VALUE DIFFERENCES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

by Myron W. Lustig

Nearly twenty-five hundred years ago, the Greek historian Herodotus, whom Cicero called "The Father of History," related a story about Darius, the first monarch of the great Persian empire. Darius became King of Persia (now Iran) in 521 B.C., and he ruled a vast empire that, for a time, included most of the known world, including southeastern Europe, northern Africa, India, southern Russia, and the Middle East. Darius, so the story goes,

> ...sent for the Greeks at his court to ask them their price for devouring the corpses of their ancestors. They replied that no price would be high enough. Thereupon the Persian king summoned the representatives of an Indian tribe which habitually practiced the custom from which the Greeks shrank, and asked them through the interpreter, in the presence of the Greeks, at what price they would burn the corpses of their ancestors. The Indians cried aloud and besought the king not even to mention such a horror. From these circumstances the historian drew the following notable moral for human guidance: If all existing customs could somewhere be set before all men in order that they might select the most beautiful for themselves, every nation would choose out, after the most searching scrutiny, the customs they had already practiced (Gomperz 1901, pp. 403-404).

In the preceding passage, Herodotus described what today is called **ethnocentrism, which is the belief that the customs, practices, and values of one's own culture (or group, society, tribe, et cetera) are superior to those of other cultures.** Ethnocentrism is a learned belief in cultural superiority. Although ethnocentrism can be a major source of problems in intercultural communication episodes, it is present in all cultures and serves a useful purpose by maintaining order and cultural stability. After all, cultural practices would not survive, and the cultures themselves would disintegrate, if the members did not believe that **their** values and customs were superior to the alternatives.

A culture's value system is regarded as superior by that culture's members precisely because it is rarely, if ever, "changed, challenged, questioned, or even seen" (Laing 1972, p. 106). As with Isaac Newton's falling apple, which led to the discovery of the physical laws of thermodynamics, only the most perceptive people pay attention to the commonplace world around them. Most people remain oblivious to the unseen forces that govern cultural behaviors, like fish who are unaware of the water that surrounds them. The tendency for most people to be "blind to the obvious" has led Ichheiser (1970) to declare that "nothing evades our attention as persistently as that which is taken for granted" (p. 8).

This article is about the "taken-for-granteds" of human cultures. It deals with

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the unseen forces -- the cultural values -- that underlie cultural behaviors and decisions. These unseen forces are very important because they include both the cultural assumptions about what the world is and the collective judgments about what it should be. These impressions about what consti-tutes a good or bad world, in turn, influence the kinds of experiences that are sought and the interpretations that are made of everyday events.

What are Values?

Cultures can exist only because their members follow predictable behavior patterns. Tasks such as eating, sleeping, dressing, working, playing, and relating socially are so predictable and commonplace within a culture that they pass nearly unnoticed. In the United States, freeways clog during rush hours, lunch is usually over by 1:30 p.m., gifts brought by dinner guests are usually opened in the presence of the guests, and toilet flushing dramatically increases during the televised commercials of the annual Super Bowl. In Italy, lunch hasn't even begun by 1:30 p.m., and soccer is more popular than American football. In Malaysia, gifts are never opened in front of the giver; doing so is considered bad manners.

These predictable behavior patterns, which are stable over time and which lead to roughly similar behaviors across similar situations, are based upon a form of mental programming called **values**. Values are what people regard as good or bad, beautiful or ugly, clean or dirty, valuable or worthless, right or wrong, kind or cruel, just or unjust, and appropriate or inappropriate. Despite their importance in the control of cultural behaviors, values can't be seen, heard, tasted, or experienced because values are not available for direct investigation, although the consequences of particular values -- human behaviors, or what people say and do -- are readily observable. Values are inside people, in their minds. They are a way of thinking about the world, of orienting oneself to it. Values, therefore, are mental programs that govern specific behavior choices.

Some aspects of this mental programming are, of course, unique to each specific individual. Even within a single culture, no two people are programmed identically, and these ideosyncratic personality differences separate the individual members of a culture. Comparing across cultures, some mental programs are shared by all humanity and are essentially universal, or *etic* (Pike 1967). A mother's concern for her newborn infant, for example, reflects a biological program that exists across all known cultures and that is a part of our common genetic inheritance. In addition to those portions of our mental programs that are unique or universally held, there are mental programs that are widely shared, but only by members of a particular group or culture. Termed *emic* (Pike 1967), these collective programs can be understood only within the context of a particular culture, and they include cultural differences in the preferred degree of social equality, the importance of group harmony, the degree to which emotional displays are permitted, the value ascribed to assertiveness, and the like.

As you can see, **value and culture are** inextricably linked. Each can be understood only in terms of the other because values form the basis for cultural differences. In a sense, a culture's values provide the basic set of standards and assumptions that guide thought and action. By providing its members with shared beliefs and assumptions about the "right" and "proper" ways of behaving, cultures provide the context within which individual values develop (Lee 1948).

HOW CULTURAL VALUES FORM

Cultures invent, discover, or develop specific values as a result of two forces that affect the culture as a whole: **environmental adaptations** and **historical factors**. Environmental adaptations refer to the need for the culture to accommodate specific external constraints such as harsh weather, the availability or unavailability of certain foods and other raw materials, and biological forces such as life expectancy and fertility rates, which influence the culture's ability to sustain itself. Historical factors refer to the unique experiences within cultures that have become a part of the collective mental programming. Wars, inheritance rules, economic developments, prior experiences, legislative acts, and the allocation of power to specific individuals are all historical events that influence the formation of cultural values.

As an example of environmental and historical forces that influence the formation of cultural values, Singer (1987) described the effects of population, religion, resource availability, and life expectancy on the formation of certain cultural values within Ireland and India during the late nineteenth century. In Ireland, the population was large relative to the available food, and severe food shortages were not uncommon. Therefore, a pressing need existed to reduce the size of the population. Because the Irish were predominantly Catholic, artificial methods of birth control were unacceptable. Given the negative cultural value associated with birth control and the problems with overpopulation and a lack of food, a cultural value evolved that women ought not to marry before the age of about thirty. The population was reduced, of course, by delaying marriages.

India, at about the same time, also had harsh economic conditions, but the average life expectancy was about twenty-eight years, and nearly half of the children died before age five. Given that reality, a cultural value evolved that the preferred age for an Indian woman to marry was around twelve or thirteen. That way, all available childbearing years were available for procreation, thus increasing the chances for the survival of Indian society.

Singer (1987) suggested that these extreme cultural adaptations were not made consciously. Rather, the cultures were faced with the need to adapt to their environments, and had they not succeeded, they might have perished.

> Every group is confronted with environmental realities of one sort or another. Every group must deal with those realities in one way or another, or it will perish. Some groups may not adapt as well as others. There is no rule that says every group must survive. Throughout history many have not (Singer 1987, p. 168).

Once formed, a culture's basic values have to be transmitted from one generation to another. The primary agents for transmitting these values are parents, but the entire folklore of a culture provides an unrelenting message about the preferred ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and acting in relation to problems with which the culture must cope. Most of these core values are programmed at a very early age. North Americans, for example, value achievement, practicality, material comfort, freedom, and individuality. These values are not so much consciously taught as unconsciously experienced as a byproduct of day-to-day activities.

DIMENSIONS OF VALUES

Cultural values can differ in a variety of ways. Thus any description of value differences requires a listing of the ways in which cultures could potentially differ. One such description of values has been provided by Rokeach (1968, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1979). In his extensive writings, Rokeach said that cultures develop values about broad modes of conduct and about end-states of existence -- means and ends. Table 1 provides a listing of these two kinds of values. **The values referring to broad modes of conduct, called instrumental values, include honesty, love, obedience, ambitiousness, and independence.** The listing of instrumental values is further subdivided into those with a moral focus and those concerned with competence or self-actualization. **Moral values** are most closely related to interpersonal communication and include such modes of conduct as being cheerful, helpful, loving, and honest with others. **Competence values** are related to an individual's personality and include such modes of conduct as being ambitious, imaginative, logical, and self-controlled.

The values referring to end-states of existence, called terminal values, include freedom, a comfortable life, wisdom, a world at peace, and true friendship. Like the instrumental values, the listing of terminal values is further subdivided into those with a social or interpersonal focus and those with a personal focus. Terminal values with a social focus include a world at peace, social recognition, and true friendship. Terminal values with a personal focus include freedom, happiness, and salvation.

Table 1 Rokeach's Instrumental and Terminal Values

Instrumental Values
Ambitious (hardworking, aspiring)
Broad-minded (open-minded)
Capable (competent, effective)
Cheerful (lighthearted, joyful)
Clean (neat, tidy)
Courageous (standing up for your beliefs)
Forgiving (willing to pardon others)
Helpful (working for the welfare of others)
Honest (sincere, truthful)
Imaginative (daring, creative)
Independent (self-reliant, self-sufficient)
Intellectual (intelligent, reflective)
Logical (consistent, rational)
Loving (affectionate, tender)
Obedient (dutiful, respectful)
Polite (courteous, well mannered)
Responsible (dependable, reliable)
Self-controlled (restrained, self-disciplined)
Terminal Values
A comfortable life (a prosperous life)
An exciting life (a stimulating, active life)
A sense of accomplishment (lasting contribution)
A world at peace (free from war and conflict)
A world of beauty (beauty of nature and the arts)
Equality (brotherhood, equal opportunity for all)
Family security (taking care of loved ones)
Freedom (independence, free choice)
Happiness (contentedness)
Inner harmony (freedom from inner conflict)
Mature love (sexual and spiritual intimacy)
National security (protection from attack)
Pleasure (an enjoyable, leisurely life)
Salvation (saved, eternal life)
Self-respect (self-esteem)
Social recognition (respect, admiration)
True friendship (close companionship)
Wisdom (a mature understanding of life)

Table 2 Ranking of Forty Countries on Hofstede's Four Dimensions of Values*

	Power Distance	Uncertainty Avoidance	Individualism	Masculinity
Argentina	25	10	23	18
Australia	29	27	2	14
Austria	40	19	18	2
Belgium	12	3	8	20
Brazil	7	16	25	23
Canada	27	31	4	21
Chile	15	8	33	34
Colombia	10	14	39	11
Denmark	38	39	9	37
Finland	33	24	17	35
France	9	7	11	29
Germany	30	21	15	9
Great Britain	31	35	3	8
Greece	17	1	27	16
Hong Kong	8	37	32	17
India	4	34	21	19
Iran	18	23	24	28
Ireland	36	36	12	7
Israel	39	13	19	25
Italy	23	17	7	4
Japan	22	4	22	1
Mexico	2	12	29	6
Netherlands	28	26	5	38
New Zealand	37	30	6	15
Norway	34	28	13	39
Pakistan	21	18	38	22
Peru	13	7	37	31
Philippines	1	33	28	10
Portugal	16	2	30	33
Singapore	6	40	34	24
South Africa	24	29	16	12
Spain	20	9	20	30
Sweden	35	38	10	40
Switzerland	32	25	14	5
Taiwan	19	20	36	27
Thailand	14	22	35	32
Turkey	11	11	26	26
U.S.A.	26	32	1	13
Venezuela	3	15	40	3
Yugoslavia	5	5	31	36

* A low ranking (e.g., 3) indicates a high rating on that dimension.

Adapted from Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1980), p. 315.

Another taxonomy of the dimensions along which cultures differ has been provided by Hofstede (1980). Hofstede (1980) has assembled some impressive data concerning cultural differences in work-related value orientations. Recent evidence suggests that Hofstede's dimensions are applicable not only to work-related values but to cultural values generally (Forgas and Bond 1985; Hofstede and Bond 1984). Using survey data gathered from more than 116,000 respondents in 40 countries, Hofstede (1980) described four dimensions along which cultural value systems can be ordered: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity. Table 2 provides a ranking of the forty countries on each of the four dimensions.

Power distance indicates the degree to which the culture believes that institutional and organizational power should be distributed unequally. Cultures with a small power distance, such as Austria, Denmark, Israel, and New Zealand, believe in minimizing social or class inequalities, reducing hierarchical organizational structures, and using power only for legitimate purposes. Cultures with a large power distance, such as Mexico, the Philippines, Venezuela, and India, believe in a social order in which each person has a rightful and protected place, that hierarchy presumes existential inequality, and that the legitimacy of the purposes desired by the power holder is irrelevant.

Uncertainty avoidance indicates the degree which the culture feels threatened by ambiguous situations and tries to avoid uncertainty by establishing more structure. Cultures with weak uncertainty avoidance, including Great Britain, Hong Kong, Ireland, and Sweden, believe in the reduction of rules, the acceptance of dissent, a willingness to take risks in life, and tolerance for deviation from expected behaviors. Cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance, including Greece, Belgium, Japan, and Portugal, have high levels of anxiety and aggressiveness that create a strong inner urge to work hard, the need for extensive rules and regulations, a desire for consensus about goals, and a craving for certainty and security.

Individualism-collectivism indicates the degree to which a culture relies upon and has allegiance to the self or the group. Cultures with an individualist orientation, such as the United States, Australia, Netherlands, and Belgium, believe that people are only supposed to take care of themselves and, perhaps, their immediate families such that autonomy, independence, privacy, and an "I" consciousness are the ideal. Cultures with a collectivist orientation, such as Venezuela, Thailand, Pakistan, and Peru, expect their in-groups to take care of them, in exchange for which they feel an absolute loyalty to the group. Consequently, collectivist cultures believe in obligations to the group, dependence of the individual on organizations and institutions, a "we" consciousness, and an emphasis on belongingness.

Masculinity-femininity indicates the degree to which a culture values "masculine" behaviors such as assertiveness and the acquisition of wealth or "feminine" behaviors such as caring for others and the quality of life. Cultures with a masculine orientation, including Japan, Austria, Italy, and Mexico, believe in performance, achievement, ambition, the acquisition of material goods, and ostentatious manliness. Cultures with a feminine orientation, including Austria, Norway, Portugal, and Venezuela, believe in the quality of life, service to others, equality between the sexes, nurturing roles, and sympathy for the unfortunate.

It is instructive to examine Table 2 in order to determine how citizens of the United States differ from their nearest cultural neighbors. The United States is just below the midpoint on power distance, does not avoid uncertainty, is extremely individualistic, and is somewhat masculine in its value orientations. Canada has a pattern of values that is very similar to that of the United States, but Mexico differs from the United States on all dimensions except masculinity. The ethnocentric tendency to regard the values of one's own culture as superior to others suggests that the United States and Mexico will sometimes differ on what each country regards as appropriate. For instance, many American college students, given their high regard for individualism, consider it appropriate to live hundreds of miles from home if doing so will allow them to pursue the best education. Many Mexican college students, on the other hand, have refused educational opportunities that required them to live far away from their homes and families because their collectivist orientation places group relationships before individual achievement.

WHEN VALUES CLASH

Normally, one's values lead to consistent expectations about potential courses of action. The value system provides a generalized plan

> ...that can perhaps best be likened to a map or architect's blueprint. Only that part of the map or blueprint that is immediately relevant is consulted, and the rest is ignored for the moment. Different subsets of the map or blueprint are activated in different social situations (Rokeach 1973, p. 14).

Sometimes, however, components of the internal blueprint -- the value system -- may conflict, or cultural differences in value orientations may create disagreements. At an individual level, a person may feel a conflict about being polite versus being honest, or being ambitious versus being helpful. When two people are from different cultures, value differences may hinder the achievement of rational agreement on important issues. As Nadler, Nadler, and Broome (1985) have suggested, "In an intercultural negotiation context, certain values may influence what interactants bring to the conflict, the process of negotiation, and eventually modes of conflict resolution" (p. 89).

Etzioni (1968) has argued that there is no such thing as a truly "rational" decision, as virtually all cultural decisions presume an agreement on fundamental values that were acquired without specific intent or even conscious awareness. For instance, some cultures have a system of patronage in which gifts are given to public officials in return for assistance. Such gifts are both expected and accepted by members of that culture as the proper way of doing things. Therefore, any "rational" attempts to approach such governmental bureaucracies would include the giving of such gifts as a natural and proper component of the interaction. Other cultures, including that of the United States, object to such patronage and consider the gifts to be illegal payoffs. As with other examples of ethnocentrism, all cultures consider their own customs to be preferable to any others.

For encounters within a single culture, such value differences rarely collide, However, when members of two or more cultures communicate, differences in values greatly increase the likelihood of misunderstandings. When a young Peruvian woman applied for employment with a well-

known company in the United States, she attached twenty dollars to her application. To her, the money was given because it was the only polite thing to do. To have done otherwise, she believed, would have been as rude as refusing to shake hands in the initial greeting ritual. The American employer, of course, was angered by what he perceived to be an attempt at bribery.

Of course, shared values don't guarantee the absence of conflict. Many conflicts between cultures occur precisely because there is agreement on the value and importance of certain scarce resources but disagreement about who should control them. Nevertheless, value differences are often behind intercultural disagreements.

CONCLUSION

Values are powerful unseen forces that are collectively shared within a culture. Values provide a pattern of basic assumptions that are used by the culture to cope with its problems. It is hoped that an awareness of and sensitivity to cultural value differences will help to promote intercultural understanding and will help to make attempts at intercultural communication more successful.

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