

### **Interpersonal Communication in an Intercultural Setting**

Humans have been communicating for four million years. On the other hand, the birth of culture is estimated to have taken place about 35,000 years ago. Today, both culture and communication have evolved considerably and have become interdependent of one another. Thus, our own culture has a deep impact on our thoughts and actions. Since each culture is characterized by its' own distinct features, intercultural communication can be the cause of conflict and misunderstanding. There are three main issues which are at the root of the problem of intercultural mis- communication : language as a barrier, cultural diversity and ethnocentrism. I will analyze these three issues in situations in which intercultural communication is frequent such as in the business world, social settings, as well as the classroom.

The way people communicate varies widely between, cultures. One type of communication is the use of language. Language has always been a link between people but it can also constitute a barrier. Across cultures, certain words and phrases are used in different ways. For example, even in countries that share the English language, the meaning of "yes" varies from "maybe, I'll consider it" to "definitely so." Furthermore, communication between cultures that do not share a similar language is considerably more difficult. Each culture, has its distinct syntax, expressions and structure which cause confusion in intercultural communication. For example, in Asian countries the word "no" is rarely used, so that "yea" can mean "no" or "perhaps". Therefore, an American

traveling to Japan might be considered impolite if he ignores this rule. In the same way individuals who are not familiar with a certain language may be frowned upon. Such is the case in the classroom where a student who has a perfect knowledge of a subject may have difficulty expressing his idea due to his inability to write properly and therefore would not receive the grade he justly deserves. In addition when teachers and students communicate with one another in a classroom setting, they will naturally follow the assumptions and rules governing discourse within their respective cultures. Discourse rules govern such aspects of communication as: opening or closing conversations, taking turns during conversations, interrupting, using silence as a communicative device, as well as using nonverbal behavior. An American student studying in the Middle East, who would constantly interrupt the teacher in order to clarify the professor's opinion, would be considered to be extremely rude since he would be defying his authority.

Besides language, other factors such as cultural diversity may be the root of miscommunication. In comparison to verbal communication, non-verbal communication takes a different form in different cultures. Gestures and facial expressions play a key role in communication. However, each culture incorporates different types of gestures and disregards others. For example, in most western societies, it is customary to shake one's hand upon introduction. However, in most oriental countries shaking one's hand is frowned upon because they believe bowing is the only acceptable type of introduction. Another example is in Hong Kong the culturally recognized signal for summoning a waiter in a restaurant is done by making a writing motion with both hands. In some parts of the United States, however, extending two fingers and motioning toward oneself may be accepted as the appropriate signal. In addition, different people and cultures tend to

use facial expressions in different ways. For example, North American males frequently mask and internalize their facial expressions because they have been taught that showing emotion is not a sign of "manliness," while an Italian male feels none of these restrictions and uses facial expressions freely and frequently.

Non-verbal communication includes not only facial expressions and gestures, but it also involves, proximity, and perception of time. The word proximity refers to how different groups of people use and perceive their social and personal space. Every person is surrounded by a psychological "bubble" of space, this bubble contracts and expands depending on the person's cultural background. For example, Northern Europeans, English, Scandinavians and Germans- tend to have a larger zone of personal space and often avoid touching and close contact unless absolutely necessary. They require more room around them and structure their lifestyles to meet this need for more room. Thus the English are stereotyped as being distant and impersonal, not showing great emotion. In contrast, Italians, Russians, Spaniards, Latin Americans, Middle Easterners and the French generally tend to like and condone close personal contact. Imagine, also, an American businessman meeting with a Spanish colleague when attempting to close an important business deal. The American may feel a strong aversion to the Spaniard's perfectly friendly, normal physical actions such as extended handshaking, seating himself very close to his colleague and invading the American's closely guarded bubble of personal space. Such a situation could result in a ruined business transaction all due to a misunderstanding on the part of the two businessmen, both viewing one another as rude and distant. Another important aspect of interpersonal communication in an intercultural setting is the perception of time. Some cultures view time as monochronic, in which time

is perceived as significant and important. While other cultures view time as polychronic , in which there is no pressure or anxiety about the future. North Americans, Asians and those raised in Western American societies operate on monocronic time. In this culture, punctuality is considered a large part of good manners and civility. When one says they will arrive at eight o'clock, that is precisely what they mean. These cultures view tardiness as a signal of hostility, procrastination and a relaxed attitude toward responsibility. In Britain or North America one may be five minutes late for a business appointment, but certainly not fifteen or thirty minutes late. In Latin America one is expected to arrive late for an appointment, and is considered rude if he/she arrives early or punctually. This same tardiness for Germans or North Americans is unacceptable and frowned upon. Americans traveling abroad often become irritated by the seeming lack of concern for time commitment among residents of some countries. Businesspeople may become confused over what "on time" means as they meet those from other cultures.

In addition, many other differences between cultures lead to miscommunication such as Ideologies and values. Values correspond to the general states of affair which are considered which are regarded as desirable. We might perceive that values are regarded equally internationally, but it is simply not the case. Even though each culture condemns killing and embraces love, they do not value them in the same manner. For example, Szalay and Maday found that Americans rated love and friendship as their most important life concerns, health as 5th , while Koreans ranked these respective values as 12th , 14th and 19<sup>th</sup>.

Problems in communication do not only occur because of language differences or cultural diversities, but also because of our attitudes when confronted by these diversities.

This is the idea of ethnocentrism is a sociological concept that states, that our customs, beliefs and attitudes are of central importance and a basis for judging all other groups. Ethnocentrism derives from patriotism and an overwhelming pride of one's culture. We become infatuated with our own culture and tend to dismiss others without any reason or logic. Furthermore, ethnocentrism can lead to a stereotypical view of other cultures. An example is the belief that the unfortunate economic conditions of African American man and woman today are attributed solely to their racial characteristics, ignoring the environmental circumstances that are the real cause of their low income. Hence, this type of attitude is harmful to the communication process since one communicator has a premature judgment about the other.

In conclusion, intercultural communication encompasses many problems. Language represents one of the many obstacles, since each culture has its proper expressions. Moreover, cultural variations also exist in the rules for general discourse in oral communication. Similar to verbal communication, there are also variations in non-verbal communication between cultures. Gestures, facial expressions, sense of time and personal distance take different forms in different cultures. Variations in values, social relationships, religion, economy and politics consist of only a few of these diversities. These differences can be the source of ethnocentrism, if one becomes overly patriotic in regard to one's own culture. Intercultural problems can be avoided if we all develop mindfulness, a sense of flexibility and seek information about the other culture.

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