NEW SCHOOL OF MULTILATERALISM
NSM#BLOG

January 19, 2026

The Double Iceberg Model:
Revealing the Deep Structure of Intercultural Conflict

by Joel Högl

Abstract: Intercultural conflicts rarely originate in the misunderstandings we can see. Instead, they are driven by the deep cultural logics we cannot. This paper introduces The Double Iceberg Model of Intercultural Conflict, a new analytical framework that reveals why cross-cultural disputes persist despite good intentions, established negotiation techniques, or shared interests. Expanding Hall's classical iceberg metaphor, the model visualizes two cultural icebergs, two sets of visible behaviors and two far larger, invisible cultural worlds, whose interaction produces the real sources of intercultural friction. Drawing on contemporary research in intercultural communication, the paper demonstrates how misaligned expectations, emotional misinterpretations, stereotypes, and conflicting communication styles are merely symptoms of deeper structures such as divergent value systems, historical traumas, collective memories, identity narratives, and unconscious cultural scripts. These deeper structures shape interpretations, expectations, and emotional responses in ways that traditional conflict resolution approaches often overlook. By revealing these hidden dynamics, the Double Iceberg Model offers a more precise foundation for diagnosing and transforming intercultural conflicts.

Introduction

Intercultural conflicts often appear as surface-level misunderstandings or behavioral mismatches, yet their origins typically lie much deeper within the cultural belief systems of the individuals or groups involved. As research in intercultural communication has repeatedly shown, cultural differences can profoundly influence meaning-making, with considerable "potential for misunderstanding... [as] intercultural communication often involves a mismatch of codes" (Arasaratnam-Smith & Smith 2025, p. 28). These misunderstandings persist because perception itself is shaped by deeply internalized cultural frameworks; indeed, as Hall famously noted, people from different cultural backgrounds "not only speak different languages but... inhabit different sensory worlds" (Hall 1966, as cited in Arasaratnam-Smith & Smith 2025, p. 23).

While conflicts may also be driven by material, political, or economic factors, intercultural contexts add an additional layer of interpretation and expectation that can intensify misunderstanding and escalation, even when culture is not the primary cause. Material drivers may trigger conflict, but collective memory, identity narratives, cultural trauma and cultural values often shape

how it is perceived, justified and supported within societies. In this sense, culture is not treated as a single explanatory cause, but as a meaning-making structure that mediates how conflict is communicated, interpreted, and sustained.

Building on the classical Iceberg Model of culture (Hall 1976)—originally developed to illustrate that cultural meaning is largely hidden beneath observable behavior—this expanded model re-conceptualizes the iceberg metaphor to explain the nature, structure, and dynamics of intercultural conflicts. By doubling the iceberg, the model represents both cultural parties involved in conflict, demonstrating that meaningful conflict analysis must examine the deep structures of two cultural systems simultaneously. As Arasaratnam-Smith and Smith emphasize, "Culture A and Culture B have worldviews that are incommensurate... a given culture must be understood in its own terms... [and] members of a culture often practice behaviors that have latent, or out-of-awareness meanings" (Arasaratnam-Smith & Smith 2025, p. 42). These insights reinforce the argument that intercultural conflict cannot be understood solely through surface behaviors but must be analyzed at the level of the deep cultural logics that shape interpretation and expectation.

Expanding Hall's Iceberg Metaphor: The Double Iceberg Model of Intercultural Conflict
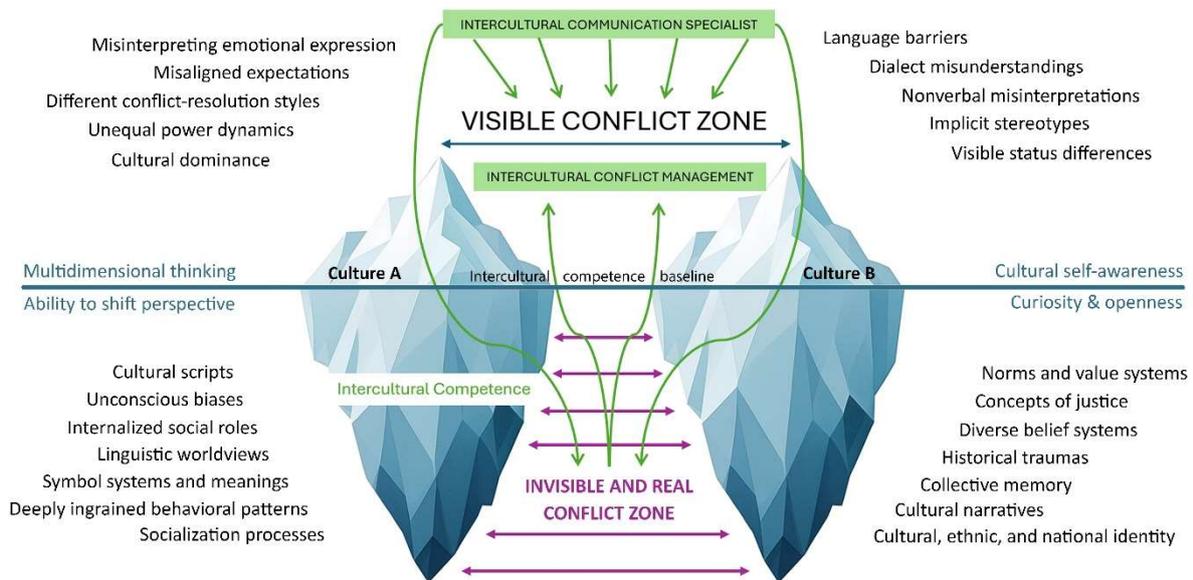

Figure 1. The Double Iceberg Model of Intercultural Conflict. Joel Högl, 2026. New School of Multilateralism, NSM#BLOG.

While the traditional iceberg model (Hall 1976) highlights the distinction between visible and invisible cultural elements within a single cultural system, intercultural conflict involves the interplay of two distinct sets of cultural assumptions, worldviews, systems and behavioral norms. This model therefore visualizes two parallel icebergs facing each other, each extending far beneath the waterline. The doubled iceberg metaphor underscores that intercultural conflict does not arise

NSM#BLOG, ed. Ursula Werther-Pietsch and Friedarike Santner

Citation: Högl, The Couble Iceberg Model, NSM BLOG January 2026,
https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog

from surface-level interaction alone but emerges from the interplay of deep-seated cultural logics embedded within both parties.

The purple arrows in the model illustrate the vertical depth of these structures, emphasizing that the "roots" of conflict reach far beyond what is immediately observable. Thus, understanding and resolving intercultural conflict requires analytical movement into both cultural depths, an exploration of the values, narratives, and socialization processes that shape each party's perceptions and behaviors.

The Visible Conflict Zone

The upper portion of the model represents the visible conflict zone, where intercultural tensions are experienced directly. Although these manifestations are immediately perceptible, they are only the outward signs of much deeper cultural dynamics. Factors in the visible conflict zone often complicate or obstruct effective conflict management. These include, among other factors:
- language barriers,
- dialect or accent-related misunderstandings,
- nonverbal misinterpretations,
- implicit stereotypes,
- visible status differences,
- misinterpretation of emotional expression,
- misaligned expectations.

These elements shape the trajectory of interaction and often intensify conflict, yet they provide only partial insight into the actual causes of intercultural tensions. Focusing solely on these surface-level indicators risks misinterpreting the conflict and leads to ineffective or superficial solutions.

The Role of the Intercultural Communication Specialist

In order to bridge the visible and invisible dimensions of the conflict, the model positions the intercultural communication specialist at the center of the process, symbolized by the green arrows. This specialist plays a crucial mediating role by identifying, interpreting, and articulating the underlying cultural patterns in both the visible and invisible conflict zones that generate surface-level tensions.

Beyond mediation, the intercultural communication specialist actively navigates between the two cultural icebergs, moving across distinct sets of values, social systems, and worldviews. This navigation requires a deep and nuanced understanding of cultural norms, communication styles, and social expectations. The specialist must be able to recognize how these elements shape the participants' interpretations of the conflict and influence their emotional and behavioral responses.

A central part of this role involves decoding culturally influenced differences that often remain unspoken or misunderstood by the parties themselves. This includes interpreting symbolic

NEW SCHOOL OF
MULTILATERALISM
N S M # B L O G

meanings, uncovering implicit assumptions, and making visible the cultural logics that operate beneath the surface. By translating these hidden dynamics into accessible insights, the specialist supports both sides in gaining a clearer understanding of the conflict's deeper roots. In this way, the specialist not only connects the visible and invisible layers of the model but also enables a more grounded and culturally informed pathway toward conflict resolution (see the path indicated by the green arrows leading to "intercultural conflict management").

To perform this function effectively, the specialist must possess a high level of intercultural competence, which includes the following core capacities:

- **Multidimensional thinking**: the ability to recognize that intercultural communication involves two interacting icebergs—each with its own visible and invisible dimensions—and to consider multiple cultural logics and conflict trajectories simultaneously, including the capacity to think within both the visible and invisible zones.

- **Ability to shift perspective**: adopting and understanding the viewpoints of different cultural actors through critical thinking, while accepting the relativity of reality, which allows for flexibility in changing perspectives.

- **Cultural self-awareness**: the ability to engage in critical self-reflection and to recognize one's own cultural assumptions and interpretive frameworks.

- **Curiosity and openness**: approaching cultural difference with willingness and respect.

These competencies—represented by the blue horizontal line, the intercultural competence baseline—enable the specialist to move analytically between the visible manifestations of conflict and their invisible cultural sources.

The Deep Conflict Zone: Hidden Cultural Structures

Beneath the waterline lies the invisible and real conflict zone, where the true origins of intercultural tension reside. These deep subconscious structures shape individuals' interpretations, expectations, and emotional responses and therefore exert a profound influence on the visible aspects of conflict. The model identifies several core elements within this zone:
- differing norms and value systems,
- distinct concepts of justice,
- diverse belief systems,
- historical traumas and collective memory,
- cultural narratives and identity constructions,
- unconscious biases,
- linguistic worldviews,
- symbol systems and meanings,
- deeply ingrained behavioral patterns, and
- lifelong socialization processes.

NSM#BLOG, ed. Ursula Werther-Pietsch and Friedarike Santner

Citation: Högl, The Couble Iceberg Model, NSM BLOG January 2026, https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog

Although these elements are not immediately observable, they exert substantial influence on how individuals interpret conflict situations. They shape emotional reactions, expectations about appropriate behavior, understandings of moral responsibility, and culturally grounded perceptions of fairness, respect, and identity. As such, they are the true drivers of intercultural conflict and must be analyzed to achieve meaningful conflict resolution. While many conflicts may be triggered by material interests and power dynamics, the invisible cultural dimension often shapes how societies interpret, emotionally respond to, and publicly support conflict.

Integrating the Layers: Foundations for Effective Intercultural Conflict Management

The model demonstrates that intercultural conflict management within the visible zone is only achievable when deeper cultural structures are also addressed. This resonates with research showing that intercultural conflict typically emerges when individuals hold "incompatible expectations, values, norms, interests, or goals in interactions" (Dai & Chen, 2023, pp. 1–2; see also Wilmot & Hocker, 2007). Such conflicts may occur at interpersonal or intergroup levels and often involve political, economic, or cultural dimensions. As Dai and Chen (2023) emphasize, the complexity of these dynamics requires drawing on multiple perspectives to form a comprehensive understanding of conflict processes.

Attempting to resolve intercultural conflict without examining its underlying cultural foundations risks reinforcing misunderstandings or generating temporary, superficial solutions. Culture-based attitudes and practices frequently operate outside conscious awareness, meaning that "the lack of conscious knowledge of our own cultural scripts and those of others… implies that conflict is more likely to occur and harder to resolve" (Stadler, 2020, p. 1). This is especially relevant in intercultural settings, where communicators bring differing worldviews and value orientations into interaction. Indeed, research consistently shows that the greater the cultural distance between interlocutors, the higher the likelihood of tension and misinterpretation (Dai, 2023; Ting-Toomey, 2007, 2009).

These tensions are further amplified by the fact that similar communicative strategies—such as accommodation, compromise, avoidance, or competition—may be interpreted differently across cultures. As Haslett (2023) explains, despite the existence of well-established conflict-resolution strategies, intercultural interactions remain prone to misunderstanding because "the same communicative strategy may be interpreted differently by different cultures" (pp. 74–75; see also Haslett, 2014; Kozan, 1997, as cited in Haslett, 2023). Consequently, even well-intentioned conflict-management efforts can inadvertently escalate confusion if cultural logics are not properly recognized.

Moreover, intercultural communication is typically marked by discrepant expectations rooted in cultural norms and values, increasing the potential for pseudo-conflicts, misunderstandings that arise not from substantive disagreement but from divergent interpretive frameworks (Kim & Kameo, 2023; see also Lee & Rogan, 1991). When such unrecognized discrepancies shape

interaction, surface-level conflict-management techniques rarely address the structural drivers of tension.

Therefore, effective conflict resolution requires specialists capable of diagnosing and interpreting the full structural complexity of the conflict. This includes analyzing observable behavior, identifying deeper cultural logics, and helping the parties recognize how cultural backgrounds, norms and value systems, and collective memory shape perceptions, interpretations, and expectations. Only by integrating analyses across these layers can intercultural conflict be addressed in a way that produces durable, meaningful solutions rather than temporary accommodation.

Conclusion

The Double Iceberg Model of Intercultural Conflict offers a new analytical lens not only for intercultural communication research but also for international peacebuilding. While peace processes often concentrate on visible elements—political demands, territorial disputes, security issues—the deeper cultural and historical layers usually remain unaddressed. The model highlights that behind many visible conflicts lie two cultural icebergs, two visible and two invisible dimensions: two value systems, two forms of collective historical memory shaped by different collective traumas, and thus two concepts of truth and two narratives. Even when conflicts are triggered by material interests or power dynamics, their societal legitimacy and public support often emerge through these deeper cultural structures, which shape how conflict is interpreted, justified, and sustained.

Lasting peace becomes most achievable when negotiation and mediation processes move beyond the surface and engage with these hidden structures. This is where intercultural competence becomes essential, and where specialists capable of navigating the cultural logics between the two icebergs play a crucial role: interpreting historical traumas, decoding symbolic meaning systems, and making visible the cultural foundations of conflict.

Thus, the Double Iceberg Model is more than a metaphor. It is an analytical tool that, when integrated into peacebuilding efforts, can support more durable and meaningful outcomes. Without exploring cultural depth, peace remains fragile; by engaging with the deep structures, genuine conflict transformation becomes possible, where peace is not merely an agreement, but a shared process of cultural meaning-making.

NSM#BLOG, ed. Ursula Werther-Pietsch and Friedarike Santner

Citation: Högl, The Couble Iceberg Model, NSM BLOG January 2026, https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog

References

Arasaratnam-Smith, L. A., & Smith, L. R. (2025). *Communicating in intercultural spaces*. Routledge.

Dai, X. (2023). *The development of interculturality and the management of intercultural conflict*. In X. Dai & G.-M. Chen (Eds.), *Conflict management and intercultural communication: The art of intercultural harmony* (2nd ed., pp. 56–68). Routledge.

Dai, X., & Chen, G.-M. (2023). *Introduction*. In X. Dai & G.-M. Chen (Eds.), *Conflict management and intercultural communication: The art of intercultural harmony* (2nd ed., pp. 1–10). Routledge.

Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Anchor Press.

Haslett, B. B. (2023). *Transforming conflict through communication and common ground*. In X. Dai & G.-M. Chen (Eds.), *Conflict management and intercultural communication: The art of intercultural harmony* (2nd ed., pp. 69–91). Routledge.

Kim, M.-S., & Kameo, Y. (2023). *Multicultural identity and conflict communication competence in the 21st century*. In X. Dai & G.-M. Chen (Eds.), *Conflict management and intercultural communication: The art of intercultural harmony* (2nd ed., pp. 132–149). Routledge.

Stadler, S. (2020). *Conflict, culture & communication*. Routledge.

Joel Högl is a graduate researcher in transcultural communication and cultural sociology. He holds a BA in Transcultural Communication and is currently pursuing an MA in Cultural Sociology at the University of Graz, where he previously worked as a Student Research Assistant at the Department of Translation Studies. Alongside his academic work, he supports NGOs, schools, and public institutions as an intercultural community interpreter, specializing in trauma- and conflict-sensitive communication. He has contributed to international publication projects, including ORF news translation and multilingual communication for Interreg Europe.

Find more of the blog here:
https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog/