Ethnocentrism/Xenophobia

Bennett, M. (2013). Entry in C. Cortes (Ed) *Multicultural America: A multimedia encyclopedia*. New York: Sage

The term "ethnocentrism" was coined by William Graham Sumner in reference to the view that one's own group is the center of everything, with others judged in terms of the familiar standards of that group. One manifestation of ethnocentrism is "xenophobia," or the fear of outsiders. Xenophobia may have served an evolutionary purpose in the development of homo sapiens by allowing them to automatically reject potentially competitive groups, but it is an increasingly dysfunctional response to modern mobility and multiculturality. Fear, like all emotions, arises from our perceptual experience. So to address the fear of outsiders, we need to understand how insiders and outsiders are being created and maintained by our perceptual experience of culture.

The idea of ethnocentrism has long been associated with a kind of national xenophobia, but the basic mechanism of ethnocentrism is equally applicable to understanding many troublesome aspects of domestic intergroup relations. The key to reducing xenophobia among domestic ethnic groups, including immigrant groups, is to assume 1) that all groups have a cultural dimension and 2) that relations among groups includes a kind of intercultural communication. With these assumptions, it is possible to see three major aspects of ethnocentrism that impact multicultural relations in America (and elsewhere). (See section on Intercultural Communication for a discussion of "culture" in multiculturalism.)

Ethnocentrism as Denial

The primary mechanism of ethnocentrism is perceptual. The groups in which we are socialized provide us with a set of figure/ground distinctions that give form to some phenomena and not to others. For instance, U.S. American women as a group are taught to make many more distinctions in texture and color than are U.S American men, while generally men are provided with more categories for distinguishing technical objects like automobiles and computers. (See section on Generalizations for a discussion of generalizing about a group without stereotyping members of the group.) The result of this socialization is that women tend to treat color and texture as objects of interest, while men tend to treat them as just background. Men, on the other hand, tend to treat cars or computers as important objects of interest, while women tend to see them as just the mechanisms through which transportation or information occurs.

In communication between these two groups, American women may see American men as aesthetically incompetent, while men may lament women's intransigence towards learning basic mechanical skills. However, in both cases, the issue is not really about behavior – it is about perceptual conditioning. If we have not learned to differentiate certain objects, we cannot generate categories that let us talk about or even think about those objects. The others may seem incompetent, but really they are simply oblivious.

There are at least two major implications of perceptual conditioning for multicultural group relations. One is that entire groups of people may exist and not be perceived at all by people of other groups. For instance, not so long ago in the United States, many straight people did not have a well-developed perceptual category for gay people. Consequently, straights tended not to perceive the existence of gays as a group; when asked, they greatly underestimated the size of the group, and they reacted to individual gay people who came to their attention as deviants from their own group rather

than normal people in a different group. The perceptual category for gays is now much better defined, as evidenced by the recent event of the president of Iran claiming that there were no gay people in Iran – a statement ridiculed by many of the same people who once claimed the same thing in the U.S.

African Americans and members of other minority groups have usually experienced having their existence denied, meaning that they were not noticed as objects of attention and treated only as part of the general background. Recipients of this non-attention often report that they would rather be the object of discrimination than not an object at all.

The second implication of this kind of ethnocentrism is that people may fail to attribute equal humanity to others. The reason for this is that ethnocentric people experience their own culture as much more complex than other cultures; they have well-developed perceptual categories to organize the familiar events of their own culture, while they have at best only vague notions of the perceptual categories generated by other cultures. As a consequence, these people may experience themselves and their compatriots as complex human beings while they experience others as more simple and primitive. In its relatively benign form this contrast generates the "little brown brother" syndrome, wherein dominant-culture members help others to develop the obviously superior dominant-culture perceptual categories.

The more serious implication of denying equal humanity to others is its potential to support exploitation or even extermination. If others are not as human as one's self, it is no more exploitive to enslave them than it is to harness animals. And from perceiving others as valuable animals, it is only one more step to experiencing them as disgusting rodents or insects, possibly justifying genocide or ethnic cleaning.

Ethnocentrism as Defense

As people's perceptual categories for other groups become somewhat better defined, those groups may seem to be more threatening; they seem more human, but in a simple and primitive way. Following basic psychological attribution theory, ethnocentric people attribute complex motivations to members of their own culture while attributing simple motivations to other groups. For instance, immigrant groups assumedly come to the U.S. only because "they want to take our jobs" and minority groups have children so "they can collect government welfare checks." These and the other typical negative stereotypes form the basis of a perceived attack on "our way of life." Under this threat, ethnocentric people defend their own culture by derogating others and by asserting the superiority of themselves.

The defense/derogation form of ethnocentrism is more obvious than the denial form, since it generally involves a strong polarization of "us and them" and overt expressions of disrespect for others. We are the good guys and they are the bad guys. But the boundaries of who constitutes "us" and who constitutes "them" are mutable. Against immigrants, "us" may be U.S. Americans of all majority and minority groups. But an arbitrary generational boundary may separate some of "us" who have been in the U.S. more than three or four generations from "us" who have only been in the U.S. for one or two generations. For this reason, African Americans of U.S. slave heritage may consider more recently arrived African Americans as "them," but both groups may be "us" compared to the "them" of blacks of Caribbean slave heritage. While this is an obvious cultural identity issue, it also fuels different expressions of ethnocentrism, since the culture that is experienced as central is a moving target.

Slightly more subtle expressions of defense are statements of the superiority of one's own culture. Rather than derogating others, ethnocentrism may be expressed by affirming the standards of one's group as central to quality and civilized action. Thus, community development efforts, like colonialism, may be enactments of an experience of cultural superiority, and schools may insist, in the name of preserving educational quality, on helping students match the cultural standards of one ethnic group. People who promulgate such efforts often do so with good (albeit ethnocentric) intentions, and they may be surprised or even angered if prospective recipients reject the offered assistance. On an interpersonal level, similar ethnocentric assumptions may underlie some coaching or mentoring efforts

in organizations. When an ethnocentric member of the dominant group (in the U.S., usually an older white male) is given the task of mentoring a younger person, a woman, or a person of color, he may take it as a directive to help his charge get over his or her troublesome cultural predilections and to adopt the clearly successful cultural standards of European Americans.

Sometimes ethnocentrism is expressed in a reversed polarization of "us" and "them." This may occur when a member of a dominant group takes on the cause of an oppressed group in a way that romanticizes the adopted group while derogating the dominant culture. Romanticizing, or exotifying a group involves experiencing the group's culture in terms of positive stereotypes, such as "all Asians are smart," or "Latino people have a deep love of life." The simplistic (but positive) experience allowed by these stereotypes is juxtaposed to the more complex experience of the shortcomings of one's own culture. In other words, "them" become the good guys and "us" become the bad guys. This is still ethnocentric defense, but with the poles reversed.

Ethnocentrism as Minimization

The subtlest form of ethnocentrism is when cultural difference is minimized in favor of stressing human similarity and common experience. On the surface, such minimization appears to be the solution to ethnocentrism, since it reduces many of the expressions of the denial and defense. However, minimization actually reinforces the basic mechanism of ethnocentrism – the experience of one's own culture as central to reality. Rather than rejecting or derogating other groups, one's own culture is taken as being central to the experience of all human beings, whatever cultural group they belong to.

In the minimization form of ethnocentrism, attention is directed to the fact that human beings of all groups are genetically quite similar, and that they all face the challenge of satisfying needs for safety, security, socialization, and spirituality. Further, certain "universal values" are assumed to underlie our various cultural experiences, making particular cultures like transforms of a universal cultural grammar shared by all human beings. Variations in group experience therefore become relatively trivial compared to our immersion in the basic experience of being human. Here, ethnocentrism is expressed as a kind of worldview projection. For instance, ethnocentric Christians tend to believe that deep down, whether they know it or not, everyone is a child of God. But ethnocentric Hindus tend to think that everyone has dharma and karma. Ethnocentric Marxists believed that everyone given a chance would revolt against class-based economic control, but ethnocentric capitalists think that everyone given a chance would try to become an individual entrepreneur in a market-driven society.

In domestic relations among groups in a multicultural society, minimization becomes a pressure towards assimilation. In the United States, ethnocentric members of the dominant ethnic group of European Americans tend to define aspects of their culture – e.g. individualism, personal responsibility, and communicative directness – as central to all human experience. Further, they may see the U.S. as "exceptional" in its adherence to these assumedly basic human qualities. Consequently, in this view, to be an American is to share these cultural qualities – not because European Americans have the power in many cases to enforce these qualities through education and selection, but because they are the universal human qualities that America has the responsibility for upholding. And to note that alternative cultural qualities co-exist within the American national culture is not taken as an accurate description of multiculturalism, but as a betrayal of the sacred covenant upon which the country was founded.

Minimization also masks cultural privilege. European Americans tend to believe that all people have an equal opportunity for success in the U.S. unless they are victims of active prejudicial discrimination. When it is noted that the higher ranks of nearly all organizations are populated by a predominance of European American males, including in organizations with strict anti-discrimination policies and procedures, ethnocentric members of that group may claim that other people certainly had the chance, but they just didn't want to work as hard. This expression of minimization ignores the privilege enjoyed by dominant culture members, which is to define the path to success in their own cultural terms.

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See also in this volume: Acculturation/Assimilation; Constructivism; Genocide; Identity Development (ethnic and racial); Intercultural Communication; Stereotypes/Generalizations, Racism.

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Intercultural Communication

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Intercultural communication is the study and practice of communication across cultural contexts. It applies equally to domestic cultural differences such as ethnicity and gender and to international differences such as those associated with nationality or world region. Intercultural communication is an approach to relations among members of these groups that focuses on the recognition and respect of cultural differences, seeks the goal of mutual adaptation leading to biculturalism rather than simple assimilation, and supports the development of intercultural sensitivity on the part of individuals and organizations to enable empathic understanding and competent coordination of action across cultural differences.

The following paragraphs expand on the definitions of "communication" and "cultural context" based on principles of constructivism [See the section on "Constructivism" for a definition and discussion of that term], and then summarize the development of intercultural sensitivity as the basis for exercising competent intercultural communication.

Communication

Communication is much more than a simple transmission of information: it is the *mutual creation of meaning*. Information is not, in itself, meaningful; it is only when information is intended and interpreted in some way that it attains significance. For instance, if you are telling me about a movie you just saw, you probably intend for me to understand what the movie is about and also something about your experience and evaluation of it. You pose the information in a language I know, use references to concepts and other films I might know, and in conveying your feeling you assume that I am able and willing to access your experience. For my part, I try to interpret the information in the way you intended it by using common meanings for words and concepts and by recognizing both our common experience of similar events and the uniqueness of your personal experience in this particular event.

Of course, the exchange described above is an ideal that is seldom achieved in one pass (or many). What usually happens is that my interpretation is both more and less than what you intended. It is less in my probable failure to assign exactly similar meaning to words and concepts that you use, and it is more in that I probably project many of my own feelings about similar events onto your description. In my response (feedback) to your message, you may recognize some of my discrepant interpretation and correct it. Assuming that this is not your first communication with someone like me, you may have already anticipated some of my likely misinterpretation by tailoring your message to me in the first place. So both your intention and my interpretation are in play as we attempt to negotiate a mutually acceptable match. The final meaning of the communication event is neither just your intention nor simply my interpretation; it is our mutual creation of an agreeable position.

Culture

The sense of "culture" used in intercultural communication is that of "worldview." Culture is a generalization about how a group of people coordinate meaning and action among themselves. One way they do that is through institutions such as religious, political, and economic systems, and family and

other social structures. But underlying these institutions is a habitual organization of how the world is perceived, and thus how it is experienced. These habits are often referred to as cultural assumptions and values, and they occur in all groups, not just national societies. In general, intercultural communication focuses on this worldview aspect of culture and not so much on the institutions of culture. Human communication is conducted by people, not institutions. The concern of any study of communication is therefore with the way that human beings organize meaning. We all are influenced by the institutional structures that we internalize as part of socialization, and understanding those institutions may give insight into how we habitually organize our perception, but in the end it is our human worldview that generates meaning, not institutional structure.

An essential element of culture is the boundary that distinguishes "us" from "them." Every human being belongs to groups defined by boundaries. Typical boundaries are those formed by nation-states (e.g. US Americans, Japanese, Nigerians) or by ethnic groups composed of people with a particular tribal, national, or regional heritage (e.g. Kurdish, Jewish, Russian, European, African). Within a boundary, people communicate with each other differently than with people outside the boundary. The difference may or may not involve using a different language or jargon, but it always includes different kinds of agreements on meaning and action. A cultural boundary indicates a greater amount of interaction and need for coordination among those enclosed by it.

In the case of some ethnic heritage, family interaction may be primarily responsible for preserving the cultural agreements, but for many ethnicities there is also likely to be greater interaction with other members of the ethnic group (e.g. Chinese Americans). This is particularly true if color (race) is involved, since people naturally distinguish themselves by color and thus may group more easily with people who are physically similar. Color discrimination is not necessarily associated with prejudice, but it certainly can be used for that purpose, as can other distinctions among groups. Color is a particularly complex boundary, since in many societies it does represent a particular type of social experience vis a vis prejudice or privilege, and that common experience may produce certain agreements on meaning (e.g. an understanding of "driving while black"). Yet color is not necessarily associated with any particular ethnicity (e.g. black people of African vs. Caribbean heritage, white people of Anglo vs Teutonic vs Latin heritage). The ethnic boundary is a much more powerful cultural indicator than the color boundary, since it rests on a deeper set of institutions. So for instance, black Caribbean Americans may experience prejudice similarly to black African Americans, but that fact does not obviate the significant cultural differences between those two groups.

In multicultural societies, national and ethic boundaries are often combined to indicate membership in both groups (e.g. African American, European American, Malay Singaporean, Russian Kazakhstani). In addition to these common distinctions, boundaries are also formed by geographical regions within or across national boundaries (e.g. Southern Italians, Pacific Northwest Americans, Western Europeans, Sub-Saharan Africans) Also importantly, the boundaries of organizations often indicate very strong and distinct cultural worldviews (e.g. corporate cultures, police culture, armed services culture, peace corps culture). Within organizations, different functional groups such as accountants, service people, engineers, detectives, etc. are likely to share a culture. Within societies, cultural boundaries may also include gender, sexual orientation, generation (age), and other grouping. In these and other cases, the culture is generated not by any particular belief or behavior of the group, but by the need to coordinate meaning and action among more frequently interacting people. So, for instance, gay culture is not about homosexuality per se; it is about how people communicate with other people with whom they are more likely to be in contact due to shared sexuality. In this same way, some religious or political groups can generate culture, not because of their particular beliefs, but because people in the groups are spending more time with others who agree with them.

When an intercultural approach is used in domestic multicultural situations, it commonly generates some controversy. The argument against the assumption of domestic cultures generally goes like this: cultural differences, if they exist among different ethnic and racial groups, are not nearly so important as differences in power, privilege, and access to sources of wealth and well-being. So even if

they exist, a focus on cultural differences is just a distraction from the more pressing concerns of social and institutional equity. Roughly this same argument is used against focusing on the intercultural communication aspects of gender relations.

One counter-argument is to note the "humanizing" effect of worldview. Focusing on the unique experience of a cultural worldview is a direct antidote to an objectification and exploitation of people that is based simply on their color, gender, or heritage. Intercultural communication necessitates understanding the unique experience of others as the key to coordinating meaning and action towards some common goal. Another argument in favor of intercultural communication is that culture must be understood relative to its own context. Culture cannot be judged against an absolute standard of civilization, and therefore people of one culture are not intrinsically superior or inferior to people of another culture. They are just different.

Intercultural Communication

Since "communication" is the mutual creation of meaning and "culture" is the coordination of meaning and action in a group, it follows that "intercultural communication" is the mutual creation of meaning across cultures. This means that intercultural communication is the mechanism whereby people of different groups perceive and try to make sense of one another. While there is no guarantee that people will be respectful of the differences they encounter in this process, it is certainly a criterion of good communication that people seek to understand the intentions of each other in non-evaluative ways. For that reason, intercultural communication incorporates particular strategies that encourage us to attribute equal humanity and complexity to people who are not part of our own group.

The most common tactical goal of intercultural communication is to inform one-way cross-cultural adaptations in situations such as teaching in multicultural classrooms, providing social services (including policing) in multicultural communities, traveling for business or pleasure, and some kinds of international study. In those cases, sojourners need to recognize cultural differences that are relevant to short-term communication, to predict misunderstanding that may arise from those differences, and to adapt their behavior as necessary to participate appropriately in the cross-cultural encounter. Central to this application is having a good system for identifying cultural differences that are relevant to communication. Several of those systems are included in the Further Reading following this entry. Whatever system is used, the outcome of employing tactical intercultural communication is generally to decrease stereotyping of the cultures encountered, increase knowledge of cultural differences, and broaden the behavioral repertoire of the adapters.

A more substantial practical goal of intercultural communication is to contribute to the success of cross-cultural projects such as transferring knowledge, conducting long-term business, or effecting change through community development projects. In these cases, more people involved in the cross-cultural encounter need to make adaptations toward one another in order to coordinate meaning and action adequately. When intercultural adaptation is two-way, or mutual, it tends to create "third cultures" in which two or more cultural patterns of coordination are themselves coordinated. Third cultures are virtual conditions that come into existence for the purpose of intercultural communication and then dissolve when that communication is not active. Third cultures may become longer lasting when they constantly employed in multicultural groups or communities, but, by definition, third cultures do not supplant the original cultural patterns that they coordinate.

The most strategic application of intercultural communication is to derive the value of cultural diversity. This has long been the goal of multicultural societies, and it more recently is being touted by global corporations. After some mistaken hope that diversity in itself generates value, it is now accepted that cultural diversity creates the potential but not the actuality of added value. The potential of diversity is to offer alternative perspectives and approaches to tasks, thus contributing to innovation and creativity. However, the actuality is that diversity is frequently suppressed or eliminated in the name of unified action: "my way or the highway." This is particularly notable in immigration policies and in

corporate mergers and acquisitions, where the rhetoric of added value is generally at direct odds with the practice of demanding assimilation to the stronger culture. Assimilation destroys the potential for added value from diversity. One-way adaptation preserves the potential of added value, but it does not actualize it. Only mutual adaptation can generate third cultures that support the coordination of cultural differences, and it is from those coordinated differences that value is added.

Other Intergroup Relations Terms

Within the context of intercultural communication, the term "multicultural" is used to refer to the multiple cultures represented in a group, So, for instance, the U.S. workforce has become more multicultural, meaning that there is more diversity of national heritage due to immigration, more variation in domestic ethnic groups, more gender and age diversity, and more representation of minorities such as people with disabilities. Communities become multicultural as immigrants settle there, and teachers face increasingly multicultural classrooms.

The term "diversity" is sometimes used synonymously with "multicultural," referring to the existence of cultural difference. For instance, when a company has a diversity policy, it often refers to how minorities will be actively recruited, thus creating a more multicultural organization. Sometimes "diversity" or the term "inclusion" is used more generally to refer to dealing with issues associated with multiculturality, such as prejudice, stereotyping, segregation, denial of equal rights, and other inappropriate or illegal behavior. Occasionally "diversity" is used to refer to actual cultural diversity, and diversity training moves beyond prejudice reduction towards recognizing, respecting, and dealing productively with cultural differences.

The term "cross-cultural" refers to contact between cultural groups. For instance, in a company with a multicultural workforce, there is more likely to be cross-cultural contact among the workers. More substantially, expatriate managers or exchange students who live in a different cultural context have significant amounts of cross-cultural contact. Cross-cultural contact in itself is not necessary contributive to good intercultural relations. Under some conditions it may generate negative stereotypes or defensiveness, while at best it increases tolerance and reduces stereotyping. Cross-cultural may also refer to comparative studies of culture; e.g. in a cross-cultural study of smiling, Thai respondents were more likely than US Americans to interpret that facial gesture as embarrassment.

The term "intercultural" refers to interaction among members of two or more distinct cultural groups. The term is seldom used synonymously with multicultural, so groups are not described as intercultural unless they are specifically set up to encourage interaction (e.g., the "intercultural workshop"). The term intercultural is usually used as a modifier, so for instance "intercultural communication" or "intercultural relations." The term "intercultural sensitivity" has a long history of referring to an ability to make complex perceptual discriminations among cultural patterns, and recently the term "intercultural competence" has been used to refer to an array of characteristics and abilities that seem related to successful intercultural interactions.

The following statement follows the definitions: a *multicultural* workforce is likely to have a lot of *cross-cultural* contact that demands more competence in *intercultural* communication from everyone.

Developing Intercultural Sensitivity and Competence

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) developed by Milton J. Bennett is a framework that explains how people experience and handle cultural difference. The DMIS is grounded theory; it is based on observations made in both academic and corporate settings about how people become more competent intercultural communicators. The model uses concepts from constructivist psychology and communication theory to organize these observations into positions along a continuum of increasing sensitivity to cultural difference.

The underlying assumption of the model is that as one's perceptual organization of cultural difference becomes more complex, one's experience of culture becomes more sophisticated and the potential for exercising competence in intercultural relations increases. By recognizing how cultural difference is being experienced, predictions about the effectiveness of intercultural communication can be made and educational interventions can be tailored to facilitate development along the continuum.

The DMIS continuum extends from *ethnocentrism,* the experience of one's own culture as "central to reality," to *ethnorelativism,* the experience of one's own and other cultures as "relative to context." Positions along the continuum define the general ways in which perception of cultural difference is being organized into experience. Generally, developmental movement is one-way and permanent, although there may be retreats from one ethnocentric position to another and some ethnocentric issues may remain unresolved as people move into ethnorelativism. Nevertheless, each individual or group has a *predominant experience of cultural difference*, described by the following positions:

- **Denial** of cultural difference is the experience in which cultural difference is not perceived at all, or it is perceived only in very broad categories such as "foreigner" or "minority." The constructs available for perceiving one's own culture are far more complex than those available for other cultures. People experience psychological and/or physical isolation from cultural difference, and they are disinterested or perhaps even hostilely dismissive of intercultural communication. It is difficult to recognize the essential humanity of others who are obviously different from one's self, and naïve questions about the other culture may appear disrespectful. In the extreme, power may be used to exploit others without sensitivity to their feelings of degradation.
- **Defense** against cultural difference is the experience in which cultural difference is perceived in simplistic stereotyped ways. Cultures are organized into "us and them," where typically the "us" is superior and the "them" is inferior. People at Defense are threatened by cultural difference, so they tend to be highly critical of other cultures and apt to blame cultural difference for general ills of society. Power derived from institutional dominance or from non-dominant posturing is used to support segregation.
- **Defense/Reversal.** An alternative form of the Defense reverses the polarity of "us" and "them," where an adopted culture is romanticized, while one's own group is subjected to greater criticism. Reversal has traditionally been found in non-dominant groups as "internalized oppression," where the dominant group culture is valued more highly than the non-dominant one. When dominant group members discover that their own group is the oppressor ("externalized oppression"), they sometimes switch sides and take on the cause of a non-dominant group with extreme zeal. Internationally, this also may happen when exchange students "go native." In both cases, the experience is one of self-criticism combined with exotification of other groups.
- **Minimization** of cultural difference occurs when elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal. People tend to assume that their physical or psychological experiences are shared by people of all cultures, and/or that certain basic values and beliefs transcend cultural boundaries. The stressing of cross-cultural similarity reduces Defense, so people here are much more tolerant of cultural diversity, although the tolerance generally does not extend into appreciation of substantial cultural differences. People who move from Defense and settle into Minimization may feel that they have arrived at an enlightened position. They are likely to label any discussion of cultural difference as a form of Defense, because that is their only prior experience of cultural difference. Because they now think that intercultural understanding is based primarily on similarity, they tend to overestimate their sensitivity to people who in fact are quite different from them. At this position, people of the dominant group underestimate their racial and cultural privilege – their exaggerated assumption of similarity leads them to also exaggerate equality of opportunity. Also, dominant-group members may engage in certain forms of political correctness that stress similarity, such as being "color-blind."

- **Acceptance** of cultural difference is the experience in which one's own culture as just one of a number of equally complex worldviews. Cultural difference becomes important again, this time out of curiosity rather than threat. In accepting difference, people acknowledge that people of other cultures, while equally human to themselves, are in fact organizing their experience of reality differently – according to the different assumptions of their culture. Acceptance does not mean agreement with or liking other cultures – cultural difference may be judged negatively – but the judgment is made in a contextually relative way. The recognition that people are equally complex, but different, is a strong antidote to bigotry. Rather than trying to directly reduce prejudice (which, if successful, just creates Minimization), the move to Acceptance extends the boundary of human similarity and difference to include other groups. In other words, people of other cultures are afforded equal and unique humanity.
- **Adaptation** to cultural difference occurs when people build on their Acceptance of cultural difference by temporarily trying to organize the world in different ways. Using a process of cognitive frame-shifting, people can create a "facsimile worldview" that organizes their perception of events in a way corresponding more closely to that of the other culture. The alternative worldview generates an alternative experience – one that is more appropriate to the other culture. By basing behavior on the alternative "feeling of appropriateness," people at this position can intentionally modify their behavior to communicate both authentically and effectively in another culture. When both parties to a communication attempt to adapt their behavior in this way, it generates *virtual third cultures* – new contexts that emerge intentionally from particular cross-cultural interactions.
- **Integration** of cultural difference is the experience of self that includes movement in and out of different cultural worldviews. People at this position maintain complex multicultural identities and exist in a kind of liminal state where they are constantly in the process of becoming something different. This makes them outsiders to most groups and generates ethical ambiguity, but it also pushes them toward cultural bridge-building and sophisticated ethical commitments. Integration is more likely to occur among non-dominant minority groups, long-term expatriates, "global nomad kids," and others with primary or acquired multiculturality.

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See also in this volume: Ethnocentrism/Xenophobia, Constructivism, Stereotypes/Generalizations, Acculturation/Assimilation, Identity Development (Ethnic & Racial), Intercultural Competence, Cross-Cultural Psychology, Culture, Culture Shock, Diversity & Inclusion, Tolerance (Understanding & Empathy).

Further Reading

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Stereotypes/Generalizations

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A cultural generalization is a statement about a group of people. For instance, saying that US Americans tend to be more individualistic compared to many other cultural groups is an accurate generalization about that group. A cultural generalization may become a stereotype if it is definitively applied to individual members of the group. For instance, it would be stereotyping a particular person to assume that he or she must be individualistic by virtue of being a US American.

The term "stereotype" refers to a metallic template used in printing repetitive copies of something. As it is used in the context of intercultural communication, a cultural stereotype is a rigid description of a group (all people of Group X are like this) or, alternatively stated, it is the rigid application of a generalization to every person in the group (you are a member of X, therefore you must fit the general qualities of X). Stereotypes can be avoided to some extent by using cultural generalizations as only tentative hypotheses about how an individual member of a group might behave.

We cannot and should not avoid making cultural generalizations. Generalizations are an inherent part of human perception. Every describable object of perception has been assigned to a category that associates it with other assumedly similar objects and contrasts it with other assumedly different objects. For instance, horses may be assigned to the category of domesticated work animals, similar to oxen and camels, but different than pets such as cats and parrots. Horses may also (or alternatively) belong to the category of food animals (along with cows and goats) in contrast to the category of competitive animals such as roosters and dogs. But there cannot be a horse or any other object of perception without some set of associations.

The idea of “culture” is itself a categorization of people. In fact, it is impossible to refer to a group at all without making a generalization about what qualities are shared by members of the group. But like horses, people could be assigned to different cultural categories depending on what criteria are used for comparing them to other groups. Also, individual members vary in the degree to which they share the group’s common characteristics. To deny that variation -- to assume that every individual is a static representative of a single group -- is the essence of stereotyping.

It is possible to make accurate generalizations about prevalent qualities of a group without stereotyping individuals in the group. Accurate generalizations are based on the measurement of a chosen set of cultural criteria (for instance, “styles” or “values”) in a large number or a random sample of individuals. This process either generates groups based on similar patterns of criteria, or it describes the patterns that exist within a group based on other criteria, such as national boundaries. If the generalization rests on too small a sample, it may describe some unusual quality that is not represented widely in the group as a whole. This is why it is not a good idea to generalize from having met a few members of an existing group; they probably are not representative of the group. Basing a generalization purely on personal experience is likely to be inaccurate, but inaccuracy is not the basis of stereotyping. It is when generalizations – accurate or inaccurate – are rigidly applied to individuals that they become stereotypes.

Level of Analysis for Generalizations

For the purpose of making cultural generalizations that are useful for analyzing interaction, it is important to define what *level of analysis* we are using in observing human behavior. Culture in the sense it is used in intercultural work refers to a *group level* of analysis, where the concern is with the prevalence of defined qualities such as values or styles within defined groups such as a national societies, ethnic groups, geopolitical regions, etc. (See section on Intercultural Communication) By contrast, an *individual level* of analysis refers to individual characteristics and personality. It is generally assumed that genetically driven personality traits and personal characteristics such as intelligence are more or less equivalently distributed in different cultural contexts. Following this assumption, we cannot say that one culture has more of a personality trait like extroversion than another, and similarly we certainly cannot say that one cultural group is less intelligent than another. In other words, we cannot make cultural generalizations about individual characteristics; to do so constitutes a "confusion of level of analysis."

It is important for intercultural work to not confuse these two levels of analysis. If, for instance, we are trying to analyze a conflict between two people, the individual level of analysis would lead us to consider differences in personality (e.g. extroversion/introversion), intelligence, learning style, leadership style, and other characteristics that are treated as personal variations. However, we could also analyze the conflict at a group level of analysis, looking for differences in cultural worldview such as communication style, nonverbal expression, or cultural values (e.g. individualism/collectivism). It may well be that the conflict can be explained adequately with reference to only personal differences – a "personality clash." But in many situations, particularly cross-cultural ones, clashes in worldview may be as or more important in explaining the conflict. Since much of popular and even academic lore regarding communication is posed in psychological terms (at the individual level of analysis), it takes a conscious effort to maintain focus on worldview issues at the group level of analysis.

At an *institutional level* of analysis, focus is on human behavior in terms of institutions such political, economic, or religious systems. Events can be analyzed at this level by understanding how institutions channel human behavior into certain interaction patterns. For instance, the conflict mentioned earlier might be approached usefully by analyzing status and power relationships of the participants or by understanding their possibly different allegiances to competing organizations. Some forms of cultural studies combine the institutional and individual levels of analysis, seeking to position individuals in social organizations in terms of power, privilege, and oppression. A wide range of behavior (e.g. dominant/non-dominant group relations) is then explained in terms of the roles (and thus the relative power) people have in society.

Without denying the importance of power relationships, the institutional level of analysis may nevertheless be conceptually dangerous ground for cultural generalizations. Institutions such as political and economic structures, architecture, literature, etc. are artifacts of culture; that is, they are the products of groups of people who are coordinating meaning and action amongst themselves. Once created, institutions become "objective" in the sense that they exist as relatively stable objects in our environment. When we define behavior in terms of objective institutions, the behavior itself becomes objectified, and role relations among people in institutional terms becomes static. In explaining human interaction exclusively in institutional terms, we are in danger of saying that, whoever we are personally, and whoever we are culturally, our behavior is essentially determined by our position in society. This is the ultimate stereotype, using social role as an essentialized label.

The key to using cultural generalizations without stereotyping is to use them at a group level of analysis, seeking to understand individual behavior as to some extent a manifestation of cultural worldview, and to understand interaction among individuals as to some extent a clash and coordination of those worldviews. We can also analyze personality and power dimensions of interaction, but to confuse those levels of analysis with the cultural level is to risk overwhelming cultural generalizations with individual or social stereotypes.

Scope Conditions for Generalizing Culture

The level of specificity of a cultural generalization depends on the scope of the group being generalized. Using the definition of culture as "the coordination of meaning and action among people interacting within a boundary," the scope of a culture group is defined by its boundary. A typical boundary follows the national border, so we can speak of "Italian" culture or "U.S. American" culture. However, the scope of most national groups is already quite broad, and the accurate generalizations that can be made are therefore relatively broad (abstract) as well. For instance, one might accurately generalize that Italians are more relationally-focused than US Americans who are more task-focused, even though that true statement includes a huge variation in both groups. If we wanted to make a more specific generalization such as "people of culture X tends to be more hospitable that people of culture Y," then we need to refer to a more specific group. For instance, Southern Italians tend to be more hospitable that Northern Italians, and African Americans are more hospitable than European Americans.

At the extremes, generalizations become very vague or very sharp. At an extremely wide scope, we might compare "the West" to "the East," but we can only make rather vague generalizations about this contrast. For instance, one might generalize that Asians tend to be more sensitive to context than Europeans or Americans. But the variation is so great in both groups that such a statement is not very useful for specific cases of communication. At an extreme narrow scope we might compare the culture of one department in a company to another; for instance, the departments may differ in their preference for email or telephone communication. But beyond interaction between those specific groups, such a narrow-scope generalization is not very useful. The most useful generalizations are those that are positioned at a mid-level of abstraction, neither so broad as to be only vaguely true nor so narrow as to be only trivially true. Good mid-level cultural generalizations generate cultural contrasts that are relevant to intercultural communication and transferable to various other cultural contrasts.

For instance, we can accurately generalize that North Americans use a more linear (low-context) communication style than do South Americans, who use a more circular (high-context) style. This contrast is immediately relevant to intercultural communication, in that can it can predict a likely mutual negative evaluation: a North American may find the South American unfocused and time-wasting, while a South American may find the North American simplistic and arrogant. The simple act of bringing this difference in communication style into perception may be enough ameliorate the negative evaluation and possibly provide some grounds for mutual adaptation. This mid-level generalization is about two rather broad regional cultures, but it is reasonably applicable to national and ethnic variations within the regions. And, most importantly, the generalization is transferable to other cultural contrasts such as more linear Dutch vs. more circular Italians, or more linear European Americans vs. more circular African Americans.

Culture-General Frames

Culture-general frames are constructed for the purpose of creating useful cultural generalizations. Unlike culture-specific information, culture-general frames do not claim to describe cultures exhaustively as an anthropological ethnography might. Instead, the frame is constructed to guide perception towards distinctions and contrasts that are useful to interaction and that are general enough to be applied to a wide range of cultural contexts. (See the Constructivism section for a discussion of how and why these frames are constructed). A frame defines a domain and a continuum: the domain defines a focus such as nonverbal behavior, and the continuum is a variation in some specific behavior in the domain such as eye contact. Generalizations are then made about how the behavior is distributed among the population

of different cultural groups. Following are some examples of how culture-general frames can be used to generate useful generalizations about cultural differences without creating stereotypes.

Language Use. The domain here is not language systems, but the way language is used in ritual ways to coordinate social relations. Continuua typically include greeting, leave-taking, and other rituals such arguing, negotiating, complimenting or criticizing. For example, *verbal greeting rituals* might be contrasted in terms of length (short to long), general content (impersonal to personal), and style (joking to serious). To contrast European American men's culture with European American women's culture: E-A men tend to verbalize short greetings in passing, emphasizing impersonal common experience such as sports-viewing, and sometimes using a teasing style. E-A women are more likely to engage in longer greetings, emphasizing personal relational experience and perhaps including a compliment on each other's appearance.

A potential misunderstanding arising from the above contrast in greeting ritual might go like this: the woman may perceive the man as brusque and unfriendly, and maybe even hostile in his use of "baiting." The man, on the other hand, may perceive the reception of unexpected personal revelations and compliments from the woman as unusually intimate and even flirtatious. These perceptions are likely to be inaccurate because they flow from the wrong level of analysis. Because the greeting rituals were not identified as cultural patterns, they are mistakenly taken as indications of personal traits. Actions taken on the basis of these misperceptions will probably exacerbate the situation. For instance, the man might feel justified in flirting back to the woman. In the context of her perception of the man, the woman might find his sexual attention particularly distasteful or even frightening.

Nonverbal behavior. Even more than ritual use of language, nonverbal behavior eludes cultural explanation. This can be illustrated with the eye contact frame, which includes continua for *eye-contact length* (short to long) and for use of eyes in *conversational turn taking* (strong to weak). In a cultural contrast between U.S. Americans and people of some northern European countries such as Holland or Germany, Americans tend to make medium-length eye contact before looking away, and they use a longer, direct gaze as a cue for changing speakers. Germans and Dutch people tend to make longer and more direct eye contact, and turn taking is more likely to be cued by looking away.

There are several potential misunderstandings arising from this difference in nonverbal behavior. Many Americans interpret strong eye contact as indicating either sexual or physical aggressiveness, depending on the situation. Germans, on the other hand, tend to interpret weaker eye contact as indicating lack of interest or attention. These misinterpretations are likely to be exacerbated by Germans intensifying eye contact in an attempt to engender attention, while Americans may weaken eye contact to reduce the perceived threat. Things may get even worse, since the shifting American eyes send unconscious cues to Germans that it is always their turn to talk, while the steady gaze of Germans sends the same message to Americans. Consequently, both participants in an intercultural interaction may go away convinced that the other was trying to dominate the conversation.

Communication Style. There are several forms of this frame, many of them based on Edward T. Hall's distinction between *high-context* and *low-context* styles. The high-context side of the continuum is where a lot of meaning is derived from the surrounding situation rather than from what is said explicitly. Populations that are mainly distributed on the high-context side may have various language use patterns (e.g., they may be very talkative or mostly silent), but they share a reliance on "reading between the lines" to communicate the real meaning. In contrast, people on the low-context side rely more on explicit statements to convey meaning. Such people may also be either talkative or relatively silent, but they will usually look to whatever is actually said for the real meaning. On this continuum, people with European roots tend to be low context, as compared to the high-context style used by many people of African, Latin American, and Asian roots.

Misunderstandings along the high/low context continuum are quite common. European Americans may wait for Asians to request something explicitly before they offer it, leaving the Asians to wonder (silently) at American insensitivity and obtuseness. Some Asians, on the other hand, may create

relational confusion by reading unintended meaning into European American behavior. In the face of confusion, European Americans are likely to become more direct and explicit, which may lead people who use a higher-context style to become more indirect and circumspect, thus creating a spiral of increasingly incompetent exchanges.

Cognitive Style. This domain of this frame is patterns of thinking, or how people process perceptions. The basic continuum runs from *concrete*, where people use more description and physical metaphor to capture their perceptions, to *abstract,* where people are more likely to use theory and explanation to organize perception. On this continuum, people in many Asian cultures tend to be concrete, stressing accurate description and direct experience of events. In contrast, people many Northern European cultures tend to be abstract, stressing coherent explanation and historical contexting of events. U.S. Americans tend to be midrange on this continuum, stressing action-oriented procedures that are neither particularly accurate nor particularly coherent.

Given their position along the continuum, U.S. Americans tend to be impatient with both theory and relationships, preferring to focus on tasks. Within the U.S., Americans of European heritage are more tolerant of abstraction compared to Americans of African or Asian heritage, who are more likely to attend to the relational aspects of task-completion.

Cultural Values. This is one of the best-known intercultural frames. Its domain is how people assign goodness to ways of being in the world. For instance, many Westerners think it is good for people to act as individuals, with stress on self-reliance, independent decision-making, and individual achievement. Many Asians place more value on the family or other group, stressing responsibility to others, contextual decision-making, and collective achievement. In addition to this continuum of *individualism/collectivism*, other typical value continua include *time orientation* (learning from the past to planning for the future), *activity* (letting things happen to making things happen), *social roles* (stressing status difference to stressing role equality), and *tolerance of ambiguity* (low avoidance of uncertainty to high avoidance of uncertainty).

A common clash of values between U.S. Americans and people of many other cultures occurs on the value continuum of social roles. Americans tend to be uncomfortable with the overt recognition of role and status differences, even though such differences obviously exist. Many Asians, Africans, South Americans, and Europeans (that is, everyone else outside of North America, including those of non-European heritage with the U.S.) are more comfortable with the acknowledgment of status differences, as indicated by their more frequent use of titles.

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See also: Intercultural Communication, Constructivism, Anti-racist Education, Class (Socioeconomic), Colorism, Stereotype Threat, Racism

Further Reading

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Constructivism, Intercultural

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Constructivism is an epistemological position commonly found in communication theory, cultural anthropology, developmental psychology, and learning theory. It holds that knowledge and experience of the world is constructed, not discovered. Constructivism is the primary perspective of intercultural communication, which seeks to coordinate meaning and action across cultures. The idea of constructivism is important to multicultural and intercultural contexts because it supports cultural adaptation, the practical alternative to assimilation. Without constructivist theory, it is difficult to imagine how cultural groups can co-exist other than segregating from each other or one assimilating to the other. Constructivism allows a third alternative, which is bi-cultural adaptation. The following paragraphs trace the paradigmatic roots of constructivism and show how it informs the intercultural adaptation strategy.

Paradigms

Paradigms are comprehensive sets of assumptions that guide scientific theory. While the concept of paradigms originated in the physical sciences, the idea is also useful in understanding changes in social science, including intercultural communication theory. The three major paradigms in physics are Newtonian, Einsteinian, and quantum. Their translations into social science (usually with a significant time lag) are termed positivist, relativist, and constructivist.

Like Newtonian physics, positivism assumes that there is a single absolute reality that can be described, predicted, and controlled by an objective observer. The idea of "culture" in a positivist paradigm is something like "civilization," a position that lies at the top of a pyramid of human beings. Below civilized people are barbarians – people who have the potential to be civilized, but who need the help of colonization or nation building to join the upper ranks. Below barbarians are sub-human savages who can be exploited for their labor without concern for elevating them to higher levels. This idea drives a kind of "social Darwinism" that thrived in the 18th and 19th centuries has found new favor in some forms of libertarian capitalism. In this view, a few talented people who are more "fit" than others will appropriately rise to the top and enjoy the richest fruits of civilization, while less fit people populate the lower ranks and make do with more modest tastes of culture.

At around the turn of 19th to the 20th century, Albert Einstein introduced the idea of relativism into physics in a move that is now considered a paradigm shift. The absolute reality of Newton gave way to a relativistic universe where the position and perspective of the observer was intrinsic to how reality was apprehended. In social science, this view became the basis of systems theory, where events always needed to be understood in context. An important context for events was culture, and the notion of cultural relativity successfully challenged the pyramidal model of civilization. In the new paradigm's view, cultures represented more or less autonomous worldviews that could not be evaluated according to a single absolute standard of civilization. Instead, each culture needed to be understood in its own context; Hopi Indian culture – its worldview and its products – represented just as much a sophisticated civilization as French culture or Chinese culture.

While (ideally) cultural relativism freed the myriad ways of being in the world from the hierarchical judgments of social Darwinism, colonialism, and imperialism, it also separated cultures from any single, objective base of meaning that could be used for communication. Cultural relativism does not suggest how people of different cultural contexts might understand one another, short of becoming re-socialized in the different cultural context. But global business, international education, and a host of other activities in multicultural societies and the global village depend on successful short-term communication among different cultural groups. This need for intercultural communication could only be addressed from a different paradigm.

The quantum paradigm in physics was established more or less concurrently with the Einsteinian paradigm, but it has come more slowly into social science as constructivism. While some concepts of constructivist epistemology certainly predated quantum physics, that paradigm articulated the idea that observers are intrinsically involved not only in the viewing of reality, but also in the construction of reality itself. In other words, observers cannot be separated from that which they observe – they co-evolve each other. This idea is key to how constructivism supported the development of intercultural communication.

Constructivism in Intercultural Communication

The idea of co-evolution was applied to understanding culture by the constructivist sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. In their seminal text *The Social Construction of Reality* they defined the circular process whereby people are born into a society filled with institutions that focus their attention on certain constructions of reality, which are internalized through socialization to become the cultural worldview, which is in turn is externalized through role behavior that supports the continuing existence of the institutions. Thus culture is constantly being re-created by people acting out their experience of the cultural institutions they were born into. Rather than being an absolute thing like civilization in the positivist paradigm, or even a relativist thing like a cultural system, culture in this constructivist view is not a thing at all. It is a process of being, and, when employed as a description, it is simply a way of observing human behavior.

In using the idea of constructed culture, intercultural communication is able to address several limitations of cultural positivism and relativism. Considering culture as a process of being avoids the essentialization and reification of culture that occurs in a positivist paradigm, positions that contribute to ethnocentrism and negative stereotyping. In this view, culture is <u>not</u> like a submerged iceberg waiting to smash into unsuspecting sojourners; it is simply the way groups of people habitually understand one another. We can learn those habits or not, but in either case we need not be threatened by the simple existence of alternative ways of being in the world.

The idea of culture as a process also avoids the romanticizing and exotifying of cultures that sometimes occurs in a relativist paradigm, positions associated with the simplification and positive stereotyping. By virtue of their existence, all ways of being are viable. We may prefer one way of being over than another, and we may even believe that a particular process is a better way for people to organize themselves. But the responsibility is with us, the observers, to be making such a judgment – superiority or inferiority does not exist in culture itself.

We are both the perceivers and the creators of cultural boundaries. This allows us to define and participate in multiple cultural groupings simultaneously, generating a *multi-layered cultural identity*. Thus, a person can simultaneously be a member of a national group such as U.S. American, an ethnic heritage group such as African American, a generational group such as millennial, and a sexual orientation group such as heterosexual. We may feel affiliated with those groups, or we may be ascribed membership in them by other observers, or we may both participate in and be observed to participate in the groups. Sorting through the complex layers of cultural identity is one of the tasks facing all of us in a multicultural society, and a constructivist definition of culture allows us to do so more intentionally.

Intercultural communication employs the idea of *constructed etic categories* to provide a means of comparing cultures without recourse to an objective standard like "civilization." The term "etic" refers to the cross-cultural applicability of the categories. Typical etic categories are those of language use, nonverbal behavior, communication style, cognitive style, and cultural values. Each of these categories allows us perceive certain cultural differences, for example variations in greeting rituals, eye contact, verbal directness, abstractness, or individualism/collectivism. These differences lie in a constructivist paradigm, which means that they do not have an *a priori* existence in the cultures being described. For instance, people within a culture do not typically perceive themselves as engaging in greeting rituals; they are just communicating with one another. But by differentiating this particular behavior, an observer is able to contrast it to that of other cultures in a way that allows for possible misunderstanding to be identified and for possible adaptations to be considered. Note that people can be

observers of their own cultures, in which case it generates *cultural self-awareness.* (See Stereotypes/Generalizations and Intercultural Communication for a longer discussion of this process).

Finally, constructivism provides an authentic way to adapt to other cultures. In a positivist paradigm, there is only civilization, those that have it, and those that might get more of it through acculturation. In a relativist paradigm, there are only cultural contexts, and to change context demands that the old one be rejected as part of assimilating to the new one. But in a constructivist paradigm, it is possible to expand one's worldview to encompass both a primary socialization and one or more alternative ways of being of the world; that is, to develop a bi or multicultural identity. On the way to doing so, people attain various levels of expertise in perceiving cultural differences, generating alternative worldview elements, and experiencing the world in alternative ways. (See Intercultural Communication for a discussion of this developmental process).

A foundational idea in constructivism is that of "experience." Because reality is co-evolving with our perception of it, we do not have experience simply by being in the vicinity of events when they occur. Rather, our experience is a function of how we perceive (discriminate, construe) those events. In cross-cultural terms, this means that a U.S. American does not have a French experience simply by being in France; rather, he or she is likely having an American experience in the vicinity of French events. Similarly, a European American does not have a minority experience simply by being the only white person in a group of blacks; he or she is really having a dominant-culture experience in a minority situation. And certainly a man does not have a woman's experience simply by living with one; men are having their own experience in the vicinity of women. This doesn't mean that it is impossible to have an alternative cultural experience; it just means that we must perceive the world in an alternative way to have that kind of experience.

The process of re-organizing our perception of the world to enable an alternative experience is called "empathy." Empathy allows us to intentionally shift our perspective towards that of another culture and eventually towards that of another person in that cultural context. By allowing ourselves to have an embodied experience of the world through the alternative perspective, we temporarily expand our worldview to include that alternative way of being. When we enact the alternative experience in our behavior, we are adapting (not assimilating, not acculturating) to the other culture. At any moment we can choose to enact our primary cultural experience. In the process of constructivist empathy, we do not lose ourselves; we gain authentic alternative selves.

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See Also: Intercultural Communication, Stereotypes/Generalizations, Collective Consciousness

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