

Culture: Our Invisible Teacher



Culture is the medium evolved by humans to survive. Nothing in our lives is free from cultural influences. It is the keystone in civilization's arch and is the medium through which all of life's events must flow. We are culture.

EDWARD T. HALL

People in Paris eat snails, but people in San Diego put poison on them. Why? People in Tabriz or Tehran sit on the floor and pray five times each day, but people in Las Vegas stand up all night in front of slot machines. Why? Some people speak Tagalog, others speak English. Why? Some people paint and decorate their entire bodies, but others spend millions of dollars painting and decorating only their faces. Why? Some people talk to God, but others have God talk to them. Why? The general answer to these questions is the same. People learn to think, feel, believe, and strive for what their culture considers proper.

As we saw in the previous chapter, people respond to the world through the messages they receive, but it is culture that determines, to a large extent, the form, pattern, and content of those messages. Culture also determines the content and conformation of the messages we send. This omnipresent quality of culture leads Hall to conclude that “there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture.”¹ In many ways, Hall is correct: culture is everything and everywhere. And more importantly, at least for our purposes, culture and communication work in tandem. In fact, they are inseparable: it is often difficult to decide which is the voice and which the echo.

Culture governs and defines the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted. The content of our repertory of communicative behaviors depends largely on the culture in which we have been raised. Remember, we are not born knowing how to dress, what toys to play with, what to eat, which gods to worship, or how to spend our money and our time. Culture is both teacher and textbook. From how much eye contact we employ in conversations to explanations of why we get sick, culture plays a dominant role in our lives. When cultures differ, communication practices may also differ, as Alfred Smith pointed out:

In modern society different people communicate in different ways, as do people in different societies around the world; and the way people communicate is the way they live. It is their culture. Who talks with whom? How? And about what? These are questions of communication and culture. A Japanese geisha and a New England



Photo Peter Menzel/Stock, Boston

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librarian send and receive different messages on different channels and in different networks. When the elements of communication differ or change, the elements of culture differ or change. Communication and culture are inseparable.²

Culture and communication are so inextricably bound that most cultural anthropologists (and we, as the authors of this book) believe the terms are virtually synonymous. This relationship is the key factor to understanding intercultural communication. Studying intercultural communication without studying culture would be analogous to investigating the topic of physics without looking at matter. In this chapter, we will treat culture in much the same way we did communication in the last chapter. We shall explain why cultures develop, define culture, discuss the major components of culture, and link culture to communication by offering a model of intercultural communication that isolates the characteristics of culture most directly related to communication.

CULTURE

In Chapter 2, we apologized for reducing a topic as complex as communication to simple terms. We fear that here in Chapter 3 we must do the same because we are now faced with the task of grappling with a concept that is, as Em Griffin has said, “somewhat vague and

difficult to grasp.”³ As we have just noted, that concept also has the potential to be all-inclusive. We will therefore look only at those aspects of culture that are most germane to the study of intercultural communication.

The Basic Functions of Culture

The anthropologist William Haviland suggests that “people maintain cultures to deal with problems or matters that concern them.”⁴ It is believed that culture evolved for the same reasons: it serves the basic need of laying out a predictable world in which each of us is firmly grounded and thus enables us to make sense of our surroundings. As the English writer Thomas Fuller wrote two hundred years ago, “Culture makes all things easy.” Although this view might be slightly overstated, culture does ease the transition from the womb to this new life by giving meaning to events, objects, and people—thus making the world a less mysterious and frightening place.

From the instant a child is born, culture formally and informally teaches it how to behave in a manner that is acceptable to adults and that garners them rewards. Therefore, there is no need for members of a culture to expend energy deciding what each event means or how to respond to it; usually, all those who share a common culture can be expected to behave correctly, automatically, and predictably. Hence, culture shields people from the unknown by offering them a blueprint for all of life’s activities. Try to imagine a single day in your life without having the guidelines of your culture. Without rules to govern your actions, you would soon feel helpless. From how to greet strangers to how to find a mate, culture provides us with structure. To lack culture is to lack structure: without them, we would be intellectually defenseless, floundering animals in an unfathomable realm. We might even go so far as to agree with Marvin Harris that “our primary mode of biological adaptation is culture, not anatomy.”⁵ Culture teaches each of us how to make the most of the wisdom our species has accumulated through millions of years of evolution.

In addition to making the world a less perplexing place, cultures, Malinowski maintains, have now evolved to the point where they are people’s primary means of satisfying three types of needs: *basic needs* (food, shelter, physical protection), *derived needs* (organization of work, distribution of food, defense, social control), and *integrative needs* (psychological security, social harmony, purpose in life).⁶ As we shall see throughout this book, the methods for meeting these and other needs might vary from culture to culture, but the reasons people turn to their culture remain the same: to help them survive emotionally and physically.

Some Definitions of Culture

The multifaceted nature of culture and communication makes it difficult to arrive at a single definition for them. We have seen that both are ubiquitous, multidimensional,

complex, and all-pervasive. As with communication, many definitions have been suggested for culture. As early as 1952, A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn listed 164 definitions of culture that they found in the anthropology literature.⁷ And, of course, many new definitions have appeared since. Definitions of culture range from all-encompassing ones ("it is everything") to narrower ones ("it is opera, art, and ballet"). We will examine some of these definitions so that you might better understand the role of culture in intercultural communication.

Perhaps the broadest of all definitions is one proposed by E. Adamson Hoebel and Everett Frost, who see culture in nearly all human activity. They define culture as an "integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance."⁸ For them, culture is not genetically predetermined or instinctive.⁹ They have two reasons for taking this position. First, as all scholars of culture believe, culture is transmitted and maintained solely through communication and learning; that is, culture is learned. Second, as scholars who take the sweeping view believe, each individual is confined at birth to a specific geographic location and thus exposed to certain messages while denied others. All of these messages, whether they be about religion, food, dress, housing, toys, or books, are culturally based; therefore, everything that a person experiences is part of his or her culture.

From a definition that includes all learned behavior we can move to definitions that propose culture has distinct boundaries. But here again scholars do not agree. Some, such as Harry Triandis, take an expansive view of culture, suggesting that it "can be distinguished as having both objective (e.g., roads, tools) and subjective (e.g., norms, laws, values) aspects."¹⁰ Those who define culture in this way look at what a culture does to its environment as well as what it does to its members. Geert Hofstede views culture from a psychological perspective, defining it as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another."¹¹ Both of these definitions stress the mental conditioning that cultural experiences impose.

Because culture is complex and difficult to pin down, most definitions are lengthy and are usually followed by rather detailed descriptions. A good example of an all-inclusive and descriptive definition is the one advanced by Daniel Bates and Fred Plog:

Culture is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. This definition includes not only patterns of behavior but also patterns of thought (shared meanings that the members of a society attach to various phenomena, natural and intellectual, including religion and ideologies), artifacts (tools, pottery, houses, machines, works of art), and the culturally transmitted skills and techniques used to make the artifacts.¹²

Although the Bates and Plog definition is broad enough to include most of the major territory of culture, we have arrived at a definition that we believe is more suited to the

goals of this book. We define culture as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. Culture can therefore include everything from rites of passage to concepts of the soul. Think for just a moment of all the beliefs you hold and the objects that have meaning for you because you are a member of your culture. How you respond to the American flag, as opposed to the Canadian flag, is part of your cultural membership. Your views on work, freedom, age, being graded by your teachers, cleanliness and hygiene, ethics, dress, property rights, etiquette, healing and health, death and mourning, play, law, magic and superstition, modesty, sex, status differentiation, courtship, formality and informality, bodily adornment, and the like are part of your cultural membership.

Regardless of the definition employed, there is general agreement as to what the major characteristics of culture are. Examining these characteristics will help us understand this nebulous concept called culture and enable us to see how these characteristics influence communication.

The Characteristics of Culture

It is important that we begin our examination of the characteristics of culture by reminding you that within each culture there are numerous co-cultures and specialized cultures. Later in this chapter we will define some of these, but for now we need to clarify what our reference is when we use the term *culture*. When we refer to culture, we are applying the term to the dominant culture found in each society. While many discussions of culture use the terms *umbrella culture* and *mainstream culture*, we prefer the designate *dominant*, which clearly indicates that the culture we are talking about is the one in power. These are the people who historically have controlled, and who still control, the major institutions within the culture: the church, government, education, military, mass media, monetary systems, and the like. By determining and manipulating the content and flow of messages, as well as the laws generated by these institutions, the dominant culture sets goals, perpetuates customs, establishes values, and makes the major decisions affecting the majority of the population. Thus, they influence what people think and say. By examining the characteristics of culture, you will be able to see how this one group of people, regardless of their numbers, can dominate the fund of knowledge, perceptions, and communication patterns found within a culture.

Culture Is Not Innate; It Is Learned

Without the advantages of learning from those who lived before us, we would not have culture. You can appreciate, therefore, why we say that learning is the most important of

all the characteristics of culture. Babies cut off from all adult care, training, and supervision would instinctively eat, drink, defecate, urinate, gurgle, and cry. But what they would eat, when they would eat, where they would defecate, and so forth would be random. All of us are born with basic needs—needs that create and shape behavior—but how we go about meeting those needs and developing behaviors to cope with them are learned. As Bates and Plog note:

Whether we feed ourselves by growing yams or hunting wild game or by herding camels and raising wheat, whether we explain a thunderstorm by attributing it to meteorological conditions or to a fight among the gods—such things are determined by what we learn as part of our enculturation.¹³

The term *enculturation* denotes the total activity of learning one's culture. More specifically, enculturation is, as Hoebel and Frost say, "*conscious or unconscious conditioning occurring within that process whereby the individual, as child and adult, achieves competence in a particular culture.*"¹⁴ In social psychology and sociology, the term *socialization* is often used synonymously with *enculturation*. Regardless of which word is applied, the idea is the same. From infancy, members of a culture learn their patterns of behavior and ways of thinking until most of them become internalized and habitual. Enculturation usually takes place through *interaction* (your parents kiss you and you learn about kissing—whom to kiss, when to kiss, and so on), *observation* (you watch your father do most of the driving of the family car and you learn about gender roles—what a man does, what a woman does), and *imitation* (you laugh at the same jokes your parents laugh at and you learn about humor—it is funny if someone slips as long as he or she doesn't get hurt).

The words *conscious* and *unconscious* used in Hoebel and Frost's definition help us make our next assertion about learning. Throughout the following discussion, remember that a single word can stand for many things. Think, for example, of the word *pain*. How different the meaning is when the word denotes the discomfort caused by a small splinter in the finger, as opposed to the anguish of a burn victim. When we look at the word *learned* as it applies to culture, we find it also has numerous meanings. That is, we learn our culture in many different ways. The little boy in the United States whose father tells him to shake hands when he is introduced to a friend of the family is learning culture. The Arab baby who is read the Koran when he or she is one day old is learning culture. The Indian child who lives in a home where the women eat after the men is learning culture. The Jewish child who helps conduct the Passover ceremony is learning culture. The French child who is given hard cider at dinner is learning culture.

Conscious learning is easier to understand and to explain than is unconscious learning. In its simplest form, it is learning the ideas and behaviors of your culture by being told about them or by reading about them. We learn them at the conscious level. A mother tells her young son to take a bath before he goes to bed, and he learns health habits and the importance of cleanliness. A father tells his daughter to thank someone who pays her

a compliment, and she learns about manners. The teacher tells a pupil not to talk in class, and the pupil learns about discipline. The football coach admonishes his team to “take their punishment like men,” and they learn gender roles. In each of these examples, the person is told what to learn. However, it is at the second level of learning, the unconscious, where we learn the bulk of what we call culture.

Since culture influences us from the very day we are born, we are rarely aware of many of the messages that it sends us. As Felix Keesing says, “It is a tenet of cultural anthropology that culture tends to be unconscious.”¹⁵ This unconscious or hidden dimension of culture leads many researchers to claim that culture is invisible. Ruben, for example, writes that “the presence of culture is so subtle and pervasive that it simply goes unnoticed. It’s there now, it’s been there as long as anyone can remember, and few of us have reason to think much about it.”¹⁶ Most of us would have a difficult time pointing to a specific event or experience that taught us about such things as direct eye contact, our use of silence and space, the importance of attractiveness, our view of aging, our ability to speak one language instead of another, our preference for activity over meditation or for one mode of dealing with conflict over another. Learning cultural perceptions, rules, and behaviors usually goes on without our being aware of it. *yes*

Most of what we learn is communicated to us in our interactions with other people. Early in life we receive normative instructions from family and friends. However, there are numerous other teachers that pass on the messages of culture. Let us pause for a moment to look at just a few of these instructors and their instructions.

A very powerful set of instructions comes from proverbs, which are found in nearly every culture. Often called maxims or adages, these sayings create vivid images that are easy to learn and difficult to forget. As we grow up, they are repeated with such regularity they soon become part of our belief system. Because all people, regardless of their culture, share common experiences, many of the same proverbs appear throughout the world.

Below are some proverbs from places other than the United States. We would like to share them with you so that you may gain a better appreciation of how cultures teach important lessons. You will see some of these proverbs again elsewhere in the book as we use them to explain the communication behavior of the cultures from which they come.

A proverb is like a swift horse. This Yoruba saying calls attention to the importance of proverbs as a teaching aid in this culture.

One does not make the wind blow but is blown by it. This saying, found in many Asian cultures, suggests that people are guided by fate rather than by their own devices.

Order is half of life. This expresses the value Germans place on organization, conformity, and structure.

Women have but two residences—the house and the tomb. This expresses an Algerian view of the place of women within society.

The mouth maintains silence in order to hear the heart talk. This saying expresses the value Belgians place on intuition and feelings in interaction.

He who speaks has no knowledge, and he who has knowledge does not speak. This saying from Japan reinforces the value of silence.

Even if it is a stone bridge, make sure it is safe. This Korean saying expresses the wisdom of going slowly, being cautious or reflective.

Nothing done with intelligence is done without speech. This Greek saying emphasizes the importance of talk as a means of communication.

How blessed is a man who finds wisdom. This Jewish saying expresses the importance of learning and education.

A zebra does not despise its stripes. From the Maasai of Africa, this saying expresses the value of accepting things as they are, of accepting oneself as one is, and of not envying others.

Loud thunder brings little rain. This Chinese proverb teaches the importance of being reserved instead of boisterous.

A man's tongue is his sword. With this saying, Arabs are taught to value words and use them in a powerful and forceful manner.

A single arrow is easily broken, but not a bunch. This proverb, found in many Asian cultures, expresses the belief that the group is stronger than the individual.

He who stirs another's porridge often burns his own. The Swedish, a very private people, attempt to teach the value of privacy with this proverb.

We also learn our culture from folk tales and folklore. Whether it embodies ancient myths or current popular beliefs, folklore is value-laden and teaches and reinforces what a culture deems important. Whether it be Pinocchio's nose growing larger when he lied, Columbus being glorified because he was daring, Abraham Lincoln learning to read by drawing letters on a shovel by the fireside, or four pizza-eating turtles defending democracy and fighting for what is "right," folklore constantly reinforces our fundamental values.

We also learn what is important from sources as refined as poetry and art and as commercialized as the media. In Asian cultures, most art depicts objects, animals, and landscapes, seldom focusing on people. American and European art, however, emphasizes people. This difference reflects a difference in views: Asians believe that nature is more powerful and important than a single individual, and the Americans and Europeans view that people are at the center of the universe. In the United States, the mass media deliver many of the lessons of culture, such as the tolerance of violence. Sports, war stories, police stories, and many documentaries reflect violence. The language that we use in sports mirrors and sanctions violence. Sitting in front of a television set, one hears words and statements such as "kill," "head-hunter," "It's a war," and "They destroyed the offense."

The messages that are strategic for any culture come from most of the sources we have been talking about: parents, schools, folk tales, art, church, the media, and peers. Think

for a moment of the thousands of ways you have been told the importance of being popular and well liked, or the many messages you have received concerning competition and winning. Our games, sports, toys, movies, and so on all reinforce the need to win. A famous tennis player tells us that he “feels like dying when he comes in second.” And the president of a major car company concludes his television pitch by announcing, “We want to be number one—what else is there?” Regardless of how we learn our culture, the most significant and crucial perceptions, rules and behaviors are continuously being reinforced.

Although the *carriers* of culture are nearly the same for all peoples, the messages they transmit are specific to each culture. A case in point is the popular folk tale “Cinderella.” Although nearly every culture has its own version of this story, the emphasis varies. For example, the American version stresses Cinderella’s attractiveness as a reflection of her inner qualities; she is also rather passive and weak. In the Algonquin Indian tale, the virtues of truthfulness and honesty are the basis of Cinderella’s character. The Japanese story accentuates intellectual ability and gentleness. In one Japanese version, there are only two sisters and they wish to go to a Kabuki play. In place of the famous slipper test is the challenge of having to compose a song extemporaneously. One sister manages only a simple, unimaginative song, which she sings in a loud voice. But Cinderella composes a song that has both meter and metaphor, and she sings it in soft tones. She, of course, proves to deserve the rewards of goodness. These examples show that the lessons of culture may travel by similar channels—in this case a common folk tale—but they can bear different messages and values.

We conclude our description of the first characteristic of culture by reminding you of how our discussion directly relates to intercultural communication.

First, *many of the behaviors we label as cultural are not only automatic and invisible, but also engaged in without our being aware of them.* For example, in American culture women smile more often than men,¹⁷ a behavior learned unconsciously and performed almost habitually. Such cultural behavior tends to be unconscious in both its acquisition and expression.

Second, *common experiences produce common behaviors.* The sharing of experience and behavior binds members and is what makes a culture unique. The Polish poet Stanislaw said it far more eloquently: “All of our separate fictions add up to a joint reality.” Discovering those realities is what this book is all about.

Culture is Transmitted From Generation to Generation

For cultures to exist and endure, they must ensure that their crucial messages and elements are passed on. As Richard Brislin said, “If there are values considered central to a society that have existed for many years, these must be transmitted from one generation to another.”¹⁸ This idea supports our assertion that culture and communication are linked: it

is communication that makes culture a continuous process, for once cultural habits, principles, values, attitudes, and the like are “formulated” they are communicated to each individual. So strong is the need for a culture to bind each generation to past and future generations that, Kessing tells us, “Any break in the learning chain would lead to a culture’s disappearance.”¹⁹

It is important for students of intercultural communication to remember that some of the behaviors a culture selects to pass on are universal and others are unique. Americans tell each generation to always look forward. In China, the message is to look to the past for guidance and strength. Americans tell each generation that competition is valuable. For Mexicans and Native Americans, the message is that cooperation is more important than the contest. Americans tell each generation to value youth. In Korea, the message is to respect and treasure the elderly. Each of these examples makes the same point: *the content of culture is what gets transferred from generation to generation.*

As we noted earlier, one thing that makes this transference so interesting is that much of the process is invisible and unconsciously performed. To this day, Jews, while reading from the Torah, sway backwards and forwards like camel riders, having inherited this behavior unconsciously from centuries ago. Because Jews then were prohibited from riding camels, this imitation of riding was developed as a form of compensation.²⁰ Although the motive for the behavior is gone, the action has been passed on to each new generation by means of the unconscious, silent, invisible power of culture.

Culture Is Based on Symbols

Our symbol-making ability enables us to both learn our culture and pass it on from individual to individual, group to group, and generation to generation. Through language—be it verbal, nonverbal, or iconic—it is, as Ward Goodenough says, “possible to learn from cumulative, shared experience.”²¹ An excellent summary of the importance of language to culture is offered by Bates and Plog:

Language thus enables people to communicate what they would do if such-and-such happened, to organize their experiences into abstract categories (‘a happy occasion,’ for instance, or an ‘evil omen’), and to express thoughts never spoken before. Morality, religion, philosophy, literature, science, economics, technology, and numerous other areas of human knowledge and belief—along with the ability to learn about and manipulate them—all depends on this type of higher-level communication.²²

As we have already indicated, the symbols any culture employs take a variety of forms. Cultures can use the spoken word as a symbol and tell people about the importance of freedom. They can use the written word as a symbol and let others read about the War of Independence. They can use nonverbal actions, such as shaking hands or bowing, as symbols to greet one another. They can use flags as symbols to claim territory or demon-

strate loyalty. They have the means to use automobiles or jewelry as symbols of success and status. They can use a cross, crescent, or six-pointed star to show love of God.

The portability of symbols allows us to package and store them as well as transmit them. The mind, books, pictures, films, videos, computer disks, and the like enable a culture to preserve what it deems to be important and worthy of transmission. Hence, each individual, regardless of his or her generation, is heir to a massive repository of information that has been maintained in anticipation of his or her entry into the culture. Culture is therefore historical and preservable. As the French novelist Proust wrote, "The past remains the present."

Culture Is Subject to Change

Cultures are dynamic systems that do not exist in a vacuum, so they are subject to change. From the wandering nomad of thousands of years ago to "CNN News" in the 1990s, cultures are constantly being confronted with ideas and information from outside sources—contact that has the potential to bring change. Change through contact is another example of how communication and culture are alike. As you will recall, in the last chapter we emphasized that communication was not static, but rather dynamic, and constantly changing. We now suggest that cultures are also subject to fluctuations, seldom remaining constant. Although cultures change through several mechanisms, the two most common are *innovation* and *diffusion*.

Innovation is usually defined as the discovery of new practices, tools, or concepts that many members of the culture eventually accept and that may produce slight changes in social habits and behaviors.²³ In the United States, the computer and the Women's Rights Movement are good examples of products and concepts that reshaped culture. These are also examples of how innovation sometimes does not gain wide acceptance in a culture. Force of habit tends to work against most innovations. As you know, there are still countless individuals in America who dislike computers and others who rail against women having rights equal to those of men.

Diffusion is the borrowing by one culture from another, and another way in which change occurs. Because cultures want to endure, they usually adopt only those elements that are compatible with their values and beliefs or that can be modified without causing major disruption. The assimilation of what is borrowed accelerates when cultures come into direct contact with each other. For example, as Japan and the United States have more commerce, we see Americans assimilating Japanese business practices and the Japanese using American marketing tactics.

Cultures, then, are quite adaptive. History runs over with examples of how cultures have been forced to change because of natural disasters, wars, or other calamities. Events in the last few hundred years have scattered Jews throughout the world, yet their culture has adapted and survived. And think for a moment about the major changes made by the Japanese to their society: their government and economy were nearly destroyed during



Photo: Thomas Nebbia/Woodfin Camp & Associates, 1983

From the wandering nomad thousands of years ago to *CNN News* in the 1990s, cultures are constantly being confronted with ideas and information from external sources. This contact has the potential to bring change to any culture.

World War II, yet because they could adapt, their culture has endured and they are now a major economic force in the world.

We must remind you that although many aspects of culture are subject to change, the deep structure of a culture resists major alterations. That is, changes in dress, food, transportation, housing, and the like, though appearing to be important, are compatible with the existing value system. However, values associated with such things as ethics and morals, work and leisure, definitions of freedom, the importance of the past, religious practices, the pace of life, and attitudes towards gender and age are so deeply embedded in a culture that they persist generation after generation—a point Dean Barnlund makes when he writes, “The spread of Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Confucianism did not homogenize the societies they enveloped. It was usually the other way around: Societies insisted on adapting the religions to their own cultural traditions.”²⁴

Even demands for a more democratic government in countries such as China and the former Soviet Union have their roots in the history of those countries. In the United States, studies conducted on American values show that most of the central values of the 1990s are similar to the values of the last two hundred years. In short, when assessing the degree of change within a culture, you must always consider what it is that is changing. Don't be fooled because downtown Tokyo looks much like Paris or New York. Most of

what we call culture is below the surface or like the moon: we observe the front, which appears flat and one-dimensional, but there are other dimensions that we cannot see.

Culture Is Integrated

Throughout this chapter, we have broken down and isolated various parts of culture and talked about them as if they were discrete parts. The nature of language makes it impossible to do otherwise, yet in reality culture functions as an integrated whole. That is, *the various facets of culture are interrelated*. As Hall said, "You touch a culture in one place and everything else is affected."²⁵ Values towards materialism will influence family size, the work ethic, spiritual pursuits, and the like. A complex example of the interconnectedness of cultural elements is the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, which affected the country like a large stone cast into a pond. The Movement has brought about changes in housing patterns, discrimination practices, educational opportunities, the legal system, career opportunities, and even interaction patterns. Hence, this one aspect of culture has altered American attitudes, values, and behaviors.

Culture Is Ethnocentric

Ethnocentrism might well be the characteristic that most directly relates to intercultural communication. Its important tie with communication can be seen in its definition. William Sumner, generally credited with introducing the term to the study of group relations and culture, defined ethnocentrism as "the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it."²⁶ In other words, ethnocentrism is the perceptual lens through which cultures interpret and judge each other. Anthropologists generally agree that ethnocentrism is found in every culture.²⁸ If one culture tends to view the eating of dogs as barbarous and abnormal, the people with such habits are apt to consider the custom of confining the elderly to convalescent homes just as cruel and unnatural. The impact of ethnocentrism on a culture's self-image is described by Keesing: "Nearly always the folklore of a people includes myths of origin which give priority to themselves, and place the stamp of supernatural approval upon their particular customs."²⁷

Feelings that *we are right* and *they are wrong* pervade every aspect of a culture's existence. Examples range from the insignificant ("Earrings should be placed on the ears, not on the nose") to the significant ("We need to defeat our enemies to protect what is right"). As we shall point out in Chapter 10, when these kinds of attitudes are carried to their extreme, ethnocentrism can impair intercultural understanding. The logical extensions of ethnocentrism are *detachment* and *division*, which can take a variety of forms, including war. We find East Indians looking down on the Pakistanis, the Japanese feeling superior to the Chinese, and ethnic rivalries causing strife between Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia. In more subtle ways, ethnocentrism can cause the alienation of co-cultures



Photo Larry A. Samovar and Lisa Stefani, 1994

The traditions and patterns of a culture are passed from generation to generation.

from the dominant culture, or one group from another. How often we find white-collar workers isolated from blue-collar ones, African Americans living apart from whites, and those with disabilities removed from our sight.

Our discussion thus far should not lead to the conclusion that ethnocentrism is always conscious, for much of it is not. Like culture itself, ethnocentrism is usually learned at the unconscious level. For example, when our schools are teaching American history, geography, literature, and government, they are also, without realizing it, teaching ethnocentrism. By being exposed only to this single orientation, the student is developing the view that America is the center of the world, as well as learning to judge that world by the American standards he or she has been taught. If most of the authors, philosophers, scientists, composers, and political leaders you have studied are white males, you will use white males as a basis to judge others. The omission of African Americans and women from most textbooks is, in a very real sense, the result of ethnocentrism.

What makes the pull of culture so very strong, as we indicated earlier in the chapter, is that the teaching begins at birth and continues all through life. Using the standard language of her time (sexist by today's standards), anthropologist Ruth Benedict offered an excellent explanation of why culture is such a puissant influence on all our lives:

The life history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community. From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behavior. By

the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities. Every child that is born into his group will share them with him, and no child born into the opposite side of the globe can ever achieve the thousandth part.²⁹

Intercultural Communication

Having discussed communication in the previous chapter and culture in this chapter, we are now ready to link these two concepts. This connection is crucial, for culture influences how we send and receive messages. A German, an Egyptian, a youth gang member, or a Brazilian is taught how to communicate by his or her culture. People view the world and respond to the world through categories, concepts, and labels that are the products of experiences selected by their culture. To better understand these experiences and their impact on communication, we will examine intercultural communication by *offering a definition of it, canvassing some of its forms, presenting a model of how it operates, and previewing its elements*. The remainder of this book will be devoted to a discussion of those elements.

A Definition of Intercultural Communication

A number of terms describe various aspects and levels of communication between people of different backgrounds. As we have already indicated, intercultural communication is the overall term. In its most general sense, it defines those occasions when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture. More precisely, intercultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event. Frequently, the term *cross-cultural communication* is used when referring to communication between people from different cultures. Because this term implies a comparison between cultures (for example, different styles of leadership) we find it too restrictive. There are, however, other terms that we can use to focus on various dimensions and forms of intercultural communication.

Forms of Intercultural Communication

Interracial communication occurs when source and receiver are from different races. The term *race* pertains to physical characteristics, such as color of skin, contour of head, shape of eyes, texture of hair, and the like. Even though some people believe that these physical traits might no longer be distinct and that the term *racial* is consequently outdated, physical differences frequently do influence communication. And interracial communica-

tion may not be intercultural. For instance, if a third-generation Korean American whose family has been thoroughly assimilated into American culture is talking with a white American, their communication would be interracial, but hardly intercultural. On the other hand, if a recently arrived Panamanian is talking to the same Korean American, their communication would be both interracial and intercultural.

The major difficulty encountered in interracial communication is racial prejudice, a problem that can often be traced to ethnocentrism. Strong prejudice leads to stereotyping and suspicion, both of which prevent meaningful interaction. Another barrier to interracial communication is the use of power by the dominant culture to control the degree to which racial groups are accepted into the mainstream. In the United States, the white race is both the governing and predominant race, and as such often determines the degree to which members of other races may acquire membership in the dominant culture. Because of its power, the dominant culture not only benefits from most of the rules and laws governing society, but also tends to establish the value system that the media and other institutions transmit.

Interethnic communication occurs when the participants are of the same race but of different ethnic origins or backgrounds. Ethnic minorities usually form their own communities in a country or culture. Cubans living in Miami, Mexicans in San Diego, Haitians in New York City, and the Chinese in San Francisco might all be citizens of the United States, yet their ethnic culture is transferred intergenerationally. This transfer enables the members of these, and other ethnic groups, to preserve their identity to some degree while living within the dominant culture.³⁰

The term *interethnic* is also used to denote situations such as that in Canada, where there are English Canadians and French Canadians. Individuals from both groups may be citizens of Canada and members of the same race, but they have quite different backgrounds, perspectives, goals, and languages.

Intracultural communication is communication between members of the same culture. Although the term can define the exchange of messages between members of the dominant culture, it is usually applied to communication in which one or both of the participants hold dual membership. In these cases, racial, ethnic, or other such factors also come into play.

Two things should be obvious at this point in our description of the forms of intercultural communication. First, *many people hold membership in a number of different groups and co-cultures are also influenced by the norms and values of the dominant culture.* As Julia Wood points out, these affiliations can be based on race, ethnic background, gender, age, sexual preference, and so forth.³¹ Second, although there might be minor distinctions among instances of interracial, interethnic, and intracultural communication, they all share the same processes and elements. That is, specialized alliances and associations create shared perceptions, comparable norms and values, and distinctive verbal and nonverbal codes. For these reasons, it would be helpful if we were able to find a single word or phrase

Many people hold membership in a number of different groups and co-cultures.



Photo Lisa Stefani, 1994

that described those instances of intercultural communication involving people with dual or multiple memberships. We believe that that word is *co-culture*. Although we have been using the word *co-culture* all along it might be helpful if we paused for a moment to explain the rationale behind our preference for it.

For a number of years the social scientific literature employed the word *subculture* when referring to individuals and groups of people who, while living in the dominant culture, had membership in another culture. In recent years, however, the term has been replaced and the concept itself reformulated. When referring to the general category of intracultural communication, the term *co-culture* is now used because the word *subculture* implies that members of the nondominant group are inferior in some way. Because we believe this switch in terms was sound, we shall use the word *co-culture* when talking about groups or social communities exhibiting communication characteristics sufficient to distinguish them from other groups and communities.

We need only return to our general analysis of culture to see why these co-cultures have distinct patterns of communication. Remember that two essential characteristics of culture can be applied to co-cultures. The first is the process by which *culture dictates what one experiences*. Being gay, disabled, Mexican American, African American, or female exposes a person to a set of messages that help determine how he or she perceives some aspects of the external world and, just as significantly, how he or she communicates those perceptions. The second is the process whereby *culture, through carriers transmits these experiences*

so that they are learned by each new set of members —be they children or adults. We will apply these two characteristics to the American co-culture of women, then offer a justification for treating it as a co-culture. Keep in mind that we could offer the same analysis for any co-culture composed of individuals who had shared common experiences over a long period.

If, as Barbara Bate stated, culture is “a relatively organized set of beliefs and expectations about how people should talk, think, and organize their lives,”³² we can understand how women and men grow up in two distinct communication cultures. Although at first glance it may appear that they share common environments and experiences, such as homes, schools, churches, and media, the messages they receive from these institutions are often quite different. Girls are expected to do indoor chores and boys outdoor ones. Girls have to stay near the house while boys can go exploring. Girls’ games are calm and restrictive; boys engage in games that are active, aggressive, combative, and competitive.³³ And think of the messages embedded in the selection of toys: dolls for girls, and cars and guns for boys. Books, magazines, movies, and television offer stories and images that encourage gender-specific views of what is important and worthwhile in life. Girls are told to focus on romantic concerns and on being attractive; young boys are told that a man is mechanically minded, strong, tough, and self-assured. These, and thousands of other messages, produce two groups of people who perceive themselves differently (women have lower self-esteem than do men), perceive the world differently (women view the world with more anxiety and hostility), talk differently (women use more tag lines and interrupt less), and make different use of nonverbal cues (women engage in more eye contact and use smaller gestures).

What we have said about women could be modified to apply to any co-culture. What is important for our analysis is not the specific example, but rather the idea that unique experiences generate unique modes of behavior that will, as we point out throughout this book, influence communication.

An Intercultural Communication Model

Having defined some forms of intercultural communication, we can now begin to visualize the countless situations we face each day that represent these forms. We will study a model of a typical encounter that will clarify intercultural communication and assist you in predicting some of the consequences of bringing people together from different cultures or co-cultures.

Figure 3-1 illustrates the influence of culture on individuals, and the problems inherent in the production and interpretation of intercultural messages. In this figure, three cultures are represented by three geometric shapes: Cultures A and B are similar to one another and are represented, respectively, by a square and an irregular octagon that resembles a

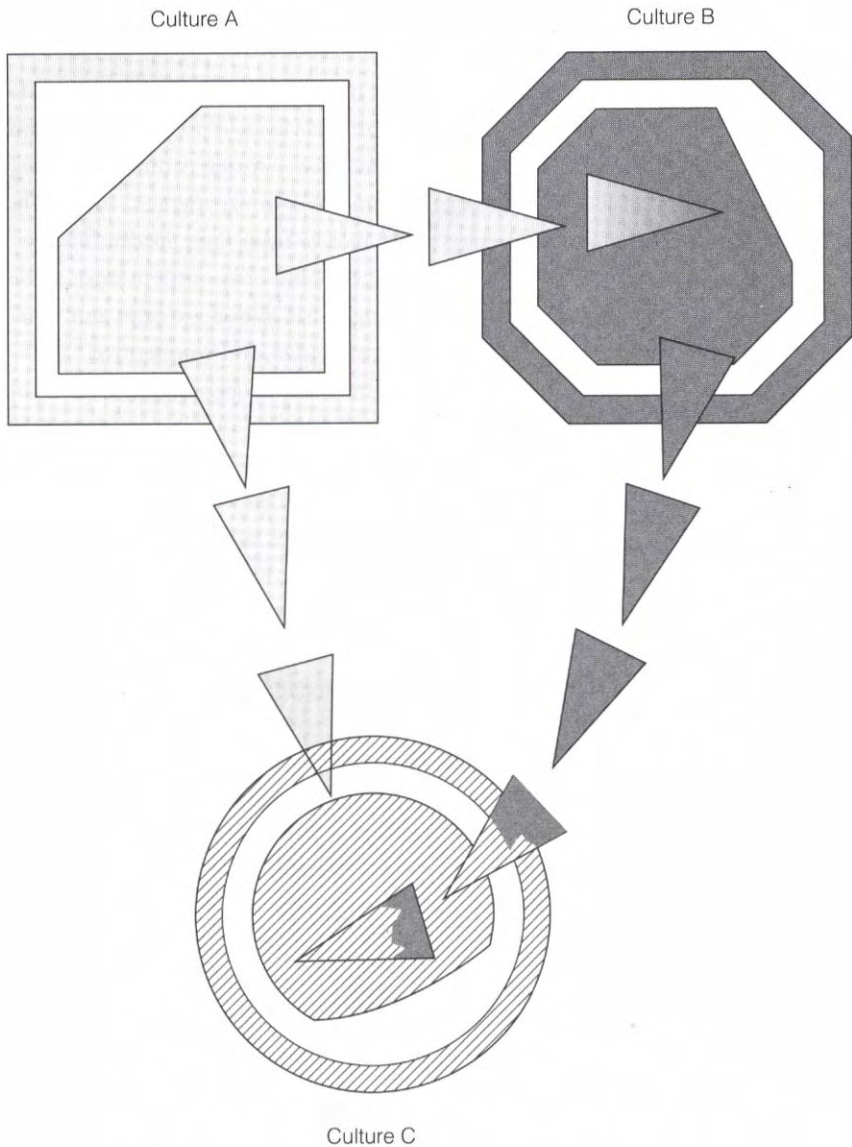


Figure 4-1 Model of Intercultural Communication

Figure 3-1 Model of Intercultural Communication

square; and Culture C, which is quite different from Cultures A and B, is distinguished from both by its circular shape and its distance from Cultures A and B.

Within each of these representations is another, smaller form that is similar in shape and that represents a person who has been molded by the culture. The shape of this form is somewhat different from that of the culture, which suggests that other influences besides culture act on the individual. As we have said throughout this book, culture is but one factor influencing how we perceive and interact with the world; group affiliations and individual personalities also come into play each time we send and receive messages. Although culture is the dominant force shaping an individual, within any culture people vary to some extent from each other.

Message production, transmission, and interpretation across cultures are represented by the series of arrows connecting the cultures. When a message leaves the culture in which it is encoded, it carries the content its sender intended, insofar as this is possible. That the meaning the message conveys is only part of what the message producer intended is represented by the arrows leaving the culture having the same pattern inside as that within the message producer. When a message reaches the culture in which it is to be interpreted, the meaning is again modified: it is subjected to the repertoires of social reality, communicative behaviors, and meanings of the new culture.

Culture's influence on intercultural communication is a function of the dissimilarity of the cultures, which is indicated in the model by the degree of change in the pattern of the message arrows. The change that occurs in messages between Cultures A and B is much less than that in messages between Cultures A and C and between Cultures B and C. This is because Cultures A and B are similar. Hence, the repertoires of social reality, communicative behaviors, and meanings are similar and the decoding process produces results compatible with the original content of the message. Because Culture C is quite different from Cultures A and B, the decoded message is different and resembles more closely the patterns of Culture C.

The model suggests that there can be a wide variation in cultural difference—due to circumstances or forms—during intercultural communication. Intercultural communication occurs in situations ranging from interactions between people with extreme cultural differences to interactions between people who are members of the same dominant culture and whose differences are the result of their membership in co-cultures, subgroups, or racial groups. If we imagine these differences as arranged along a minimum-maximum dimension (see Figure 3-2), we see that the degree of difference between two cultural groups depends on their relative social dissimilarity. Although this scale is somewhat oversimplified and unrefined, it allows us to assess intercultural communication acts and to gain insight into the effects of cultural differences on communication. To see how this scale helps us understand intercultural communication, we can look at some examples of cultural differences positioned along the scale.

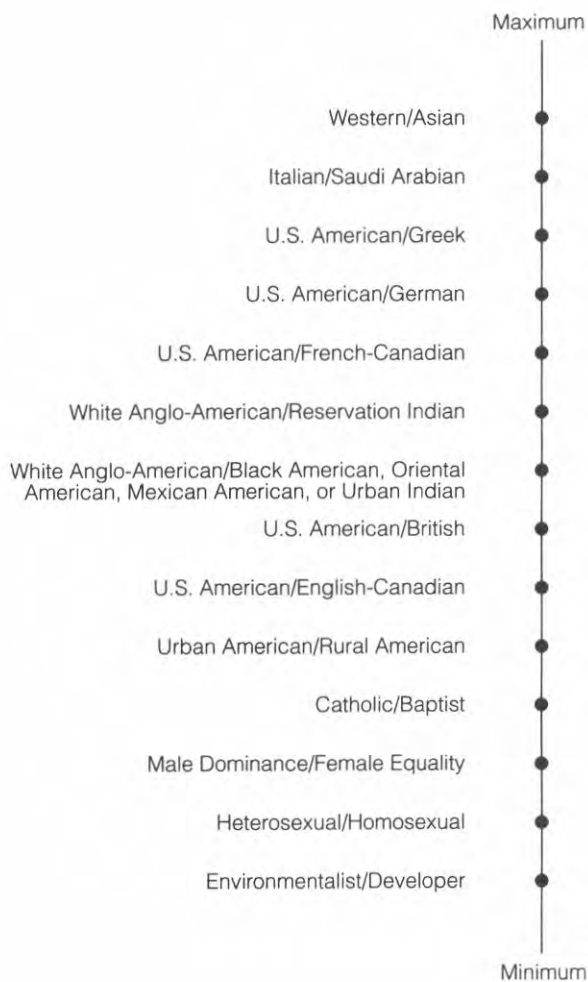


Figure 3-2 Arrangement of Cultures, Co-cultures, and Subgroups along a Scale of Minimum to Maximum Sociocultural Differences

The first example—Asian and Western cultures—represents maximum differences. Imagine an interaction between two farmers, one working on a communal farm on the outskirts of Beijing in China and one operating a large mechanized and automated wheat, corn, and dairy farm in Michigan. In this situation, we would expect to find the greatest variation among cultural factors: for example, physical appearance, religion, philosophy, economic systems, social attitudes, language, heritage, basic concepts of self and of the universe, and degree of technological development. We would also have to recognize, however, that these two people would have in common farming, with its rural lifestyle and love of the land. In some respects, then, they might be more closely related to each other than to members of their own cultures living in large cities. In other words, in some ways, the Michigan farmer might share more with the Chinese farmer than with a Wall Street securities broker.

An example representing the center of the scale is the difference between American and German cultures. Here, there is less variation: physical characteristics are similar; the English language derives in part from German and its ancestor languages; the roots of both German and American philosophy lie in ancient Greece; and most Americans and Germans share the Christian religion. But there are also some significant differences: German political and economic systems differ somewhat from those in the United States; German society tends toward formality, and ours toward informality; Germans experienced local warfare, the destruction of their cities and economy, and their defeat in two world wars, and the United States has never lost a war on its own territory.

Examples representing minimal differences can be divided into two groups. The first consists of members of separate but similar cultures—for instance, Americans and English Canadians. Their differences are less pronounced than those between American and German cultures, between American and Greek cultures, between American and British cultures, and between American and French Canadian cultures, but greater than those generally found within a single culture. The second consists of co-cultures, subgroups, and racial groups within the dominant culture. For example, in the United States, sociocultural differences may be found between members of the Catholic church and the Baptist church, between ecologists and advocates of further development of Alaskan oil resources, between middle-class Americans and the urban poor, between heterosexuals and the gay community, between the able and the disabled, and between male-dominance advocates and female-equality advocates; but these are not as profound and significant as those found between dominant cultures.

Members of cultural groups with minimal differences may speak the same language, worship forms of the same religion, attend the same schools, and live in the same neighborhoods, but they do not fully share the same experiences, nor the same perceptions. They see their worlds differently, their lifestyles may diverge greatly, and their beliefs, values, and attitudes may differ significantly. Because of their cultural similarities, however, they differ primarily in certain aspects of their social perception. Social perception is the

process by which we construct unique social realities by attributing meaning to the social objects and events we encounter in our environments.

Intercultural communication can best be understood as communication affected by cultural variability in social perception. Culture conditions and structures our perceptual processes so that we develop culturally determined perceptual sets, which not only help determine which external stimuli reach our awareness but, more importantly, significantly influence the social aspect of perception: the social construction of reality by the attribution of meaning to these stimuli. The difficulties in communication that this perceptual variability causes can best be resolved by learning about and understanding the cultural factors that are subject to variation, and by developing an honest and sincere desire to communicate successfully across cultural boundaries.

A Preview of the Elements of Intercultural Communication

Culture, as we have presented the concept, is a complete pattern of living. It is elaborate, abstract, and pervasive. Countless aspects of culture help determine and guide communication behavior. These influences on communication, called sociocultural elements, are diverse and embrace a wide range of human activity. We have selected those cultural elements that have the potential to affect situations in which people from different backgrounds come together. These elements fall into three general groupings—*perception*, *verbal processes*, and *nonverbal processes*—and become apparent in certain settings and contexts. What we shall do in the remainder of the book is look at perceptual, verbal, and nonverbal processes as they manifest themselves in various environments. Each of these categories has a number of subsets that we will also examine.

Sociocultural elements are the constituent parts of intercultural communication. When we combine them, as we do when we communicate, they are like the components of a stereo or computer system: each one is related to and needs the others. In our discussion, we will treat the elements individually. Our perceptions—the way we make sense out of the world—are contextual and influence all stages of message production and reception.

All these processes work together in an inextricable matrix of interacting variables that we call intercultural communication. We need to point out again that our examination will be abbreviated and introductory; in the following chapters, each of these categories will be the subject of a separate and detailed analysis.

Perception

In its simplest sense, perception is, as Marshall Singer tells us, “the process by which an individual selects, evaluates, and organizes stimuli from the external world.”³⁴ In other words, *perception is an internal process whereby we convert the physical energies of the world*

into meaningful internal experiences. Because that world embraces everything, we can never completely know it, as Singer notes: “We experience everything in the world not as it is—but only as the world comes to us through our sensory receptors.”³⁵

Much of what is called perception has its roots in our biology: the act of bringing the outside world to our consciousness involves most of our nervous system, with its complex chemistry and anatomy. Two significant claims have been made for perception. First, *people behave as they do because of the ways in which they perceive the world.* Second, *one learns these perceptions, and the behaviors they produce, as part of one’s cultural experiences.* Whether it be our judgment of beauty or responses to a snake, the way we react to outside forces is primarily the result of what our culture has taught us. In the United States, we might respond positively to someone who “speaks his mind,” yet this same behavior would be frowned upon in most Asian cultures. In short, the world looks, sounds, tastes, and feels the way it does because our culture has given us the criteria of perception.

You should be able to infer from the above example how complicated this issue of perception can be if we include such factors as age, space, ethics, work, power, aggressive behavior, self-disclosure, time, sex role, humor, and competition—all of which have their roots in culture.

Most communication scholars grant that perceptions are part of every communication event and have evolved a fairly consistent taxonomy for those perceptual variables that have the potential to impede seriously the intercultural encounter. The three major sociocultural elements that directly influence the meanings we attach to our perceptions are as follows: *beliefs, values, and attitudes; world view; and social organization.*

Beliefs, Values, and Attitude Systems

In a general sense, *beliefs are subjective probabilities that some object or event is related to some other object or event or to some value, concept, or attribute.* What makes our belief system relevant to this discussion is that it is learned, and hence subject to cultural interpretation. Beliefs are our convictions in the truth of something—with or without proof: we may believe an object or event possesses certain characteristics, for example. We have beliefs about religion (Jesus is the son of God), events (the Desert Storm war was necessary), other people (I know John is smart), and even ourselves (I am very witty). Our list of beliefs is endless. We may believe that rain will cause the grass to grow or that our next-door neighbor is unfriendly. The degree to which we believe that an event or object possesses certain characteristics reflects the level of our subjective probability.

Values are the valuative components of our belief, value, and attitude systems. Valuative qualities include usefulness, goodness, aesthetics, ability to satisfy needs, and ability to produce pleasure. As Milton Rokeach says, they “represent a learned organization of rules for making choices and for resolving conflicts.”³⁶ Although each of us has a unique set of

values, there also are values that tend to permeate a culture. These are called **cultural values**.

Cultural values usually are derived from the larger philosophical issues that are part of a culture's milieu. Hence, they tend to be broad based, enduring, and relatively stable. Values generally are normative in that they inform a member of a culture what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, positive and negative, and the like. Cultural values define what is worth dying for, what is worth protecting, what frightens people, what are proper subjects for study and for ridicule, and what types of events create group solidarity. Most importantly, cultural values guide both perception and behavior.

As we have already indicated, values are learned; they are not universal. In many Native American cultures, where there is no written history, age is highly valued: older people are sought out and asked to take part in many important decisions, and younger people admire them and include them in social gatherings. The positive value placed on age by this co-culture contrasts sharply with the attitude of the dominant American culture, which often shuns the elderly and makes them the brunt of jokes.

Beliefs and values contribute to the development of our attitude systems and provide some of the content of these systems. An attitude is *a learned tendency to respond in a consistent manner to a given object of orientation*. The strength of our attitudes is dependent on the intensity of our convictions that our beliefs and evaluations are correct. Thus, our attitudes prepare us to react to the objects and events in our environment. For instance, if we believe that intentionally injuring another person is wrong, or if we fear being injured, and if we further believe that boxing is likely to cause injury, we may not be well disposed toward boxing (an attitude) and may avoid attending or participating in boxing matches.

World View

The next sociocultural element, though listed second, has the distinction of being both the most important and the hardest to describe. World view is most important because it is a culture's orientation toward such things as God, nature, life, death, the universe, and other philosophical issues concerned with the meaning of life and existence. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes used to say that science made major contributions to minor needs, but religion was at work on the things that mattered most.³⁷ In short, our world view helps us locate our place and social rank in the universe. Rahman Olayiwola argues that world view even influences the social, economic, and political life of a nation.³⁸ Reflect for just a moment on how your concepts of death, illness, and the environment often direct your choices and goals. The relevance to intercultural communication should be clear: different world views produce different choices.

The issues associated with world view are timeless and represent the most fundamental basis of a culture. A Hindu, with a strong belief in reincarnation, will not only perceive

time differently from a Christian, but will also have answers to the major questions of life different from those of a Catholic, Muslim, Jew, Taoist, and atheist.

World view influences a culture at a very deep and profound level. Its effects often are quite subtle and do not reveal themselves in obvious ways. It might be helpful to think of a culture's world view as a pebble tossed into a pond. Just as the pebble creates ripples that spread out and reverberate over the surface of the pond, world view envelopes a culture and permeates every facet of it. We shall return to this analogy and the important topic of world view in Chapter 5.

Social organization

The manner in which a culture organizes itself is reflected in that culture's institutions. These institutions have a variety of configurations and can be formal or informal. Our schools, families, and governments all help determine how we perceive the world and behave in it. Let us briefly examine these institutions and their importance to any study of intercultural communication.

The American author William Thayer once wrote, "As are families, so is society." His words clearly express the importance of family to both culture and individuals, for it is the family that helps the culture teach the child what the world looks like and his or her place in it. It is the family that greets us in this new world once we leave the comfort of the womb. As we will point out in Chapter 5, the family is charged with transforming a biological organism into a human being who must spend the rest of his or her life around other human beings who expect him or her to act much like all the other members of their culture.

The family is also important because by the time the other major cultural institutions influence the child, the family has already exposed it to countless experiences. From our introduction to language to our ways of expressing love, the family is the first teacher. Just think for a moment of some of the crucial attitudes, values, and behaviors to which the family introduces the child. Any list would have to include self-reliance, responsibility, obedience, dominance, social skills, aggression, loyalty, gender roles, and age roles. Keep in mind that at the moment of birth, a human being's development can take any of a number of paths. A child born in India perceives many people living together in one house and is learning about extended families. By being in the same house with elderly people, the child is also associating a value with the aged. In most of Africa, the entire village raises a child, so the child is learning about the extended family. These seemingly insignificant experiences, when combined with thousands of other messages from the family, shape and mold children into members of their culture.

As with world view, the influence of formal and informal government is hard to pin down. For when we speak of the effect of government, we are talking about much more than a culture's political system. The Cuban or Chinese brand of communism produces an individual different from that produced by American or Norwegian democracy. But the

most influential role of any government is as the carrier of history, a role referred to by Theodore Gochenour when he wrote, "The cultural traits of people are rooted in the history which has molded them."

Cultural values, ideals, and behaviors originate in a culture's history. History can therefore help answer such questions as why one type of activity evolved instead of another. The value Mexicans place upon conversation, for example, originates in the socializing that was part of the Aztec marketplace of several centuries ago.

There are countless instances of how the history of a culture determines its world view. For example, to fully understand modern-day Jews and their way of perceiving events and people, you would have to know about the seven thousand years of continuous persecution that their culture has suffered. When Jews make fundamental choices regarding education, freedom, war, civil rights, and the like, they call on their history.

Within our own culture, the interaction among government, history, and culture helps explain the evolution of certain values and attitudes. From the War of Independence to the writing of a constitution that tells us we can all own guns, our history has stressed individual freedom and the defense of that freedom even if it means engaging in acts of aggression.

In Chapter 5, we shall look at a number of examples of how a culture's history helps direct its actions. But for now it is important to remind you that individuals begin membership in their culture with a fund of knowledge that has been built up over a long period. History is one of the storehouses of that knowledge.

School, whether it be a private academic institution or a thatched hut, is another social organization that exerts its influence on perception and communication. Regardless of the culture, schools—in both formal and informal ways—are given part of the responsibility for preserving and transferring the history and values of the culture. Schools may teach geography or wood carving, God or evolution, mathematics or nature lore; they may tell stories of revolution or tales of peace, but regardless of the specific lessons, the central messages are the same: this is what we were, this is what we are, and this is what we want to become. In Chapter 9, we will reconsider education as an essential feature of all cultures.

Verbal Processes

As we shall use it, the phrase *verbal processes* refers to two closely related activities involving symbols: *how we talk to each other* and the *internal activities of thinking*. Although these will be examined in detail in Chapter 6, we will preview them now so that you can begin to appreciate their relationship to culture and communication.

Verbal Language

We begin our preview by noting that it is impossible to separate our use of language from our culture, for in its most basic sense, *language is an organized, generally agreed upon,*

learned symbol system used to represent the experiences within a geographic or cultural community.

Culture teaches us both the symbol (dog) and what the symbol stands for (a furry, domesticated animal). Objects, events, experiences, and feelings have the labels or names they do because a community of people arbitrarily decided to so name them. If we extend this notion to the intercultural setting, we can see that different cultures can have both different symbols and different responses. In some areas of the world—such as Hong Kong, Korea, and the Philippines—dogs are considered a culinary delight and often are eaten. In the dominant American culture, dogs are absorbed into the family and never killed for food. Hence, the word *dog* conveys a meaning in the dominant American culture quite different from that in Hong Kong. If you imagine shifting your cultural references for every word and meaning you know, you can begin to visualize the influence of culture on how we send and receive messages. Think for just a moment about the variety of meanings various cultures have for words such as *freedom*, *sexuality*, *trespassing*, *wealth*, *nature*, *leadership*, *assertiveness*, *security*, *illness*, or *disease*.

Even the way people use language shifts from culture to culture. In the Arab tradition, Myron Lustig says, “verbal language patterns that emphasize creative artistry by using rhetorical devices such as repetition, metaphor, and simile are highly valued.”³⁹ Japanese culture encourages minimum verbal communication, as is evident in their proverb “By your mouth you shall perish.” People living within the same geographic boundaries can also use language in ways that differ from those of the dominant culture. We are all aware of the rich examples that can be drawn from African American communication. And women, because they are raised to be polite and to focus on others, use language differently: they ask more questions than do men and consciously or unconsciously let men control the flow of conversation.

Patterns of Thought

The mental processes of reasoning and problem solving prevalent in a community also often influence the intercultural encounter. If you, like most Americans, use the deductive method of reasoning to solve problems, and you are interacting with someone who is using the inductive method (as is common in the Korean culture), you are apt to misunderstand each other as you try to agree on what the problem and its solution are. You are moving from broad categories to specific examples that rely on “facts,” while your associate from Korea is starting with specific observations and extracting generalizations. And many of the Korean’s generalizations might be based on intuitive discovery.

Unless we have had experience with people from cultures that use different patterns of thought, it is quite natural to assume everyone thinks the way we do. Even the simple organizational pattern of introduction, body, and conclusion is not universal. We take this scheme for granted, but much of the world does not structure its discourse in this fashion.

Nonverbal Processes

All human beings also use nonverbal symbols to share their thoughts and feelings. Although the process of using our actions to communicate is universal, the meanings for those actions often shift from culture to culture. Hence, nonverbal communication becomes yet another element one must understand if one is going to interact with people from different cultures. This element is significant enough to take up an entire chapter later in the book. For now, however, let us briefly introduce you to three categories of nonverbal behavior: *bodily behavior*, *time*, and *space*.

Bodily Behavior

Examples of touch as a form of communication demonstrate how nonverbal communication is a product of culture. In Germany, women as well as men shake hands at the outset of every social encounter; in the United States, women seldom shake hands. In the Arab culture, men often greet each other by kissing and hugging. In Thailand, people do not touch in public, and to touch someone on the head is a major social transgression. Even co-cultures differ in their use of touch. In the United States, women touch and receive more touch than do men, yet men tend to initiate the touching.

Even some of our most elementary gestures are culture-bound. We make a zero with our index finger and thumb as a way of saying everything is perfect; yet this same gesture means money in Japan, is used as an insult in Malta and Greece, and is perceived as an obscene gesture in Brazil.

In Chapter 7, we will look at nonverbal differences as they apply to general appearance, dress, body movements, posture, facial expressions, eye contact and gaze, touch, smell, and paralanguage. For now, however, it should be clear that the same action can elicit contrary responses.

Concept of Time

Concept and use of time are also of importance when people of different cultures come together. Most Western cultures think of time in lineal-spatial terms. We are time-bound. Our schedules and our lists dominate our lives. The Germans and the Swiss are even more aware of time than we are. For them, trains, planes, and meals must always be on time. In many parts of the world, however, the activity, not the clock, determines action. Hence, these cultures interpret being tardy, for example, in quite different terms.

Use of Space

When they interact, Arabs and Latins tend to stand or sit closer together than do Americans, and we feel uncomfortable when people from these cultures get too close to us—examples of yet other behaviors that are conditioned by culture. Distance, however, is just one aspect of use of space as a form of communication; physical orientation is also

influenced by culture. Americans prefer to sit face-to-face or at right angles to one another, whereas Chinese generally prefer side-by-side seating. The English and Germans are conditioned to waiting in a straight line when seeking services in public, but Arabs see nothing wrong with propelling and jostling themselves into the best possible position to secure service.

We conclude this section on the elements of intercultural communication by reminding you that they will be examined in great detail in later chapters.

SUMMARY

Culture

- The world is a confusing place until we can make some sense of it, so the basic function of culture is to explain the world to each new member of the culture. By telling us what to expect, culture reduces confusion and helps us predict the future.
- We define culture as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, timing, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, and material objects acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.
- Six characteristics of culture that most directly affect communication are that it is (1) learned, (2) transmitted from generation to generation, (3) based on symbols, (4) dynamic, (5) integrated, and (6) ethnocentric.

Intercultural Communication

- Intercultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event.
- Interracial communication occurs when source and receiver are from different races.
- Interethnic communication refers to situations in which the parties are of the same race but of different ethnic origins.
- Intracultural communication is communication between members of the same culture, including racial, ethnic, and other co-cultures.

An Intercultural Communication Model

- The model of intercultural communication demonstrates how the meaning of a message from one culture changes when subjected to the repertoires of social reality, communicative behaviors, and meanings of another culture.

The Elements of Intercultural Communication

- One element of intercultural communication is perception, “the process by which an individual selects, evaluates, and organizes stimuli from the external world.” Cultural perceptions are based on beliefs, values, and attitude systems.

- Another intercultural element is verbal processes: how we talk to each other and think.
- Nonverbal processes, the third element, involve the use of actions to communicate. The meanings of these actions shift from culture to culture.

ACTIVITIES

1. Ask your partner from another culture to relate a folk tale (or a song, a work of art, or something similar) from his or her culture. What cultural values does it convey? Compare it to one from your culture. Do they stand in opposition to each other, or are there similarities?
2. In small groups, list the American cultural values mentioned in this chapter. Try to think of others. Then find examples from American advertising campaigns that illustrate these values. For example, the advertising slogan from an athletic-shoe manufacturer, "Just do it," reflects the American value of accomplishment.
3. Find out as much as you can about the history of your partner's culture. Try to isolate examples of how his or her cultural values have been determined by historical events.
4. In small groups, play a word-association game. Your instructor will compose a list of potentially culture-bound words such as *motherhood*, *freedom*, and *sex*, then say the words one at a time. Write down the first thing that comes into your mind as you hear each word. Then compare your reactions. Are there any major differences within the group? Discuss them. Then compare your answers with the entire class and discuss.

DISCUSSION IDEAS

1. Explain American views toward these elements of culture: work, dress, hygiene, courtship, sex, and status.
2. Describe a typical day from morning to night in terms of the cultural values that govern your actions. For example:

<i>Action</i>	<i>Value</i>
Brush teeth, take shower	Personal odors are offensive in American culture
Put on jeans and T-shirt	Comfort and informality are acceptable in educational settings

3. Give additional examples, from recent history, of cultures that have changed as a result of invention, diffusion, and calamity.
4. In France, there are now several fast-food restaurants, such as McDonald's. Does this mean that traditional French values regarding food and eating have changed? Explain your answer.

5. Give an example of a situation in which another culture's use of nonverbal communication confused you.
6. Find examples in the news of events that involve interracial, interethnic, intercultural, and intracultural communication and explain how they are examples of each.

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