

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Week 3: Theoretical Foundations

Lecturer: Wayumba Iddah

Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Explain the importance of theoretical foundations in Intercultural Communication.
- Identify and describe key theories used to understand intercultural interactions.
- Examine how cultural differences influence communication using theoretical frameworks.
- Analyze intercultural communication challenges through theory-based perspectives.
- Apply relevant theories to real-life intercultural contexts.

What is a Theory?

- A theory is a systematic set of ideas that explain, interpret and predict a phenomenon.

In simple terms, a theory helps us answer questions like:

- Why does this happen?
- How does it happen?
- What is likely to happen next?

It is, therefore, an organised explanation of something we observe in the world.

Theoretical Foundations of Intercultural Communication

The theoretical foundations of Intercultural Communication provide frameworks that help us understand

How people from different cultural backgrounds interact

Interpret messages

Manage differences

These theories explain why misunderstandings occur and how effective communication can be achieved across cultures.

Importance of theories in Intercultural Communication

- Provide systematic explanations of cultural behaviour
- Help predict and manage communication challenges
- Offer tools for analyzing intercultural interactions
- Enhance Intercultural Competence

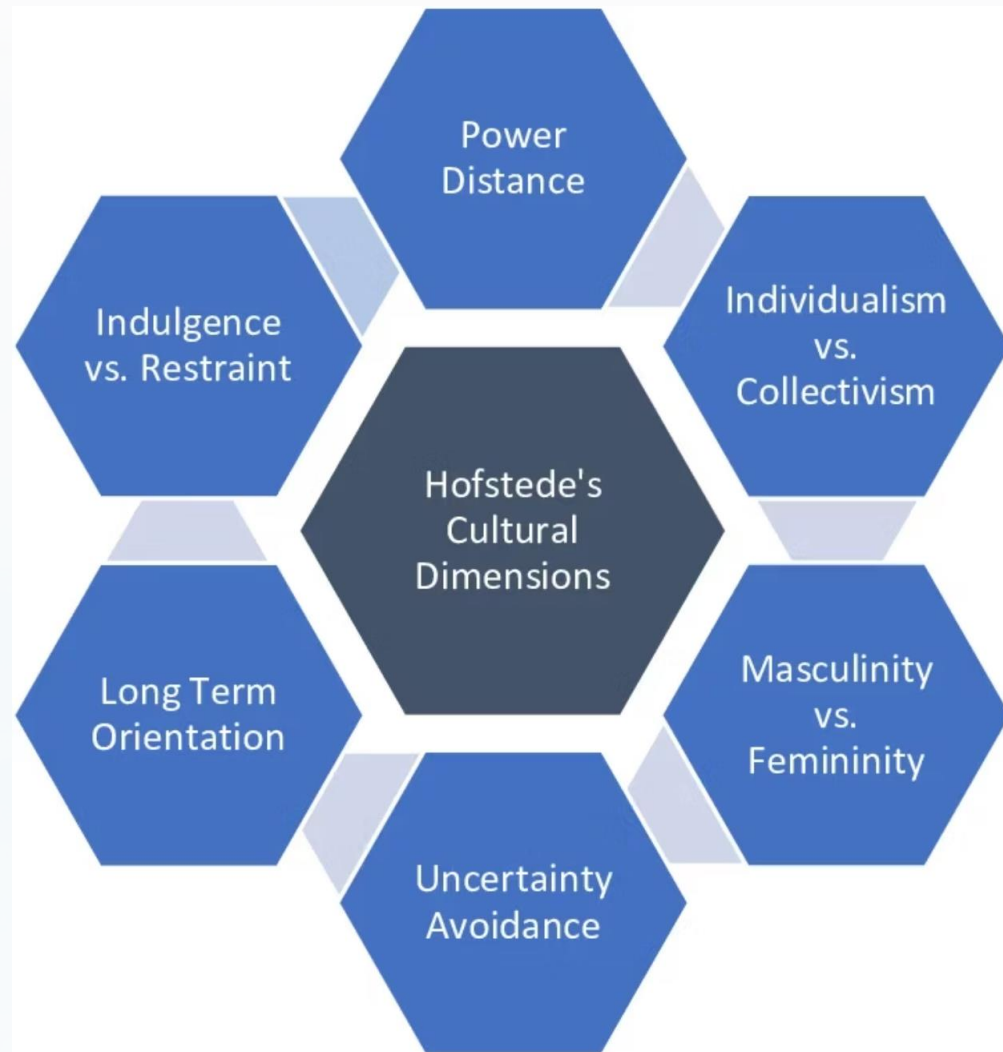
Intercultural Communication Theories

1. Cultural Dimensions Theory

Cultural Dimensions Theory was developed by Geert Hofstede to explain how cultural values influence behaviour in workplaces and societies.

Hofstede identified six dimensions along which cultures can be compared, which help explain why people from different cultures think, behave, and communicate differently.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions



Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory. Source: Adapted from Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework.

1. Power Distance (PDI)

- Power distance is the degree to which people in a society accept and expect unequal distribution of power.
- High PDI: Hierarchical societies; authority is rarely questioned (*e.g., many African, Asian countries*)
- Low PDI: Egalitarian societies; authority can be challenged (*e.g., Denmark, New Zealand*)

Example: In high-PDI cultures, students may not question lecturers; in low-PDI cultures, open debate is encouraged.

2. Individualism Vs Collectivism

- It explains whether people in a society see themselves mainly as **independent individuals** or as **part of a group**.
- **Individualistic cultures:** Independence, personal achievement (*e.g., USA, UK*)
- **Collectivist cultures:** Group harmony, family/community loyalty (*e.g., Kenya, China*)

Example: In collectivist cultures, decisions often involve consultation with family or the community.

3. Masculinity vs Femininity (MAS)

Masculinity vs. Femininity explains the dominant values and priorities in a culture. Whether a society places greater emphasis on:

Achievement, competition, ambition and success or care, cooperation, relationships and quality of life.

Masculine cultures: Achievement, competition, success

Feminine cultures: Cooperation, quality of life, care for others

Example: A masculine culture may prioritize career success, while a feminine culture emphasizes work-life balance.

4. Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)

- It refers to the extent to which people in a culture feel uncomfortable with uncertainty, ambiguity, and unpredictability.
- High UAI: Preference for rules, structure, predictability
- Low UAI: Flexibility, openness to change

Example: High UAI cultures rely heavily on policies and procedures; low UAI cultures are more adaptable.

5. Long-Term vs Short-Term Orientation (LTO)

- It explains how a culture views time, planning, tradition, and future goals. Focuses on time orientation.
- Long-term orientation: Future-focused, persistence, saving
- Short-term orientation: Tradition, immediate results

Example: Long-term cultures invest in education and planning while short-term cultures value quick outcomes.

6. Indulgence vs Restraint (IVR)

- It explains how a society manages human desires, enjoyment, and self-control.
- Relates to how societies manage gratification of desires.
- Indulgent cultures: Allow enjoyment, leisure, freedom
- Restrained cultures: Control desires, emphasize discipline

Example: Indulgent societies encourage self-expression while restrained societies emphasize social norms.

2. Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM) (AUM)

- Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM) was developed by William Gudykunst and is a key theory in Intercultural Communication.
- This theory explains how people communicate effectively with others from different cultural backgrounds by managing **anxiety** and **uncertainty**.
- When people interact with strangers or people from other cultures, they may feel:
- **Anxiety** — nervousness or fear,
- **Uncertainty** — not knowing what to expect or how the other person will behave.
- AUM theory argues that communication is more effective when these two are managed at a moderate level.

Key Concepts in AUM Theory

1. Anxiety

- Feeling of nervousness or fear when interacting with people from different cultures
- Caused by: Fear of offending others, Fear of misunderstanding and Lack of confidence

Example: A student presenting in an international class may feel anxious about language and cultural expectations.

2. Uncertainty

- Inability to predict or explain others' behaviour

Example: Not knowing whether direct eye contact is respectful or rude in another culture.

3. Optimal Levels (Thresholds)

- AUM emphasizes that:
- Too much anxiety → panic, avoidance
- Too little anxiety → lack of attention or care
- Too much uncertainty → confusion
- Too little uncertainty → overconfidence/stereotyping

Effective communication occurs when anxiety and uncertainty are balanced

Factors Influencing Anxiety & Uncertainty

Personal Factors: Self-esteem, Open-mindedness, Tolerance for ambiguity

Social Factors: Cultural similarity/difference, Power relations and Previous intercultural experience

**Situational Factors: Formal vs informal setting , Language barriers and
and Context of interaction**

Mindfulness in AUM Theory

A key concept in this theory is mindfulness:

**Being aware, attentive, and open during communication and
and avoiding automatic judgments or stereotypes**

**Example: Actively listening and observing instead of assuming
meaning.**

Application of AUM Theory

- 1. Education: Helps students adapt in multicultural classrooms**
- 2. Workplace: Improves teamwork in diverse organizations**
- 3. Development Communication: Ensures effective engagement with communities and reduces misunderstanding in participatory projects**
- 4. International Relations: Used in diplomacy and cross-cultural negotiations**

3. Face Negotiation Theory

- Face Negotiation Theory was developed by Stella Ting-Toomey.
- It explains how people from different cultures manage conflict while protecting their "face" (self-image or social identity).

The theory argues that:

- Culture shapes how people handle conflict
- People try to maintain dignity, respect, and social harmony ("face")

Key Concepts

"Face" (Self-Image)

- The public image a person wants to maintain
- Linked to respect, honour and identity

Types of Faces

Type of Face	Meaning
Self-face	Concern for one's own image
Other-face	Concern for others' image
Mutual-face	Concern for both parties' image

Cultural Differences in Face Management

Individualistic Cultures:

- Focus on self-face
- Value direct communication
- Conflict style: dominating or assertive

Example: Openly confronting a colleague about poor performance

Collectivist Cultures

- Focus on other-face and mutual-face
- Value harmony and relationships
- Conflict style: avoiding, accommodating, or indirect

Example: Addressing conflict privately or indirectly to avoid embarrassment

Facework Strategies

Facework refers to the communication behaviours used to maintain face:

- Apologizing
- Showing respect
- Using indirect language
- Saving others from embarrassment

***Example:* "I understand your point, but maybe we could consider another option..." (indirect face-saving)**

Application of the Theory

- 1. Intercultural Communication: Helps avoid misunderstandings in conflict situations**
- 2. Workplace Communication: Guides managers on handling conflict in diverse teams**
- 3. Development Communication: Promotes respectful engagement with communities, avoids confrontation that may damage relationships**
- 4. Diplomacy and Negotiation: Critical in maintaining respect between cultures**

Example (African Context)

In many African cultures:

- Respect and dignity are highly valued
- Public confrontation is often avoided

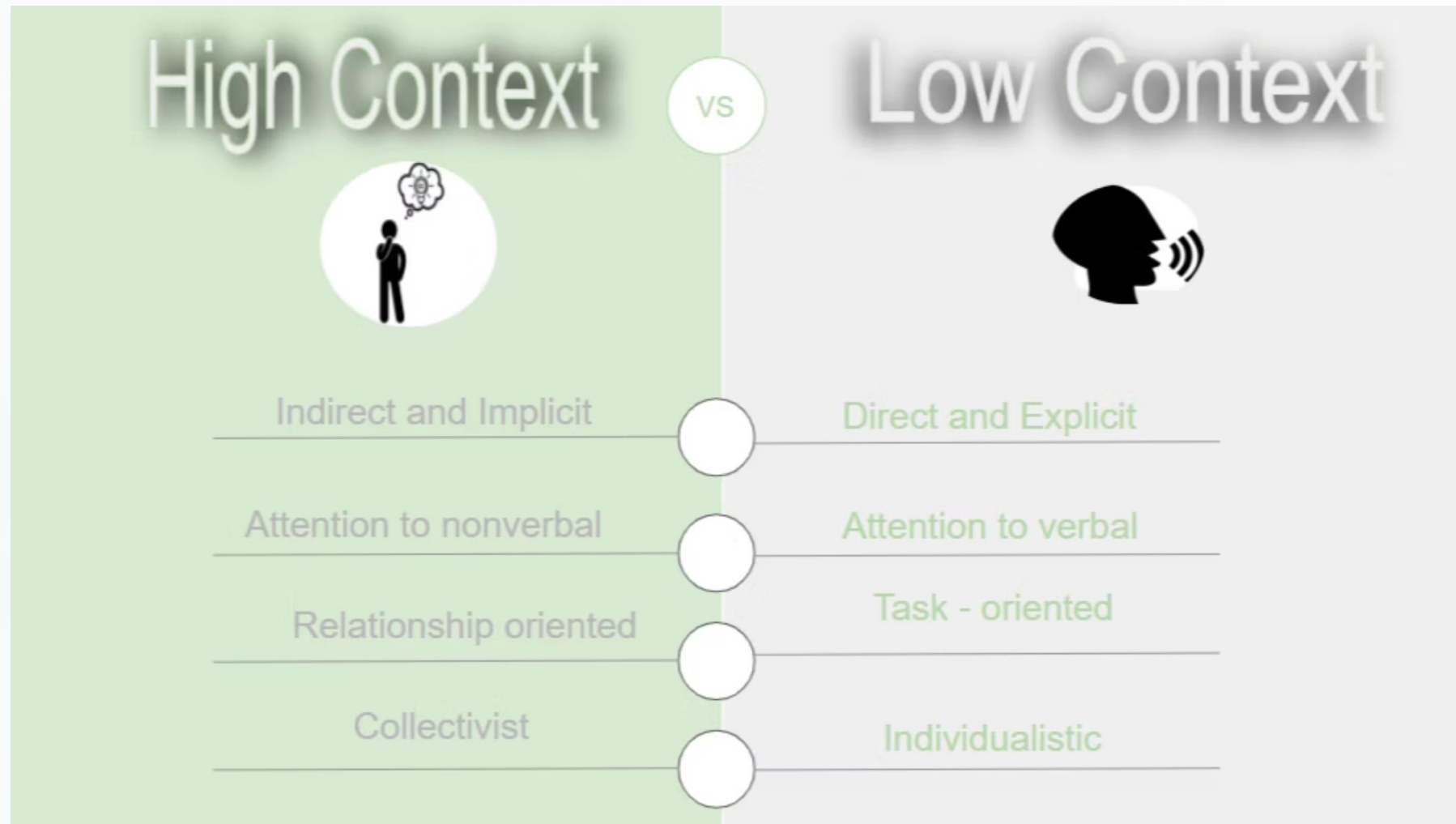
Example: A leader may correct someone privately rather than publicly to preserve their face.

- Face Negotiation Theory shows that conflict is not just about issues—but about protecting identity, respect, and relationships.

4. High vs Low Context Communication Theory (1976)

- High vs Low Context Communication Theory was developed by Edward T. Hall.
- It explains how cultures differ in the way they convey and interpret messages.
- The theory distinguishes between:
- **High-context communication** → Meaning is **implicit**, based on context
- **Low-context communication** → Meaning is **explicit**, based on words

High-context versus Low-context communication



Adapted from Edward T. Hall's high-context and low-context communication framework.

High-Context Communication

- Relies on non-verbal cues (tone, gestures, facial expressions)
- Meaning is embedded in relationships and shared experiences
- Communication is indirect and nuanced
- Messages may be implied rather than stated

Common in:

- Japan, China, Arab cultures
- Many African societies (including Kenya)

Example: Instead of saying "No", someone may say: *"We will see"* or *"It may be difficult"*

Low-Context Communication

Characteristics:

- Relies on clear, direct verbal expression
- Meaning is contained in the actual words spoken
- Communication is straightforward and explicit
- Less dependence on context or relationships

Common in:

- USA, Germany, Scandinavia

Example: *"No, I disagree with this proposal."*

Implications for Intercultural Communication

1. Misunderstandings

- Low-context communicators may see high-context communication as **vague**
- High-context communicators may see low-context communication as **rude or blunt**

2. Workplace Interaction

- High-context → emphasis on relationships and trust
- Low-context → emphasis on efficiency and clarity

3. Development Communication

- High-context communities require:
 - Cultural sensitivity
 - Use of local symbols and relationships

Key Point: The difference is not what is said—but how meaning is conveyed.

- High-context: *"Read between the lines"*
- Low-context: *"Say exactly what you mean"*

5. Cultural Identity Theory (1990s)

- Cultural Identity Theory explores how individuals define themselves based on their cultural affiliations and how this identity shapes communication. It is widely associated with scholars like Stuart Hall and Ting-Toomey.

The theory argues that:

- Identity is socially constructed
- Identity is dynamic and evolving
- People have multiple identities (not just one)

Cultural Identity Theory Illustration

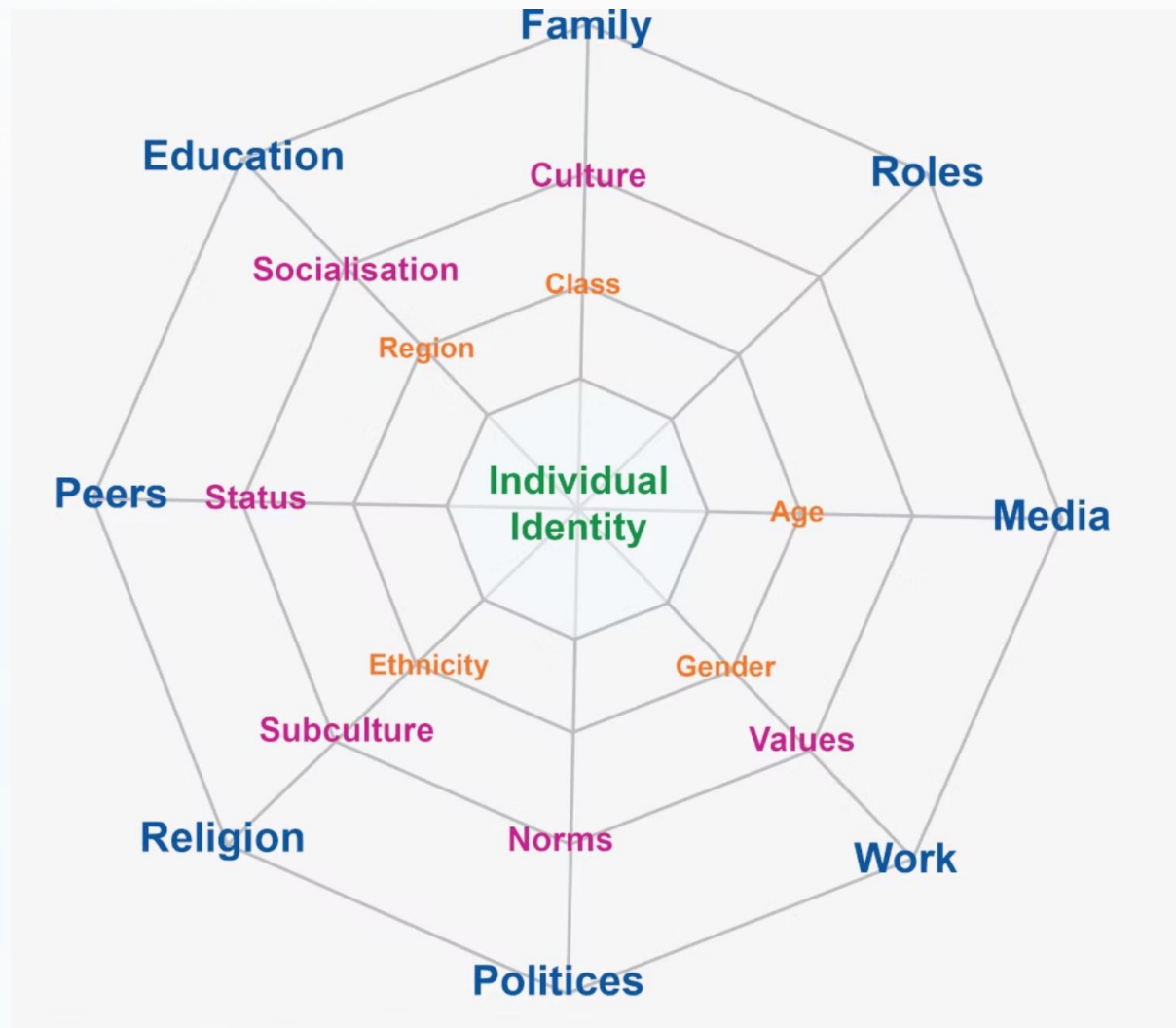


Image adapted from psychological sociological perspectives identity formation Study Guide

Key Concepts

1. Cultural Identity

A sense of belonging to a group based on:

- Language
- Religion
- Ethnicity
- Nationality
- Traditions

A Kenyan may identify as African, as a Christian/Muslim, and as part of a specific ethnic group.

2. Identity is Dynamic

- Identity is not fixed
- It changes based on:
 - Context
 - Environment
 - Interaction with others

***Example:* A student may behave differently at home, school, and in international settings.**

Key Concepts

3. Multiple Identities (Intersectionality)

- Individuals hold several identities simultaneously

Examples: Gender, Class, Profession, Religion

These identities intersect to shape communication.

4. Self vs Other Identity

- Self-identity: How we see ourselves
- Ascribed identity: How others see us

***Example:*Someone may see themselves as "modern," while others perceive them as "traditional."**

Key concepts

5. Identity Negotiation

- People adjust and express identity during interactions
- Especially important in intercultural communication

Stuart Hall's Perspective

- Stuart Hall argued that:
- Identity is "becoming" rather than "being"
- It is shaped by:
 - History
 - Culture
 - Power relations

Identity is continuously reconstructed through communication.

Functions of Cultural Identity

- Provides a sense of belonging
- Shapes perception and worldview
- Influences communication behaviour
- Affects intercultural interaction

Application in Intercultural Communication

- 1. Understanding Others-Helps explain differences in communication styles
- 2. Reducing Stereotypes-Recognises the complexity of identities
- 3. Development Communication-Ensures culturally sensitive messaging
- 4. Media and Representation-Influences how cultures are portrayed

Practical Example

In a multicultural classroom:

- Students from different backgrounds express identity differently
- Some may be outspoken, others reserved

Understanding cultural identity helps the lecturer create inclusive participation strategies

Criticisms

- Can be too abstract
- Difficult to measure identity changes
- May overlook structural inequalities

Cultural Identity is fluid, multi-layered, and central to how we communicate and relate to others.

Summary

Theory	Scholar	Focus	Key Concept	Strength	Limitation
Cultural Dimensions Theory	Geert Hofstede	Cultural values	Dimensions (PDI, IDV, etc.)	Easy comparison of cultures	Overgeneralization
High/Low Context	Edward T. Hall	Communication style	Implicit vs explicit	Explains message differences	Too simplistic
AUM Theory	William Gudykunst	Interaction process	Anxiety & uncertainty	Practical for real interactions	Hard to measure
Face Negotiation	Stella Ting-Toomey	Conflict	Face (self/other/mutual)	Explains conflict styles	Cultural bias
Cultural Identity	Stuart Hall	Identity	Dynamic identity	Explains identity complexity	Abstract

Conclusion

Intercultural Communication theories collectively demonstrate that communication is deeply shaped by culture, culture, identity, and social context.

No interaction occurs in isolation—every message is influenced by influenced by values, beliefs, norms, and lived experiences.

The theories highlight that:

- Cultural frameworks (e.g., Cultural Dimensions Theory and Hall's context theory) help us understand differences
- Interaction-based theories (such as Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory and Face Negotiation Theory) explain how communication succeeds or fails in real encounters
- Individual-focused theories (Cultural Identity) emphasize adaptation, competence, and self-awareness
- Ultimately, these theories converge on one central insight:Effective intercultural communication is not automatic—it is learned, developed, and continuously negotiated.

Conclusion

In a globalized world, the ability to:

- Respect cultural differences
- Manage uncertainty and conflict
- Adapt communication styles
- Recognize diverse identities
- It is not just an academic skill, but a practical necessity for education, leadership, development communication, and global collaboration.
- Intercultural competence is not about mastering all cultures, but about cultivating the attitude, awareness, and flexibility to communicate meaningfully across differences.

References

1. Intercultural Communication in Contexts – Judith N. Martin & Thomas K. Nakayama, McGraw-Hill Education, 2025 (8th Edition).
2. Intercultural Communication: An Advanced Resource Book for Students – Adrian Holliday, Martin Hyde & John Kullman, Routledge, 2021 (5th Edition).

Thank you