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Intercultural Communication: A Current Perspective

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The study of intercultural communication has tried to answer the question, “How do people understand one another when they do not share a common cultural experience?” Just a few decades ago, this question was one faced mainly by diplomats, expatriates, and the occasional international traveler. Today, living in multicultural societies within a global village, we all face the question every day. We now realize that issues of intercultural understanding are embedded in other complex questions: What kind of communication is needed by a pluralistic society to be both culturally diverse and unified in common goals? How does communication contribute to creating a climate of respect, not just tolerance, for diversity? The new vision and innovative competencies we bring to this changing world will determine the answer to another question about the global village posed by Dean Barnlund: “Will its residents be neighbors capable of respecting and utilizing their differences or clusters of strangers living in ghettos and united only in their antipathies for others?”¹

Dealing with Difference

If we look to our species’ primate past and to our more recent history of dealing with cultural difference, there is little reason to be sanguine. Our initial response to difference is usually to avoid it. Imagine, if you will, a group of our primate ancestors gathered around their fire, gnawing on the day’s catch. Another group of primates comes into view, heading toward the fire. I wonder how often the first group looked up and said (in effect), “Ah, cultural diversity, how wonderful.” More likely it was fight or flight, and things have not changed that much since then. We flee to the suburbs or behind walls to avoid cultural difference, and if we are forced to confront it, there often is a fight.

Historically, if we were unsuccessful in avoiding different people, we tried to convert them. Political, economic, and religious missionaries sought out opportunities to impose their own beliefs on others. The thinking seemed to be, “if only people were more like us, then they would be all right to have around.” This assumption can still be seen in the notion of the “melting pot” prevalent this century in the United States. It is difficult for many people to believe that any understanding at all is possible unless people have become similar to one another.

When we could not avoid or convert people who were different from ourselves, we killed them. Examples of genocide are not so very far away from us, either in time or distance, and individual cases of hate crimes are tragically frequent. Of course, one doesn’t need to physically terminate the existence of others to effectively eliminate them. When we make their lives miserable in our organizations and neighborhoods, we also “kill” them—they cannot flourish, and often they do not survive.

Given this history of dealing with difference, it is no wonder that the topic of difference—understanding it, appreciating it, respecting it—is central to all practical treatments of intercultural communication. Yet this emphasis on difference departs from the common approaches to communication and relationships based within a single culture.

Monocultural communication is *similarity-based*. Common language, behavior patterns, and values form the base upon which members of the culture exchange meaning with one another in conducting their daily affairs. These similarities generally allow people to predict the responses of others to certain kinds of messages and to take for granted some basic shared assumptions about the nature of reality. In monocultural communication, difference represents the potential for misunderstanding and friction. Thus, social difference of all kinds is discouraged.

¹ Dean Barnlund, “Communication in a Global Village,” this volume.

Intercultural communication—communication between people of different cultures—cannot allow the easy assumption of similarity. By definition, cultures are different in their languages, behavior patterns, and values. So an attempt to use one’s self as a predictor of shared assumptions and responses to messages is unlikely to work.² Because cultures embody such variety in patterns of perception and behavior, approaches to communication in cross-cultural situations guard against inappropriate assumptions of similarity and encourage the consideration of difference. In other words, the intercultural communication approach is *difference-based*.³

Upper-Case *Culture* and Lower-Case *culture*

When people anticipate doing something *cultural* of an evening, their thoughts turn to art, literature, drama, classical music, or dance. In other words, they plan to participate in one of the *institutions* of culture—behavior that has become routinized into a particular form. I refer to this aspect of culture as “Culture writ large,” with a capital “C.” The more academic term that is used by most writers is *objective culture*.⁴ Other examples of objective culture might include social, economic, political, and linguistic systems—the kinds of things that usually are included in area studies or history courses. The study of these institutions constitutes much of the curriculum in both international and multicultural education. For instance, courses in Japanese culture or African American culture are likely to focus on the history, political structure, and arts of the groups. While this is valuable information, it is limited in its utility to the face-to-face concerns of intercultural communication. One can know a lot about the history of a culture and still not be able to communicate with an actual person from that culture. Understanding objective culture may create knowledge, but it doesn’t necessarily generate competence.

The less obvious aspect of culture is its *subjective* side—what we can call “culture writ small.” Subjective culture refers to the psychological features that define a group of people—their everyday thinking and behavior—rather than to the institutions they have created. A good working definition of subjective culture is the *learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of groups of interacting people*. Understanding subjective cultures—one’s own and others’—is more likely to lead to intercultural competence.

Of course, social reality is constructed of both large and small “c” aspects of culture; people learn how to behave through socialization into the institutions of the culture, which leads them to behave in ways that perpetuate those same institutions.⁵ As noted above, traditional international and multicultural education tends to focus only on the objective mode of this process; in contrast, intercultural communication focuses almost exclusively on the subjective mode. For instance, interculturalists are concerned with *language use* in cross-cultural relationships, rather than in linguistic structure. They study how language is modified or supplanted by culturally defined *nonverbal behavior*, how cultural patterns of thinking are expressed in particular *communication styles*, and how reality is defined and judged through cultural *assumptions and values*. In the following pages, examples in each of these areas will illustrate how understanding subjective culture can aid in the development of skills in cultural adaptation and intercultural communication.

Levels of Culture

The definition of subjective culture also provides a base for defining “diversity” in a way that includes both international and domestic cultures at different *levels of abstraction*. National groups such as Japanese, Mexican, and U.S. American and pan-national ethnic groups such as Arab and Zulu are cultures at a high level of abstraction—the qualities that adhere to most (but not all) members of the culture are very general, and the group includes a lot of diversity. At this level of abstraction we can only point to general differences

² Milton J Bennett, “Overcoming the Golden Rule,” this volume.

³ LaRay M. Barna, “Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication,” this volume.

⁴ For example, see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in *The Analysis of Subjective Culture*, edited by Harry C. Triandis (New York: John Wiley, 1972).

⁵ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

in patterns of thinking and behaving between cultures. For instance, we might observe that U.S. American culture is more characterized by individualism than is Japanese culture, which is more collectivist.

Analysis at a high level of abstraction provides a view of the “unifying force” of culture. The very existence of interaction, even through media, generates a commonality that spans individuals and ethnicities. For instance, despite their significant individual and ethnic differences, Mexicans spend more time interacting with other Mexicans than they do with Japanese. They certainly spend more time reading Mexican newspapers and watching Mexican television than they do consuming Japanese media. This fact generates Mexican “national character”—something that distinguishes Mexicans from Japanese (and from other Latin Americans as well).

U.S. Americans are particularly resistant to recognizing their national culture. Despite the fact that nearly everyone else in the world immediately recognizes them as Americans, many of them still insist on labeling themselves as “just individuals” or “a mixture of cultures.” Of course, the very commonality of this tendency is an example of U.S. American national culture; no other people in the world but U.S. Americans are so quick to disavow their cultural affiliation. This is probably a manifestation of the individualism that is generally attributed to U.S. Americans.⁶ Whatever the reason, it is perilous for U.S. Americans to fail to see the cultural force that unifies them. It leads them to see ethnic and other cultural differences as more of a threat to national unity than they are.

While cultural difference at a high level of abstraction provides a rich base for analyzing national cultural behavior, there are significant group and individual differences within each national group that are concealed at this level. These differences provide a diversifying force that balances the unifying force of national culture.

At a lower level of abstraction, more specific groups such as ethnicities can be described in cultural terms.⁷ In the United States some of these groups are African American, Asian American, American Indian, Hispanic/Latino American, and European American. People in these groups may share many of the broad national culture patterns while differing significantly in the more specific patterns of their respective ethnicities.⁸ It should be noted that in terms of subjective culture, ethnicity is a cultural rather than a genetic heritage; dark skin and other Negroid features may make one “black,” but that person has not necessarily experienced African American enculturation. Most black people in the world are *not* American in any sense. Similarly, “whites” are not necessarily European American, although in the United States it is difficult for them to escape being socialized in the patterns that are currently dominant in U.S. American society.

Other categories of subjective cultural diversity usually include gender, regionality, socioeconomic class, physical ability, sexual orientation, religion, organization, and vocation. The concept can embrace other long-term groupings such as single parents or avid sports fans, as long as the groups maintain the clear patterns of behavior and thinking of an “identity group.”⁹ By definition, individuals do not have different cultures; the term for patterns of individual behavior is “personality.”

Stereotypes and Generalizations

Whenever the topic of cultural difference is discussed, the allegation of stereotyping usually is not far behind. For instance, if cultural patterns of men and women are being compared, someone may well offer that she is a woman and doesn't act that way at all.

⁶ Edward C. Stewart and Milton J. Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, rev. ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1991).

⁷ Some forms of ethnicity also exist at a higher level of abstraction than does national culture, e.g., Arab ethnicity, which cuts across many national boundaries: the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey, and many other groups in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

⁸ Each of these ethnic groups is, itself, at a relatively high level of abstraction. For instance “African American” includes people from many places in Africa and its diaspora, such as the Caribbean, who arrived in America anytime from a dozen generations to only one generation ago. (American Indians, of course, were here earlier.) Appropriately, “European American” and the other categories are at this same level of abstraction. More specific references, such as to Italian Americans or Mexican Americans, occur at a lower level of abstraction and should not be mixed with the higher-level generalizations. Care with these levels maintains a “conceptually level playing field” for interethnic relations.

⁹ Marshall R. Singer, “Culture: A Perceptual Approach,” this volume.

Stereotypes arise when we act as if all members of a culture or group share the same characteristics. Stereotypes can be attached to any assumed indicator of group membership, such as race, religion, ethnicity, age, or gender, as well as national culture. The characteristics that are assumedly shared by members of the group may be respected by the observer, in which case it is a *positive stereotype*. In the more likely case that the characteristics are disrespected, it is a *negative stereotype*. Stereotypes of both kinds are problematic in intercultural communication for several obvious reasons. One is that they may give us a false sense of understanding our communication partners. Whether the stereotype is positive or negative, it is usually only partially correct. Additionally, stereotypes may become self-fulfilling prophecies, where we observe others in selective ways that confirm our prejudice.

Despite the problems with stereotypes, it is necessary in intercultural communication to make *cultural generalizations*. Without any kind of supposition or hypothesis about the cultural differences we may encounter in an intercultural situation, we may fall prey to naive individualism, where we assume that every person is acting in some completely unique way. Or we may rely inordinately on “common sense” to direct our communication behavior. Common sense is, of course, common only to a particular culture. Its application outside of one’s own culture is usually ethnocentric.

Cultural generalizations can be made while avoiding stereotypes by maintaining the idea of *preponderance of belief*.¹⁰ Nearly all possible beliefs are represented in all cultures at all times, but each different culture has a preference for some beliefs over others.¹¹ The description of this preference, derived from large-group research, is a cultural generalization. Of course, individuals can be found in any culture who hold beliefs similar to people in a different culture. There just aren’t so many of them—they don’t represent the preponderance of people who hold beliefs closer to the norm or “central tendency” of the group. As a specific example (see Figure 1), we may note that despite the accurate cultural generalization that U.S. Americans are more individualistic and Japanese are more group-oriented, there are U.S. Americans who are every bit as group-oriented as any Japanese, and there are Japanese who are as individualistic as any U.S. American. However, these relatively few people are closer to the fringe of their respective cultures. They are, in the neutral sociological sense of the term, “deviant.”

Figure 1. Generalization Distributions

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Deductive stereotypes occur when we assume that abstract cultural generalizations apply to every single individual in the culture. While it is appropriate to generalize that U.S. Americans as a group are more individualistic than Japanese, it is stereotyping to assume that every American is strongly individualistic; the person with whom you are communicating may be a deviant. Cultural generalizations should be used tentatively as working hypotheses that need to be tested in each case; sometimes they work very well, sometimes they need to be modified, and sometimes they don’t apply to the particular case at all. The idea is to derive the benefit of recognizing cultural patterns without experiencing too much “hardening of the categories.”

Generalizing from too small a sample may generate an *inductive stereotype*. For example, we may inappropriately assume some general knowledge about Mexican culture based on having met one or a few Mexicans. This assumption is particularly troublesome, since initial cross-cultural contacts may often be conducted by people who are deviant in their own cultures. (“Typical” members of the culture would more likely associate only with their cultural compatriots—that’s how they stay typical.) So generalizing cultural patterns from any one person’s behavior (including your own) in cross-cultural contact is likely to be both stereotypical and inaccurate.

Another form of inductive stereotype is derived from what Carlos E. Cortés calls the “social curriculum.” He notes that school children report knowing a lot about Gypsies, even though few of the children have ever met even one member of that culture. According to Cortés’ research, the knowledge was gained from old

10 David S. Hoopes, “Intercultural Communication Concepts and the Psychology of Intercultural Experience,” in *Multicultural Education: A Cross Cultural Training Approach*, edited by Margaret D. Pusch (LaGrange Park, IL: Intercultural Press, 1980).

11 Florence R. Kluckhohn and Fred L. Strodtbeck, *Variations in Value Orientations* (1961; reprint, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973); Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*.

horror movies!¹² Through media of all kinds we are besieged with images of “cultural” behavior: African Americans performing hip-hop or bringing warmth to medical practice; Hispanic Americans picking crops or exhibiting savvy in the courtroom; European Americans burning crosses or exercising altruism toward the homeless. When we generalize from any of these images, we are probably creating stereotypes. Media images are chosen not for their typicality, but for their unusualness. So as with initial cross-cultural contacts, we need to look beyond the immediate image to the cultural patterns that can only be ascertained through research.

Assumptions of an Intercultural Communication Perspective

Beyond its emphasis on cultural difference, intercultural communication is based on some assumptions that both identify it with and distinguish it from other social sciences.

Analysis of Personal Interaction

Like interpersonal communication, intercultural communication focuses on face-to-face (or at least person-to-person) interaction among human beings. For this kind of communication to occur, each participant must perceive him- or herself being perceived by others. That is, all participants must see themselves as potentially engaged in communication and capable of giving and receiving feedback. This assumption allows us to understand why interculturalists are not particularly focused on mass media. Even though the issues of international satellite broadcasting and culture-specific cable productions are fascinating, they are essentially one-way events. However, individual, mediated communication such as faxing, e-mailing, and Internet chat room dialogue does fit the definition of person-to-person communication.

It is surprising to some that intercultural communication does not often generate comprehensive descriptions of culture, or ethnographies. While such descriptions are crucial for any cross-cultural study, they do not in themselves constitute cases of cross-cultural interaction. An intercultural perspective leads researchers to hypothesize, given some difference in the described cultures, how members of the cultures might interact.

Another useful distinction in this context is that between *cultural interaction* and *cultural comparison*. When social science studies deal with culture at all, they frequently compare one aspect of a culture to a similar phenomenon in another. For instance, psychologists might compare how Northern European depth perception differs from that of Amazonian Indians. Or sociolinguists might analyze the differences in ritual greeting between European Americans and African Americans. While interculturalists use these kinds of comparisons for their knowledge base, they focus less on the differences themselves and more on how the differences are likely to affect face-to-face interaction.

This emphasis on interaction does not mean that interculturalists neglect knowledge about specific cultures. On the contrary, it is considered a prerequisite for interculturalists to have expert knowledge of at least their own cultures (an often-neglected skill in other academic fields). Most interculturalists are particularly knowledgeable about one or more cultures in addition to their own.

Culture-Specific and Culture-General Approaches

Interaction analysis and skill development can be undertaken at two levels. At the *culture-specific* level, differences between two particular cultures are assessed for their likely impact on communication between people of those cultures. For instance, the generalization that Hispanic American patterns of cross-status communication differ from the more egalitarian patterns of European Americans¹³ could be analyzed for its possible effect on interaction between employees and managers from the two cultures. Training in alternative

¹² Carlos E. Cortés, “Pride, Prejudice and Power: The Mass Media as Societal Educator on Diversity,” in *Prejudice, Polemic or Progress?*, edited by James Lynch, Celia Modgil, and Sohan Modgil (London: Falmer Press, 1992), 367-81.

¹³ Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*; Eva S. Kras, *Management in Two Cultures: Bridging the Gap between U.S. and Mexican Managers*, rev. ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1995); John C. Condon, *Good Neighbors: Communicating with the Mexicans*, 2d ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1997).

cross-status communication styles could then help members of both cultures appreciate and deal more effectively with each other in the workplace. This approach, based on specific ethnographies, is an intercultural form of “emic” cultural analysis.¹⁴

Culture-general approaches to interaction describe general cultural contrasts that are applicable in many cross-cultural situations. For instance, Edward T. Hall’s definition of high-context and low-context cultures¹⁵ is a culture-general contrast that suggests a source of miscommunication among many diverse cultures. Similarly, culture-general skills are communication competencies that would be useful in any cross-cultural situation. They usually include cultural self-awareness, nonevaluative perception, cultural adaptation strategies, and cross-cultural empathy. This approach, based on more abstract categories and generalizable skills, is the intercultural equivalent of “etic” cultural analysis.¹⁶

Emphasis on Process and the Development of Competence

The process of communication can be thought of as the mutual creation of meaning—the verbal and nonverbal behavior of communicating and the interpretations that are made of that behavior. The meaning itself, whatever it is, can be called the *content* of the communication. Everyday communication mainly stresses content, while studies of communication tend to emphasize the process and give less attention to the content. This is particularly true for intercultural communication, where apparently familiar or understandable content may mask radically different cultural processes.

Another implication of this assumption is that knowledge of content does not automatically translate into mastery of process. I have already noted that knowledge about objective cultural institutions does not necessarily yield competence in communicating with the people whose behavior maintains those institutions. Even knowledge about subjective cultural contrasts, while more directly applicable to communication, is still not sufficient in itself for intercultural competence. Specific knowledge of subjective culture needs to be framed in culture-general categories and coupled with an understanding of both the general and specific intercultural processes involved. A knowledge of the differences between U.S. American and Japanese decision-making styles is not, in itself, particularly useful. It needs to be framed in more general value contrasts (e.g., individualism and collectivism), linked with an understanding of how individualists and collectivists generally misconstrue each other’s behavior, joined by an awareness of how those misunderstandings manifest themselves in dysfunctional communication patterns (e.g., negative spirals), and finally applied to avoiding negative spirals and other miscommunication in an actual joint decision-making effort.

Focus on Humanistic Phenomena

Most approaches to intercultural communication (and communication in general) treat it as a purely human phenomenon, not, for instance, as an expression of a divine plan. Any assumption of transcendental guidance to communication immediately runs afoul of cultural differences in religious beliefs. And if one believes that his or her communication style is dictated by a divine authority, adapting that style to a different cultural context will be difficult at best. Interculturalists generally leave questions of supernatural order to contexts where improving communication is not the goal.

In a similar vein, interculturalists tend to avoid purely ideological analyses of discourse. When communication behavior is labeled as “Marxist,” or “imperialist,” or “racist,” or “sexist,” the human aspects of that behavior are overshadowed by the reifications of principle. Polarization usually supplants any hope of inclusivity, and further exploration of communication differences is drowned out by the political commotion.¹⁷

I do not mean to say here that the abuse of power is inconsequential to communication. On the contrary, no improvement of intercultural relations is likely to occur in a climate of oppression and disrespect, and

¹⁴ Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1997).

¹⁵ Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (1976; reprint, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1981).

¹⁶ Etic analysis as used by interculturalists does not assume the existence of universal categories. Rather, contrastive categories are created to generate cultural distinctions that are useful for the purpose of communication.

¹⁷ Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

interculturalists have a role in changing that climate through their explication and facilitation of interaction. I do, however, mean to suggest that the professional work of interculturalists is not primarily ideological (except insofar as any action taken is inherently political, to some degree). Critical social analysis is an important part of political change. But when the question is how to understand and adapt to another culture more successfully, as it is in intercultural communication, purely ideological analyses yield little light and much heat.

Historical analyses of cultural behavior have some of the same disadvantages as ideological approaches. While it might be accurate to note that U.S. American individualism has Calvinistic roots nurtured in a wild frontier and that Japanese collectivism has grown out of Shintoism and close-knit agricultural communities, such an observation tells us little about how the values of individualism and collectivism are likely to affect the behavior of an American person with a Japanese person today. Similarly understanding the history of immigration into the United States, while important for other reasons, is not particularly useful in analyzing the cross-cultural aspects of interethnic communication. In both cases, the immediate behavior and its cultural context may be occluded by a preoccupation with historical causes.

The avoidance of history as an analytical frame does not mean that interculturalists neglect the subject altogether. People of most cultures feel respected if the person they encounter knows something about the history of their group, and mutual respect is a major goal of intercultural communication. Also, the acknowledgment of history is particularly important if an oppressor/oppressed relationship existed (or continues to exist) between the communication partners. Any disavowal of that history on the part of a dominant culture member is likely to be interpreted as evidence of continuing (albeit possibly unintentional) oppression. For instance, the failure by European Americans to recognize the history of slavery or of American Indian genocide in the United States is often seen as racist. A knowledge of history is also important for interpreting those aspects of people's behavior that mainly are responses to past and present mistreatment. Scottish people, for instance, take particular umbrage at being confused with the English, their historical oppressors. But, while acknowledging historical context, interculturalists usually focus on patterns of behavior in the here and now. Specifically, they analyze the human interaction that is created each time different cultural patterns are brought into contact through face-to-face communication.

Another aspect of humanism is its assumption of personal and cultural relativity. This means that behavior and values must be understood both in terms of the uniqueness of each person and in terms of the culture of that person. Absolute judgments about the goodness or badness of behavior and values are avoided, as far as communication is concerned. Interculturalists generally consider that evaluations of culturally different behavior are likely to be ethnocentric and that in any case they interfere with the communication necessary to become informed about the worldview context in which the behavior must be interpreted. In the simplest terms, cultural relativity is a commitment to understanding all events in cultural context, including how the event is likely to be evaluated in that context.

It is important to note here that cultural relativity is not the same as ethical relativity. The end result of understanding events in cultural context is not "...whatever." Like most other people, interculturalists are both professionally and personally committed to ethical positions. They may be, however, particularly concerned that their ethical commitments are not based on ethnocentric absolutes.¹⁸

Intercultural Communication Processes

For the rest of this chapter, processes and skills of intercultural communication will be reviewed. In this section, the review will be restricted to communication process. In the following sections, applications of these concepts to culture-general issues of intercultural adaptation and sensitivity will be considered.

Language and the Relativity of Experience

Many students (and some teachers) view language only as a communication tool—a method humans use to indicate the objects and ideas of their physical and social world. In this view, languages are sets of words tied together by rules, and learning a foreign or second language is the simple (but tedious) process of substituting words and rules to get the same meaning with a different tool.

¹⁸ William G. Perry Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1970).

Language does serve as a tool for communication, but in addition it is a “system of representation” for perception and thinking. This function of language provides us with verbal categories and prototypes that guide our formation of concepts and categorization of objects; it directs how we experience reality.¹⁹ It is this “reality-organizing” aspect of language that engages interculturalists.

A memorable statement of how language organizes and represents cultural experience is now known as the Whorf/Sapir hypothesis:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds.²⁰

In this statement, Benjamin Lee Whorf advances what has come to be called the “strong form” of the hypothesis: language largely determines the way in which we understand our reality. In other writings, Whorf takes the position that language, thought, and perception are interrelated, a position called the “weak hypothesis.” Interculturalists tend to use the weak form of the hypothesis when they discuss language and culture.

An example of how various languages direct different experiences of reality is found in how objects must be represented grammatically. American English has only one way to count things (one, two, three, etc.), while Japanese and Trukese (a Micronesian language) each have many different counting systems. In part, these systems classify the physical appearance of objects. For instance, one (long) thing is counted with different words from one (flat) thing or one (round) thing in Trukese. We could imagine that the experience of objects in general is much richer in cultures where language gives meaning to subtle differences in shape. Indeed, Japanese aesthetic appreciation of objects seems more developed than that of Americans, whose English language has relatively simple linguistic structures to represent shapes.

In addition, both Japanese and Trukese count people with a set of words different from all others used for objects. We might speculate that research on human beings that quantifies behavior “objectively” (i.e., like objects) would not arise as easily in cultures where people were counted distinctly. And indeed, quantitative research on human beings is much more common in Western cultures, particularly U.S. American.

Another example of the relationship of syntax and experience can be found in the grammatical representation of space. In American English, things can be either “here” or “there,” with a colloquial attempt to place them further out “over there.” In the Trukese language, references to objects and people must be accompanied by a “location marker” that specifies their position relative to both the speaker and listener. A pen, for instance, must be called this (close to me but away from you) pen, this (midway between us) pen, that (far away from both of us but in sight) pen, or that (out of sight of both of us) pen. We may assume that Trukese people, who live on islands, experience “richer” space than do Americans, whose language does not provide so many spatial boundary markers and for whom space is therefore more abstract.

Language syntax also guides our social experience. Perhaps the simplest and best-known examples are linguistic differences in “status markers.” Thai, Japanese, and some other Asian languages have elaborate systems of second-person singular (*you*) words that indicate the status of the speaker relative to the listener. In Thai, there are also variable forms of *I* to indicate relative status. Thus, I (relatively lower in status) may be speaking to you (somewhat higher in status) or to you (much higher in status), using a different form of *I* and *you* in each case. It seems apparent that cultures with languages which demand recognition of relative status in every direct address will encourage more acute experience of status difference than does American culture, where English provides only one form of *you*. European cultures, most of whose languages have two forms of *you*, indicating both status distinctions and familiarity, may represent the middle range of this dimension. Europeans are more overtly attentive to status than are Americans, but Europeans are no match for Asians in this regard.

¹⁹ Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*.

²⁰ Benjamin Lee Whorf, “Science and Linguistics,” this volume.

The preceding examples indicate a relationship between language syntax and the experience of physical and social reality. The relationship between language and experience can also be found in the semantic dimension of language. Languages differ in how semantic categories are distinguished and elaborated. For instance, several stages of coconut growth are described with separate words in the Trukese language, while English has only one word to describe the nut. On the other hand, English has an elaborate vocabulary to describe colors, while Trukese describes only a few colors and does not distinguish between blue and green. It is clear that Americans without the extra vocabulary cannot easily distinguish coconuts in their different stages; that is, they do not have the experience of the coconuts as being different. Similarly, it appears that Trukese people without additional color categories do not experience the difference between blue and green.

Other examples abound of how categories are differentiated to greater or lesser degrees. Wine connoisseurs maintain a highly differentiated set of labels for the experience of wine, as opposed to the two or three categories (red, white, and maybe blush) used by casual drinkers. Skiers distinguish more kinds of snow than do nonskiers, and so forth. Of even greater interest are situations where an entire kind of experience seems to disappear when the vocabulary for it is missing. For instance, while English has many words to describe boredom and ennui, Trukese seems to lack any reference to the entire concept. Although we cannot be sure, linguistic relativity would predict that Trukese people do not experience boredom in the same way as English speakers do until they learn to distinguish a category for it.

In summary, categories are constructed differently in different cultures and languages, and with the different constructions go different experiences of physical and social reality. These particular experiences are not *determined* by language, in the sense that other forms of experience are precluded without concomitant linguistic support. Research on color perception²¹ and other phenomena indicate that distinctions can be made without a specific “naming strategy.” Rather, linguistic relativity suggests that we are predisposed by our languages to make certain distinctions and not others—our language encourages habitual patterns of perception.

This formulation of linguistic and cultural relativity is central to intercultural communication. Without the assumption of relativity at the very root of our experience of reality, naive practitioners of intercultural relations veer toward itemizing different customs and providing tips for minor adjustments of behavior. More sophisticated interculturalists realize that their study is of nothing less than the clash of differing realities and that cultural adaptation demands the apprehension of essentially alien experience.

Perceptual Relativity

The Whorf/Sapir hypothesis alerts us to the likelihood that our experience of reality is a function of cultural worldview categories. At the basic level of perception, language and culture guide us in making *figure/ground distinctions*. From the “kaleidoscopic flux” (ground) of undifferentiated phenomena, we create a boundary that distinguishes some object (figure) from the ground.²² These figures may literally be objects, or they may be concepts or feelings. Collections of figures are “categories.” What we think exists—what is real—depends on whether we have distinguished the phenomenon as figure. And since culture through language guides us in making these distinctions, culture is actually operating directly on perception.

Micronesians, for example, are far more likely than Americans to see wave patterns—interactions of tide and current on the ocean surface that are used for navigation. To a typical American, the ocean is just “ground,” and only boats or other objects are figures. But this same American may single out an automobile sound as indicating imminent mechanical failure, while to the Micronesian it is simply part of the background noise. In general, culture provides us with the tendency to perceive phenomena that are relevant to both physical and social survival.

The boundaries of constructed objects are mutable. For instance, as mentioned earlier, speakers of Trukese do not make a blue/green distinction, (One word, *araw*, refers to both colors, and “*araw*” is the response to either question, “What color is the sea?” or “What color is the grass?”) Yet Trukese children are routinely

²¹ Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*.

²² G. Spencer Brown, *Laws of Form* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1972); Heinz von Foerster, “On Constructing a Reality,” in *The Invented Reality*, edited by Paul Watzlawick (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984): 41-62.

taught to perceive the difference in color as part of their training in English as a second language. The mutability of perceptual boundaries supports the idea that perceivers actively organize stimuli into categories. And evidence from physiological studies of vision indicate that people do indeed see different objects when looking in the same direction.²³ The human eye and brain respond selectively to stimuli, depending on whether the visual system is tuned to the stimulus as figure or as ground.

The observation that perceptual figure/ground distinctions are learned and lead to different experiences of reality contradicts the traditional view of the perceiver who confronts a specific, objective reality. Instead, the perceiver is assumed to respond to culturally influenced categorizations of stimuli. Like the assumption of linguistic relativity, this assumption of perceptual relativity lies at the heart of intercultural communication. If we fail to assume that people of different cultures may sincerely perceive the world differently, then our efforts toward understanding are subverted by a desire to “correct” the one who has it wrong.

Nonverbal Behavior

There is an entire universe of behavior that is unexplored, unexamined, and very much taken for granted. It functions outside conscious awareness and *in juxtaposition to words*.²⁴

Verbal language is *digital*, in the sense that words symbolize categories of phenomena in the same arbitrary way that on/off codes symbolize numbers and operations in a computer. Nonverbal behavior, by contrast, is *analogic*. It represents phenomena by creating contexts which can be experienced directly. For instance, it is digital to say “I love you.” It is analogic to represent that feeling with a look or a touch. Digital symbolizations are more capable of expressing complexity (“I love you twice as much now as I did last week”), but analogic representations are more credible because they are generally less easily manipulated.²⁵

Some languages put more emphasis on the digital quality than others. English, for instance, is strongly digital in the way that it divides continua of human feeling and thought into discrete, abstract categories, providing speakers with many words to name particular affective and cognitive states. In contrast, Japanese is a more analogic language. It demands that its speakers imply and infer meaning from the context of relatively vague statements—the way it’s said, by whom, to whom, where, at what time, and just before or after what other statement.²⁶

Cultures such as Japanese that stress analogic communication are referred to as “high context.”²⁷ Hall, who coined that term, defines it as a communication “in which *most* of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message.”²⁸ Cultures such as U.S. American that emphasize digital forms of communication are called “low context,” defined as communication “where the mass of information is vested in the explicit code.”²⁹

In both high- and low-context cultures, all verbal messages in face-to-face interpersonal communication are accompanied by nonverbal behavior which provides an analogic background for the digital words.³⁰ Voice, gestures, eye contact, spacing, and touching all provide direct analogic expressions of emotion that modify (in low context) or supplant (in high context) the verbal message. Even in low-context cultures, only a small percentage of the meaning created in a social communication exchange is based on verbal language,³¹ so understanding the more important nonverbal aspects of communication is vital to an overall comprehension of intercultural events.

²³ von Foerster, “On Constructing a Reality.”

²⁴ Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (1959; reprint, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1981).

²⁵ Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (New York: Norton, 1967).

²⁶ Kichiro Hayashi, *Intercultural Insights into Japanese Business Methods*, Senior Executive Seminar, Pacific University, Forest Grove, Oregon, Nov. 1990.

²⁷ Hall, *Beyond Culture*.

²⁸ Edward T. Hall, “The Power of Hidden Differences,” this volume.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, *Pragmatics*, 53.

³¹ Lawrence B. Rosenfeld and Jean Civikly, *With Words Unspoken: The Nonverbal Experience* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976), 5; James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, eds., *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Christine I. Bennett, *Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory and Practice*, 2d ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1990).

In low-context cultures such as U.S. American, nonverbal behavior is unconsciously perceived more as a commentary on the verbal message than as a part of the message itself. This tendency is particularly noticeable in the use of voice tone, such as that used in the communication of sarcasm. Words such as “My, what a nice tie” can be modified by a tone of voice that indicates to the listener, “Don’t take these words seriously.” In other words, the nonverbal cue (tone of voice, in this case) establishes the sarcastic relationship in which the words should be interpreted.

Paralanguage, which also includes the pitch, stress, volume, and speed with which language is spoken, lends itself readily to misinterpretation cross-culturally. The potential for misunderstanding begins with perception. Is the communication stimulus even discriminated as figure from the ground of other behavior? U.S. Americans are likely to miss shadings of tone which in higher context cultures would scream with meaning. Within the United States, European American males are less likely than some African American males to perceive the use of movement to signal a shift from talking to fighting. And conversely, black males may fail to discriminate the fighting cue of “intensity” in the tone of white male talk.³²

In cross-cultural situations we may also perceive the appearance of a cue when none was intended. An example of this occurs around the American English use of a pitch drop at the end of sentences. The pitch of our voices goes up on the next to the last syllable and then down on the last syllable in a spoken statement. How quickly the pitch is dropped makes a difference. In even a short utterance such as “Come in,” a medium pitch drop signifies normal interaction, while an abrupt drop may signify anger, frustration, anxiety, or impatience. Conversely, an elongated pitch drop usually indicates friendliness and relaxation, but an elongated pitch *increase* at the end of a statement can imply a manipulative or misleading intent. These implications are instantly recognized and reacted to by native speakers.

Nonnative English speakers may not respond to or generate voice tones in the same way. For instance, for native speakers of Cantonese, pitch changes are important within words but are not used to modulate sentences. So a Cantonese speaker of English as a second language may not generate an ending pitch drop. Additionally, Cantonese may sound rather staccato and a little loud to American ears. The combination of these factors leads some native English speakers to evaluate Chinese people as brusque or rude. If a native speaker generated loud, staccato, flat pitch statements, it might indeed indicate rudeness. But when the native Cantonese speaker talks that way in English, it probably means that he or she is using the English language with Cantonese paralanguage. The failure to observe intended cues or the discrimination of nonexistent cues based solely on one’s own culture can be termed *ethnocentric perception*.

Finally, we may correctly perceive that a nonverbal cue has been generated but misinterpret its meaning. This is most likely to occur when we assume (perhaps unconsciously) that particular behavior carries the same meaning in every culture. For example, the clipped speech of some British is noticed both by other British and by U.S. Americans. For the British, however, the paralanguage cues are likely to indicate social status, home region, or place of education. For the Americans, the cues may be interpreted simply as haughtiness. This tendency to assign meaning to events solely in the context of one’s own culture can be called *ethnocentric interpretation*. Both ethnocentric perception and interpretation are consistent with the idea of cultural relativity—that our experience of reality differs culturally as well as individually.

The form of nonverbal interaction analysis used in the paralanguage examples above is also generally applied to the area of kinesics, or “body language.” To illustrate this, we can imagine different degrees of gesturing placed on a continuum extending from the nearly motionless presentation of some Asians and Native Americans to the dramatic sweeps of Greeks and Italians. When they come into contact, people at contrasting positions on the continuum may fall prey to ethnocentric perception and interpretation. For instance, those in the middle of the continuum, such as European Americans, may interpret Native American reserve as “lacking ambition and self-esteem.” Native Americans, on the other hand, may interpret European American gesturing as “intrusive and aggressive.” African Americans, whose gesturing is a bit further along the continuum, may be interpreted by some Asians (Koreans, for example) as being “violent and unpredictable.” The greater reserve of the Koreans might fit into an African American interpretation of “unfriendly (perhaps because of racism).” As should be obvious from these examples, “simple” misinterpretations of nonverbal behavior may contribute to tragic failures in our educational system and terrible social strife.

³² Thomas Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 47.

Another practical consequence of nonverbal ethnocentrism occurs around turn taking in conversation, particularly in group discussion. The European American pattern involves eye contact to cue turns. The speaker ends with his or her eyes in contact with the conversational hearer. If the speaker lowers her eyes at the end of an utterance, a confused babble of fits and starts may ensue. In contrast to this pattern, some Asian cultures routinely require averted eyes and a period of silence between speakers. In groups including more eye-intensive cultures, unacculturated Asians may never get a turn. And on the other end of this continuum, some forms of African American, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean cultures tend to prefer more of a “relay-race” pattern of turn taking. Whoever wants the turn next just begins talking, and eventually the conversational baton may be passed on to her. Both Asian and European Americans may interpret this last pattern as interrupting. The simple task of facilitating a group discussion increases dramatically in complexity when even this one intercultural dimension is introduced.

Communication Style

Habitual patterns of thought are manifested in communication behavior. Since our habits of thought are largely determined by culture, in cross-cultural situations we should see contrasts in these styles of communication. One of the most striking differences is in how a point is discussed, whether in writing³³ or verbally, as illustrated in the following example.

European Americans, particularly males, tend to use a *linear* style that marches through point *a*, point *b*, and point *c*, establishes links from point to point, and finally states an explicit conclusion. When someone veers off this line, he or she is likely to hear a statement such as “I’m not quite following you,” or “Could we cut to the chase,” or “What’s the bottom line?” In many school systems, this style has been established as the only one indicative of clear critical thinking. It is, however, a culturally rare form of discourse.

An example of a contrasting style occurred in a group of international and U.S. American students. I had asked a question about early dating practices, and the Americans all answered with fairly concise statements that made some explicit connection to the question. When a Nigerian in the group replied, however, he began by describing the path through his village, the tree at the end of the path, the storyteller that performed under the tree, and the beginning of a story the storyteller once told. When, in response to the obvious discomfort of the Americans in the group, I asked the Nigerian what he was doing, he said, “I’m answering the question.” The American students protested at that, so I asked, “How are you answering the question?” He replied, “I’m telling you everything you need to know to understand the point.” “Good,” said one of the Americans. “Then if we’re just patient, you will eventually tell us the point.” “Oh no,” replied the Nigerian. “Once I tell you everything you need to know to understand the point, you will just know what the point is!”

What this student was describing is a circular, or *contextual* discussion style. It is favored not only by many Africans but also typically by people of Latin, Arab, and Asian cultures. And in the United States, the more circular style is commonly used by African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and others. Even among European Americans, a contextual approach is more typical of women than of men. The only natural cultural base for the linear style is Northern European and European American males. That doesn’t make the style bad, of course, but it does mean that other, more prevalent styles need to be considered as viable alternatives. To some extent, this issue has been addressed in the context of gender differences,³⁴ and it is getting increasing attention in the context of multicultural classrooms.³⁵

When people who favor a contextual approach generate an ethnocentric interpretation of the linear style, they may see it as simple or arrogant: simple because it lacks the richness of detail necessary to establish context, and arrogant because the speaker is deciding what particular points you should hear and then what point you should draw from them! On the other hand, proponents of a linear style are likely to interpret the circular

³³ Robert B. Kaplan, “Cultural Thought Patterns” in *Toward Multiculturalism*, edited by Jaime S. Wurzel (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1988), 207-21.

³⁴ Mary Field Belenky et al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Nancy Goldberger et al., *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by Women’s Ways of Knowing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

³⁵ Jaime S. Wurzel and Nancy Fishman, producers, *A Different Place and Creating Community: The Intercultural Classroom* (Boston: Intercultural Resource Corporation, 1993), video.

style as vague, evasive, and illogical. Interculturalists sometimes approach this kind of mutual negative evaluation with the idea of *strengths and limits*. In this case, the strength of a linear style may be in efficient, short-term task completion, while its limit is in developing inclusive relationship. Conversely, the strength of a contextual style is its facilitation of team building and consensual creativity, while its limit is that it is slow. The goal of education and training in this area, in addition to developing awareness and respect for alternative styles, may be to develop “bistylistic” competency.

Another area where differences in communication style are particularly obvious is around confrontation. European and African Americans tend to be rather direct in their style of confrontation, compared with the indirectness of many Asians and Hispanics. Adherents of the direct style favor face-to-face discussion of problems, relatively open expression of feeling, and a willingness to say yes or no in answer to questions. People socialized in the more indirect style tend to seek third-person intermediaries for conducting difficult discussions, suggest rather than state feelings, and protect their own and others “face” by providing the appearance of ambiguity in response to questions.³⁶

I was once involved in an incident involving indirect style in Malaysia. The guide had provided our group with a wonderful day of sights and cultural insight, and we were anticipating a trip to the jungle the next day with him. Upon leaving us off at the hotel, he stated somewhat offhandedly, “It will rain tomorrow.” I joked back, “Oh, that’s all right, we’re used to getting wet.” But he repeated the statement, this time adding, “It will rain really hard.” More seriously this time, I said, “Our schedule is set, so we’ll have to make this trip, rain or shine.” He said okay and left. The next (sunny) morning, we arrived at our departure point to find a substitute guide who spoke no English. When someone in our party asked me why the original guide hadn’t just said he couldn’t make it the next day, I found myself ruefully explaining about indirectness and loss of face. Knowledge does not equal intercultural competence.

An elaboration of this basic contrast between direct and indirect styles can be applied to understanding a difficulty in communication between Northern Europeans and U.S. Americans. Northern Europeans (particularly Germans) tend to be direct about intellectual topics but relatively indirect about relational matters. For instance, Northern Europeans are more likely than most U.S. Americans to say, “That idea is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” But those same Northern Europeans are less likely than Americans to discuss their feelings about casual relationships with the people involved. In contrast, U.S. Americans are more likely to be indirect on intellectual topics, making comments such as “Perhaps there is another way to think about that” or simply “Hmmm, interesting.” But those same Americans may be quick to state to his or her face how much they like a new acquaintance. So Americans often think that Northern Europeans are relationally haughty, while Northern Europeans may think that Americans are intellectually shallow. Ethnocentric perception leads U.S. Americans to fail to recognize indirectness in relational commentary, while Northern Europeans similarly fail to detect indirectness in intellectual discourse. Additionally, ethnocentric interpretation leads Americans to mistake normal Northern European argument for the intellectual arrogance it would represent in most U.S. contexts, and Northern Europeans to mistake normal American relational openness for the boorishness it would represent in many European contexts.

Values and Assumptions

Cultural values are the patterns of goodness and badness people assign to ways of being in the world. For instance, Japanese people typically assign goodness to being interdependent in groups (even if they often act individually), while U.S. Americans typically assign goodness to being independently self-reliant (even if they often act interdependently). To shorten this, we would state the generalization that, relative to the other culture, Japanese value collectivism and U.S. Americans value individualism. Conversely Japanese tend to disvalue many manifestations of individualism as unnecessarily selfish, while U.S. Americans disvalue many forms of collectivism as unduly conformist.

Cultural assumptions are interrelated with values but refer to the existence of phenomena rather than the assignment of value to them. So, in terms of the above example contrasting Japanese and U.S. Americans, most Americans assume the existence of an individual identity, which is necessary for the self-reliance of individualism to exist. Most Japanese, on the other hand, assume the existence of a kind of collective

³⁶ Sheila J. Ramsey, “Interactions between North Americans and Japanese: Considerations of Communication Style,” this volume; William B. Gudykunst, Stella Ting-Toomey, and Elizabeth Chua, *Culture and Interpersonal Communication*, vol. 8 (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988).

consciousness (“we Japanese”), which is necessary for interrelationships of collectivism to occur. In most intercultural analyses of situations, it is necessary to ascertain both what cultural assumptions are being made in the situation and what values are being placed on those assumptions.

The system that has been used traditionally by interculturalists for analyzing cultural values is the one developed by Florence R. Kluckhohn and Fred L. Strodtbeck.³⁷ Based on research with several cultures, the system defines five dimensions of cultural assumptions: peoples’ relationship to the environment, to each other, to activity, to time, and to the basic nature of human beings. Constituting each of these dimensions is a continuum of possible relationships that people might assume with the subject. For instance, people may assume that they can control the environment, that they can live in harmony with it, or that they are subjugated by the environment. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck state that all positions on the continuum will be represented to some degree in all cultures, but that one position will be *preferred*. It is this general preference that constitutes a cultural value. For example, most U.S. Americans prefer to think that nature is controllable—witness their damming of rivers, their programs to conquer space, and so forth. We could say that, in general, U.S. Americans value being in control of their environment. Other assumptions about an appropriate relationship to nature are present in U.S. society, of course. But with some exceptions, those assumptions are not as yet preferred and so are not now considered general cultural values.³⁸

Many modifications of the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck approach have proved useful for intercultural value analysis. John C. Condon³⁹ has expanded the original five dimensions into a list that can be applied to a broader range of more specific cultural phenomena, as has L. Robert Kohls.⁴⁰ Edward C. Stewart has done the most to develop the theoretical potential of the approach by defining the contrast-American approach to value analysis⁴¹ and by redefining the original dimensions in particularly useful ways.⁴²

Another approach to value analysis has been developed by Geert Hofstede.⁴³ As opposed to the deductive approach of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, Hofstede used the inductive technique of surveying a large number of people from various national cultures about their values and preferences in life. Using the statistical technique of factor analysis, he then isolated four dimensions (and later a fifth) that accounted for a large amount of the variation in answers. He named the four dimensions *Power-Distance*, referring to the assumption of status difference; *Masculinity*, referring to (among other things) the assumption of gender difference; *Individualism*, referring to the assumption of self-reliance; and *Uncertainty Avoidance*, referring to the assumption of intolerance of ambiguity. In later studies, he added the dimension of *Confucian Dynamism* or *Long-Term Orientation*, referring to focus on future rewards.⁴⁴ Returning to the data from each national culture, he was then able to rank-order the cultures in terms of each dimension. For instance, Japanese ranked 7th out of fifty countries on Uncertainty Avoidance, while the United States ranked 46th; on Individualism the United States scored 1st and Japan 22nd. By statistically combining factors, Hofstede was able to map clusters of cultures in several dimensions. Many contemporary studies of cultural values now use, at least in part, the Hofstede categories.

Cultural Adaptation

In many ways, the crux of intercultural communication is in how people adapt to other cultures. Yet the intercultural concept of adaptation is frequently misunderstood. To clarify the idea, it is useful to distinguish *adaptation* from *assimilation*. Assimilation is the process of resocialization that seeks to replace one’s original worldview with that of the host culture. Assimilation is “substitutive.” Adaptation, on the other hand, is the process whereby one’s worldview is expanded to include behavior and values appropriate to the host culture. It “additive,” not substitutive. The assumed end result of assimilation is becoming “a new

³⁷ Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, *Variations in Value Orientations*.

³⁸ The Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck system is used by interculturalists to generate convenient and useful contrasts among cultures, and not as the universal etic categories which they were originally assumed to be.

³⁹ John C. Condon and Fathi Yousef, *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication* (New York: Macmillan, 1975).

⁴⁰ L. Robert Kohls, *Values Americans Live By* (Duncanville, TX: Adult Learning Systems, 1988).

⁴¹ Edward C. Stewart, Jack Danielian, and Robert J. Foster, “Cultural Assumptions and Values,” this volume.

⁴² Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*.

⁴³ Geert Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, abridged ed, vol. 5, Cross-Cultural Research and Methodology Series (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1984).

⁴⁴ Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

person,” as Israel Zangwill wrote in his play *The Melting Pot*.⁴⁵ The assumed end result of adaptation is becoming a bicultural or multicultural person. Such a person has new aspects, but not at the cost of his or her original socialization. The identity issues around adaptation are quite complex, and understanding them is one of the new frontiers of intercultural communication.

Developmental Approaches to Cultural Adaptation

Cultural adaptation is not an on/off phenomenon. Like many other human abilities, it appears that cultural adaptation develops through stages, in much the same way as does cognition as described by Jean Piaget⁴⁶ or ethicality as described by William G. Perry Jr.⁴⁷ With descriptions of the stages of development, interculturalists who are responsible for facilitating cross-cultural encounters are able to diagnose learners’ levels of development and thus design their interventions more effectively.

A straightforward form of developmental thinking can be illustrated with one of the best-known of all intercultural concepts: *culture shock*. The evolution of this concept began with a relatively simple statement of how disorientation can occur in a different cultural context, along with the implication that culture shock was something like a disease that could be prevented, or caught and cured.⁴⁸ From this distinctly nondevelopmental beginning, the concept gained complexity as it was described in terms of *U* or *W* curves extending through time.⁴⁹ Then Peter S. Adler⁵⁰ suggested that culture shock was a process that went through five stages: the euphoria of Contact, when cultural difference is first encountered; the confusion of Disintegration, when loss of self-esteem intrudes; the anger of Reintegration, when the new culture is rejected and the old self reasserted; the relaxed self-assuredness of Autonomy, when cross-cultural situations can be handled with relative ease; and the creativity of Independence, when choice and responsibility accompany a deep respect for one’s own and others’ cultures. These ideas were placed in an even broader developmental context by Janet M. Bennett,⁵¹ who defined culture shock as a special case of the typical human response to any transition, loss, or change.

So when even a relatively simple aspect of cultural adaptation—culture shock—is cast in developmental terms, it attains a level of complexity that makes it a richer and more useful descriptor of peoples’ experiences. When the broader topic of cultural adaptation in general is described in developmental terms, the result is even more descriptive of complex experience. One example of this attempt is the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).⁵² Based on “meaning-making” models of cognitive psychology and radical constructivism,⁵³ the DMIS links changes in cognitive structure to an evolution in attitudes and behavior toward cultural difference in general. The DMIS is divided into *Ethnocentric Stages* and *Ethnorelative Stages*.

Figure 2. Development of Intercultural Sensitivity

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Ethnocentric is defined as using one’s own set of standards and customs to judge all people, often unconsciously. *Ethnorelative* means the opposite; it refers to being comfortable with many standards and customs and to having an ability to adapt behavior and judgments to a variety of interpersonal settings. Following are short descriptions of each of six stages of development.

Denial. People at the denial stage are unable to construe cultural differences in complex ways. They probably live in relative isolation from other cultures, either by happenstance or by choice. Either they do not perceive cultural differences at all, or they can conceive only of broad categories such as “foreigner,”

⁴⁵ Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot: Drama in Four Acts* (New York: Macmillan, 1921).

⁴⁶ Jean Piaget, *Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1954).

⁴⁷ Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development*.

⁴⁸ Kalvero Oberg, “Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments,” *Practical Anthropology* 7 (1960): 177.

⁴⁹ John Gullahorn and Jeanne Gullahorn, “An Extension of the U-Curve Hypothesis,” *Journal of Social Issues* 19, no. 3 (1963).

⁵⁰ Peter S. Adler, “Culture Shock and the Cross-cultural Learning Experience,” in *Readings in Intercultural Communication*, vol. 2, edited by David S. Hoopes (Pittsburgh, PA: Regional Council for International Education, June 1972).

⁵¹ Janet M. Bennett, “Transition Shock: Putting Culture Shock in Perspective,” this volume.

⁵² Milton J. Bennett, “Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity,” in *Cross-Cultural Orientation: New Conceptualizations and Applications*, edited by R. Michael Paige (New York: University Press of America, 1986).

⁵³ Paul Watzlawick, ed., *The Invented Reality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984).

“people of color,” or “Africans.” People at this stage may use stereotypes in their description of others that are not meant to denigrate but are based on knowing only one or two things about the other people. For instance, many U.S. Americans seem to think that all Africans live near jungles and have encounters with wild animals; or many Asians seem to think that all Americans from the Pacific Northwest live on ranches and ride horses.

In contrast to the complexity of our own worldview, the simplicity of these stereotypes makes “their” seemingly sparse experience seem less real than “our” demonstrably rich experience. Consequently, when actually confronted by cultural diversity, people in denial unconsciously attribute less than human status to the outsiders. They may then use power for purposes of exploiting the others, and in extreme cases of threat, they may further dehumanize the outsiders to enable genocide.

Defense. People at the defense stage have more ability to construe cultural difference, but they attach negative evaluations to it. They combat the threat of change to their stable worldview by denigrating others with negative stereotypes and by attaching positive stereotypes to themselves. Consequently, they view their own culture as the acme of “development” and tend to evaluate different cultures as “underdeveloped.” A few people may enter a reversed form of defense, wherein they vilify their own culture and become zealous proponents of an adopted culture. For example, some U.S. Americans spurn their European roots while idealizing Native Indian cultures, and some U.S. Americans, when traveling, label most of their compatriots as “the ugly Americans.” In all cases, however, defense is characterized by the polarization of a denigrated “them” with a superior “us.”

People in defense consider themselves under siege. Members of socially dominant cultures may attempt to protect privilege and deny opportunities to outsiders, while nondominant culture members may aggressively protect their ethnic identity from suppression by the majority. Ironically, while personally directed violence may be more common in defense than in denial, the threat of systematic genocide is reduced by the greater humanity accorded one’s enemy.

Minimization. People at the minimization stage try to bury cultural differences within already-familiar categories of physical and philosophical similarity. They recognize and accept superficial cultural differences such as eating customs and other social norms, but they assume that deep down all people are essentially the same—just human. As a consequence of this assumption, certain cultural values may be mistaken for universal desires; for instance, U.S. Americans may believe that people everywhere desire individual freedom, openness, and competition. Religious people may hold that everyone is a child of God, is subject to Allah’s will, or acquires karma “whether they know it or not.” Political and economic minimizers may suppose that we are all victims of historical Marxist forces or that we are all motivated by the private enterprise of capitalism. While people at the minimization stage are considerably more knowledgeable than those in denial and a lot nicer than those in defense, they are still ethnocentric in their adherence to these culture-bound universalistic assumptions.

In domestic intercultural relations in the United States, minimization is the classic “white liberal” position. It is usually accompanied by strong support for the “melting pot” idea, a distrust of ethnic and other labels for cultural diversity, and an abiding belief in the existence of equal opportunity. While eschewing power exercised through exploitation and denial of opportunity, people in minimization unquestioningly accept the dominant culture privileges built into institutions. People who do not enjoy these privileges—people of color and others who experience oppression in U.S. society—tend not to dwell at this somewhat self-congratulatory stage.

Acceptance. People at the acceptance stage enjoy recognizing and exploring cultural differences. They are aware that they themselves are cultural beings. They are fairly tolerant of ambiguity and are comfortable knowing there is no one right answer (although there are better answers for particular contexts). “Acceptance” does not mean that a person has to agree with or take on a cultural perspective other than his or her own. Rather, people accept the *viability* of different cultural ways of thinking and behaving, even though they might not like them. This is the first stage in which people begin to think about the notion of cultural relativity—that their own behavior and values are not the only good way to be in the world.

People in acceptance tend to avoid the exercise of power in any form. As a consequence, they may at times become paralyzed by the dilemmas posed by conflicting cultural norms. At this stage, people have moved

beyond ethnocentric rules for behavior and may not yet have developed ethnorelative principles for taking action.

Adaptation. People at the adaptation stage use knowledge about their own and others' cultures to intentionally shift into a different cultural frame of reference. That is, they can empathize or take another person's perspective in order to understand and be understood across cultural boundaries. Based on their ability to use alternative cultural interpretations, people in this stage can modify their behavior in ways that make it more appropriate to cultures other than their own. Another way to think about this is that people in adaptation have increased their repertoire of behavior—they have maintained the skills of operating in their own cultures while adding the ability to operate effectively in one or more other cultures. This intercultural competence may include the ability to recognize how power is being exercised within a cultural context, and some people may themselves be able to exercise power in ways that are appropriate to the other culture. Advanced forms of adaptation are “bicultural” or “multicultural,” wherein people have internalized one or more cultural frames in addition to that in which they were originally socialized. Bicultural people can completely shift their cultural frame of reference without much conscious effort.

Most people at the adaptation stage are generally interculturally sensitive; with varying degrees of sophistication, they can apply skills of empathy and adaptation of behavior to any cultural context. However, in some cases people have become “accidentally bicultural,” wherein they received primary socialization in two or more cultural frames of reference. (Children of bicultural marriages and of long-term expatriates may fall into this category.) Sometimes these people are very good at shifting between the two cultures they have internalized, but they cannot apply the same adaptation skills to other cultures. In addition, some people in adaptation do not exhibit intercultural sensitivity toward groups that they do not consider cultures. For instance, some people who are otherwise interculturally skilled retain negative stereotypes of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. When these groups are defined in cultural terms, people in adaptation are more likely to be able to relate to them in interculturally competent ways.

Integration. People at the integration stage of development are attempting to reconcile the sometimes conflicting cultural frames that they have internalized. In the transition to this stage, some people become overwhelmed by the cultures they know and are disturbed that they can no longer identify with any one of them. But as they move into integration, people achieve an identity which allows them to see themselves as “interculturalists” or “multiculturalists” in addition to their national and ethnic backgrounds.⁵⁴ They recognize that worldviews are collective constructs and that identity is itself a construction of consciousness. As a consequence, they may seek out roles that allow them to be intercultural mediators and exhibit other qualities of “constructive marginality.”⁵⁵ They also tend to associate with other cultural marginals rather than people from any one of the cultures they know.

People in integration are inclined to interpret and evaluate behavior from a variety of cultural frames of reference, so that there is never a single right or wrong answer. But, unlike the resulting paralysis of action that may occur in earlier stages, people in integration are capable of engaging in “contextual evaluation.” The goodness or ethicality of actions is not given by absolute (and ethnocentric) principles but is constructed by human beings who thereby take responsibility for the realities they are creating. Thus, people in integration face the unending task of guiding their own behavior along the ethical lines that they themselves have created.

Ethnorelative Ethics

Much of the controversy surrounding the development of intercultural sensitivity is about ethics. Some people seem to think that being interculturally sensitive means giving up any set of ethical principles or moral guidelines. They think cultural relativity is the same thing as moral relativism or situational ethics. To understand that criticism, we can turn to yet another developmental model, the Perry Scheme of Cognitive and Ethical Development.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Peter S. Adler, “Beyond Cultural Identity: Reflections on Multiculturalism,” this volume.

⁵⁵ Janet M. Bennett, “Cultural Marginality: Identity Issues in Intercultural Training,” in *Education for the Intercultural Experience*, 2d ed, edited by R. Michael Paige (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1993).

⁵⁶ Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development*.

Perry outlines a process whereby people develop ethical thinking and behavior as they learn more about the world. The model describes movement from “dualism” (one simple either/or way of thinking) to “multiplicity” (many ambiguous and equally good ways of thinking), and then on to “contextual relativism” (different actions are judged according to appropriate context) and “commitment in relativism” (people choose the context in which they will act, even though other actions are viable in different contexts).

People who are most critical of multiculturalism seem to be at Perry’s stage of dualism. They think of ethics and morality as absolute, universal rules. In this dualistic view, the acceptance of different cultures leads only to multiplicity, where all options are equal and ethical chaos reigns. Therefore, goes the dualistic argument, either you choose the absolutist ethical path that rejects cultural relativism, or you accept cultural relativism and the only alternative it offers to absolutism, moral relativity, and situational ethics.

Interculturalists by and large reject this dualistic view in favor of a third alternative, one where ethnorelativism and strong ethical principles coexist. The reconciliation of culture and ethics occurs in parallel to the latter two stages of Perry’s model. In contextual relativism, actions must be judged within context. Thus, at this stage, ethical actions must be judged within a cultural context. There is no universal ethical behavior. For instance, it is not universally ethical to be openly honest in dealing with others. That such is the case, however, does not imply that one should be dishonest whenever it is convenient or situationally normative (e.g., “Everyone else is lying to get those payments, so why shouldn’t I?”). On the contrary, Perry’s last stage suggests that we commit to acting within the context we wish to maintain. If we want a reality in which open honesty is normative, then it is ethical to act in ways that support the viability of that behavior. Perhaps this doesn’t mean that someone with such an ethical commitment is openly honest in every situation. But it probably does mean that actions that contradict or undermine a context in which “honesty is the best policy” would be avoided.

Some antagonists of intercultural and multicultural thinking⁵⁷ have suggested that interculturalists are the same as any other ethical absolutist in their adherence to the “goodness” of contextual relativity. In so doing, these critics neglect that important aspect of language called “logical type.”⁵⁸ The statement “It is good to have three wives” is different in logical type from the statement “It is good to know that forms of marriage are evaluated differently in different cultures.” The latter statement is actually a “metastatement,” a statement about other statements. Interculturalists would certainly think it was good to make that metastatement, but this thought is significantly different in type from thinking that it is good or bad to have one or three wives. Another such metastatement is “absolutists and relativists differ in their belief in the importance of contextual evaluation.” It is good to be able to make this distinction, but doing so says nothing about the goodness of either absolutists or relativists. Absolutists might be judged as “bad” in the context of intercultural communication not for any particular beliefs they hold but because they reject seeing their own behavior in cultural context.

Personal Endnote

As you can see, I think an intercultural perspective offers more than an effective way to analyze interaction and facilitate adaptation. In my opinion, intercultural communication envisions a reality which will support the simultaneous existence of unity and diversity, of cooperation and competition in the global village, and of consensus and creative conflict in multicultural societies. In this vision, our different voices can be heard both in their uniqueness and in synergistic harmony. While there are many paths which can converge into this future, the focus brought by interculturalists rests on individuals and relationships. We strive to bring culture into individual consciousness and in so doing bring consciousness to bear on the creation of intercultural relationships.

- 1 Dean Barnlund, “Communication in a Global Village,” this volume.
- 2 Milton J Bennett, “Overcoming the Golden Rule,” this volume.
- 3 LaRay M. Barna, “Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication,” this volume.
- 4 For example, see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in *The Analysis of Subjective*

⁵⁷ Dinesh D’Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1991, reprint, New York: W. W. Norton, 1998); Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Random House, 1998).

⁵⁸ Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Limits* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948).

- Culture*, edited by Harry C. Triandis (New York: John Wiley, 1972).
- 5 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).
 - 6 Edward C. Stewart and Milton J. Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, rev. ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1991).
 - 7 Some forms of ethnicity also exist at a higher level of abstraction than does national culture, e.g., Arab ethnicity, which cuts across many national boundaries: the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey, and many other groups in Europe, Asia, and Africa.
 - 8 Each of these ethnic groups is, itself, at a relatively high level of abstraction. For instance “African American” includes people from many places in Africa and its diaspora, such as the Caribbean, who arrived in America anytime from a dozen generations to only one generation ago. (American Indians, of course, were here earlier.) Appropriately, “European American” and the other categories are at this same level of abstraction. More specific references, such as to Italian Americans or Mexican Americans, occur at a lower level of abstraction and should not be mixed with the higher-level generalizations. Care with these levels maintains a “conceptually level playing field” for interethnic relations.
 - 9 Marshall R. Singer, “Culture: A Perceptual Approach,” this volume.
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 - 11 Florence R. Kluckhohn and Fred L. Strodtbeck, *Variations in Value Orientations* (1961; reprint, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973); Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*.
 - 12 Carlos E. Cortés, “Pride, Prejudice and Power: The Mass Media as Societal Educator on Diversity,” in *Prejudice, Polemic or Progress?*, edited by James Lynch, Celia Modgil, and Sohan Modgil (London: Falmer Press, 1992), 367-81.
 - 13 Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*; Eva S. Kras, *Management in Two Cultures: Bridging the Gap between U.S. and Mexican Managers*, rev. ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1995); John C. Condon, *Good Neighbors: Communicating with the Mexicans*, 2d ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1997).
 - 14 Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1997).
 - 15 Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (1976; reprint, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1981).
 - 16 Etic analysis as used by interculturalists does not assume the existence of universal categories. Rather, contrastive categories are created to generate cultural distinctions that are useful for the purpose of communication.
 - 17 Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
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 - 27 Hall, *Beyond Culture*.
 - 28 Edward T. Hall, “The Power of Hidden Differences,” this volume.
 - 29 Ibid.
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 - 31 Lawrence B. Rosenfeld and Jean Civikly, *With Words Unspoken: The Nonverbal Experience* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976), 5; James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, eds., *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Christine I. Bennett, *Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory and Practice*, 2d ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1990).

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- 33 Robert B. Kaplan, "Cultural Thought Patterns" in *Toward Multiculturalism*, edited by Jaime S. Wurzel (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1988), 207-21.
- 34 Mary Field Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Nancy Goldberger et al., *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).
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