

Who defines humanity? Psychological and cultural obstacles to omniculturalism

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Abstract

In this article we discuss the social-psychological limitations of using omniculturalism as a tool to improve intercultural relations between majority and minority groups. The omnicultural imperative suggests that intercultural interactions be framed in terms of human commonalities. This strategy might face severe psychological and cultural obstacles. Due to automatic mechanisms of ingroup projection, such framing might have adverse effects: People tend to construe their concepts of “humanity” based on their impressions about their own group. Such projection has been shown to have detrimental effects on intergroup relations, especially between groups differing in status (such as minority–majority relations). Psychological and anthropological evidence is provided to argue that the lay concept of “humanity” is often used as a tool of ingroup favouritism and discrimination. An extension of the omnicultural imperative is proposed—based on the indefinable character of humanity (inspired by Jahoda’s remarks on the definition of culture and Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblance) and human-animal similarities.

Keywords

Dehumanization, human uniqueness, infrahumanization, ingroup projection, omniculturalism

The main goal of omnicultural policy as defined by Fathali M. Moghaddam (2012, also in Moghaddam & Breckenridge, 2010) is a society bonded by human commonalities. This goal should be achieved by educational efforts—teaching children

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to emphasize the traits and characteristics that are common to all human beings; training people to focus on all-human features while interacting with outgroup members. According to the omnicultural imperative, human commonalities should be derived from the discoveries of empirical psychology and Kantian ethical principles. After focusing on such human commonalities, ethnic identities and more specific cultural values should also be addressed. This way, the omnicultural imperative goes beyond the limitations of both multiculturalist and assimilationist approaches to intercultural relations.

The concept of unifying human societies by stressing our common humanity is a considerably old one. It can be traced back to Enlightenment dreams of the progress of human civilization. Baron A. R. J. Turgot claimed that the initiation of human progress was possible through Christianity, which made the idea of human brotherhood universally accepted. But it is only in the era of the Enlightenment, according to Turgot, that the idea of progress became the conscious goal of unified efforts that was intended to bring prosperity, freedom and happiness to all (Nisbet, 2009). Marquis Nicolas de Condorcet also saw the history of the “human spirit” as a fight between the forces of Enlightenment and those of superstition. Only reason was perceived to be the source of tolerance, and a precondition of universalizing progress embodied in the new freedoms granted by the French Republic after the 18th century revolution. The Kantian ethics that inspired Mohaddam’s (2012) concept of omniculturalism are representative of the Enlightenment belief in the universalist progress of Reason.

It is, however, quite commonly conceded that the effects of the universal vision of human nature brought about by the thinkers of the Enlightenment were at least ambiguous (Bauman, 2006; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). The idea of the rational, progress-fuelled colonization and mass industrialization caused a great amount of suffering for many groups, including members of non-Western cultures that either disappeared or have become intensively and violently transformed under the influence of Western civilization. Thus, the noble idea of “Humanity” could be used to justify Western hegemony over cultures and societies that were considered less developed and needed to be “civilized”, instead of being universally applied (Bauman, 2006). These ambiguities of the Enlightenment dream of progress based on human commonalities should be kept in mind while discussing the omnicultural imperative proposed by Moghaddam.

Human commonalities and psychological research

Universalist beliefs about progress and common humanity also formed the basis of social psychological research on intergroup relations. Proponents of the intergroup contact hypothesis suggested that successful intergroup encounters should be based on commonalities rather than distinctive group features (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996; Gaertner, et al., 2000). One of the dominant models in this field, the common ingroup identity model, proposed that by focusing on

superordinate social categories, group members could redirect ingroup favouritism from their local identities (e.g. Polish) into more inclusive identities (e.g. European). By doing so, they should more positively approach outgroup members, who are included in the new, broader definition of an ingroup. This process of recategorization would reduce bias by changing the perception of intergroup boundaries (Gaertner, et al., 2000).

Defining oneself and others in terms of shared humanity is not merely another superordinate social category. Abraham Maslow (1954) suggested that identification with mankind (human kinship) can be observed in the most mature part of the human population, the self-actualizers. Self-categorization theory proposes that among various levels of abstraction and inclusiveness of social categories, the “we-humans” category represents a distinctive and the most abstract self-definition, under which all group-level categorizations become meaningless and people categorize themselves as opposed to other species (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). It is not surprising that for many social psychologists the mere existence of such a highly inclusive social category sounds like a promise for more positive intergroup relations. In that respect, the concept of the omnicultural imperative (Moghaddam, 2012) belongs to a larger tradition of social psychological theorizing. Such an approach is also frequently used in practical interventions, aiming to reduce prejudice and other intergroup animosities.

One of the most recent concepts stressing the role of common humanity in improving intergroup relations is McFarland’s idea of “identification with all humanity” (S. McFarland, 2011; S. G. McFarland, 2010; McFarland & Brown, 2008). This concept includes: positive caring, a genuine concern and love for other human beings, and treating all other human beings as a part of one’s ingroup. People who identify with all humanity are less ethnocentric, less dominance-oriented (McFarland & Brown, 2008), and more supportive of universal human rights (S. G. McFarland, 2010). Although these findings could support the omnicultural hypothesis, the concept of “identification with all humanity” has several shortcomings. First—it treats human commonality as dispositional variable of an individual rather than as situational framing of intercultural encounter. According to Moghaddam’s omnicultural imperative, human commonalities framing is rather an aspect of interaction with outgroup members. Another problem with McFarland’s approach is the overt measure of “identification with all humanity” used in his studies—it is very vulnerable to desirability norms of participants. Acknowledging attitude–behaviour inconsistencies in the expression of prejudice and discrimination (Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson, & Gaertner, 1996), one could have serious doubts if the measures of dispositional “identification with all humanity” could predict real behaviour in intergroup contexts. Although people might have declared their universalist identification in survey studies, their real-life attitude towards others (preferred social distance, behavioural avoidance, intergroup helping) were never directly measured in research on “identification with all humanity”.

Whose superordinate category?

According to Moghaddam (2012), during omnicultural interaction people should focus on such psychological traits and characteristics that are universal to the superordinate category of “human beings”. The main problem is the definition of such universally human traits. One could reasonably ask: who is entitled to define the content of humanity? What will make such a definition universal, legitimate and supported by all groups? Empirical evidence about the way people process information about superordinate categories (such as “humanity”) poses serious doubts about the potential of such categories in reconciliation. Whenever group members (e.g. the English) focus on superordinate categories (e.g. British, European, human), their default source of knowledge about the superordinate category is their knowledge about their own subgroup (in this case: English). Such *pars pro toto* reasoning about superordinate social categories is known in social psychology as ingroup projection—a widely observed cognitive shortcut in processing information about higher level social categories (Kessler et al., 2010; Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2008).

Authors of the model observed that majority groups tend to perceive minorities as less prototypical of the society to which they belong. The same phenomenon occurs in other intergroup relations as well, e.g., German students asked about characteristics of a “typical European”, would come up with the same traits that they ascribe to a “typical German”, but these traits would be different from the ones that they ascribe to a “typical Pole”. The greater the perceived relative ingroup prototypicality (compared to prototypicality of other groups), the better the evaluation of an ingroup and the worse the evaluation of an outgroup (Wenzel et al., 2008). This process is especially visible in the case of positively evaluated superordinate categories—and the category of all-humanity, suggested by the omnicultural perspective, is one of the most positive categories people may belong to.

Perception of the ingroup as being more prototypical than the outgroup directly leads to negative intergroup emotions and prejudice against immigrants (Kessler et al., 2010). The omnicultural imperative suggests that during intercultural interaction two categories should be salient: group category and superordinate category. This approach is similar to the concept of dual-identity representation that focuses simultaneously on commonalities and subgroup identities (Dovidio, Gaertner, Pearson, & Riek, 2005). The indicator of omniculturalism used in a survey conducted by Moghaddam was based on the degree of agreement with the following statement:

People should first recognize and give priority to what they have in common with all other Americans, and then at a second stage celebrate their distinct group culture. (Moghaddam, 2012, p. 323)

This is exactly what dual-identity theorists propose: identification with superordinate category, combined with acknowledgement of local identity.

Experimental research on ingroup projection shows that it is exactly this representation of subgroup-superordinate-group relations that leads to greatest projection and least positive intergroup attitudes (Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Weber, 2003). Participants who strongly identified with their own group (Germans) and at the same time strongly identified with their superordinate group (Europeans), were motivated to exclude all other groups (e.g. Poles) from their definition of the superordinate, European category. Such dual identification led to greater perceived relative ingroup prototypicality than did other forms of identification, and this in turn led to more negative attitudes toward the outgroup (Poles).

The ingroup projection model (Wenzel et al., 2008) shows a cognitive mechanism that poses a severe risk for using superordinate categories during interaction with immigrants, minorities and outgroups in general. On the other hand, based on self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), one could say that common humanity is not just another superordinate category. It is functionally different than ethnic group categories. Unfortunately, the mechanisms of projection occur on this level as well—they produce a phenomenon known as infra-humanization (Leyens et al., 2001).

We are more human than you

There is considerable cross-cultural agreement about the main characteristics that are unique to all human beings. In a study of Polish, Japanese and Scottish students, we found that the same emotions (e.g. admiration, compassion, disenchantment, melancholy, nostalgia) are perceived as uniquely human in these three different cultures, while others (e.g. fear, pain, sorrow, affection) are perceived as less unique to humans—and experienced also by other animals (Bilewicz, Mikołajczak, Kumagai, & Castano, 2010). Uniquely human (“secondary”) emotions are the ones that emerge in later stages of development, that are socially learned and that involve more cognitive and moral processing than do the animalistic (“primary”) emotions (Demoulin et al., 2004). Secondary emotions are not the only characteristics that define humanity. Another cross-cultural study performed in Australia, China and Italy (Haslam, Kashima, Loughnan, Shi, & Suitner, 2008) showed that secondary emotions and higher cognitive abilities (thoughts) are perceived to distinguish humans from animals, while any emotional life (both primary and secondary emotions) and free will (wishes, intentions) are perceived as distinguishing humans from robots. Thus, characteristics forming human-uniqueness and human-nature are similar, but not identical.

If there is such high cross-cultural agreement about distinctively human features, one could be optimistic about potential omnicultural encounters. One could easily list features that could be used in such encounters: both sides shall focus on free will, secondary emotions and ability to think. The only problem is that although there is cross-cultural agreement about which characteristics are uniquely human, there is much less agreement about extent to which people of different races, classes

or ethnicities possess these characteristics. Each group member perceives his or her own group as more human than other groups (Leyens et al., 2000, 2007) and each person perceives herself/himself as more human than other people (Loughnan et al., 2010).

When people think about the emotional life of ingroup and outgroup members, they attribute more uniquely human, secondary emotions to their ingroup than to outgroup members. There was no such difference observed in attribution of primary (animalistic) emotions. People forecast longer durations of secondary emotions among ingroup than outgroup members (Gaunt, Sindic, & Leyens, 2005), they are quicker in reacting to secondary emotions when these are expressed by ingroup, compared to outgroup members (Boccatto, Cortes, Demoulin, & Leyens, 2007) and their recall of secondary emotions of outgroup members was faster than recall for the ingroup (Gaunt, Leyens, & Demoulin, 2002). These cognitive effects suggest a stronger link between the ingroup and humanity categories, than between the outgroup and humanity. And it is obvious that such basic social-cognitive processes have strong implications for intercultural relations.

Human = our own culture

Undoubtedly, anthropological research supports psychological insights about the automaticity of dehumanization in intergroup or intercultural relations. Cultural diversity is inevitably linked with regarding members of other cultures as inferior and less humane—as long as ethnic identity is defined in opposition to the “other” (Barth, 1969). It is also common for different groups, such as tribes, to express their perceived superiority by denying the humanity of the others. Claude Lévi-Strauss addresses this issue in *Race and History*: “Humanity is confined to the borders of the tribe, the linguistic group, or even, in some instances, to the village” (1952, p. 11). In several indigenous cultures the ingroup is referred to as “the men”, “the good”, “the excellent”, “the well-achieved”, implying that other groups (tribes or villages) are subjectively deprived of human nature, being called: “bad”, “wicked”, “ghosts”, “ground-monkeys” or “lousy eggs” (Lévi-Strauss, 1952).

In some cultures, the same term is used to describe “man” or “human” and the ingroup’s ethnic identity. In the Romani language, the word “Rom” means simply “man” or “person” (Vermeersch, 2003). Several languages use the same vocabulary for outgroup behaviour and animal behavior (e.g. the Yiddish term “*peygern*” is used to express dying among gentiles and animals, while “*shtarbn*” is reserved only for Jewish people; Wex, 2005). Lévi-Strauss (1952) suggests the symmetry of this process in colonial times: while colonists dehumanized indigenous people in the Greater Antilles, the colonized indigenous people denied human characteristics to the colonists.

It is important to mention that such dehumanization did not automatically lead to extermination of outgroup members: according to Lévi-Strauss (1992), the aim of the hostile behaviour towards the outgroup was “to avenge wrongs, to capture victims for sacrifices or to steal women or property” (p. 7)—all of these are

activities were far from posing a threat to the existence of the hostile group. Thus, anthropological research suggests that dehumanization is an inevitable consequence of cultural diversity, not restricted to extreme conflicts or genocides.

Functions of dehumanization

The automatic denial of outgroup humanity is most pronounced between groups differing in status—and the case of economic immigrants is a particularly good example of such status differences. Research conducted in Poland showed that low-status immigrants are perceived in a particularly dehumanized way (Spencer, Bilewicz, & Castano, 2006). We presented participants with narrative texts about a car accident with a Russian (immigrant group member) or Polish (ingroup member) victim. The main character was presented as a person of low (construction worker) vs. high social status (CEO). Participants were asked to assess which emotions were experienced by family members of the accident victim. The results showed that the family of a low-status immigrant was ascribed less secondary (uniquely human) emotions than all other families. Immigrant groups of low status are dehumanized to a greater extent than are other immigrant groups. A study comparing dehumanization of Romani people in Romania and Britain found that Romani people are less dehumanized in Romania (where their status is not much lower than the status of the majority group) than in Britain (where the majority group has much higher status than the Romani community; Marcu & Chrysoschoou, 2005).

Exclusion from humanity also has a geographical dimension, as it is related to distance from outgroup members. Castano and Giner-Sorolla (2006) show that citizens of former colonial empires dehumanize members of colonized nations. They ascribe less secondary emotions to colonial victims when they learn about ingroup involvement in historical colonial atrocities. In this respect, dehumanization becomes a strategy of moral disengagement. Even systematic content analysis of press news appearing in the three American daily newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *New York Post*) showed that media coverage transmits dehumanized intergroup perception (Bilewicz & Castano, 2006). We found that press descriptions of an ingroup-targeting disaster (Hurricane Katrina) included significantly more secondary emotion words than did press depictions of an outgroup-targeting disaster (Asian Tsunami). Other studies found that White people ascribed less secondary emotions to the Black victims of Hurricane Katrina, while Black people ascribed less secondary emotion to the White victims. This lack of shared humanity was found to be generally responsible for non-helping behaviour (Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007). It could be summarized, that dehumanization does not allow for a broader, more inclusive concept of victimhood (Vollhardt, 2009).

An omnicultural encounter, as proposed by Moghaddam, should start from stressing the common humanity of majority and minority group members (while keeping subgroup identity salient), and this could potentially reverse the structure

of inhumanization, observed both in psychological and anthropological work. Results of empirical research calls into question such a scenario of successful contact between groups. Morton and Postmes (2011) found in two empirical studies that perception of shared humanity with a harmed outgroup reduces guilt among members of the group that committed atrocities. In less extreme forms of cross-cultural encounters, common humanity can also play a detrimental role on intergroup relations. When minority members express their uniquely human characteristics (e.g. secondary emotions), majority members are less helping and act toward the minority group in a more prejudiced way (Vaes, Paladino, Castelli, Leyens, & Giovanazzi, 2003). Thinking about victims as fellow humans reduces empathy and remorse for wrongdoing, and heightens expectations for forgiveness without any compensation (Greenaway, Louis, & Wohl, 2011). Thus, the “we are all humans” strategy seems to be maladaptive for minority or immigrant groups striving for recognition, compensation and equal treatment.

Denial of humanity from outgroup members seems to be an automatic process that is enhanced in power-asymmetry situations. Any forms of exploitation and discrimination tend to reinforce dehumanization (Bilewicz, Imhoff, & Drogosz, 2011; Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006), thus making it a cognitive mechanism of moral disengagement for high-status groups. The automaticity of intergroup dehumanization seems to be the biggest psychological obstacle to omniculturalism as a potential strategy of organizing intercultural relations.

Why do minority groups reject omniculturalism?

Members of minority groups seem to be highly aware of the dynamics described above. Moghaddam and Breckenridge (2010) observed that minority group members (Black, Hispanic) did not express support for omniculturalism, but rather chose multiculturalism as a strategy of intercultural interaction that fulfils their identity needs. This corroborates other recent findings about preferences of minority group members. Strongly identifying members of low status (minority) groups prefer focusing on differences rather than commonalities when planning intergroup contact with majority groups. Saguy, Dovidio, and Pratto (2008) showed this effect among two ethnic groups in Israel: high-status Ashkenazim and low-status Mizrahim, as well as between laboratory-created artificial groups of different status. The reason for such preferences is a motivation to change the power structure: minority group members, especially those who strongly identify with their group, are interested in affirming their own group and engaging in collective action. Without strong cultural identity, such action would not be possible.

We obtained similar results in Poland, where strongly identifying members of a minority group (Polish Jews) were disidentifying from the superordinate social category (Polish citizens), which in turn led to their greater involvement in minority communal life. Those who identified more with the superordinate social category were less willing to engage themselves for the sake of their group (Bilewicz & Wójcik, 2010).

The rejection of commonality focus among minority group members might also have another basis. Intergroup harmony that is caused by commonality-focused encounters can blur impressions about discriminatory intergroup relations. In the situation where power structures are responsible for discrimination, improving the image of oppressors among minority groups could bias their perception of intergroup inequalities—and could enhance justifications of these inequalities. The more positively high-status groups are perceived, the more just and legitimate status hierarchies could be considered (Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004). This is why it is plausible to think that the focus on common humanity—suggested in the omnicultural imperative—can ruin collective action efforts among historically victimized minority groups. Empirical research on indigenous Australians supports this view: thinking about White Australians as fellow humans increased forgiveness, but reduced identification and collective action among this minority group (Greenaway, Quinn, & Louis, 2011).

Ifat Maoz (2011), who analyzed reconciliation attempts between Israelis, Arabs and Palestinians, found that those interventions that were focused on commonalities changed Israeli attitudes toward Palestinians, while not changing the structures of political discrimination that were most important for the subordinate group (Palestinians). A similar pattern has also been observed in experimental studies: commonality-focused encounters led minority group members to more positive perceptions of intergroup relations (Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). Disadvantaged group members expected more funds from advantaged groups after commonality-focused intergroup contact, although they received the same as they would after differences-focused contact. These high expectations, aroused after commonality-focused contact, lead to dismay and disillusionment among minority groups, because such contact does not lead the majority group to allocate resources more fairly.

The problem described above is not restricted to interactions with salient common social categories. Research on relations between Blacks and Whites in South Africa (Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2010) and Israeli-Arab relations (Saguy et al., 2009) provide evidence that all forms of intergroup contact can create illusions of equal treatment among minority (or low-status) group members. For this reason, all such encounters pose an enormous risk to minority group well-being. It should not be surprising that minority leaders and strongly identified group members tend to reject any forms of intergroup contact with the majority, and especially contact that is focused on commonalities.

How to overcome these obstacles? Undefined humanity as a modification of the omnicultural imperative

The automaticity of dehumanization in relations between high status (majority) and low status (minority) groups makes the omnicultural imperative very difficult to follow in real intercultural encounters. Any group focusing on universal humanity would be inclined to project its own views of humanity onto the superordinate

category, and to deny humanity to the outgroup. This would make minority groups highly suspicious about any “common humanity” narrative.

Moghaddam suggests that the content of common humanity should be based on human universals discovered by empirical findings in psychology. This highly optimistic view suggests that scientific psychology has developed or will develop a list of universal characteristics that are common to all human beings. The universality of many psychological phenomena is severely overstated. Studies performed on American college student samples suggested that some very basic psychological findings: in visual perception (e.g. horizontal-vertical illusion), decision making (e.g. fairness in ultimatum games), spatial cognition (e.g. egocentric orientation) or self-concepts (e.g. self-enhancement) are universal, although later empirical research outside of the Western world falsified such claims (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Many other characteristics that were historically perceived as uniquely human were recently observed also in other primates and other species (for a review see Bilewicz et al., 2011). In that respect, it is difficult to maintain the belief expressed by Moghaddam that psychological science has a key role in “identifying foundational human commonalities and answering the question: what are the common human characteristics?” (2012, p. 306). Unfortunately, the list delivered by social psychologists might be a simple projection of empirical findings obtained in Western countries (conducted primarily on American undergraduate student samples).

Does this mean that any definition of all-humanity commonalities would lead to an automatic deterioration of intergroup relations? Not exactly. An interesting alternative could be based on Gustav Jahoda’s insight into the definition of “culture”. After discussing contemporary definitions of “culture”, he comes to the conclusion that “much of the time it is quite practicable and defensible simply to use the term without seeking to define it” (Jahoda, 2012, p. 300). A similar approach could be applied to common understandings of humanity. All existing definitions of human-uniqueness are subject to being abused and differentially attributed to ingroups vs. outgroups. When we think that secondary emotions define humans, we attribute them more to ingroup members than to outgroup members (Leyens et al., 2007). When we think that any certain characteristic is universally human, most probably it is a characteristic that we have observed among fellow ingroup members, and not necessarily among outgroup members (Henrich et al., 2010). Research on ingroup projection shows that when superordinate social categories are indefinable (as opposed to definable), such ingroup projection processes would be reduced—and attitudes towards outgroup members would be improved (Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Weber, 2003). This suggests that indefinable constructions of humanity could inhibit the detrimental role of projection (i.e. inhumanization) in intergroup relations. Without a clear definition of what makes someone human, people would not deny humanity to outgroups.

Thus, we suggest that it is important to precede omnicultural policy with an elaboration of a broader understanding of humanity. Following Jahoda’s

argument, as well as Wittgenstein's (1953) concept of family resemblance, we suggest an alternative understanding of humanity for such policies. The notion of "humanity" can be understood as a set of concepts related by family resemblances. Many ethnic groups and cultures have their own concepts of humanity. In all of them, humanity represents the highest virtue and qualities (a good example is the Yiddish word "*mentsch*", meaning "human being" or "a person of integrity and honor"; Wex, 2005). We suggest that before teaching children about the importance of human commonalities, it is important to stress that these commonalities are differently understood in different cultures. As a consequence, children should learn that all human beings should be granted equal rights and duties regardless of their possession of the particular traits or characteristics that psychology currently defines as essentially human. The omnicultural imperative could be more effective in changing intergroup relations if it becomes more aware of the power struggles behind the concept of humanity.

The interesting alternative is proposed in the area of human-animal interactions and speciesism (Bastian, Costello, Loughnan, & Hodson, 2011; Bilewicz, et al., 2011). It is known that some people in the human population (i.e. vegetarians, vegans or dog-owners) deny the uniquely human character of some psychological competences (secondary emotions, intelligence, etc.; Bilewicz et al., 2011). Recent studies on these issues showed that when people are informed about human-animal similarities, their attitudes toward marginalized human outgroups changed as well, because there was no essentialist basis for dehumanization (Bastian et al., 2011). Anthropology also suggests that the recognition of the basic unity of all living beings, not only human, could change attitudes toward ethnic or cultural outgroups: "the respect we want man to feel for his fellow man is just the specific case of the general respect that he ought to feel for all forms of life" (Lévi-Strauss, 1992, p. 24). The heritage of Western humanism and Enlightenment tradition defines humanity as radically separated from other species. We suggest that the omnicultural imperative could foster a more undefined notion of humanity that would include (a) other cultures' understandings of humanity and (b) focus on human-animal similarities rather than human-uniqueness when framing intercultural relations.

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