practices and beliefs. Cultural relativism helps agents recognize that a one-size-

fits-all approach may not be effective across all groups and instead motivates them to adjust their strategies to meet each community's specific needs. This kind of adaptability not only improves community engagement and learning outcomes but also enhances teamwork and collaboration when working across varied cultural settings or international Extension teams (Aririguzoh, 2022).

Example
Rather than developing separate programs for each cultural group present, Extension agents can incorporate different learning modes all within the same training, being mindful of any cultural differences. For instance, while others may prefer a formal lecture, some participants may want to learn through activities that are group-based and experiential. By incorporating both structured presentations and hands-on demonstrations into one program, the Extension professionals can help all participants feel engaged and included. This approach respects varying learning preferences and also allows the program to be more practical and adaptable for real-world application.

3. Reducing Predispositions
In multicultural environments, Extension agents benefit from applying cultural relativism to help recognize and reduce *predispositions*, that is, preconceived attitudes, beliefs, or assumptions about certain cultural groups. These predispositions, even when unintentional, can lead to biased decision-making, miscommunication, and unequal access to program resources. Addressing them is essential because such biases may negatively impact how programs are designed and delivered and how they are received by community members.

In Extension programs, agents need to limit unintentional cultural predispositions, which can hinder the opportunities provided to those within the program. For example, in an Extension program that consists of individuals from various communities and cultural backgrounds, agents should evaluate and consider communication that incorporates the preferences of all the multicultural communities they serve.

Considerations When Applying Cultural Relativism

While cultural relativism can help Extension agents' work in multicultural communities, it also presents ethical challenges — particularly when local cultural practices conflict with universal human rights or ethical standards. Cultural relativism encourages agents to respect different ways of life without imposing external judgments. However, in doing so, agents may encounter practices that reinforce social inequalities, such as discrimination based on gender, age, or ethnicity.

Predominant cultural norms in some communities may, for instance, limit women's participation in decision-making, tolerate child labor in agricultural settings, or disregard environmental sustainability. While these practices might be culturally accepted within a specific context, they can directly conflict with internationally recognized human rights, such as the right to education, fair labor, health, and safety (Rachels, 1986). Social inequalities — unequal access to power, resources, and opportunities — can be perpetuated when such practices go unchallenged, especially when they disproportionately harm marginalized groups.

For Extension professionals, this creates a critical tension between respecting cultural practices and protecting individual and community well-being. Cultural relativism asks us not to impose our own cultural norms when engaging with others, yet Extension agents are also ethically obligated to promote safe, inclusive, and just environments. The obstacle, then, lies in discerning when to intervene and when to respect cultural differences. For example, an agent might struggle to address gender disparities in leadership roles within a community-led agriculture program, unsure of whether promoting gender equity would be seen as intrusive or as necessary advocacy.

Additionally, the concept of moral progress — the idea that societies can and should move toward more equitable standards over time — can be at odds with strict cultural relativism. If all practices are viewed as equally valid, Extension professionals may find it difficult to advocate for improvements in areas such as environmental sustainability, gender equity, or child protection. This creates a dilemma. How can Extension agents support positive social change without undermining cultural values?

Ultimately, cultural relativism should not excuse harmful practices or prevent Extension professionals from advocating for ethical standards. Instead, it should encourage thoughtful, respectful engagement with communities — listening first, understanding context, and working collaboratively to address social and environmental issues in a culturally sensitive yet responsible way. This balance is essential for building trust while ensuring that Extension programming does not perpetuate harm under the guise of cultural respect.

Example of a Cultural Dilemma in Practice
An Extension agent in south Florida is supporting a community gardening initiative designed to promote sustainable agriculture and food security among multicultural immigrant populations, including Haitian, Guatemalan, and Cuban families. As the project develops, the agent observes that several participants are preparing their garden plots using slash-and-burn methods, which

are traditional, culturally familiar, and seen as efficient and cost-effective in their countries of origin.

In the Florida context, however, this technique raises serious concerns. Slash-and-burn is considered environmentally damaging due to the risk of uncontrolled fires, air pollution, and long-term soil degradation. Additionally, the practice may violate Florida's land use and fire safety regulations, potentially putting the participants and the program at legal risk.

Now the agent faces a dilemma. Should the agent immediately intervene to stop the practice, potentially undermining trust and disrespecting the community's cultural knowledge? Should the agent delay intervention to preserve relationships, thereby risking environmental harm and potential noncompliance with local regulations?

Neither choice is without consequence. The agent must weigh respect for cultural traditions and community trust against environmental stewardship and legal obligations. Navigating this situation requires more than technical knowledge; it calls for cultural sensitivity, ethical reasoning, and a commitment to co-learning.

The most appropriate path may involve facilitated dialogue, co-creation of understanding about the environmental risks, and collaborative exploration of alternative, culturally appropriate methods of land preparation. This nuanced response reflects the ethical complexity Extension professionals face when local traditions and regulatory frameworks intersect.

Potential Solution to the Dilemma
From a cultural relativist perspective, the Extension agent should respect the immigrant families' traditional agricultural knowledge and methods rather than imposing external judgments. However, this respect must be balanced with ethical and environmental responsibilities, as these practices pose serious health risks to workers, consumers, and the environment. This situation presents a dilemma.

Respect for cultural practices: The agent acknowledges that the immigrant families' slash-and-burn agricultural practice is deeply ingrained in their traditions and shaped by previous experience.

Ethical responsibility: The agent also recognizes the duty to protect families' safety, environmental sustainability, and public health in community gardens.

Finding a Balanced Approach
1. **Culturally sensitive education:** Instead of directly condemning the immigrant families' traditional practices, the Extension agent explains the risks that align with their values and emphasizes the long-term health benefits of safer alternatives.

   a. Culturally responsive teaching (Diaz et al., 2019).

2. **Introducing locally appropriate solutions:** To introduce new knowledge, the agent could use reliable information about the topic under analysis. For instance, the agent can demonstrate how integrated sustainable practices and alternative agricultural productions can be effective, providing real-world examples of successful transitions.

3. **Fostering dialogue and participatory approaches:** This approach is effective when addressing culturally embedded practices, especially when those practices may conflict with local environmental or legal standards. Rather than imposing top-down solutions, participatory engagement allows Extension agents to co-develop solutions with communities, rather than for them. This approach enhances trust, relevance, and long-term sustainability of behavioral change. To implement this approach effectively, Extension professionals can draw on several established frameworks and tools:

   a. Engage in community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Louisiana Clinical and Translational Science Center [LACaTS], 2013) to ensure ethical solutions are codeveloped with local communities.

   b. Utilize facilitation techniques that encourage open discussion about values and potential areas of concern.

   c. Consult FAO's training manual on cultural sensitivity in Extension (Oakley & Garforth, 1985), which offers guidelines on ethically engaging with culturally different communities.

   d. Consult the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) website, which provides case studies on ethical dilemmas in Extension work (GFRAS, 2017).

4. **Engaging community leaders:** Understanding that change is more likely to be accepted when endorsed by trusted figures, the agent should collaborate with the community and influential farmers to advocate for safer practices.

5. **Ensuring regulatory compliance:** While respecting cultural perspectives, the agent emphasizes that certain regulations must be followed and frames the regulations as ways to enhance farm productivity rather than as government-imposed restrictions.

Practical Strategies for Developing Cultural Relativism

The strategies mentioned below can be implemented in Extension work and professional development, with

outcomes that lead to a more participative and responsive environment for this field of work.

1. **Self-assessment and awareness:** Through self-assessment tools such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which assesses one's intercultural competence, or reflection-based workshops, Extension agents can identify their communication styles and cultural assumptions (IDI Inventory, 2024).

2. **Intercultural training:** Engaging in training focused on intercultural sensitivity is a critical step in developing empathy and reducing stereotyping. Interactive formats, such as role-playing, discussion-based seminars, and online learning modules, allow agents to explore multicultural perspectives (Bennett & Bennett, 2001; McAuliffe & Milliken, 2009). Culturally responsive training builds on this by providing agents with the tools to understand different worldviews, values, and communication styles. These trainings often include case studies, real-world simulations, and dialogue, preparing agents to adapt their communication strategies and avoid common cultural misunderstandings (Prater & Devereaux, 2009).

As a component of intercultural training, participatory communication techniques play a vital role. Extension agents benefit from learning how to adjust their messaging based on whether they are engaging with high- or low-context cultures (Lamino & Diaz, 2024; Singh, 2020). By using open-ended questions and practicing active listening, agents can foster inclusive dialogue that respects cultural nuance and enhances mutual understanding. In addition, cultural immersion and exposure are fundamental ways cultural relativism can be developed, because participation in international collaborations such as volunteer work or study abroad programs can enhance one's understanding of other cultures, ultimately leading to a wider cultural lens.

3. **Cultural immersion and exposure:** Firsthand cultural experiences are essential for deepening understanding and challenging ethnocentric views. Extension agents can engage in international collaborations or study abroad programs, or shadow bilingual colleagues in the field to immerse themselves in cultural settings that are unfamiliar to them (Onosu, 2020).

These immersive encounters provide meaningful, real-world interactions that broaden agents' perspectives and develop their capacity to navigate cultural complexity. Through sustained exposure, agents become better equipped to build relationships based on trust and cultural humility. Table 1 provides an analysis of cultural relativism.

Conclusion

Effective cross-cultural engagement requires a deep understanding of cultural relativism. While this concept fosters adaptability and empathy (Rosado, 1994), professionals must go beyond mere acknowledgment by developing intercultural competencies through cultural immersion, self-awareness, and inclusive communication. These skills are essential for navigating culturally different professional and social environments with sensitivity and ethical responsibility.

As societies become increasingly globalized, intercultural awareness and competency must be integrated into professional settings. Individuals must learn to communicate effectively across different cultural styles, adapt to varied perspectives, and challenge ethnocentric biases that may hinder meaningful collaboration.

This publication highlights the critical role of cultural relativism in intercultural competency while addressing its ethical complexities. By understanding these dynamics, professionals can foster more inclusive, respectful, and effective cross-cultural interactions.

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Table 1. Comparison of cultural practices with cultural relativism insights.

Community	Food Traditions	Communication Style	Cultural Relativism Insight
United States	Individual meals, fast food culture, and diverse cuisines.	Low-context, direct communication.	Appreciating individualism and efficiency in food and communication as cultural values.
Japan	Emphasis on presentation, seasonal ingredients, communal meals.	High-context, indirect communication.	Understanding the importance of harmony, respect, and nonverbal cues in social interactions.
India	Spices, religious dietary restrictions, communal eating.	Context-sensitive, varies by region.	Recognizing the role of religion and tradition in shaping dietary and communication norms.
Mexico	Family-style meals, traditional dishes, strong food heritage.	Expressive, warm, and indirect.	Valuing familial bonds and expressive communication as integral to cultural identity.