INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Defining Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication takes place when individuals influenced by different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in interaction.[1] What counts as intercultural communication depends in part on what one considers a culture, and the definition of culture itself is quite contestable. Some authorities limit the term "intercultural communication" to refer only to communication among individuals from different *nationalities*.[2] Other authorities, in contrast, expand the notion of intercultural communication to encompass inter-ethnic, inter-religious, and even inter-regional communication, as well as communication among individuals of different sexual orientations.[3,4]

In this sense, all interactions can be arrayed along some continuum of "interculturalness."[5] Interactions are most highly intercultural when individuals' *group identities* are most salient in determining the values, prejudices, language, nonverbal behaviors, and relational styles upon which those individuals draw. To the degree that interactants are drawing more on *personal* or idiosyncratic values, personality traits, and experiences, the interaction can be characterized as more interpersonal than intercultural. When individuals from different cultural backgrounds become more intimate, their interactions typically move along the continuum from more intercultural to more interpersonal, though intercultural elements may always play a role. For casual or business communication, sensitivity to intercultural factors is key to success.

Communication and Group Identity

Traditional theories of group identity recognize two types of group identity:[6]

1. **Ascribed identity** is the set of demographic and role descriptions that *others* in an interaction assume to hold true for you. Ascribed identity is often a function of one's physical appearance, ethnic connotations of one's name, or other stereotypical associations.
2. **Avowed identity** is comprised of the group affiliations that one *feels* most intensely. For example, if an individual is assimilated into a new culture, then the values and practices of that destination culture will figure importantly in her avowed culture. A related concept is **reference group**. A reference group is a social entity from which one draws one's avowed identity. It is a group in which one feels competent and at ease.

Ascribed and avowed identity are important for understanding intercultural communication, because a person from another culture usually communicates with you based on your ascribed identity; that is how

1 Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. New York: The Guilford Press.

2 Gudykunst, W. B. (2003). Intercultural communication: Introduction. In W.B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Cross-cultural and intercultural communication*, 163–166. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

3 Martin, J. N. & Nakayama, T. K. (2007). *Intercultural communication in contexts,* 4th ed. Boston: McGraw Hill.

4 Samovar, L. A., & Porter, R. E. (2004). *Communication between cultures*, 4th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Press.

5 Gudykunst, W. B., & Kim, Y. Y. (2003). *Communicating with Strangers*, 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw Hill.

6 Collier, M. J. (1997). Cultural identity and intercultural communication. In L.A. Samovar and R.E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader*, 8th ed., 36–44. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Press.

you are being perceived by that other person. But sometimes your avowed identity—the groups with which you really feel a sense of comfort and affiliation—diverges from that ascribed identity. In such cases, the interaction is bound to be frustrating for both parties.

Recently, many identity theorists have moved toward a **Communication Theory of Identity (CTI)**[7] or related ideas. According to this perspective, your cultural group membership is not a static label or fixed attribute. Rather, cultural identities are *enacted* or performed through interaction. One enacts identity through choice of language, nonverbal signs such as gesture and clothing, and discourse strategy. Depending on the situation and on your goals, you may enact identity in very different ways on different occasions. Cultural identity performances can vary along three dimensions:[8]

1. **Scope of Identity Performance**—How many aspects of one's behavior express cultural identity? For example, one may choose to eat a few ethnic-related foods, but reject ethnic dress. Or one may allude to national myths or sagas in speaking just with co-nationals, or may tell such stories at diverse occasions among diverse listeners.
2. **Intensity of Identity Performance**—How powerfully does one enact one's identity? One may note in passing one's national origin, or one may make a point of proclaiming the centrality of national origin at every opportunity.
3. **Salience of Identity Performance**—How obvious are the cultural elements of identity in one's daily routines? Ethnic dress, insistence on using one's first language over the host national language, or reliance solely on ethnic mass media are all ways in which one asserts identity.

Intercultural Communication Competence and Ethnocentrism

What does it mean to be a competent communicator across cultures, and what are the elements or components of that competence? Some authorities link intercultural competence with identity; the competent communicator is the person who can affirm others' avowed identities.[9] Other notions of intercultural competence focus on the communicator's goal attainment; the competent communicator is the person who can convey a sense of communication appropriateness and effectiveness in diverse cultural contexts.[10]

Certainly proficiency in the host culture language is valuable for intercultural competence. But it is not enough to know the grammar and vocabulary of that language; the competent communicator will also understand **language pragmatics** like how to use politeness strategies in making requests or how to avoid giving out too much information.[11] Equally important, competent communicators are sensitive to **nonverbal communication** patterns in other cultures.[12] In addition to avoiding insults and gaffes by using gestures that may mean very different things in a host culture as opposed to one's home culture, competent communicators understand how to use (or avoid) touch, proximity in physical space, and paralinguistic sounds to convey their intended meanings.

7 Hecht, M. L., Warren, J. R., Jung, E. & Krieger, J. L. (2005). The communication theory of identity: Development, theoretical perspective, and future directions. In W.R. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication*, 257–278. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

8 Collier, M. J., & Thomas, M. (1988). Cultural identity: An interpretive perspective. In Y. Y. Kim and W. B. Gudykunst (Eds.), *Theories in intercultural communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, 12,* 99–120. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

9 Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. New York: Guilford Press.

10 Wiseman, R. L. (2003). Intercultural communication competence. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Cross-cultural and intercultural communication*, 167–190. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

11 Gass, S. M., & Neu, J. (Eds.). (1996). *Speech acts across cultures: Challenges to communication in a second language*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

12 Anderson, P. A., Hecht, M. L., Hoobler, G. D., & Smallwood, M. (2003). In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Cross-cultural and intercultural communication*, 73–90. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Traits that make for competent intercultural communicators include flexibility and the ability to tolerate high levels of uncertainty,[13] reflectiveness or mindfulness,[14] open-mindedness, sensitivity, adaptability, and the ability to engage in divergent and systems-level thinking.[15]

The foundation of intercultural communication competence is the capacity to avoid **ethnocentrism**. Ethnocentrism is the inclination to view one's own group as natural and correct, and all others as aberrant. We tend to think prescriptively, that all groups should behave as our own group behaves. And we are naturally proud of our own group and distrustful of others.[16] Obviously a person who is highly ethnocentric cannot adapt to diverse people, and cannot communicate in an interculturally competent manner.

Some authorities hold that some degree of ethnocentrism is inevitable, and even functional for the preservation of distinct cultural groups. Competent communicators simply learn to suppress their natural ethnocentric reactions in order to better understand others on their own terms.[17] Alternatively, it may be possible for individuals to evolve beyond ethnocentrism, to become ethnorelativistic. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)[18] is frequently used in intercultural training and assessment to chart individuals' progress toward ethnorelativism. The model posits six stages:

1. Denial—The individual refuses to acknowledge cultural differences.
2. Defense—The individual begins to see cultural differences and is threatened by them.
3. Minimization—While individuals at this stage do acknowledge cultural differences, they see human universals as more salient than cultural distinctions.
4. Acceptance—The individual begins to accept significant cultural differences first in behaviors, and then in values.
5. Adaptation—The individual becomes more adept at intercultural communication by shifting perspectives to the other's cultural world view.
6. Integration—Individuals at this stage begin to transcend their own native cultures. They define their identities and evaluate their actions in terms of multiple cultural perspectives.

Communicating Across Diverse World Views and Values

To communicate competently across cultures, individuals must understand some of the ways in which cultures diverge in their world views. The pioneer in pointing out the practical implications of differing world views was the anthropologist Edward Hall. For example, Hall explained that some cultures are **monochronic**. They regard time as segmentable, an almost tangible commodity. Monochronic cultures value schedules and can evolve efficient bureaucracies. **Polychronic** cultures, on the other hand, regard events as embedded in more of a simultaneous matrix of occurrences. Little value is placed on demarcating work time as opposed to socialization time, for instance. People in polychromic cultures are little concerned with promptness or deadlines.[19]

13 Gudykunst, W. B. (2005). An anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory of effective communication: Making the mesh of the net finer. In W.R. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication*, 281–322. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

14 Langer, J. *Mindfulness*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

15 Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures, 272*. New York: Guilford Press.

16 Triandis, H. C. (1994). *Culture and social behavior*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

17 Devine, P. G. (1989). Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56*, 5–18.

18 Bennett, J. M., & Bennett, M. J. (2004). Developing intercultural sensitivity: An integrative approach to global and domestic diversity. In D. Landis, J.M. Bennett, & M.J. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training*, 3rd ed., 147–165. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

19 Hall, E. T. (1983). *The dance of life: The other dimension of time*. New York: Random House.

The most frequently utilized taxonomy of cultural world views in intercultural communication studies was developed originally by surveying IBM employees in 50 nations (and later supplemented with additional data).[20] In this taxonomy, cultures can be arrayed along five dimensions:

- Individualism/Collectivism—Are individuals defined by their unique attributes or by their group memberships? Is individual achievement and gratification most important, or is group harmony?
- Uncertainty Avoidance—Is it preferable to tread well-known traditional paths, or is risk taking and experimentation prized?
- Power-Distance—Should status differences be kept to a minimum, or are strict social hierarchies preferred?
- Masculine/Feminine—Does the culture cultivate competition or cooperation? Acquisitiveness or sharing?
- Short-Term Orientation/Long-Term Orientation (also known as Confucian Dynamism)—Are immediate outcomes and personal dignity most important, or should long-term perspectives and social order be emphasized?

Of these six dimensions, **collectivism/individualism** receives the greatest attention. Sometimes the gulf between the two orientations seems immense. While individualists are most concerned with doing what must be done to succeed at a task, collectivists may be attuned to avoiding conflict and assuring harmony. While individualists believe in direct and honest talk, collectivists may choose to communicate indirectly, through metaphor or through an intermediary, in order to avoid losing face oneself or causing others to do the same.

Because collectivist thought is literally so foreign to many Westerners, researchers have promulgated a set of **recommendations for individualists interacting with collectivists**.[21]

- Recognize that collectivists pay attention to group memberships and predict behavior thereby.
- Recognize that collectivists change their behaviors when they change group membership.
- Don't force equality of status—vertical hierarchies are ok.
- Avoid overt competition—emphasize harmony and cooperation instead.
- Avoid threatening another person's "face"—help them save face when necessary.
- Recognize that collectivists do not separate criticism of an idea or action from criticism of the person.
- Avoid overt confrontation—use a strategy of indirection—or just let go of the conflict.
- Cultivate long-term relationships.
- Behave more formally than usual in initial interactions.
- Follow the collectivists' lead in self disclosure.

Culture Shock and Adaptation

Culture shock is a common stress reaction that individuals have when they find themselves immersed in an unfamiliar culture.[22] One's sense of identity as a mature and efficacious adult can be severely challenged when one can't even figure out how to pay bus fare in a foreign transit system. For relatively short-term sojourners in a new culture—for example exchange students, aid workers, or corporate executives

20 Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind.* London: McGraw-Hill.

21 Triandis, H. C., Brislin, R., & Hui, C. H. (1988). Cross-cultural training across the individualism-collectivism divide. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 12*, 269–289.

22 Storti, C. (2001). *The art of crossing cultures*, 2nd ed. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

on temporary assignment—the pattern of adjusting to a new culture often follows a predictable pattern from elation to depression to adjustment.[23] Moreover, when the sojourn comes to an end, returnees often experience **re-entry shock** when they return home.[24] Overall, sojourners may expect to traverse through seven stages:[25]

1. Honeymoon—Newcomers are elated about all the exotic sights and experiences and by the friendliness with which they are greeted.
2. Hostility—As the welcome wears thin and more quotidian tasks are expected of the sojourner, disorientation and frustration set in. Those lacking in communication skills may either abort their visit or else retreat into isolation.
3. Humor—Sojourners are able to see their various challenges and faux pas in perspective.
4. In-Sync—Having achieved a sense of comfort and competence in their host culture, sojourners may even serve as mentors for other newcomers.
5. Ambivalence—As the end of their sojourn approaches, individuals are torn between the joy of an anticipated homecoming and the disappointment of seeing their overseas adventure coming to an end.
6. Re-entry Culture Shock—The sojourner is shocked by the lack of interest and support among those who remained behind in the home culture. Often, the stress of re-entry may exceed the original stress of encountering the host culture.
7. Resocialization—As individuals adjust to being back in their home cultures, three patterns are common. **Assimilators** try to fit back into old patterns and forget that they had ever experienced another culture. **Alienators** are never quite satisfied with what they find at home. They may feel restless until they can accept another overseas assignment. **Transformers** are change agents who use their recently acquired intercultural knowledge to help vitalize their home relationships and organizations.

For immigrants, refugees, or émigrés, the long-term counterpart of culture shock is acculturation or adaptation. For them, there is to be no re-entry to their home cultures. Communication plays a key role in the adjustment of these individuals to their new home culture.[26] Important communication components that will determine the quality of cross-cultural adaptation include (a) a critical mass of same-culture immigrants to provide community support and mass media, (b) the receptivity of the host culture to non-native populations, and (c) opportunities for immigrants and refugees to participate in interpersonal interaction with host nationals. If these communication factors are absent or out of balance, there is a danger that immigrants or refugees may either lose their native cultural identities and assimilate, or that they may isolate themselves from their host culture and fail to participate fully. The goal of communication for adaptation is the establishment of integrated bi-cultural (or multi-cultural) identity.[27]

23 Oberg, K. (1960). Culture shock and the problems of adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology, 7*, 170–179.

24 Martin, J. N., & Harrell, T. (2004). Intercultural re-entry of students and professionals: Theory and practice. In D. Landis, J. M. Bennett, & M. J. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook ofintercultural training*, 3rd ed. 309–336. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

25 Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures, 248-250*. New York: Guilford Press.

26 Kim, Y. Y. (2001). *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

27 Maloof, V., Rubin, D. L., & Miller, A. N. (2006) Cultural competence and identity in cross-cultural adaptation: The role of a Vietnamese heritage language school. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 9:2,* 255–273.

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