

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 ethnic 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 multiculturalism, 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 necessarily 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 multiculturalism.

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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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