CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION
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The need for effective intercultural communication arises because cultures differ in almost every aspect of communication, from the language spoken through to the subtleties of nonverbal communication. The reasons can be found in the span of human history. As people spread out from Africa, they developed language and communication within a group, which maintained some contact as it spread and grew through reproduction. At some point, people lost contact with their more far-flung relatives. Unrelated groups also existed, and when they came into contact, conflict was the frequent result.

Different groups developed their own languages, communication styles, and values, with little reference to one another. Of course, the common ancestry and common responses to similar environments meant that certain basic similarities, or cultural universals, existed in all (or nearly all) cultures. For example, most linguists today would agree that the basic structure of language—subject, verb, and object—is universal. Psychologists and anthropologists would also agree that values such as honesty and respect are universal across cultures, although manifestations of these values differ. Furthermore, cultures tend to have contact with nearby and related cultures, so it is possible to trace languages and communication styles through a region and contrast them to those of a more distant region. For example, most (but not all) European languages belong to the Indo-European language family, which has similarities in word meanings and grammar that link languages such as English, French, and Russian and differentiate them from another group, such as the Sino-Tibetan (e.g., Chinese languages, Tibetan, Burmese).

Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication focuses on patterns of interaction between people from different cultures as they engage in mutual meaning making, including the process of developing intercultural competence in bridging differences. For example, if a person from one culture expresses ideas indirectly to someone from a more direct culture, the more direct person is likely to perceive the indirect person to be shy, ineffective, or even secretive. The more indirect person may see the straightforward communicator as patronizing, cold, or even rude. Intercultural communication suggests methods for analyzing this interaction, as well as adaptive strategies. On the other hand, cross-cultural communication compares one culture with another among a pair of cultures (or a variety of cultures), often conducting analyses on the same attributes—in essence, doing comparisons of patterns. For example, the cross-cultural professional might look at preschool classrooms and compare teaching styles in two cultures. Thus, intercultural communication focuses on interaction, whereas cross-cultural communication focuses on comparisons.

Another way of looking at this involves the distinction between the emic and etic aspects of culture. Ernic refers to the unique features of a particular culture from the perspective of a cultural insider. Ernie study concentrates on the details of a specific culture, often referred to as the culture specific perspective. The culture-specific perspective might ask the following: What is unique about Japanese culture; what characteristics exist there that are not found elsewhere? Etic, by contrast, refers to the features of culture and communication abstracted from any particular
culture: the underlying dimensions of culture in general, often referred to as the culture-general perspective. Etic study, therefore, focuses on cultural universals. The culture-general perspective might ask the following: Where does Japan fall on the widely recognized continuum of individualism and collectivism that we can find in most cultures? A person who is about to have intercultural contact is likely to emphasize the universals (etic) but learn enough about the differences (emic) to cope in a new environment.

Dimensions of Cultural Differences in Communication

Many scholars believe that culture is communication; every aspect of culture is expressed, understood, and re-created through communication. There are general features of culture that are nearly universal. Geert Hofstede characterized cultures on four dimensions: (1) individualism-collectivism, the extent to which individual interests take precedence over group considerations and relationships; (2) power distance, the extent to which people at different levels of the social hierarchy are treated differently; (3) uncertainty avoidance, the extent to which members of a culture seek clarity and avoid ambiguity and change; and (4) masculinity-femininity, the extent to which a culture treats members of key social categories, such as men and women, unequally. Later, a fifth dimension was added: long-term orientation, the extent to which a culture strives for long- or short-term goals and has a long- or short-term time orientation. This includes whether time is used exactly (emphasizing promptness, saving time, counting time) or less precisely (emphasizing larger time blocks, such as years and lifetimes). These five dimensions have been shown to predict many cultural differences, from values and sex roles to subtle features of language.

Edward T. Hall described languages on a general dimension, from high- to low-context languages. Low-context languages, such as English and German, are explicit and give listeners everything they need to know in order to understand what is said. These languages are ideal for transmitting information to people who lack expertise. High-context languages, such as Chinese and Japanese, leave a great deal unsaid and use silences and nonverbal communication to indicate much meaning. Speakers of these languages depend on relationships and inside knowledge to understand one another.

The ongoing process of globalization means that the cultural isolation of previous times is breaking down. Most cultures are exposed to mass media and to products from other cultures ranging from clothing to soap operas. This influence means that many cultures are adopting aspects of other cultures to produce fusions.

Cultural Knowledge and Cross-Cultural Communication

Many people about to enter a new culture want to learn everything about it. They seek out a cultural dictionary containing all the words, meanings, values, and artifacts that characterize the new culture (emic). Acquiring such culture-specific knowledge is exhausting, of course, and cultural trainers tend to emphasize culture-general knowledge, or the (etic) dimensions and universals that are used to describe cultures in the abstract. Of course, people do not view cultures through a neutral lens. There is a ubiquitous desire to distinguish one's own groups positively in comparison with other groups, so that people are likely to have more negative attitudes and beliefs about other cultures, especially when there is conflict or competition between them. These attitudes are cued by language. As soon as a particular language is heard, related attitudes and stereotypes are made
Salient. Communication often proceeds through this filter, and judgments of individuals are distorted.

Scholars studying cross-cultural communication have looked at cultures in contact. There is a large literature on acculturation, referring to the value that people place on their old and new cultures, and thus the extent to which they wish to adopt the features of the new culture. There are also many studies of language accommodation—the extent to which people who can speak two or more languages (which means most people in the world) switch to the language of another speaker or maintain their own language, as a way of signaling their attitude to the other culture. Often, the accommodation is subtle, and people are frequently not aware of the detailed features of the communication style being used.

Why Learn About Cultural Differences in Communication?

The study of cross-cultural communication is endlessly fascinating. As the world comes closer through the Internet and mass media, cultures nevertheless preserve their unique features—and develop new ones. For example, cultures today emphasize the distinctive features of their dress. Even within a culture, groups use dress, speech style, and jargon—all of communication—to distinguish themselves and to maintain a positive identity against other groups. It may not be possible to learn everything about the way every culture communicates, but it is both possible and desirable to become more culturally aware.

_Cynthia Gallois_

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