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# Understanding and Applying Intercultural Communication in the Global Community: The Fundamentals

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**Y**ou are no doubt already familiar with terms such as “globalization,” “global village,” “culture,” “communication,” and “cultural diversity,” all common expressions today. Perhaps you have even heard or read something about “intercultural communication,” but it is less likely that you have been exposed to an in-depth examination of what it is, how it works, and why it is important. Answering those questions is the purpose of this chapter.

Our exploration begins with a brief overview of the role that intercultural communication has played in some of the notable eras of world history. We then provide a summary of how intercultural communication has developed as an academic discipline over the past seventy years. This historical review will help you realize that intercultural communication is not a new phenomenon, but rather a process that has long been an integral part of human interactions. Following the two historical synopses, the chapter examines what are considered the fundamentals of intercultural communication. Understanding these basic concepts will facilitate your study and appreciation of how prevalent, and important, intercultural communication is in contemporary society.

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## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### The Beginnings

The history of intercultural interactions is as old as humankind. The migration of peoples, whether seeking new homelands, engaging in trade, or bent on physical or ideological conquest has brought people from different cultural backgrounds into contact. Often these interactions have proven beneficial, but sometimes they have led to disaster. Let us look at a few examples of how intercultural communication has been instrumental in shaping sweeping global changes.

Consider for a moment how two of the world's great religions originated in the Middle East and subsequently spread globally. Christianity began its journey from a small area in what is today Israel and Palestine, and over a couple of centuries spread across the globe to become the world's largest religion. A few hundred years after the rise of Christianity, Islam was founded in the desert of modern-day Saudi Arabia and ultimately spread across the Middle East, Northern Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia. It is now the world's second largest religion. During the Seventh Century, Buddhism arose in contemporary northeast India and over the next several hundred years spread eastward throughout Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan. Today, it is the world's fourth largest religion. The ability to promulgate, establish, and sustain the religious philosophy of each of the faiths across such a diversity of cultures and languages required competent intercultural communication.

Commerce is another context that easily lends itself to demonstrating the historical and enduring effect of intercultural communication. Let us reflect on just two very early examples—the Phoenicians and the Silk Road. The Phoenicians were an ancient trading civilization located in the coastal area of what is now Syria and Lebanon. By the late 800s BCE, they had established trading routes, outposts, and colonies along the southern Mediterranean coast and ventured into the Atlantic along the peripheries of Spain and West Africa. The Phoenicians focused on maritime trade rather than territorial conquest, which obviously required a keen appreciation for different cultures and

languages. Their legacy remains evident today in the word “Bible,” which the Greeks derived from Byblos, the name of an ancient Phoenician city (Gore, 2004).

Reference to the “Silk Road” often conjures up a Hollywood based romantic image of caravans transporting exotic goods across Central Asia between China and the West. In actuality, however, there were numerous roads, or routes, linking China with the west, beginning late in the first millennium BCE and lasting until the fifteenth century CE. These tracks passed through Central Asia, South Asia, along the coast of the Arabian Peninsula, and through today’s Middle East. In addition to the many tradesmen, the routes were traveled by explorers, religious prelates, philosophers, warriors, and foreign emissaries. New products, art works, technology, innovation, and philosophical ideas traveled in both directions to consumers in the east and west, as well as those in between. These overland conduits passed through the domains of many different cultures. Thus a successful transit required the knowledge and ability to effectively interact with peoples instilled with contrasting worldviews, possessing varied cultural values, and speaking a multiplicity of languages.

These several examples from the distant past illustrate two important factors. First, globalization is not new. Peoples from other lands and diverse cultures have been interacting across the span of time. The advent of new technologies has simply accelerated the process. Second, these historical vignettes demonstrate the instrumental role intercultural communication has played in the establishment of today’s global social order. We will next look at the development of intercultural communication as an academic discipline.

## **Intercultural Communication as an Academic Discipline**

Despite a lengthy historical legacy, intercultural communication as an academic discipline is relatively new, commencing only about 70 years ago. A focused examination of culture and communication arose out of a need to understand allies during World War II and to better carry out the post-war reconstruction of the many nations destroyed by that conflict. The continued growth of international commerce in the

1970s and 1980s created a need to understand how to effectively interact with, and manage, people from other cultures. As a result, scholars became interested, launched research projects, and began offering classroom courses treating different contexts. The end of the Cold War, in the early 1990s, coupled with technological advances in transportation and communication made intercultural competence a necessity. Suddenly, there were unprecedented levels of interaction among people from different national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Commercial and social organizations realized the importance of communicating across cultures on both an international and domestic level. This heightened the demand for increased scholarly inquiry and topic specific literature, which continued unabated into the new century. Post 9/11 conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated a need for cultural awareness training among U.S. forces.

Today, the rapidly globalizing social order has made the study and practice of intercultural communication a requisite for success in both the international and domestic arena. Now, an appreciation of cultural differences is needed in order to succeed in almost any endeavor. The essays in this text are designed to help you achieve that awareness and assist in acquiring the ability to become a more skilled intercultural communicator. Each chapter introduces you to a topic considered critical to acquiring and improving intercultural competence.

Before moving further into the study of culture and communication, however, we need to specify our approach to intercultural communication and recognize that other people investigate quite different perspectives. For example, some scholars who examine mass media are concerned with international broadcasting, worldwide freedom of expression, the premise of Western domination of media information, and the use of electronic technologies for instantaneous worldwide communication. Other groups study international communication with an emphasis on interactions among national governments—the communication of diplomacy, economic relations, disaster assistance, and even political propaganda. Still others are interested in the communication needed to conduct business on a global basis. Their concerns include such issues as cross-cultural marketing, negotiation styles, management, and conflict resolution, as well as

daily communication within domestic, multinational, and transnational organizations. And scholars who apply critical theory seek to demonstrate how communication can be used as a means of domination.

Our focus, however, relates to the more personal aspects of communication: What happens when people from different cultures interact face to face? Thus, our approach explores the interpersonal dimensions of intercultural communication across different contexts. The essays we have selected for this edition focus on the variables of culture and communication that are most likely to influence an intercultural communication encounter—those occasions when you attempt to exchange information, ideas, or feelings with someone from a culture different from your own.

With this in mind, we adhere to the following definition: *Intercultural communication occurs whenever a person from one culture sends a message to be processed by a person from a different culture.* Although this may seem somewhat simplistic, it requires a thorough understanding of two key elements—communication and culture. Therefore, in the following section we begin by examining communication and its various components, after which culture is explained. Finally, we explore how these two concepts are fused into the components of intercultural communication.

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## UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION

Communication is inescapable. It is something we have to do and something we enjoy doing, and in the Digital Age, we do a lot of it. Think about the many different ways that you engage in communication every day—watch TV, listen to music, talk to friends, listen to a class lecture (well, at least pretend to), daydream, send and receive messages through e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter, search for something new on YouTube, wear a suit to an interview, and in many, many other ways.

These are but a few of the communication events you participate in on a daily basis. To function in today's data rich society, one cannot avoid communicating. Moreover, we seem to have an innate need to associate with, and connect to, other people through communication. Thus, the motives for entering into

any communicative interaction can be categorized under one of three broad classifications. When people communicate, regardless of the situation or context, they are trying to (1) persuade, (2) inform, or (3) entertain. In other words, when you communicate, you do so with a purpose, an objective.

### Explaining Communication

It should be intuitively evident that communication is fundamental to contemporary daily life. But what exactly is communication? What happens when we communicate? In answering those questions, we will first define and then explain the phenomenon.

Communication has been defined variously, and each definition is usually a reflection of the author's objective or of a specific context. Often the definition is long and rather abstract, as the author tries to incorporate as many aspects of communication as possible. In some instances, the definition is narrow and precise, designed to explain a specific type or instance of communication. When studying the union of culture and communication, however, a succinct, easily understandable definition is in everyone's best interest. Thus, for us, *communication is the management of messages with the objective of creating meaning* (Griffin, 2005). This definition is somewhat broad, yet is precise in specifying what occurs in every communicative episode. Nor does it attempt to establish what constitutes successful or unsuccessful communication. Success is actually determined by the involved participants, can vary from one person to another, and is frequently scenario dependent. The only qualifiers we place on communication are intentionality and interaction. In other words, if communication is considered to be purposeful—to persuade, inform, or entertain—then we communicate with an intention, and we achieve our objective only by interacting with someone.

### The Framework of Communication

Employing the definition of communication provided above, let's now examine the eight major structural components used to manage messages and create meaning. The first and most obvious is the **sender**—the person or group originating the message. A sender

is someone with a need or desire, be it social, work, or public service, to communicate with others. In completing this desire, the sender formulates and transmits the message via a channel to the receiver(s).

The **message** consists of the information the sender desires to have understood—the data used to create meaning. Messages, which can be verbal or nonverbal, are encoded and transmitted via a **channel** to the receiver. The channel is any means that provides a path for moving the message from the sender to the receiver. For example, an oral message may be sent directly when in the immediate presence of the receiver or mediated through a cell phone, a conference call, or a YouTube video. A visual, or nonverbal, message can be transmitted directly by smiling to indicate pleasure or mediated through a photograph or text. Today, websites such as YouTube, Facebook, or LinkedIn provide channels offering senders a means to reach millions of receivers through mediated messages.

The **receiver(s)** is the intended recipient of the message and the location where meaning is created. Because the receiver interprets the message and assigns a meaning, which may or may not be what the sender intended, communication is often characterized as *receiver based*. You may text a friend, but for a variety of reasons, such as lack of nonverbal cues or insufficient context, the receiver may misinterpret the message and feel offended. After interpreting the message and assigning a meaning, the receiver may prepare a **response**. This is any action taken by the receiver as a result of the meaning he or she assigns to the message. A response can be benign, such as simply ignoring a provocative remark, or, at the other extreme, a physically aggressive act of violence.

The **feedback** component of communication is related to, yet separate from, the response. Feedback helps us to evaluate the effectiveness of a message. Perhaps the receiver smiles, or frowns, after decoding our message. This offers a clue as to the meaning the receiver assigned to the message and helps the sender adjust to the developing situation. Depending on the feedback, we may rephrase or amplify our message to provide greater clarity, ask whether the message was understood, or perhaps even retract the statement.

Every communicative interaction takes place within a physical and contextual **environment**. The physical environment refers to the location where

the communication occurs, such as a classroom, coffee shop, business office, or on an airplane. The contextual, or social, environment is more abstract and exerts a strong influence on the style of communication employed. Think about the different styles of communication you use during an interview or when applying for a student loan, asking a stranger for directions, visiting your professor's office, or apologizing when late meeting a friend. We alter our communicative style in response to the occasion and the receiver—the contextual environment.

**Noise**, the last component of communication, concerns the different types of interference or distractions that plague every communication event. *Physical noise* is separate from the communication participants and can take many forms, such as two people chatting in the back of the classroom during lecture, someone talking loudly on the subway, the sounds of traffic coming through the window of an apartment, or static on your cell phone.

Noise that is inherent to the people participating in the communication episode can take a variety of forms. Suppose during a Friday class you find yourself concentrating more on plans for a weekend road trip than on the lecture. Perhaps you are in a funk after learning your car needs an expensive brake job, or you might be worried about a term paper due next week. These are examples of *psychological noise* that can reduce your understanding of the classroom communication. *Physiological noise* relates to the physical well-being of the people engaged in the communication activity. Coming to class with too little sleep, dealing with a head cold, or simply feeling too hot or cold in the room will interfere with your ability to fully comprehend the classroom activity.

The final type of noise often occurs during intercultural communication and can easily produce misunderstandings. For effective communication in an intercultural interaction, participants must rely on a common language, which usually means that one or more individuals will not be using their native tongue. Native fluency in a second language is very difficult, especially when nonverbal behaviors are considered. People who use another language will often have an accent or might misuse a word or phrase, which can adversely influence the receiver's understanding of the message.

This type of distraction, referred to as *semantic noise*, also encompasses jargon, slang, and even specialized professional terminology (Wood, 2013).

Collectively, these eight components provide an overview of factors that facilitate, shape, and can hamper communication encounters. But there is also another influential factor that normally plays a role in communicative interactions. Our *culture* provides each of us with a set of standards that govern how, when, what, and even why we communicate. However, you must first understand the concept of culture itself in order to appreciate how it impacts communication.

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## WHAT IS CULTURE?

*Culture* is an extremely popular and increasingly over-used term in contemporary society. Expressions such as *cultural differences*, *cultural diversity*, *multiculturalism*, *corporate culture*, *cross-culture*, and other variations continually appear in the popular media. Culture has been linked to such diverse fields as corporate management, health care, psychology, education, public relations, marketing, and advertising. You may have heard that before deploying to Afghanistan U.S. troops receive training about the local culture and language. The pervasive use of the term attests to the increased awareness of the role that culture plays in our everyday activities. Seldom, however, are we provided a definition of just what constitutes culture or exactly what it does. This section will provide that information.

### Explaining Culture

As with communication, the term culture has been the subject of numerous and often complex, abstract definitions. What is frequently counted as one of the earliest and most easily understood definitions of culture, and one still used today, was written in 1871 by British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, who said culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (“Sir Edward,” 2012, para 1).

Ruth Benedict offered a more succinct definition when she wrote, “What really binds men together is their culture—the ideas and the standards they have in

common” (1959, p.16). A more complex explanation was provided by Clifford Geertz, who said culture is “a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (1973, p. 89). Contemporary definitions of culture commonly mention shared values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, norms, material objects, and symbolic resources (e.g., Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2010; Jandt, 2012; Lustig & Koester, 2012; Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Neuliep, 2011; Samovar et al., 2012). Indeed, the many and varied definitions attest to the complexity of this social concept called culture.

We propose an applied and hopefully more simplified explanation of culture. Stop for a moment and think about the word *football*. What mental picture comes to mind? Most U.S. Americans will envision two teams of eleven men each in helmets and pads, but someone in Montréal, Canada, would imagine twelve men per team. A resident of Sydney, Australia, might think of two eighteen-men teams in shorts and jerseys competing to kick an oblong ball between two uprights, while a young woman in São Paulo, Brazil, would probably picture two opposing teams of eleven players each attempting to kick a round ball into a net. In each case, the contest is referred to as “football,” but the playing fields, equipment, and rules of each game are quite different.

Try to think about how you would react in the following situations. Following your successful job interview with a large Chinese company, you are invited to dinner. At the restaurant, you sit at a round table with other people, and plates of food are continually being placed on a turntable in the table’s center. People are spinning the table, taking food from different places, talking with each other, and urging you to try items you are completely unfamiliar with. *How do you feel?* At a later date, one of your close friends, whose parents immigrated from Mumbai, India, invites you to his home for the first time. There, you are introduced to your friend’s grandfather, who places his palms together in front of his chest as if praying, bows, and says, “*Namaste.*” *What do you do?* In each of these examples perhaps you felt unsure of what to do or say, yet in China and India these behaviors are routine.

These examples illustrate our applied definition of culture. Simply stated, *culture is the rules for living and functioning in society*. In other words, culture provides the rules that socially organize a collective of people (Gudykunst, 2004; Yamada, 1997). Because the rules differ from culture to culture, in order to function and be effective in a particular culture, you need to know how to “play by the rules.” We learn the rules of our own culture as a matter of course, beginning at birth and continuing throughout life. As a result, our culture rules are ingrained in the subconscious, enabling us to react to familiar situations without thinking. It is when you enter another culture, with different rules, that problems are encountered.

## What Culture Does

If we accept the idea that culture can be viewed as a set of societal rules, its purpose becomes self-evident. Cultural rules provide a framework that gives meaning to events, objects, and people. The rules enable us to make sense of our surroundings and reduce uncertainty about the social environment. Recall the first time you were introduced to someone you were attracted to. You probably felt some level of nervousness because you wanted to make a positive impression. During the interaction you may have had a few thoughts about what to do and what not to do. Overall, you had a good idea of the proper courtesies, what to talk about, and generally how to behave. This is because you had learned the proper cultural rules of behavior by listening to and observing others. Now, take that same situation and imagine being introduced to a student from a different country, such as Jordan or Kenya. Would you know what to say and do? Would the cultural rules you had been learning since childhood be effective, or even appropriate, in this new social situation?

Culture also provides us with our identity, or sense of self. From childhood, we are inculcated with the idea of belonging to a variety of groups—family, community, church, sports teams, schools, and ethnicity—and these memberships form some of our different identities. Our cultural identity is derived from our “sense of belonging to a particular cultural or ethnic group” (Lustig & Koester, 2006, p. 3), which may be Chinese, Mexican American, African American, Greek, Egyptian, Jewish, or one or more of many, many other

possibilities. Growing up, we learn the rules of social conduct appropriate to our specific cultural group, or groups in the case of multicultural families such as Vietnamese American, Italian American, or Russian American. Cultural identity can become especially prominent during interactions between people from different cultural groups, such as a Pakistani Muslim and an Indian Hindu, who have been taught varied values, beliefs, and different sets of rules for social interaction. Thus, cultural identity can be a significant factor in the practice of intercultural communication.

## Culture’s Components

While there are many explanations of what culture is and does, there is general agreement on what constitutes its major characteristics. An examination of these characteristics will provide increased understanding of this abstract, multifaceted concept and also offer insight into how communication is influenced by culture.

**Culture Is Learned.** At birth, we have no knowledge of the many societal rules needed to function effectively in our culture, but we quickly begin to internalize this information. Through interactions, observations, and imitation, the proper ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving are communicated to us. Being taught to eat with a fork, a pair of chopsticks, or even one’s fingers is learning cultural behavior. Attending a Catholic mass on Sunday or praying at a Jewish Synagogue on Saturday is learning cultural behaviors and values. Celebrating Christmas, Kwanza, Ramadan, or Yom Kippur is learning cultural traditions. Culture is also acquired from art, proverbs, folklore, history, religion, and a variety of other sources. This learning, often referred to as enculturation, is both conscious and subconscious and has the objective of teaching the individual how to function properly within a specific cultural environment.

**Culture Is Transmitted Intergenerationally.** Spanish philosopher George Santayana wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” He was certainly not referring to culture, which exists only if it is remembered and repeated by people. You learned your culture from family members, teachers, peers, books, personal observations, and a host of media sources. The appropriate way to act, what to

say, and things to value were all communicated to the members of your generation by these many sources. You are also a source for passing these cultural expectations to succeeding generations, usually with little or no variation. Culture represents our link to the past and, through future generations, hope for the future. The critical factor in this equation is communication.

**Culture Is Symbolic.** Words, gestures, and images are merely symbols used to convey meaning. It is the ability to use these symbols that allows us to engage in the many forms of social intercourse used to construct and convey culture. Our symbol-making ability facilitates learning and enables transmission of meaning from one person to another, group to group, and generation to generation. In addition to transmission, the portability of symbols creates the ability to store information, which allows cultures to preserve what is considered important, and to create a history. The preservation of culture provides each new generation with a road map to follow and a reference library to consult when unknown situations are encountered. Succeeding generations may modify established behaviors or values, or construct new ones, but the accumulation of past traditions is what we know as culture.

**Culture Is Dynamic.** Despite its historical nature, culture is never static. Within a culture, new ideas, inventions, and exposure to other cultures create change. Discoveries such as the stirrup, gunpowder, the nautical compass, penicillin, and nuclear power are examples of culture's susceptibility to innovation and new ideas. More recently, advances made by minority groups, the women's movement, and gay rights advocates have significantly altered the fabric of contemporary U.S. society. Invention of the computer chip, the Internet, and the discovery of DNA have brought profound changes not only to U.S. culture but also to the rest of the world.

Diffusion, or cultural borrowing, is also a source of change. Think about how common pizza (Italian), sushi (Japanese), tacos (Mexican), and tandoori chicken and naan bread (India) are to the U.S. American diet. The Internet has accelerated cultural diffusion by making new knowledge and insights easily accessible. Immigrants bring their own cultural practices, traditions, and artifacts, some of which become incorporated into the

culture of their new homeland, for example, Vietnamese noodle shops in the United States, Indian restaurants in England, or Japanese foods in Brazil.

Cultural calamity, such as war, political upheaval, or large-scale natural disasters, can cause change. U.S. intervention in Afghanistan is bringing greater equality to the women of that nation. For better or worse, the invasion of Iraq raised the influence of Shia and Kurdish cultural practices and lessened those of the Sunni. International emergency relief workers responding to the earthquake and tsunami disaster in Japan brought their own cultural practices to the situation, some of which no doubt became intermingled with the cultural practices of the local Japanese.

Immigration is a major source of cultural diffusion. Many of the large U.S. urban centers now have areas unofficially, or sometimes officially, called Little Italy, Little Saigon, Little Tokyo, Korea Town, China Town, Little India, etc. These areas are usually home to restaurants, markets, and stores catering to a specific ethnic group. However, they also serve to introduce different cultural practices to other segments of the population.

Most of the changes affecting culture, especially readily visible changes, are often topical in nature, such as dress, food preference, modes of transportation, or housing. Values, ethics, morals, the importance of religion, or attitudes toward gender, age, and sexual orientation, which constitute the deep structures of culture, are far more resistant to major change and tend to endure from generation to generation.

**Culture Is Ethnocentric.** The strong sense of group identity, or attachment, produced by culture can also lead to ethnocentrism, the tendency to view one's own culture as superior to others. Ethnocentrism can arise from enculturation. Being continually told that you live in the greatest country in the world or that the United States is "exceptional," or that your way of life is better than those of other nations, or that your values are superior to those of other ethnic groups can lead to feelings of cultural superiority, especially among children. Ethnocentrism can also result from a lack of contact with other cultures. If exposed only to a U.S. cultural orientation, it is likely that you would develop the idea that your way of life was superior, and you would tend to view the rest of the world from that perspective.

An inability to understand or accept different ways and customs can also provoke feelings of ethnocentrism. It is quite natural to feel at ease with people who are like you and adhere to the same social norms and protocols. You know what to expect, and it is usually easy to communicate. It is also normal to feel uneasy when confronted with new and different social values, beliefs, and behaviors. You do not know what to expect, and communication is probably difficult. However, to view or evaluate those differences negatively simply because they vary from your expectations is a product of ethnocentrism, and an ethnocentric disposition is detrimental to effective intercultural communication.

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## INTEGRATING COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

There are a number of culture related components important in the study of intercultural communication. These include (1) perception, (2) patterns of cognition, (3) verbal behaviors, (4) nonverbal behaviors, and (5) the influence of context. Although each of these components will be discussed separately, you must keep in mind that in an intercultural setting, all become integrated and function at the same time.

### Perception

Every day we encounter an overwhelming amount of varied stimuli that we must cognitively process and assign a meaning. This procedure of selecting, organizing, and evaluating stimuli is referred to as perception. The volume of environmental stimuli is far too large for us to pay attention to everything, so we select only what is considered relevant or interesting. After determining what we will attend to, the next step is to organize the selected stimuli for evaluation. Just as in this book, the university library, media news outlets, or Internet web sites, information must be given a structure before it can be interpreted. The third step of perception then involves evaluating and assigning meaning to the stimuli.

A common assumption is that people conduct their lives in accordance with how they perceive the world, and these perceptions are strongly influenced by culture. In other words, we see, hear, feel, taste, and even

smell the world through the criteria that culture has placed on our perceptions. Thus, one's idea of beauty, attitude toward the elderly, concept of self in relation to others, and even what tastes good and bad are culturally influenced and can vary among social groups. For example, Vegemite is a yeast extract spread used on toast and sandwiches that is sometimes referred to as the "national food" of Australia. Yet, few people other than those from Australia or New Zealand like the taste, or even the smell, of this salty, dark paste spread.

As you would expect, perception is a critical aspect of intercultural communication, because people from dissimilar cultures frequently perceive the world differently. Thus, it is important to be aware of the relevant socio-cultural elements that have a significant and direct influence on the meanings we assign to stimuli. These elements represent our belief, value, and attitude systems and our worldview.

**Beliefs, Values, and Attitudes.** **Beliefs** can be defined as individually held subjective ideas about the nature of an object or event. These subjective ideas are, in large part, a product of culture, and they directly influence our behaviors. Bull fighting is generally thought to be cruel and inhumane by most people in the United States but many people in Spain and Mexico consider it part of their cultural heritage. Strict adherents of Judaism and Islam believe eating pork is forbidden, but in China, pork is a staple. In religion, many people believe there is only one god but others pay homage to multiple deities.

**Values** represent those things we hold important in life, such as morality, ethics, and aesthetics. We use values to distinguish between the desirable and the undesirable. Each person has a set of unique, personal values and a set of cultural values. The latter are a reflection of the rules a culture has established to reduce uncertainty, lessen the likelihood of conflict, help in decision making, and provide structure to social organization and interactions. Cultural values are a motivating force behind our behaviors. Someone from a culture that places a high value on harmonious social relations, such as Korea and Japan, will likely employ an indirect communication style. In contrast, a U.S. American can be expected to use a more direct style, because frankness, honesty, and openness are valued.

Our beliefs and values push us to hold certain **attitudes**, which are learned tendencies to act or respond in a specific way to events, objects, people, or orientations. Because culturally instilled beliefs and values exert a strong influence on attitudes, people tend to embrace what is liked and avoid what is disliked. Someone from a culture that considers cows sacred will surely take a negative attitude toward your invitation to have an Arby's roast beef sandwich for lunch.

**Worldview.** Although quite abstract, the concept of worldview is among the most important elements of the perceptual attributes influencing intercultural communication. Stated simply, worldview is what forms an individual's orientation toward such philosophical concepts as God, the universe, nature, and the like. Normally, worldview is deeply imbedded in one's psyche and usually operates on a subconscious level. This can be problematic in an intercultural situation, where conflicting worldviews can come into play. As an example, many Asian and Native North American cultures hold a worldview that people should have a harmonious, symbiotic relationship with nature. In contrast, Euro-Americans are instilled with the concept that people must conquer and mold nature to conform to personal needs and desires. Individuals from nations possessing these two contrasting worldviews could well encounter difficulties when working to develop an international environmental protection plan. The concept of democracy, with everyone having an equal voice in government, is an integral part of the U.S. worldview. Contrast this with Afghanistan and parts of Africa where the worldview holds that one's tribe or clan takes precedence over the central government.

### **Cognitive Patterns**

Another important consideration in intercultural communication is the influence of culture on cognitive thinking patterns, which include reasoning and approaches to problem solving. Culture often produces different ways of knowing and doing. Research by Nisbett (2003) has demonstrated that Westerners use a linear, cause-and-effect thinking process, which places considerable value on logical reasoning

and rationality. Thus, problems can be best solved by a systematic, in-depth analysis of each component, progressing individually from the simple to the more difficult. In contrast, Nisbett's research disclosed that Northeast Asians (Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans) employ a holistic thinking pattern. They see problems as much more complex and interrelated, requiring a greater understanding of, and emphasis on, the collective rather than focusing separately on individual parts.

A culture's normative thought patterns will influence the way individuals communicate and interact with each other. However, what is common in one culture may be problematic in another culture. As an illustration, in Japanese-U.S. business negotiations, the Japanese have a tendency to reopen previously discussed issues that the U.S. side considers resolved. United States negotiators find this practice to be frustrating and time-consuming, believing that once a point has been agreed upon, it is completed. From the Japanese holistic perspective, however, new topics can have an influence on previously discussed points (McDaniel, 2000). This example demonstrates the importance of understanding that variant patterns of cognition exist and the need to learn how to accommodate them in an intercultural communication encounter.

### **Nonverbal Behavior**

Another critical factor in intercultural communication is nonverbal behavior, which includes gestures, facial expressions, eye contact and gaze, posture and movement, touch, dress, silence, the use of space and time, objects and artifacts, and paralanguage. These nonverbal activities are inextricably intertwined with verbal behaviors and often carry as much or more meaning than the actual spoken words. As with language, culture also directly influences the use of, and meanings assigned to, nonverbal behavior. In intercultural communication, inappropriate or misused nonverbal behaviors can easily lead to misunderstandings and sometimes result in insults. A comprehensive examination of all nonverbal behaviors is beyond the scope of this chapter, but we will draw on a few culture-specific examples to demonstrate their importance in intercultural communication exchanges.

Nonverbal greeting behaviors show remarkable variance across cultures. In the United States, a firm handshake among men is the norm, but in some Middle Eastern cultures, a gentle grip is used. In Mexico, acquaintances will often embrace (*abrazar*) each other after shaking hands. Longtime Russian male friends may engage in a bear hug and kiss each other on both cheeks. People from Japan and India traditionally bow to greet each other. Japanese men will place their hands to the side of the body and bow from the waist, with the lower-ranking person bowing first and dipping lower than the other person. Indians will perform the *namaste*, which entails holding the hands together in a prayer-like fashion at mid-chest while slightly bowing the head and shoulders.

Eye contact is another important culturally influenced nonverbal communication behavior. For U.S. Americans, direct eye contact is considered a necessary part of making a good impression during an interview. However, in some cultures, direct eye contact is considered rude or even threatening. Among some Native Americans, children are taught to show adults respect by avoiding eye contact. When giving a presentation in Japan, it is common to see people in the audience with their eyes shut, because this is thought to facilitate listening (try it . . . you may be surprised). How a person dresses also sends a strong nonverbal message. What are your thoughts when you see an elderly woman wearing a *hijab* or a Jewish child with a *yarmulke*, or a young black man dressed in hip hop style.

Nonverbal facial and body expressions, like language, form a coding system for constructing and expressing meaning, and these expressions are culture bound. Through culture, we learn which nonverbal behavior is proper for different social interactions. But what is appropriate and polite in one culture may be disrespectful or even insulting in another culture. People engaging in intercultural communication, therefore, should try to maintain a continual awareness of how body behaviors may influence the interaction.

## Contextual Influences

We have defined culture as a set of rules established and used by a group of people to conduct social interaction. These rules determine what is considered correct communicative behavior, including both verbal

and nonverbal elements, for both physical and social (situational) contexts. For example, you would not normally attend a funeral wearing shorts and beach sandals or talk on your cell phone during the service. Your culture has taught you that these behaviors are disrespectful (i.e., contextually inappropriate).

Context is also an important consideration in intercultural communication interactions, where the rules for specific situations usually vary. What is expected in one culture is not necessarily correct in another. As an example, among most White U.S. Americans, church service is a relatively formal occasion, but among African American congregations, services are traditionally more demonstrative, energetic gatherings. In a restaurant in Germany, the atmosphere is usually somewhat subdued, with customers engaging in quiet conversation. In Spain, however, the conversation will be much louder and more animated. In U.S. universities, students are expected to interactively engage the instructor, but in Japan the expectation is that the instructor will simply lecture, with limited or no interaction.

In these examples we see the importance of having an awareness of the cultural rules governing the context of an intercultural communication exchange. Unless both parties in the exchange are sensitive to how culture affects the contextual aspects of communication, difficulties will most certainly arise and may negate effective interaction.

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## CONCLUSION

We began with a discussion of how intercultural communication has been a constant factor in human interactions throughout history. We end with a reflection on the requirement and urgency for greater tolerance of cultural differences generated by this new globalized, interdependent world order.

The world's population, as well as U.S. domestic demographics, continues to move toward a pluralistic, multicultural society at a quick-step pace. The social, economic, and political forces behind this movement will not easily or soon subside. The resulting cultural mixing requires that everyone, both individually and as a society, become more tolerant of the varied beliefs, worldviews, values, and behaviors of people from other cultures. Acceptance or tolerance may not be

appropriate in every situation, nor is universal, unquestioning acquiescence to every difference advocated. We do, however, have to be willing to “live and let live” on a broader scale. That we do not yet seem able or prepared to do this is demonstrated by ongoing international and domestic struggles.

The international community is beleaguered with violence and strife arising from ideological, cultural, ethnic, and historical differences. As we write this chapter, conflict between religious factions in Iraq appears to be resurging. The long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved and there is little promise of a solution in the near future. The dispute between India and Pakistan continues over who should control the Jammu and Kashmir Province in the Himalayas. Japan is at odds with China and the Republic of Korea over two different sets of uninhabited islands. The indigenous Tibetan population continues to resist what they consider an oppressive domination by the Chinese government. Iran is at odds with most of the Western world over the issue of becoming a nuclear power. The global war on terrorism, a product of variant ideological and cultural perspectives, continues with little prospect of a final solution. Disagreement over what constitutes human rights remains a source of tension among many nations, but especially the United States, China, and Russia.

Intolerance of differences is also a continuing issue within the United States, where we are divided over a seeming multitude of culturally based issues, many of which fall along a conservative vs. liberal ideology divide. The demands of coping with diverse customs, values, views, and behaviors inherent in a multicultural society are producing increased levels of personal frustration, social stress, and often violence.

### Selected Sources of US Domestic Division

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|---------------------------------------|---|
| • Stem cell research                  | • Assisted suicide                            |
| • Gay rights                          | • Same sex marriage                           |
| • Affirmative action                  | • Illegal immigration                         |
| • Right to life vs. Freedom of choice | • Government involvement in healthcare issues |
| • School prayer                       | • School voucher program                      |
| • Legalization of drugs               | • Sex education                               |
| • Death penalty                       | • Gun control                                 |
| • Role of government                  | • Environmental issues                        |
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As tides of immigrants and refugees continue to arrive in the United States and other economically developed nations, we will be confronted with increased cultural diversity. If we continue to aver that cultural diversity is a valuable, desirable asset and embrace the concept of a global village, we must quickly learn to accept and tolerate the resulting differences. Your authors do not profess to have the solution to these problems. However, as a means of better preparing you for life in the global village, requiring frequent interactions with people who perceive and experience the world differently from you, we do hope to stimulate thought and discussion about the advantages and difficulties of multiculturalism and the need for effective intercultural communication.

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