#1

3. In an article entitled "We Are All Americans" in the liberal Spanish newspaper *El País*, Vincente Verdu has this to say about the American influence on other cultures:

> The American model of life repeats itself like a fractal in the many different aspects of everyday existence, be it communal life, sex, art, or money. . . . American influence consists of a whole bundle of things, of varying degrees of goodness and toxicity. . . . Thanks to the Americans, we have ecology, although the United States did not sign the Kyoto Accord, and thanks to the Americans we have hard-line feminism, militant gays, nontraditional couples, equity within couples, and acceptance of multiculturalism. (2002: 41)

Can you identify some "distinctly American" concepts and how they are represented with verbal or nonverbal signs in other cultures? An example would be the concept of fast food and its representation by the sign "McDonald's" (verbal) or the golden arches (nonverbal).

CHECK YOURSELF

- Symbol
- Semiotics
- Linguistic relativity
- Lacuna
- Strong version of linguistic relativity
- Weak version of linguistic relativity
- Cognitive look
- Image-schema
- Corporeal look
- Manifested category
- Manifesting category

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Q #2

CASE STUDY
THE 1999 COCA-COLA SCARE IN EUROPE

This case study is based on an article entitled "Cultural Variability as a Challenge to Global Public Relations: A Case Study of the Coca-Cola Scare in Europe," by Maureen Taylor (2000). As usual, it is recommended that you read the article in its entirety; below is a summary of the article.

Be ready to identify and then discuss the following topics:

1. Intercultural communication as a shared space
2. Reasons for different cultural responses to the crisis
3. Continuous nature of intercultural communication

The article discusses the so-called Coca-Cola tainting crisis, which occurred in Western Europe during the summer of 1999. This crisis was considered the worst health scare in Coke's 113-year history and a public relations disaster.

The crisis broke out in June 1999, when school children in Belgium reported feeling ill after drinking Coca-Cola soft drinks. The Belgian government ordered Coca-Cola to immediately recall all its products in the country. The company complied, but maintained that independent laboratory tests did not show any harmful substances in its products. The next day, France and Spain accused the company of selling tainted products. Coca-Cola pulled all its products from the shelves in those two countries as well. Other European nations, such as Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, reacted differently to the tainting scare and did not recall Coca-Cola products. The Coca-Cola company did not accept any responsibility for the incident, suggesting it was a case of a mass hysteria. Tainting might have been caused by other factors—for instance, the low quality of carbon dioxide in the "fizz" in the products bottled at the Belgian Coca-Cola factory. Not until nine days later did M. Douglas Ivester, CEO of the organization, acknowledge the problem and fly over to the region to deal with the crisis. On June 22, 1999, he apologized to the Belgian people in an open letter published in 15 Flemish and French papers in Belgium.

The article documents in detail the different responses of six West European countries to the scare, as well as Coca-Cola's communication strategy during and after the incident. Belgian, French, and Spanish consumers not only stopped drinking traditional Coke products but also stopped buying related Coca-Cola products such as Fanta and Nestea. In France, the Dunkirk plant manufacturing Coca-Cola products was closed down. In Spain, where most of the Coca-Cola products are manufactured by Coca-Cola Espana, the Health Ministry pulled all imported bottles of Coca-Cola, regardless of place of origin. In Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, however, no actions (e.g., bans or boycotts) were taken against Coca-Cola. Their governments seemed to be less worried that tainting would endanger their populations.

Following the incident, the relations between the organization and its Western European publics were visibly damaged. On December 7, 1999, Ivester, who had been widely criticized for his perceived arrogance after school children in Belgium became sick, announced his resignation. He was replaced by Douglas Draft, an Australian with extensive intercultural expertise. A new "Coke's Back" advertising campaign was carried out in the region. Coca-Cola began to implement a new marketing strategy, trying to better understand cultural differences around the world. As the company learned, the "one market, one strategy" approach did not work. On January 29, 2000, Coca-Cola issued a news release describing its new realignment strategy. Among other things, it said, "Our success depends on our ability to make billions of individual connections each day in every community around the world."

DISCUSSION

Now let's see how this case study can be an illustration of the Continuum Principle of intercultural communication.

1. Intercultural communication as a shared space. Intercultural communication in this chapter is discussed as a space, no part of which can be distinguished from neighboring parts. The interactions between Coca-Cola and the six European cultures can definitely be understood in terms of continua. There would be no interaction between them if they were not connected by lines made up of some ultimate parts. In this particular case, these continua can be represented by such global cultural dimensions as Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance. Thus, intercultural communication between Coca-Cola and the six European cultures can be seen as a shared space formed by (at least) two continua—High Power Distance/Low Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance/Uncertainty Acceptance. These dimensions apply to all the interacting cultures, such as American Coca-Cola and Belgium. In other words, intercultural communication must be viewed as a process of constructing a shared space.

As we saw, this process, as described in the article, was not successful in some cases and was more successful in others. Why was that? Why did the various European cultures react to the crisis differently?

2. Reasons for different cultural responses to the crisis. Now that we have identified the global cultural dimensions that form the continua, we can take a closer look at the positions that different cultures occupy along the continua. Not surprisingly, the countries that showed a lower tolerance for the crisis (Belgium, France, and Spain) have higher scores on both the Uncertainty Avoidance index and the Power Distance index. According to Hofstede's research, Uncertainty Avoidance scores are as follows: United States, 46; France/Spain, 86; Belgium, 94. Power Distance scores are as follows: United States, 40; Spain, 57; Belgium, 65; and France, 68. These scores explain why Belgium, France, and Spain were so displeased with Coca-Cola. First, because those countries have a low tolerance for uncertainty, they dislike the entry of any global product into their cultures. It might be said that the Coca-Cola company was condemned not so much for the tainting situation as for its silence for over a week after the first illnesses. Second, those countries were not happy with Coca-Cola's response to the crisis because Coca-Cola's claim that its products were safe challenged their authority. In addition, no formal apologies were made to the French public, ignoring a large distance between low power distance United States (40) and high power distance France (68).

The scores of the three Scandinavian nations on the two continua described above are more similar to those of the United States. According to Hofstede's research, Uncertainty Avoidance scores are as follows: United States, 46; Denmark, 23; Sweden, 29; and Norway 50. Power Distance scores are as follows: United States, 40; Denmark, 18; Sweden, 31; and Norway, 31. Thus, more successful communication between Coca-Cola and these cultures may be attributed to their similar attitudes toward risk and authority.

(continued)

THE 1999 COCA-COLA SCARE IN EUROPE CONTINUED

3. Continuous nature of intercultural communication. In this case, communication can continue only because of the distances between Coca-Cola and the European nations, described in the article. In capturing the interactions that took place during the summer of 1999, the article tries to stop the (analogic) flow of communication and present it as a (digital) snapshot.

Coca-Cola, of course, failed to perceive the distances between the countries and draw the distinctions in various continua that formed the intercultural space. As a result, the company had to drop its "one market, one strategy" approach and vow to pay more attention to cultural differences in order to connect with various communities around the world. To its credit, Coca-Cola chose to expand its intercultural horizons. In order to maintain its continuity as one of the leading American companies, Coca-Cola had to change. Appointing a new CEO with extensive intercultural expertise was one of the first steps in that direction.

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