

LECTURE 4: Communication and Culture

This topic will address the way we perceive ourselves and others, and the factors that influence the perception of our selves either positively or negatively.

Learning Outcomes



After going through this lecture you should be able to:

1. Understanding Cultures and Co-cultures.
2. Explain how Cultural Values and Norms Shape Communication.
3. Analyze Co-cultures and Communication.
4. Discuss Developing Intercultural Communication Competence.

4.1 Understanding Cultures and Co-cultures

Definitions: Culture and co-culture—*Culture* is language, values, beliefs, traditions, and customs that are shared and learned. Culture is a matter of perception and definition. Co-culture - the perception of membership in a group that is part of an encompassing culture

Differences and Similarities

Co-cultures are based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, religion, physical ability, population density, physical size, geographic location, age, and among other characteristics. So why is this important? A person's culture and co-cultures essentially determine perceptions. Messages are encoded, transferred, and decoded in the context of one's culture and co-culture. This process is automatic, subtle, and subconscious. For example, just because I am male does not mean I think that messages must be encoded and decoded in specific ways, but subconsciously that is exactly what happens! Encoding: The act of preparing a message to be transmitted to another person. Our thoughts are encoded into verbal and non-verbal symbols; different cultures and co-cultures encode messages differently. Decoding: The process of receiving verbal and non-verbal symbols and interpreting those symbols; different cultures and co-cultures decode messages differently.

Cultures may comprise many subsets, and these co-cultures may thrive within them. For example, many world cities have a Chinatown. A student resident of London's Chinatown might have a British passport, but he could be described as having a set of co-cultures, including Hong Kong parentage, bilingualism, being a business school student, drone enthusiast and a 20-

something, living with parents. We can draw up dividing lines within any society to isolate co-cultures using parameters such as age, gender, politico-social affiliation, lifestyle choice, socioeconomic level, ethnicity, education, region, language, and religion. We may all belong to the human species, and we may all be unique, but if you were asked to describe yourself in 20 adjectives, you would probably share these features with at least one other person on the planet.

Salience of Differences

What is cultural salience?

Ethnic identity salience involves **the extent to which individuals hold their ethnicity to be of importance**. Cultural identity salience, on the other hand, involves the extent to which individuals hold their larger culture to be of importance. In sociology and social psychology, an in-group is a social group to which a person psychologically identifies as being a member. By contrast, an out-group is **a social group with which an individual does not identify**.

1. *In-groups* are groups with which we identify.
2. *Out-groups* are groups that we view as different.
3. *Social identity* is the part of the self-concept that is based on membership in groups.

An in-group is a social category or group with which you identify strongly. An out-group, conversely, is a social category or group with which you do not identify. An important characteristic of the in-group or out-group dichotomy is that groups mark their identities communicatively by the distinctive language and speech styles they create and use, the dress codes they adopt, and the festivals and pageants that highlight their unique traditions and rituals, and so forth. In this way, language and communicative features are important devices for creating an us-versus-them (see Gaudet & Clément, 2008) as indicated in the following examples of in- and outgroup labels:

- Christian versus Heathen
- Muslim versus Infidel
- ZhongGuoRen versus WaiGuoRen (Chinese versus non-Chinese)
- Nihonjin versus Gaijin (Japanese versus “out people”)
- Jew versus Goyim

A broader example is from a videotape allegedly from former Al-Qaeda militant leader Osama bin Laden that proclaimed: “The world has been divided into two camps. One under the banner of the cross and another under the banner of Islam.”

Culture affects communication

As we learn culture through communication, we also use communication to express our culture and frequently communicate our worldview when we present ourselves for strategic purposes and thus worldview reflected by media. The following concepts are important in understanding communication and culture:

- A. *Intercultural communication* describes the process that occurs when members of two or more cultures or co-cultures exchange messages in a manner that is influenced by their different cultural perceptions and symbol systems, both verbal and nonverbal. *Salience* - weight attached to a particular person or phenomena.
- B. To understand the relationship between interpersonal and intercultural communication, the relationship between interpersonal relationships and intercultural communication shows that some interpersonal transactions have no cultural elements while others are almost exclusively intercultural and without personal dimensions.
- C. Cultural differences are numerous, as there are a number of ways communication varies within cultures. Sometimes there are greater differences within cultures than between cultures.

How Cultural Values and Norms Shape Communication

Cultural values and norms are captured by five subtle yet vital values and norms that shape the way members of a culture communicate. The following are Cultural Values and Norms That Shape Communication:

a. Individualism and Collectivism

Members of an individualistic culture view their primary responsibility as helping themselves, as opposed to members of a collectivistic culture who feel loyalties and obligations to their in-group.

Individualism stresses individual goals and the rights of the individual person. Collectivism focuses on group goals, what is best for the collective group, and personal relationships.

An individualist is motivated by personal rewards and benefits. Individualist persons set personal goals and objectives based on self. Individualistic workers are very comfortable working with autonomy and not part of a team.

The collectivist is motivated by group goals. Long-term relationships are very important. Collectivistic persons easily sacrifice individual benefit or praise to recognize and honor the

team's success. In fact, being singled out and honored as an individual from the rest of the team may be embarrassing to the collectivistic person.

The generalized geographic clusters of individualism may be found in Anglo countries, Germanic Europe, and Nordic Europe. Geographic clusters for collectivism are often located in Arab countries, Latin America, Confucian Asia, Southern Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

b. High and Low Cultural Contexts

High- versus low-context—Low-context culture uses language primarily to express thoughts feelings and ideas as directly as possible, while high-context culture relies heavily on subtle, often nonverbal cues to maintain social harmony.

High context implies that a lot of unspoken information is implicitly transferred during communication. People in a high context culture such as Saudi Arabia tend to place a larger importance on long-term relationships and loyalty and have fewer rules and structure implemented.

Low context implies that a lot of information is exchanged explicitly through the message itself and rarely is anything implicit or hidden. People in low context cultures such as the UK tend to have short-term relationships, follow rules and standards closely and are generally very task-oriented.

Understanding whether your international colleagues are high context or low context will help you to adapt your communication style and build stronger relationships with them.

High and low context cultures usually correspond with polychronic and monochronic cultures respectively. The table below shows some general preferences of people from high context and low context cultures.

High Context	Low Context
Indirect and implicit messages	Direct, simple and clear messages
Polychronic	Monochronic
High use of non-verbal communication	Low use of non-verbal communication
Low reliance on written communication	High reliance on written communication
Use intuition and feelings to make decisions	Rely on facts and evidence for decisions
Long-term relationships	Short-term relationships
Relationships are more important than schedules	Schedules are more important than relationships
Strong distinction between in-group and out-group	Flexible and open

SOURCE: Matthew MacLachlan(2010) Cross-Cultural Communication Styles: High and Low Context <https://www.communicaid.com/cross-cultural-training/blog/high-and-low-context/>

c. Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is a term used to reflect the degree to which members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous situations and how much they try to avoid them.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; it ultimately refers to man's search for Truth. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. Unstructured situations are novel, unknown, surprising, different from usual. Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of such situations by strict laws and rules, safety and security measures, and on the philosophical and religious level by a belief in absolute Truth; 'there can only be one Truth and we have it'. People in uncertainty avoiding countries are also more emotional, and motivated by inner nervous energy. The opposite type, uncertainty accepting cultures, are more tolerant of opinions different from what they are used to; they try to have as few rules as possible, and on the philosophical and religious level they are relativist and allow many currents to flow side by side. People within these cultures are more phlegmatic and contemplative, and not expected by their environment to express emotions.

Some characteristics of societies that have high and low uncertainty avoidance orientation (based on House et al, 2004, p. 618)

HIGH UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE societies have characteristics such as...

- Use formality in interactions with others.
- Are orderly and keep meticulous records.
- Rely on formalized policies and procedures.
- Take moderate, carefully calculated risks.
- Show strong resistance to change.

LOW UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE societies have characteristics such as...

- Use informality in interactions with others.
- Are less orderly and keep fewer records.
- Rely on informal norms for most matters.

- Are less calculating when taking risks.
- Show only moderate resistance to change.

d. Power Distance

Power distance describes the degree to which members of a society accept an unequal distribution of power.

Power Distance is the “extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.” The United States has a lower power distance, where all people feel entitled to a certain amount of power. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has a higher power distance, where people recognize that some are given little, or no, power and others are in extremely high powered positions.

Culture’s that have a low power distance “expect and accept power relations that are more consultative or democratic. People relate to one another more as equals regardless of formal positions.” Those holding inferior positions are willing to question and challenge those in superior positions, whether it comes to decisions making or suggesting a new idea. For example, in a lower power distance culture, if one was to want a promotion at their job, they would be willing to confront their boss and ask for one.

In countries with high power distance, the “less powerful accept power relations that are more autocratic and paternalistic. Subordinates acknowledge the power of others simply based on where they are situated in certain formal, hierarchical positions.” As a whole, higher power distance countries believe that inequality is good, everyone has a specific place, people should depend on their leader, and that the powerful should not hide their power and are entitled to many privileges.

e. Competition and Cooperation

Achievement cultures place a high value on material success and focusing on the task at hand versus a *nurturing culture* that regard the support of relationships as an especially important goal. Competition is emphasized more by individualist cultures than collectivist cultures (Triandis et al., 1990), while cooperation is more likely to be chosen by those from collective communities over individualist communities. Triandis (1995) says that in individualistic cultures, personal goals take priority over group goals, and the reverse is true in collective cultures, thereby emphasizing individual competition over cooperation in individualistic cultures.

Co-cultures and Communication

Co-cultures are groups whose members share at least some of the general culture’s system of thought and behavior, but which have distinct characteristics or group attitudes that both unify

them and distinguish them from the general culture. Our communication is intrinsically tied to our co-cultural experience.

A. Ethnicity and race

1. Race – category created to explain differences between people whose ancestors originated in different regions of the world. Race has little use in explaining individual differences
2. Ethnicity is more commonly used. Ethnicity is the degree to which a person identifies with a group, usually on basis of nationality, culture or other unifying perspective.

B. Gender identity/sexual orientation

1. LGBTQ- lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer
 - a. Being open can give a sense of being authentic and belonging to supportive co-culture
 - b. Disclosure can be risky. People may be shocked or judgmental.
 - c. Social climate has become more receptive to LGBTQ individuals than in the past.

C. Age/generation

1. Age-related communication reflects culture as much as biology. We learn how to “do” various ages.
2. Western cultures honor youth and attitudes about aging are more negative than positive.
3. People who believe older adults have trouble communicating are less likely to interact with them and use patronizing speech when they do interact.
4. Communication challenges can arise when different generations work together.

D. Socioeconomic status

1. Social class can have a major impact on how people communicate.
2. In U.S. people identify as working class, middle class, upper class.
3. First-generation college (FGC) students may feel intercultural strain of living in two worlds.
4. Cultural hegemony is the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class which manipulates the culture of that society—the beliefs and explanations, perceptions, values, and mores—so that the imposed, ruling-class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm

Developing intercultural communication competence

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts. There are numerous components of ICC. Some key components include motivation, self- and other knowledge, and tolerance for uncertainty.

- A. Motivation and attitude describe the desire to communicate successfully with strangers, along with people from other cultures. Initially, a person's motivation for communicating with people from other cultures must be considered. Motivation refers to the root of a person's desire to foster intercultural relationships and can be intrinsic or extrinsic (Martin & Nakayama, 2010)
- B. Tolerance for ambiguity has to do with the level of uncertainty when encountering communicators from different cultures. Competent intercultural communicators must accept and welcome ambiguity.
- C. Open-mindedness involves being free of *ethnocentrism*, which is an attitude that one's own culture is superior to others, and *prejudice*, which is an unfair and intolerant attitude toward others who belong to an out-group.
- D. Knowledge and skill are needed for communicators to possess enough knowledge about other cultures to know what approaches are appropriate.
 - 1. *Passive observation* is noticing what behaviors members of another culture use and applying them effectively.
 - 2. *Active strategies* are gaining insights about intercultural communication through seeking information from reading, watching films, and asking experts and members of the other culture how to behave.
 - 3. *Self-disclosure* is volunteering personal information to people from the other culture with whom you want to communicate.
- E. Patience and perseverance are needed to move from culture shock to adaptation. Motivation and knowledge can inform us as we gain new experiences, but how we feel in the moment of intercultural encounters is also important. Tolerance for uncertainty refers to an individual's attitude about and level of comfort in uncertain situations (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Some people perform better in uncertain situations than others, and intercultural encounters often bring up uncertainty.
- F. Thinking under the Influence: Communication and culture scholar Brenda Allen coined the phrase "thinking under the influence" (TUI) to highlight a reflective process that can help us hone our intercultural communication competence (Allen, 2011). As we discussed earlier, being mindful is an important part of building competence. Once we can become aware of our thought processes and behaviors, we can more effectively monitor and intervene in them. She asks us to monitor our thoughts and feelings about other people, both similar to and different from us. As we monitor, we should try to identify instances when we are guilty of TUI, such as uncritically accepting the dominant belief systems, relying on stereotypes, or prejudging someone based on their identities.

FURTHER READING IN SUMMARY



1. **Communication and Culture** Chapter 3
2. **Culture is a learned system of thought and behavior that** belongs to and typifies a relatively large group of people; it is the composite of their shared beliefs, values, and practices.
3. **Understanding Culture** • Culture is learned through communication • Through these processes, you acquire a set of shared perceptions and develop models for appropriate behavior • **Worldview:** the framework through which you interpret the world and the people in it • Much of your worldview is not obvious
4. **Culture affects communication** • As we learn culture through communication, we also use communication to express our culture • We frequently communicate our worldview when we present ourselves for strategic purposes • **Worldview reflected by media**
5. **Intercultural Communication Matters** • People from different cultures with different worldviews perceive the world quite differently • **Intercultural Communication:** communication between people from different cultures who have different worldviews • The answer to intercultural misunderstanding is not to hide under a rock or only associate with people like you
6. **A Diverse Society** • In order to function competently as a member of such a diverse society, you need to be able to communicate appropriately and effectively with a wide array of individuals • Two key parts: understanding your cultural expectations for communication and respecting those of others • **Mobility** • Must be ready to address cultural differences • 6 in 10 adults have moved to a new community in their lives • More than 1 in 5 say the place they are living now is not “home” • You will, almost without exception, communicate at some time or another with people from outside your culture/hometown both face-to-face and through media
7. **Mediated Interaction** • We communicate electronically more and more each year • Internet and other technology allows us to connect with far-off family members and friends, plus individuals from around the country—or around the world. • Even Americans who don’t have access to these technologies, traditional media still makes exposure to different cultures possible • **Diverse Organizations** • Any job you take will involve some degree of intercultural communication • Being aware of the way that culture impacts communication is especially crucial to business communication across borders
8. **Communication and Cultural Variations** • Scholars have identified seven major communication variations across cultures: • **High and Low context** • **Collectivist and Individualist orientations** • **Comfort with uncertainty** • **Masculine and Feminine orientations** • **Approaches to power distance** • **Time orientation** • **Value of emotional expression** • These variations fall on a spectrum, they are not opposites
9. **High and Low Context Cultures** • Culture has a big impact on how direct we are in our use of language and how much we rely on other, nonverbal ways to communicate • **High-context:** use contextual cues—such as time, place, relationship, and situation—to both interpret meaning and send subtle messages • **Low-context:** uses very direct language and relies less on situational factors to communicate

11. **Collectivist and Individualist** • Collectivist cultures: individuals perceive themselves first and foremost as members of a group and communicate from that perspective • Emphasize cooperation and group harmony, group decision making, and long-term, stable friendships • Individualist cultures: value individuality, autonomy, and privacy • Little attention to hierarchy and status based on age or family connections • Individual initiative and achievement are rewarded; individual blame and credit are assigned
12. **Comfort with Uncertainty** • Uncertainty avoidance: all cultures, to some degree, adapt their behaviors in order to reduce uncertainty and risk • High uncertainty avoidance cultures: more anxious about the unknown, so their behaviors are adapted to minimize risk and uncertainty • Low uncertainty avoidance culture: higher tolerance for risk and ambiguity
13. **Masculine and Feminine Orientations** • The way an entire culture values and reflects characteristics that are traditionally—even stereotypically—associated with one sex or the other • Masculine culture (achievement culture): value ambition, assertiveness, achievement, and competitiveness • Feminine culture (nurturing cultures): value relationships and quality of life • Studies consistently find different scores for men and women within larger cultures
14. **Approaches to Power Distance** • Power distance: the way in which a culture accepts and expects the division of power among individuals • High power distance: people with less power accept their lower position as a basic fact; experience more anxiety when communicating with those of higher status • Low power distance: tolerate less difference in power between people and communicate with those higher in status with less anxiety
15. **Time Orientation** • Time orientation: way that cultures communicate about/with time; frequently overlooked cultural dimension • Monochronic cultures: treat time as a limited resource or a commodity that can be saved or wasted; time used to structure activities and stick to schedules; attend to one person or task at a time • Polychronic cultures: attend to multiple people or things at a time; don't adhere closely to schedules and change plans often and easily
16. **Value of Emotional Expression** • Value of emotional expression varies among cultures; some associate it with strength while others associate it with weakness • Collectivist cultures tend to use hyperbole—vivid, colorful language with great emotional intensity and exaggeration • Individualist cultures tend towards understatement—language that downplays emotional intensity or importance of events often with euphemisms • “the rivers ran red with the blood of the slaughtered” vs. “there were a number of casualties” “Terminate with Extreme Prejudice”
17. **CO-Cultural Communication** • Co-cultures: groups who's members share at least some of the general culture's system of thought and behavior, but which have distinct characteristics or group attitudes that both unify them and distinguish them from the general culture • Our communication is intrinsically tied to our co-cultural experience
19. **Social Identity and Intergroup Communication** • Social Identity theory: you have a personal identity (sense of your unique individual personality) and a social identity (part of your self-concept that comes from your group memberships) • Ingroups: groups which we identify with and we feel that we belong to • Outgroups: the “others” outside our group

20. **Social Identity and Intergroup Communication** • Intergroup communication: discipline that focuses on how communication within and between groups affect relationships • The comparisons we make have a tremendous impact on communication • Our identification and communication shift depending on which group membership is made salient at a given moment • Ways in which social identity perceived by others influences communication on many levels
21. **Intercultural Communication Challenges** • With all existing cultural variations and multitude of individual and co-cultures, communication difficulties will arise • We experience challenges and confusion with intercultural communication • Anxiety • Ethnocentrism • Discrimination
22. **Anxiety** • “What if I do something offensive?” or “What if I embarrass myself?” • Natural part of any new experience • Ethnocentrism • Belief in the superiority of your own culture or group and tendency to view other cultures through your own lens • We communicate from the perspective of our own group without acknowledging other perspectives • Ethnocentrism is NOT the same as cultural or ethnic pride
23. **Discrimination** • Behavior toward a person or group based solely on their membership in a particular group, class or category • One group is favored, the other is harmed • Positive stereotypes can have similarly discriminatory effects • We treat ingroup members more favorably than members of an outgroup • Interpret ingroup behaviors more favorably • Behavioral affirmation: seeing or hearing what you want to see or hear in the communication of assorted group members • Behavioral confirmation: we act in a way that makes our expectations about a group come true
24. **Improving Intercultural Communication** • Intercultural communication can be improved with effort • Changing thinking: increase our knowledge about cultures and co-cultures; develop more complex ways of thinking about a culture • Changing feelings: experience greater enjoyment and less anxiety in our intercultural exchanges • Changing behavior: when thoughts and feelings are altered, behavioral changes occur; the result is developing better interpersonal relationships
25. **Be mindful** • Be aware of your behavior and behavior of others • Intercultural sensitivity: mindfulness of behaviors that may offend others • Desire to learn • Learning culture-specific information can be very useful as a starting point in intercultural communication • Overcome intergroup biases • Intergroup contact theory: interaction between members of different social groups generates a possibility for more positive attitudes to emerge • Mindlessly putting people from different groups together can backfire as well • Need good quality contact outgroup members
26. **Accommodate Appropriately** • Accommodation: process in which you adapt and adjust your language and nonverbal behaviors • Convergence: when speakers shift their language or nonverbal behaviors toward each other’s way of communicating • Overaccommodate: going too far in changing your language or changing your language based on an incorrect or stereotypical notion of another group • Practice your skills • Listen effectively • Think before you speak or act • Be empathetic • Do the right thing Speaking Italian

SOURCE: Communication and Culture. Chapter 3. Culture is a learned system of thought and behavior that belongs to and typifies a relatively large group of people; it is the composite of their shared beliefs, values, and practices. . Understanding Culture. Culture is learned through communication

Uploaded on Jul 22, 2014 Chaconas, Ocean (2014) *Communication and Culture*
<https://www.slideserve.com/ocean/communication-and-culture>

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