Article

Talking about Difference: Cross-Cultural Comparison and Prejudice in Anthropology and Beyond

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Abstract: In recent years, the question of "difference" has become a central feature of public debate and social concern, especially in the context of transnational migration. The underlying question that we attempt to answer in this article is: how can we talk about difference without reinforcing prejudice? Starting from the observation that perceptions and representations of difference have an impact on the way that individuals and groups interact with each other in increasingly diverse urban environments, we argue that a systemic approach to the analysis of intercultural situations gives us a unique window into emerging discourses and evolving norms about difference. After a brief historical overview of debates surrounding cross-cultural comparison in anthropology, we consider how various fields outside of anthropology have drawn inspiration from anthropology in order to gain a deeper understanding of intercultural dynamics in various professional settings. This article also examines several anthropological concepts that have been used as tools to theorize cross-cultural comparison, and how participants in a new research methodology use the systemic notion of "cultural variables" to resolve the basic paradox underlying pluralist philosophy and practice.

Keywords: intercultural communication; indirect ethnography; comparison; difference; prejudice; systems theory; anthropology; Montréal; Québec

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1. Introduction

While there has probably never been a period of history with more public discourse about diversity, contemporary Western societies are also plagued with deep-seated fears about difference. The polarization of social and traditional media has reactivated culture wars from decades past, and the question of diversity is at the heart of these debates. Given the hostile nature of these debates and the extent to which they are accompanied by the emergence of new forms of extremism, there is clearly cause for concern. It seems safe to say that in the wake of the events that led to the #MeToo movement in 2017 and the tragic death of George Floyd in 2020, the public conversation about diversity has begun to shift, placing much greater emphasis on gender and race-based discrimination, especially but not exclusively, in the United States. In recent years, the well-known version of diversity as folklore has given way to a diversity that is increasingly associated with the concepts of equity and social justice, a change that has been welcomed by human rights activists and critically minded anthropologists, but that has also fueled anger and consternation on the part of traditional social conservatives.

If it is true that we live in a period of unprecedented human mobility [1], then it is not difficult to see why migrant and refugee communities have been the object of so much concern. In many ways, these communities are on the front lines of diversity politics. The burgeoning literature on "super-diversity"—much of which was inspired by Steven Vertovec's writing on the subject [2]—has consistently made the point that the study of diversity cannot be reduced to cultural differences, and yet there seems to be surprisingly

little agreement about how to talk about difference in the context of global migration, apart from observing that certain categories of people are victims of systemic discrimination and within those categories certain people experience further stigmatization because they carry multiple markers of minority identity [3,4]. Why does difference matter? Is it possible to talk about difference without further stigmatizing those who are already victims of prejudice? How can we talk about difference without doing the work of comparison?

Since the beginning of anthropology as a discipline, anthropologists have had heated debates over the relevance of cross-cultural comparison: Is it possible to make comparisons across or between humans? What exactly are we setting out to compare and to what end? How can we talk about the differences between groups without falling into the trap of essentialism? "Never since the 1950s", writes Candea, "has the discipline seen such an efflorescence of discussions and proposals for comparison" [5] (p. 2), and yet the idea of comparison as an "impossible method" (ibid) is still very common among anthropologists. As we will discuss in this article, one of the central problems underlying cross-cultural comparison is the nagging discomfort with the notion of culture, a phenomenon which has certainly been a matter of increasing concern in recent years, but which is not at all new in anthropology [6]. Today, in an era where public discourse about diversity is more and more polarized, and where public debates about diversity increasingly call attention to the problematic and constructed nature of cultural identity, the idea of cross-cultural comparison seems not only antiquated but actually presents itself as an obstacle in settings where anthropologists must decide how, if at all, to talk about difference. The context we describe in this article—a series of interactive workshops that use ethnographic description to understand intercultural dynamics in cities—will attempt to show that cross-cultural comparison is not simply a possibility, or even a risk, but in some situations, it is actually a necessity.

As part of a project to study intercultural dynamics in Montreal, the Laboratoire de recherche en relations interculturelles (LABRRI) developed the "Intercultural Situations Workshop" (ISW). These workshops propose a series of concepts and tools that enable participants to identify, describe, and analyze situations in settings characterized by a high degree of ethnic and racial diversity. Following the discovery of what we refer to as "indirect ethnography", the ISW methodology was tested with local social actors, not only professionals and researchers but also through contact with everyday residents and citizens. This methodology has been the subject of several scientific articles on the dynamics of cohabitation in multi-ethnic settings [7]. Indirect ethnography enables us to identify data that is both more targeted and broader than traditional ethnographic fieldwork, because participants are asked to describe situations experienced in everyday life or at work, and because they are involved in a large number of territories as well as sectors of activity and intervention.

The implementation of the intercultural situation workshops in various settings across the city has made us aware that naming differences (especially differences related to race and ethnicity) can easily become a source of tension during workshops and between workshop participants. However, this tension is already present in many organizational settings, especially where employees are responsible for promoting diversity and inclusion [8]. Talking about cultural differences or naming particular communities is associated with the fear of saying things that might be interpreted as discriminatory or racist. Certain participants resist the idea of naming cultural differences because they believe that doing so will only reinforce negative stereotypes, thereby reinforcing or reifying dominant norms and social hierarchies. Others make the claim that they simply do not see differences since "all human beings are created equal". Discussions regarding racial differences are even more difficult for participants, a subject that we will discuss in the final section of this article.

As the largest French-speaking city in the Americas and the metropolis of the predominantly French-speaking province of Quebec, Montreal is a particularly interesting place to conduct ethnographic research on intercultural dynamics in cities and our research is in many ways influenced by the local history of interculturalism. There is a longstanding

tradition of research, public policy, and community-based action on intercultural dynamics in Québec [9–12]. Obviously, however, the problem of naming differences is not specific to the context of Montreal or the particular methodology that we developed to collect and analyze data about intercultural dynamics in cities. On the contrary, concerns about culture and the naming of group-based differences are at the heart of postcolonial critiques about how the West creates a particular position for itself as the central protagonist in the story of modernity, thereby relegating non-Western societies to the status of anterior and inferior [13]. It may even be argued that the question of cultural diversity constitutes a structural paradox at the heart of pluralist thought in contemporary Western societies [12], primarily since modern nation-states use ethnicity as a means of claiming legitimacy over specific territories while simultaneously promoting the democratic principles of diversity and equality. The underlying question raised by this research is deceivingly simple: how can we talk about difference(s) without reinforcing prejudice? Workshop participants in our research often expressed a sense of relief after hearing this question, since the underlying premise of the question recognizes that individuals and organizations are often faced with an impossible set of choices if they want to recognize the needs of specific groups without unwittingly contributing to further stigmatization. Indeed, in some situations, we were faced with the possibility that this question is impossible to answer.

In his influential work on systemic theory and social organization, Gregory Bateson makes the observation that any theory of communication must begin with the articulation of difference [14]. Echoing Bateson's interest in communication, Fredrik Barth's early work on frontiers shows how the foundation of human social organization is structured around relations of difference, especially in settings where group-based difference is articulated through the construction of ethnic borders [15]. The overlapping of multiple identities in humans means that we cannot necessarily predict exactly which difference or differences are considered relevant in specific communicational settings: in Bateson's terms, what is the difference that makes (a) difference? From this point of view, and if we agree that difference is a structural element of all human communication, then it would certainly seem counterproductive to ignore difference in the description and analysis of intercultural situations, but which differences matter and what is the role of "culture" in this debate? White (2017) has written about how the principle of pluralism in Western liberal democracies represents a paradox and how the different ways of talking about difference can put researchers and practitioners in what Bateson referred to famously as a "double bind", or a situation in which actors must respond simultaneously to two or more imperatives that are mutually exclusive [12]. In this case, naming difference can further stigmatize immigrants and minorities who are already faced with systemic forms of discrimination, but not naming difference makes it impossible to recognize the contributions and the needs of specific communities, especially those that are increasingly vulnerable precisely because they carry the markers of difference in everyday forms of social interaction.

Following systemic principles, we start from the assumption that perceptions and representations of difference—not only cultural but all forms of difference (ethnicity, race, gender, social class, language, religion, etc.)—have an impact on the way that individuals and groups interact with each other in increasingly diverse urban environments. Using concrete examples from workshops and focusing on the way that workshop participants struggle with the question of how—or indeed if—to name difference, we argue that a systemic approach to the analysis of intercultural situations gives us a unique window into emerging discourses and evolving norms about difference, especially in the context of super-diversity [2]. After identifying and describing specific situations that they either experienced or observed, participants are asked to apply some basic principles of systemic theory by first identifying the cultural variables that are at play in the situations they described. Then, participants and facilitators work together to explore how different codes or frames of reference may have led to a breakdown in communication between the various actors involved in the situation. Invariably, the comparison of these codes makes it possible for participants to be more aware of their own frames of reference. The process described

here is very similar to other forms of systemic analysis, where the comparison of two objects (presumed to be both similar and different) requires the observer to carry out a particular type of meta-analysis, jogging back and forth between two levels of meaning, in this case that which is common to all humans and that which is specific to a particular group [16].

After a brief overview of debates surrounding cross-cultural comparison in mainstream anthropology over the last century, we will consider how various fields outside of anthropology (particularly management and to a lesser degree psychology) have drawn inspiration from anthropology in order to gain a deeper understanding of intercultural dynamics in various settings. The following section will give some examples of how workshop participants used the notion of "cultural variables" in their attempts to resolve the basic paradox underlying the application of pluralist principles, effectively mobilizing systemic theory to talk about similarity and difference in complex communicative settings. In the final section, we will discuss how searching for the right words can help participants go beyond the double binds that characterize intercultural communication in increasingly diverse urban settings.

2. Comparison in Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Studies

Cross-cultural comparison has been a feature of anthropology since the beginning of the discipline, but the value of such an undertaking has not always been the object of consensus among anthropologists. Discomfort with cross-cultural comparison in anthropology has to do with the fact that certain branches of thinking in the early years of the discipline were closely aligned with the scientific racism that set out to use evolutionary theory as a means of justifying the alleged superiority of whites; comparison—in this case between "races"—was a central feature of this ideologically driven research agenda. Indeed, the history of "modern anthropology" often begins with critiques of 19th-century scientific racism, not only by Franz Boas in the United States but also by Bronislaw Malinowski in the United Kingdom [5].

Franz Boas, often presented as the "father" of American anthropology, was very critical of the comparative method associated with evolutionism, primarily because he believed that each society evolved in relation to specific contexts and environments. He refuted the ideas of a universal development of societies and of universal laws to which the human mind would obey [17] (p. 904) [16] (p. 56). He was an ardent empiricist and inductivist interested in culture-specific knowledge with an emphasis on historical and cultural context [18]. Boas's criticism of evolutionist ideology, his cultural relativism, as well as his methodological inclinations, may give the impression that cross-cultural comparison is contradictory or even irreconcilable with his vision of culture [19]. Lewis (1955), however, claimed that Boas actually wanted to improve it and specifically referred to his historical method as an "improved comparative method" [20] (p. 259). He argued that comparison required a complex analysis of the comparability of similar phenomena, because these similar cultural traits might have been the result of different causes [17] (p. 904). The role of his historical method was to discover the processes by which certain social phenomena emerge or evolve over time, what Boas referred to as diffusionism. If anthropology wishes to establish laws governing the development of cultures, he wrote, it must compare not the outcome of these developments, but their processes, paying special attention to practices on a small scale [17] (pp. 907–908).

Following Boas's criticism, but also in the wake of new approaches to fieldwork, cross-cultural comparison became increasingly unpopular amongst anthropologists. Berry writes that functionalism reinforced this feeling [21] (p. 120), most notably in the work of British social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. Though this is something of a simplification [22], Malinowski is generally credited with developing the methodology of long-term intensive ethnographic fieldwork, disrupting the division between "armchair anthropologists" and those who conducted their own fieldwork [23] (pp. 15–19). Malinowski emphasized the need to understand social and cultural dynamics from the point of view of insiders, at a time when many mainstream theorists were more interested in discovering general principles for

understanding human social organization more generally [23] (pp. 15–19). Functionalist anthropology started with the premise that all cultures are fundamentally unique in their development. However, if all societies are unique and can only be understood in their own terms, how can we compare and generalize? [23] (pp. 15–19). Some authors began to refer to this question as the "Malinovskian dilemma". One of Malinowski's answers to this dilemma can be found in the functionalist approach itself. If all institutions meet basic human needs, then anthropology can compare institutions as responses to those needs. That being said, Malinowski's work, as well as the vast majority of British anthropologists of that time, rarely conducted comparative analysis or research and did not develop elaborate or systematic methodologies for cross-cultural comparison, at least not in any strict sense of the term. Generalization from a single field of research was not only difficult, but in many cases, it was frowned upon, and Malinowski's students are known to emphasize exceptions rather than categories or logical types [23] (pp. 15–19).

Radcliffe-Brown also offered his answer to the question. In response to Malinowski and Boas's work, he claimed that comparison is in fact possible and even constitutes the basis for the anthropological project as a whole. He saw anthropology as including both the historical method (as outlined by Boas) and the comparative method. Without comparison, he argued, anthropology would simply become historiography and ethnography [24]. The comparative method is "one by which we pass from the particular to the general, from the general to the more general, with the end in view that we may in this way arrive at the universal, at characteristics which can be found in different forms in all human societies" [24] (p. 22). In this vein, only the comparative method can offer general propositions, while the historical method provides specific propositions [24]. Thereupon, he made a distinction between ethnology, as "the historical study of primitive societies" and social anthropology, which would be a branch of comparative sociology [24] (p. 22).

Similarly, according to French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the "ultimate goal" of anthropology was to achieve certain universal forms of thought and morality, while its primary goal was "to analyse and interpret differences" [24]. Lévi-Strauss was strongly influenced by structural linguistics. He borrowed from Roman Jakobson the theory that the underlying structure of a language comes from markers of difference [25]. According to Lévi-Strauss, this allows us to go past the opposition between Durkheim's positivism and Boas's historical particularism. This is to say that "universal constants"—which Durkheim advocated for—do not come from similarities or resemblances between cultures, but rather from "the hidden invariance of the relationships that exist between variables" [25] (p. 1, our translation). By analyzing the systems that come together to constitute a whole society, it would be possible to highlight invariants: the laws, present across different forms of social organization. Following this logic, anthropology would be the discipline that studies these invariants. By extension, the structuralist project would then be to start from observations of particular facts in order to deduce general properties and to put together a repertoire, or a "general inventory of societies", in which "each facet appears as a possible combination of these general and elementary traits" [26] (p. 2, our translation).

As an example, the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), an inter-university non-profit founded in 1949 and based at Yale University, crystallized some of the most important debates in anthropology around cross-cultural comparison. In the 1930s, the Yale Institute of Human Relations, a think tank consisting of social and behavioral scientists, started to collect and classify cultural materials from various primary and secondary sources available at the time [27]. Research at Yale was rooted in a "long history of attempts to make available to scientists and scholars basic information on the peoples of the world, their environs, their behavior and social life, and their culture" [28] (pp. 1–2). The idea was both to improve access to ethnographic data, but also to develop a rigorous methodology for undertaking cross-cultural comparison. In the HRAF 2000 report, it is stated that the mission of the databases was "to encourage and facilitate worldwide comparative studies of human behaviour, society, and culture" [29] (p. 3). HRAF provides a database called "Explaining Human Culture" which features more than 800 cross-cultural studies. Within this database,

it is possible to search through the documents, or through thousands of "variables" and "hypotheses". For each document, one or more hypotheses are identified and marked as "supported" or "not supported" by the cross-cultural study. Perhaps not surprisingly, HRAF has been criticized by anthropologists of various theoretical leanings. This criticism "has been inseparable from criticism of the comparative method" [30] (p. 476).

This being said, there has also been important work on cross-cultural comparison outside of anthropology, especially in the historically eclectic field of cross-cultural studies. Debates in this field have been less concerned with theoretical or philosophical issues about comparison and more focused on conceptual frameworks or tools that can be used for the analysis of particular social dynamics. In this field, which includes a variety of disciplines such as communication, psychology, and management, there is a general assumption that certain variables or "cultural dimensions"—to use the expression of Edward T. Hall—exist in all human societies and that these variables can be compared across cultures. Often recognized as the "father" of cross-cultural studies, Hall was an anthropologist who played a key role in the development of intercultural training and in the emergence of intercultural communication as a field of study [30]. After earning his PhD and teaching for a few years, he became the director of the Point V training program at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), where he developed, from 1950 to 1955, training programs for American technicians and managers leaving to work abroad [31]. His work at the FSI was crucial in the development of his thinking on intercultural communication. He is best known in anthropology for his studies in proxemics, the cultural relation to space, but he also identified other dimensions of culture, such as the relation to time, and the division between high and low context in communication [32].

Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede took inspiration from Hall in his research on cross-cultural communication and organizational analysis. He is most well-known for his comparative model based on Hall's cultural dimensions. Hofstede initially identified four dimensions, but he later revised his model to encompass six dimensions: power, distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance index, long-term vs. short-term normative orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint [33]. Hofstede discusses what we have referred to earlier as the "Malinovskian dilemma" in the following terms:

> *Throughout the history of the study of culture there has been a dispute between those stressing the unique aspects and those stressing the comparable aspects. The first holds that "you cannot compare apples and oranges," whereas the second argues that apples and oranges are both fruits that can be compared on a multitude of aspects, such as price, weight, color, nutritive value, and durability. The selection of these aspects obviously requires an a priori theory about what is important in fruits [34] (p. 24).*

Hofstede argued that cross-cultural comparison requires clearly defined comparative criteria, the proper unit of comparison, and the functional equivalence of these units [35] (p. 17). In Culture's Consequences, Hofstede presents the results of a large research project on national differences, based on questionnaires administered to IBM employees in more than 50 countries in the 1960s and 1970s [34]. Hofstede's model of national culture might be one of the most notable examples of the comparative tradition in cross-cultural studies, as well as representing its statistical turn, especially given its emphasis on large quantitative data sets. Following in the footsteps of Hofstede, Erin Meyer, professor of management practice, has identified eight scales related to key areas in management (communicating, evaluating, persuading, leading, deciding, trusting, disagreeing, and scheduling). Comparison between countries based on these scales, according to Meyer, would help to grasp the influence of culture on international collaborations and help managers work more efficiently in these contexts [36]. Her work shows the legacy, in international management, of Hofstede's tradition of cross-cultural comparison, and how distant it now is from Hall's anthropological work. This particular strand of cultural analysis, which identifies a limited number of cultural variables and is focused primarily on the fixed markers of national identity, is often a source of discomfort for anthropologists.

Recent research in the field of migration studies has approached the question of difference by going beyond the search for specific traits or characteristics based on cultural or national group-based identity. One way of doing this is to examine how discourse about difference actually structures human social relations in any given setting. As Steven Vertovec claims, studying "the social organization of difference [. . .] leads to better understanding of how social changes related to difference take place and generate various outcomes" [37]. Starting from Appadurai's conception of diversity as a lens to observe social processes, Vertovec places "diversity" prominently in the realm of public discourse and uses "difference" as a way to understand the socially constructed nature of representations, structures, and interactions. From this point of view, interactions are conditioned by the interpretation groups make from others, and it is important to address these representations because they can reinforce and reproduce the representations of others. However, it is not always simple to ask how the representations of other groups have become a kind of truth and how these representations can unwittingly reinforce stigmatization.

Looking back at the work of these different theorists and schools of thought has shown that the possibility of cross-cultural comparison has long been a source of debate. The analysis we propose in this article does not set out to demonstrate the value of comparison as a fundamental feature of scientific research or to make a case as it were for the value of "universals". We are also not trying to attribute a list of cultural characteristics to specific cultural groups, as has often been the case in various strands of cross-cultural research (for a recent critique of this approach, see [38]). Rather, beginning from the ethnographic descriptions of intercultural situations, we have set out to work with intellectually curious non-academics in the documentation and analysis of the social organization of difference. This work, which is at the border of fundamental and applied research, starts from a very practical concern, rooted in everyday communication and interactions. The nature of this process, which as we will show relies heavily on co-interpretation [39], requires us to talk about differences and to engage with cross-cultural comparison. In this context, it would be counter-productive to spend time debating about whether comparison is desirable or possible. We do, however, need to tackle the important question of how to talk about difference when the question of comparison invites itself into the debate.

3. The Difficulty of Talking about Difference

Gregory Bateson first asked the question about difference in human social organization, in many ways laying the groundwork for what would later become known as systems theory [40]. Bateson's analysis called attention to at least two facets of communication. First, he was attempting to show that human communication operates on the premise that objects have their meaning not because of their intrinsic nature or material characteristics, but rather because the way that humans name objects and ideas is at some level arbitrary. Bateson often illustrated this idea with a drawing of an object that could be seen as either a boot or a trapezoid, depending on the communicative context. According to Bateson, this arbitrary association between things and words can be seen as the glue or cement that makes communication possible, since human beings have shared codes with regard to the pathways of contingency that structure language: "In fact, what we mean by information—the elementary unit of information—is a difference which makes a difference, and it is able to make a difference because the neural pathways along which it travels [. . .] are ready to be triggered" [14] (p. 453).

The second element, no less important, was Bateson's insistence on the importance of context. Without context, Bateson argued, there is no meaning, and this is why communication in intercultural settings is so complex, since codes are not shared. Though Bateson was not focused on the question of intercultural communication per se, his work on communication is central to our understanding of how humans communicate with each other in the context of super-diversity. One example of how context matters to the analysis of intercultural communication is the notion of situational identity. All individuals have multiple identities, and it is not always possible to predict or to control which aspect of

individual identity will be considered relevant in any given context. From the point of view of systems theory, the analysis of communicative events in highly diverse urban settings requires us to understand how actors decide which aspects of individuals' identities are relevant to the particular situation being analyzed and how these decisions impact the outcomes of interactions. This observation about the importance of multiple, layered identities is central to recent research in the field of intersectionality. Indeed, scholars of intercultural communication have a great deal to learn from research on intersectionality, most notably the way that the layering of identities can exacerbate various forms of systemic discrimination and structural inequality.

Through his discussion of "logical types" and "patterns" [40], Bateson might have argued that the idea of talking about variation within groups (for example how some individuals do not feel at home with the habits or norms of their group) is a moot point if the purpose of cross-cultural comparison is to understand what leads to breakdowns in communication. When we compare characteristics at the group level (for example between Protestants and Catholics, or between Europeans and North Americans) we necessarily lose sight of diversity and complexity among members of the same group [41]; as anthropologists, especially given our conviction that the documentation of cultural complexity is an antidote to ethnocentrism [42], this proposition can be difficult to understand and to accept. The analysis of inter-group dynamics requires us to look at patterns that can be said to be representative of each group on the whole as well as patterns that may occur in interactions between groups. In this sense, the analysis of cultural variability is more concerned with patterns than exceptions (what Bateson referred to as probabilities) and more concerned with the analysis of practices at the group level than at the level of individuals. This focus on analysis at the level of group-based identities seems counter-intuitive given recent trends in the social sciences that focus on the individual level (life history, intersectionality, and individual agency), but as we will try to demonstrate, perceptions of difference in multi-ethnic urban settings tend to play out primarily at the level of dynamics between groups. Below we will discuss how the concept of "cultural variables" was mobilized during the intercultural situations workshops and how it affected participants' ability to maintain a critical distance with regard to various forms of group-based prejudice.

3.1. Cultural Variables and Prejudice

In the context of the workshops, we observed that cultural variables can be difficult to identify at first, but after being presented with a specific intercultural situation by a friend or colleague, most participants are able to identify one or more variables that apply to the situation. In some cases, participants will discuss among themselves to find the best way to name the variable and in the case of multiple variables (see the examples below) there will often be discussion to better discern between the different variables identified, including the question of how to prioritize them. The process of centering, which is "the conscious consideration of our own traditions and frames of reference" [7], makes it possible to better understand what aspect of a participant's identity is activated by the situation they are describing. This process can take some time and we noticed that participants from the majority group (in this case white francophone Canadians) can have a hard time naming cultural variables because they do not automatically think about themselves as being part of cultural diversity in their city or society [43]. We also noticed that certain individuals and groups (for example those from the white majority) find it difficult to talk about race or racial difference, especially when workshop participants included people from different ethnic or racial backgrounds.

After having identified and agreed upon a short list of relevant cultural variables, we ask participants to make observations about the identity of the person or persons involved in the intercultural situations they have set out to describe. Participants are encouraged to name the different markers of identity that may or may not have played a significant role in the situation (ethnicity, religion, race, gender, age, etc.) and to reflect upon how these markers may have influenced their perception or the perception of the people involved in

the situation. Many participants feel discomfort during this part of the workshop, either because they do not know how to talk about the markers of identity or because they are concerned about stigmatizing individuals based on ethnic or racial criteria. In general, we have been able to reduce this discomfort by explaining that the aim of the exercise is not to discriminate or to put people in boxes, but to understand what kind of prejudices are at stake and what markers of identity come into play in the situation being described; in other words, what difference or differences make a difference in any given situation?

With this information, participants are generally able to overcome their concerns about reinforcing prejudice, and in most cases other participants contribute to the discussion in order to arrive at a consensus about what identity markers are important and why, if at all, group-based identity is important to the analysis of intercultural encounters. Going through a list of possible identity markers even makes participants realize that some aspects of their identity that they did not think of were relevant, for example age or gender. In addition, naming differences helps participants go past the more obvious ones (race, ethnicity) and thus not only do they develop a more complex sense of diversity, but also this might lead them to deconstruct prejudices. It is important to mention that the goal of this exercise is not to catalog traits that correspond with particular ethnic or national identities, but to see how different types of identity markers are brought to bear in particular contexts or settings. The identity markers that are named become relevant in the context of a particular situation but fall to the side when the situation changes.

3.2. Intercultural Situations and the Dilemma of Difference

The self-reflexive group-based activity described above is an important part of what we have referred to as "indirect ethnography": a new methodology for eliciting and analyzing ethnographic data about intercultural situations in rapidly diversifying urban settings [7]. This methodology has proved to be effective in settings where participants are motivated to describe and analyze the situations they have experienced in their everyday lives as citizens or in the context of their professional activities. As it has not been tested in settings where participants are anti-immigration or opposed to pluralist principles, it cannot not be seen as a methodology that is suitable in all contexts. Nonetheless, this approach makes it possible to document a wide variety of intercultural situations, identify the cultural variables that underlie these situations, and provide preliminary observations about the dynamics of prejudice that result from what Gumperz classically referred to as "inter-ethnic miscommunication" [44]. Indirect ethnography is one way to capture the dynamics of social interactions in increasingly diverse urban settings, but it also enables participants to develop specific skills with regard to intercultural communication, for example the ability to describe intercultural situations, the ability to identify cultural variables, and the capacity to reflect on the specificity of one's own group. Below we discuss two examples of situations that were shared during the first phase of our research on cohabitation and intercultural dynamics in Montreal.

3.2.1. Situation 1: Movie Night in the Park

> *As part of the activities for Montreal's 375th anniversary, a cultural promoter organizes a film screening in an ethnically diverse neighborhood in Montreal. The film is scheduled for 9 p.m. and since it will be projected in public, it is preceded by a warning that the film contains scenes of nudity and violence. After the film begins, the crowd becomes agitated, especially during a scene featuring sexual relations between a French settler and an indigenous woman. Certain parents express their disapproval and leave the park. A disgruntled father, who the promoter assumes is North African, approaches him and strongly criticizes the decision to show a film of this type in the presence of children. Soon after, he is joined in agreement by two other fathers, whom the organizer assumes are from the same community. The promoter does not know how to react since he thinks he has taken all the necessary precautions for this kind of activity in public.*

In describing this situation, the cultural promoter (of French-Canadian descent) was annoyed remembering how the situation made him feel. According to him, he had taken all of the necessary precautions related to the presence of a scene involving nudity: the film was projected late in the evening, and he made an announcement at the beginning of the projection. These precautions should have been enough to avoid any problems. Moreover, the fact that it was a film on the history of encounters between First Nations communities and various waves of foreigners, especially during the celebrations of Montreal's "foundation", should have been more important than the public display of nudity. He recalled that his initial reaction to the disgruntled fathers was very negative. Explaining why the situation bothered him, he claimed that a good parent should make sure that their children go to bed at a "reasonable time". He also felt that in the interest of their integration (he assumed the parents were immigrants), parents should recognize that nudity is not as taboo in Québec as it is in other parts of the world. They also should have recognized that the projection of the film was intended to facilitate dialogue about the history of relations between colonizers, settlers, and the various indigenous communities that continue to share the unceded indigenous territory today known as Québec.

In discussing his reaction with the other participants, he explained that with some hindsight he was able to better understand the point of view of the disgruntled fathers. He also suggested that their reaction could have been related to differences in cultural codes. At this moment, the discussion became more intense, as certain participants seemed to agree with his analysis and others questioned why it was necessary to make a connection between the reaction of the fathers and cultural differences. As mentioned before, caution was almost always present at this point of the workshop. Participants are wary of the possible pitfalls of starting to bring in cultural differences. In reaction to what the participant recalling the situation had said about "being a good parent", another participant asked: "How do we know what it means to be a good father in his country of origin?" This question triggered a less polarized but very thoughtful discussion about the cultural variable that had been identified by the group: being a good parent. Participants observed that the cultural promoter and the disgruntled parents most likely did not have the same idea about what it means to be a good parent and that ideas about being a good parent, while they can also differ among people in the same community, probably differ more significantly between communities.

By acknowledging that the cultural promoter and the disgruntled parents might have had different conceptions about "being a good parent", it was possible to go beyond the idea that one group, or the other, were bad parents. Rather, the participants were able to temporarily suspend their beliefs in order to examine different visions of parenthood and hypothesize that they might have been divergent, at least with regard to something as seemingly simple as bedtimes. In addition to the cultural variable of "being a good parent", participants also observed a number of other cultural variables, for example nudity, nudity in public, sexuality in public, inter-racial relations, and perhaps the most interesting, expression of disagreement. The cultural promoter was frustrated with the reaction of the disgruntled fathers, not only because they decided to keep their children up late, or because they were shocked by something that is not as taboo in Québec, but also because they employed what he considered to be an aggressive tone in expressing their disapproval (an element which in itself varies greatly from one society to another). The cultural promoter, who was concerned that his decision to show this film might have a negative impact on his employer or on social cohesion in the neighborhood more generally, explained that this event was very troubling for him. In discussion with the other participants, he conceded that "it was just a movie night in the park", but the situation had somehow spun out of control and initially he did not see how his own cultural values influenced his perceptions. In the context of the workshop, he was able to identify the cultural variables that seemed to have been at play, and with the help of others he was able to put his finger on how his own values and judgments affected his analysis of the situation.

3.2.2. Situation 2: Headgear in the Workplace

> *An executive under my responsibility, a white man of Anglo-Saxon origins, informed me that an employee, a white francophone woman, was advised not to wear a baseball cap at her workstation. This employee then reacted by questioning why an Afro-descendant employee with Caribbean origins was allowed to wear a headscarf (headtie or headwrap, not religious). Our reaction was that you can't compare a headtie and a baseball cap. It was decided that the employee could wear her scarf, and that a baseball cap is not an appropriate accessory to meet customers. The employee was met and an explanation was provided that these outfits do not have the same value in a customer service context (casual vs. elegance).*

The core of this situation comes from what seems to be interpreted by the white woman as a form of discrimination since she was told that she could not wear a cap during business hours, while her colleague was allowed to wear a headscarf. The participants observed that one part of the problem was related to different visions of what is considered appropriate attire in the workplace. However, some participants also raised the idea that norms regarding casual attire may vary from one society to another. The participants in the workshop agreed that a baseball cap was not the same as a headscarf, but the emphasis placed on the cultural dimension led to a certain discomfort for certain participants. Again, this question was raised: should we be talking about cultural differences? Is that a productive lens of analysis? Then, the group started to ask if there might have been a racist or discriminatory element to the situation: "Is this woman being targeted because she is black?" Given that the situation was reported by a third party (a supervisor within the organization), this is hard to know, but the supervisors who were responsible for mediating this situation were conscious of this possibility.

The participants tried to see this situation from different sides. For the organization, the interdiction of wearing a cap was primarily a matter of providing quality customer service and reflecting their professionalism. For the employee wearing a baseball cap, however, the problem was situated in the relationship between attire and equity, especially since she expressed her concern that she was being treated unfairly. This situation, which was not initially perceived as intercultural by workshop participants "became" intercultural, since the identification of cultural variables shed light on the role that cultural codes about attire played in the situation. What this analysis shows is that the process of analyzing intercultural situations inevitably leads to some form of cross-cultural comparison. In this case, the comparison between two different perceptions of the same administrative norm shows how cultural differences can lead to various moral and procedural outcomes; some of these outcomes may lead to a positive social response, while others may lead to discrimination and exclusion.

The work of cultural variables makes it possible for participants to better understand how everyday situations and perceptions can contribute to larger systemic factors that are brought to bear on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, in this case the extent to which members of the majority group make claims about differential treatment and the perception of "reverse discrimination". Working on cultural variables also enables participants to determine whether or not inter-ethnic dynamics are at play in the situation being described, or if some other form of identity-based marker is the root of the problem (e.g., gender, race, class, etc.). In the two cases considered above, it seems safe to say that talking about differences did not lead to more discrimination. On the contrary, through the process of comparison, explicitation, and centering, participants were able to see how, under certain circumstances, naming differences can reduce the effects of stigmatization.

4. Searching for the Right Words

Talking about differences between majority groups and minority groups can sometimes feel like walking on eggshells. In contexts such as Québec, people from the majority group tend to define diversity as something that is outside of themselves, a social category that applies principally to immigrants and refugees. In many circumstances, placing

emphasis on differences can be perceived as an obstacle to social cohesion or what in the French-speaking world is often referred to as “vivre-ensemble” [11], especially for those who believe in the universal humanist ideals of French-style republicanism. In the context of our workshops, and sometimes in the safety of exchanges behind closed doors, people from the French-speaking majority ask for more detailed information and training about specific ethnic groups in order to have more sensitive or more effective interactions. While these requests may be misguided, they are clearly not made with the intent to discriminate or stigmatize.

The desire for a quick fix (in French “recette facile” or “solution rapide”) in response to intercultural situations is a common reaction in many settings and is by no means unique to Québec. Although specialists in cross-cultural communication often discourage the use of a “quick fix” approach, the desire to identify specific communities with particular traits or characteristics may be seen as a common reflex in human communication more generally. Obviously, possessing information about specific communities or particular cultural characteristics is not enough to comprehend the complexity of intercultural communication, not only because this complex field of meanings necessarily involves codes from multiple perspectives within each community, but also because individuals are shot through with multiple, situated identities (some of which are in conflict with each other) and these identities can evolve over time. In this sense, context generates the meaning of encounters between different forms of difference and perceptions about difference determine what forms of difference matter, to whom, and with what consequence. Searching for the right words to describe complex intercultural situations is not just semantics. It involves doing the work of carefully interrogating nuanced perceptions of difference and taking risks in order to identify what differences are at play and why, while carefully monitoring the potential of differentiation to reinforce negative stereotypes and prejudice.

Looking back over the history of cross-cultural comparison within and outside of anthropology, and following the particular experience of indirect ethnography, there are several lessons to be learned. While it may be true that anthropology has produced “more versions and visions of the comparative method than any other discipline” [5] (p. 3), mainstream cultural anthropology (especially in North America) has focused more on the complexity of specific communities than on the interactions between communities [6,10]. This historical tendency in the discipline to focus on internal complexity makes it difficult to address the question of difference in rapidly diversifying contexts closer to home. Indeed, as Marcus and Fischer explain, much of the work completed by the students of Boas was focused on documenting cultural practices in other parts of the world as a way of combating ethnocentrism in the United States: “anthropology as cultural critique” [45]. In this sense, U.S.-based cultural anthropology was not engaged in an effort to make cross-cultural comparisons per se, but was invested in the idea of describing the complexity of non-Western cultures in the hopes that students and readers of anthropology would find some way to connect the comparative dots.

In the Malinowski-inspired tradition of long-term intensive fieldwork, anthropologists everywhere have come to believe that the only way to fulfill their duty as scientists and as citizens of the world is to dig down deep into the history and complexity of particular communities. Whether it be in the area of student supervision, in the evaluation of publications, or in their own plans for research, anthropologists are often reluctant to take on the task of cross-cultural comparison, claiming that understanding one ethnographic context is already extremely complex and that anthropology does not possess the tools to conduct systematic comparison across cultures. According to Candea, “...for many anthropologists writing over the past forty years or so, comparison is not just equivocal but also deeply suspicious. And yet, it is unavoidable” [5] (p. 7). In addition to this disciplinary habitus or “culture”, constructivist critiques of the culture concept have made anthropologists increasingly skittish about the idea of cross-cultural comparison, primarily out of fears of being accused of cultural essentialism or even worse, racism.

If anthropology—which as a discipline laid the groundwork for cross-cultural comparison in social science and humanities—has been running away from cross-cultural comparison, afraid to fall into the trap of culturalism, it is also true that scholars from outside of anthropology have rarely taken the time to explore the discipline's history of thinking about cultural diversity and cross-cultural analysis. The fact that Hall's work on "cultural dimensions" has had so much traction outside of anthropology should be a source of pride for anthropologists. Indeed, Hall saw his mission as an academic to help non-anthropologists understand the importance of culture [46]. However, the reduction of cultural complexity to a series of four to six "cultural dimensions" is deeply disturbing to researchers in the field of critical intercultural studies [10,38]. If, as in the case of mainstream contemporary anthropology, the goal of research is to further knowledge about particular communities, then cross-cultural comparison is not a necessary operation. If, on the other hand, the goal of research is to understand social dynamics between individuals and groups of diverse origins, then as we have tried to show, we are required to take seriously the idea of cross-cultural comparison. Working toward this goal requires tools such as cultural variables that make it possible to engage in serious discussions about similarity and difference, an idea that is central not only to intercultural analysis but also to systemic theory. Indeed, in some sense, it is the context and analysis of intercultural situations that requires us to address the question of cross-cultural comparison, and not the opposite. While comparison in cultural and social anthropology is concerned with the possibility of comparing cultures as abstract objects or entities, the ethnographic analysis of intercultural situations requires us to focus on interactions in specific contexts that are uniquely located in time and space. Given the nature of intercultural encounters, comparison is not an option but a necessity.

From a systemic point of view, we can look at different expressions of group-based identity (call them "cultures" if you will) as systems that are based on logical types, codes, and patterns. Individuals do not always fit into or fully understand these mechanisms, and thus variation at the individual level can be even more complex than the group level, but individual variation does not prove the irrelevance of group-based identity. It simply shows that groups are made up of internal diversity, something that we already knew. This particular form of analysis requires first and foremost the identification of what we have referred to as "cultural variables". In the context of the workshops we developed to document and analyze intercultural situations in Montreal, participants were motivated and surprisingly adept in the process of identifying cultural variables. As we had hoped, the act of identifying cultural variables led many participants to reflect on the norms and practices in their own communities (what we have referred to as "centering") and this very simple act of comparison in many cases led to a re-examination of socially accepted norms in the context of super-diversity. In fact, as the workshops have evolved, we have begun to talk about the identification of cultural variables as a key competency for professionals who work in multi-ethnic settings [7].

In his analysis of how anthropology might go beyond the paralysis of "our impossible method", Candea argues that the work of cultural comparison can be divided into at least two different approaches or postures. Whereas frontal comparison involves looking at the similarities and differences between "us" and "them", lateral comparison requires self and other to perform a type of Batesonian meta-analysis, changing perspective to look at the objects of comparison from outside of the us-them nexus: "...lateral comparison involves entities which are formally of the same kind, although different in content, frontal comparison involves entities which are constitutively different in form—indeed, constitutively asymmetrical [5] (p. 218). Therein resides the major source of discomfort: people from the historical majority tend to include people of immigrant background as objects of integration and in some cases as obstacles to the project of "social cohesion". By working together in groups to identify the various cultural variables at play, workshop participants are able to objectify their own cultures by creating equivalencies between worldviews: relation to authority, risk perception, and leisure to name a few. This shift, which is usually

unconscious, occurs with relative fluidity as participants in the discussion move from a frontal to a lateral form of comparison. Cultural variables in this context function primarily as placeholders, enabling participants to exchange examples of how the variable plays out in different times and places and to analyze real-life situations in which culturally specific codes may have led to miscommunication or tension. This temporary suspension (which Candea refers to as "bracketing") is essential to doing the work of cross-cultural comparison from an intercultural perspective. The goal of comparison in this context is not to compare two different cultures, but to provide participants with the necessary distance from their own culture in order to be able to analyze breakdowns in communication during intercultural encounters.

As we have set out to explain in this article, the work of identifying cultural variables—something that is not always easy—is not the hard part. The real challenge for workshop participants, and also for academics, is the difficulty associated with naming difference. First, in our analysis of intercultural situations, it is not clear that we have actually identified the difference that makes a difference in any given setting or situation; research in the field of intersectionality has shown us how the complexity of multi-factorial markers of identity can contribute to systemic discrimination in sometimes unexpected and disturbing ways [3,4]. This is especially true of situations that may seem to be about ethnic differences but in reality involve other identity markers, for example gender, generation, or race. On numerous occasions, we were presented with situations that were not intercultural at all, if by intercultural we mean inter-ethnic. Secondly, in the current era of heightened awareness about racism and systemic discrimination, there is always a risk of reinforcing stereotypes about specific communities and exacerbating the marginalization and exclusion that we as anthropologists have always set out to eradicate. Talking about difference is important, but it is never easy. It requires particular conditions in order to fight against the tendency to reduce or reify the identity of others. It also requires us to ensure that the reasons for wanting to name difference do not undermine the underlying principles of any anthropological endeavor: the admittedly utopian idea of "making the world safe for difference" [47].

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